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An Experiential Approach to Kant's Moral Philosophy: A Reply to Dogmatism, Formalism and Rigorism

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** iii

**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS** ix

**INTRODUCTION** 1

**CHAPTER ONE: KANT’S MORAL PHILOSOPHY AND THREE COMMON CRITICISMS** 3

I. Kant’s Early Influences in Moral Philosophy 4
   (a) Wolff, Hutcheson and Rousseau 4
   (b) Reason and Kant’s Departure from the Brits 10

II. Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* 11
   (a) *Groundwork* Section I – Good Will and Duty 12
   (b) *Groundwork* Section II – The Categorical Imperative 17
   (c) *Groundwork* Section III – A Deduction of Morality? 23

III. Kant’s Doctrine of a “Fact of Pure Reason” 27
   (a) Kant’s “Fact of Pure Reason” 28
   (b) Questions Concerning Kant’s “Fact” 31

IV. Three Common Criticisms of Kant’s Moral Philosophy 33
   (a) Dogmatism 35
   (b) Formalism 36
   (c) Rigorism 39
   (d) The Three Common Criticisms and Existential Veracity 40

V. An Experiential Approach to Kant’s Moral Philosophy 40

VI. Conclusion 43

**CHAPTER TWO: AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO KANT’S MORAL PHILOSOPHY: HAPPINESS AND MORAL FEELING** 45

I. Happiness 49

II. Moral Feeling 54

III. Summary Results of this Experiential Account 73
   (a) Summary 73
   (b) A Response to the Three Criticisms? 76

IV. Conclusion 80

**CHAPTER THREE: KANT’S DOCTRINE OF VIRTUE** 81

I. Kant’s Doctrine of Virtue 85
   (a) Doctrine of Virtue 85
   (b) Ends That are Duties 88
   (c) Kant’s Derivation of Ethical Duties 92
   (d) Summary of Some Key Conclusions from Kant’s Doctrine of Virtue 94
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER FOUR: A REPLY TO DOGMATISM, FORMALISM AND RIGORISM</th>
<th>115</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. An Experiential Reply to Dogmatism, Formalism and Rigorism</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Dogmatism</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Formalism</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Rigorism</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) Summary of the Experiential Reply to Dogmatism, Formalism and Rigorism</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER FIVE: TWO APPLICATIONS OF THE EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO KANT’S MORAL PHILOSOPHY</th>
<th>140</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Teaching Kant’s Moral Philosophy</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Critical Comparison with Emmanuel Levinas</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Kant and Levinas on Moral Feeling and Happiness</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| CONCLUSION | 167 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 169 |
| VITA        | 184 |
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Kant:

All page references to Kant’s works are to the Royal Prussian Academy Edition of *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*. The abbreviations for the English translations are as follows:


C  *Correspondence*, translated and edited by A. Zweig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)


Works by Other Authors


INTRODUCTION

Many of Kant’s commentators and critics interpret his moral philosophy solely in terms of the cognitive dimension of his categorical imperative. Such a predominant manner of reading Kant gives rise to the criticism that his moral philosophy is too far removed from the actual way in which human beings orient themselves as moral persons in the world. In response to this general tendency in Kant interpretation, my dissertation proposes to offer an experiential approach to Kant’s ethics. By the expression experiential I mean an approach to Kant’s thinking that attends to the living sense in which we experience the phenomena and realities that his moral philosophy presents. In this dissertation I consider three common criticisms of Kant’s moral philosophy (dogmatism, formalism and rigorism), and I show how an experiential approach to Kant’s ethics can help us to respond to these three charges. In chapter one I explain the central arguments that Kant’s foundational works in moral philosophy proposed, and I outline the three criticisms of Kant’s ethics. In chapters two and three I present my experiential approach to Kant’s practical philosophy by exploring the experiential character of happiness [Glückseligkeit], moral feeling [moralisches Gefühl] and the ethical duties that Kant derives in his doctrine of virtue [Tugendlehre]. In the fourth chapter I show how my experiential approach to Kant can help us to address these three criticisms that are commonly leveled against his ethics, and in the fifth and final chapter I consider how this experiential approach can be fruitfully applied. For instance, I show how an experiential approach to Kant can help
instructors to better introduce Kant to first time Kant readers, and I demonstrate how an experiential approach to Kant allows us to bring Kant’s insights into an interesting and revealing conversation with Emmanuel Levinas. With respect to this latter conversation, I show how a critical comparison between these two thinkers can lead us to investigate the rather intriguing notion of an elevated form of happiness.
CHAPTER ONE:

KANT’S MORAL PHILOSOPHY

AND THREE COMMON CRITICISMS

The moral law is given \([gegeben]\), as it were, as a fact of pure reason
-Immanuel Kant

In this opening chapter I present and examine the central line of argument from Kant’s

*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and his *Critique of Practical Reason*. These
two texts are commonly considered to be Kant’s “foundational” works in moral
philosophy because they together seek to clarify and establish \([Festsetzung]\) what Kant
calls “the supreme principle of morality” \([G 4:392]\). Kant’s readers are very often
introduced to his ethics on the basis of these two works, and Kant’s critics have tended to
level their criticisms against the views that were expressed in these two texts. In this
chapter I will outline Kant’s central line of reasoning in these two works, and I will
conclude the chapter by explaining three criticisms (viz., dogmatism, formalism and
rigorism) that have been commonly directed against his moral philosophy. As we will
see, each criticism (in its own way) contests the *existential veracity* of Kant’s moral
philosophy. That is to say, each criticism contends that Kant’s “supreme principle of
morality” does not properly resonate with our actual moral lives. I will explain the sense
in which these three criticisms have been raised and directed against Kant, and I will
indicate at the conclusion of this chapter how an experiential approach to
Kant’s thinking might help to respond to these three concerns. The outline of this chapter will be as follows. In order to situate the context of Kant’s thinking I will begin this chapter by first looking at some of his formative influences in moral philosophy. In section two, I will turn my attention to the main line of argument that Kant proposes in his *Groundwork* and his second *Critique*. I will show how Kant’s reasoning in these two works leads him to justify the reality [Realität] of the “supreme principle of morality” in terms of a “fact” of rational autonomy. In the final section of this chapter I will describe and explain three common criticisms of Kant’s moral philosophy, and I will prepare the way for my own experiential approach to Kant’s thinking as a way of responding to these three allegations.

I. Kant’s Early Influences in Moral Philosophy

(a) Wolff, Hutcheson, and Rousseau

We know from correspondence, lecture transcriptions and some of Kant’s earliest writings that his thinking prior to the critical period was marked and influenced by a number of different sources.¹ Like most lecturers in East Prussia at the time Kant’s textbooks and core lectures were largely based upon the philosophies of Leibniz and Wolff.² But the philosophies of Leibniz and Wolff were not the only kind of philosophical thinking that Kant deemed worthy of close attention and philosophical study. One of

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² In his *Kant: A Biography*, Kuehn writes: “Kant’s core lectures were essentially based on the most radical brand of Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy” (p. 109).
Kant’s earliest students, Ludwig Borowski [1740-1832], reported that during the late 1750’s Kant had held in high esteem the philosophical thinking that was emerging from out of Scotland:

During the years in which I was one of [Kant’s] students Hutcheson and Hume were especially estimated by him, the former in the discipline of ethics, the latter in deep philosophical enquiries…He recommended these two thinkers to us for careful study.³

In matters specific to moral philosophy the influence of Wolffian-style rationalism and Hutcheson’s moral-sense theory can be most clearly observed in the concluding section to his 1763 Preisschrift.⁴ Although Kant’s essay was largely concerned with matters of metaphysical and mathematical cognition, its final section briefly considered those principles that were most basic to moral philosophy. In this final section Kant adopted the two Wolffian principles of “realize the greatest perfection you can” (rule of commission) and “do not do that which can hinder the greatest possible perfection realizable through you” (rule of omission), but he observed that these two principles remained merely formal until we actually knew the material content for what indeed constituted perfection or the good [P 299]. In this respect, Kant remarked that “Hutcheson and others have provided a start toward some excellent observations” [P 300]. Kant credited “Hutcheson and others” (e.g., Hume and Shaftesbury) for showing

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⁴ This essay is often referred to as Kant’s “prize essay.” He submitted it at the very end of 1762 (December 31st) to a competition run by the Royal Academy of Sciences in Berlin. First prize was awarded to Moses Mendelssohm, but the Academy voted to publish Kant’s essay along with Mendelsohn’s in 1764. The full English title of Kant’s “prize essay” is “Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morals.”
us that the material basis of the good was not merely some object of cognition

[Erkenntnis] (as the Wolffians had maintained), but that it was instead a matter of simple unanalyzable feeling [P 299]. In this way, Kant’s early views in moral philosophy followed Hutcheson’s observation that all human beings were oriented by an innate moral feeling [moralischen Gefühl] that was capable of directly perceiving what was good or what was perfect.\(^5\) Kant further concluded in this piece that we acquired “many” such simple feelings of the good, and that our direct access to the good was indeed “the foundation for all the other practical principles” [P 300]. Although he ended his essay by noting that “the fundamental concepts of obligation” still needed to be “determined more reliably” [P 300], this essay nevertheless indicates that Kant’s early views in moral philosophy tended toward the perspective that the commands of morality first arose by means of a basic “moral feeling.”

By the time the Royal Academy decided to publish this Preisschrift, however, Kant had already began to move away from this perspective. A leading feature of this departure stemmed from his reading of Rousseau’s Contrat Sociale and Émile.\(^6\) In an oft-quoted remark, Kant himself noted the influence that Rousseau’s work had had on his thinking:

There was a time when I thought that [the pursuit of truth and knowledge] alone could constitute the honor of mankind [Menschheit], and I despised the rabble who knows nothing. Rousseau set me right. This blind prejudice vanishes; I learn to respect human nature, and I should consider myself far more useless


than a common laborer if I did not believe that this view could give worth to all others to establish the rights of man.  

Prior to his reading of Rousseau Kant had held the view that human beings were worthy of honor solely on the condition of their intellectual virtue. After reading Rousseau, Kant became convinced that human nature [Menschheit] was to be honored and respected unconditionally. That is to say, Kant became convinced that the true worth of a human being did not reside, for example, in their level of education, nor in their particular skills and talents, nor in their social status within a given community. Instead, Kant had learned from Rousseau that a basic respect [Achtung] for mankind was directed toward human nature itself because the most essential nature of every human being was their freedom. In Kant’s view, Rousseau had shown that although human beings developed a certain dependence upon their passions and inclinations, it was the fundamental nature of every human being to ultimately “free itself” from such acquired habits. And as the


8 In his Kant: A Biography, Kuehn claims (p. 458f.) that Kant’s view concerning humanity prior to his reading of Rousseau was largely informed by Christoph Wieland’s 1755 “Platonische Betrachtungen über den Menschen” (Wieland, Sämtliche Werke, XIV, pp. 65-100). Wieland’s work divided human beings into four classes. Wieland claimed that only the top two classes (composed of speculative minds and genius) had any real value, whereas the bottom two classes were without value because they were driven by their sensible nature alone.

9 In the year 1765, although Kant had learned about the significance of freedom from Rousseau, Kant had not yet fully developed his own perspective on why freedom was deserving of our unconditional respect. In Kant’s later moral thinking [1785-97], he would develop the view that our basic “respect” for human nature [Menschheit] is directed toward the rational nature [vernünftiges Wesen] of humanity, because reason-ability [das Vermögen der Vernunft] is what enables human beings to become the free legislating source of their own action.

10 According to Richard Velkley’s work Freedom and the End of Reason: The Moral Foundation of Kant’s Critical Philosophy (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), Kant interprets the chief aim of Emile’s adult virtue as one that seeks to combat its surrounding corruptions (p. 65). As Velkley highlights, in his Remarks Kant claimed that the aim [Zweck] of Emile’s adult virtue consisted in “seeking to be free
above passage further indicates, Kant moreover learned from Rousseau that unless this basic freedom of humanity was something to be honored and respected *unconditionally*, then the “rights” of human beings would never receive their proper foundation or grounding.

The significance of Rousseau’s influence eventually led Kant to problematize those moral philosophers (e.g., Hutcheson) who had understood the basis of morality in terms of *feeling*. Two leading reasons motivated Kant’s departure. One concerned the *variability of feeling*, the second concerned the very possibility of *freedom*. Already in his *Observations Concerning the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* [1764] Kant had argued that: “it [was] impossible to reach a common agreement on feelings, because feeling [was] by no means uniform” [B 2:226]. Kant’s difficulty here concerned the manner by which the incomparable “dignity of human nature” [B 2:217] could be at all established if it were grounded upon the *variability* of our human sentiments. For, according to Kant’s view in this early essay, the unconditional dignity of humanity simply could not rest upon what human beings happened to find likable or attractive (i.e., upon our variable feelings of love, sympathy or generosity). Instead, Kant thought that the basic dignity of humanity had to be based upon a command that we were simply not entitled to refuse. That is to say, on Kant’s developing account, our respect and esteem for human nature had to be grounded upon something that imposed itself upon us regardless of how we happened to *feel* toward human beings. Moreover, beyond the

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of [acquired] inclinations and learning to dispense with them gladly” [20:77]. Velkley devotes several chapters to closely identifying the complex differences and similarities that obtain between Kant and Rousseau’s respective conceptions of human freedom. See especially pp. 67-74 for a close analysis of these main differences.
mere variability of human feelings, it was also difficult for Kant to see how human freedom could be at all possible if feeling grounded the basis of moral commands. For, if feeling grounded the basis of moral commands, then the ultimate motivating drive [Triebfeder] for the human will would always depend upon how the human will felt toward the objects that were external to its own will. In this way, Kant thought that if feeling grounded the basis of moral commands, then it would be impossible for anyone to be ultimately responsible for their actions, because if all human actions were simply the causal result of how human beings felt toward what was external to their individual will, then the human will would never itself be the free (i.e., primary) source from which its actions were first motivated. In this vein, Kant would later remark that any moral theory that was based upon human feeling “must necessarily fail in their end” [G 4:443] because such a theory could never explain how human beings were actually free to be the kind of being who was in fact responsible for his or her actions.

As a result, since the Scottish moralists had based the commands of morality upon human sentiment Kant’s thinking began to depart from the view that the basis of morality could be grounded upon human feelings. This departure was most clearly signaled by the time of his 1770 Inaugural Dissertation when he stated:

So moral philosophy, in as much as it supplies the first principles of critical judgment, is only cognized by the pure intellect and itself belongs to pure philosophy. And the man who reduced its criteria to the sense of pleasure or pain, Epicurus, is very rightly blamed, together with certain moderns who have followed him to some extent from afar, such men as Shaftesbury and his supporters.11

Having abandoned the leading perspective of the British moralists, the stage was now set for Kant to think through the ground of morality without making fundamental recourse to empirically based principles. Although he repeatedly promised to be close to completing such a work throughout the 1770’s,\(^\text{12}\) this so-called “silent decade” failed to produce any publications of significance. We can nevertheless observe from some of his unpublished Reflexionen\(^\text{13}\) written during this period that his thinking was already closing in on the results that would soon revolutionize the field of moral philosophy. In a reflection written at some point between 1772 and 1773 Kant remarked:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{[T]he principle of moral judgment is not the divine will; not the universal concept of perfection; not the universal concept of happiness; not private happiness (for this would be empirical); not the moral feeling and not taste (for taste is relative in relation to the subject); it is reason \([\text{Vernunft}]\).}\end{align*}
\]

Here we can already see the seeds of the perspective that would later dominate his analyses in moral philosophy. Within Kant’s developing thought the basis of moral commands would no longer be grounded upon an ideal of perfection, nor by God’s will, nor even by our own subjective conceptions of what makes human beings happy. Instead, a firm basis in morality would require an appeal to the self-legislating power of reason \([\text{Vernunft}]\). Although by 1773 Kant had not yet worked out all of the elements and syntheses that would be required for this proposed (re)grounding of morality, his

\(^{12}\) For a good overview of this time-line see Lewis White Beck’s *A Commentary on Kant’s “Critique of Practical Reason”* pp. 7-9.

\(^{13}\) Many of Kant’s Reflections are now available in English. See Immanuel Kant. *Notes and Fragments*, translated by C. Bowman, P. Guyer, and F. Rauscher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

\(^{14}\) Kant, *Notes and Fragments* [19:151, R 6760].
mind had been made up: previous attempts in moral philosophy had failed to properly identify the basis of morality, and what was now required was an investigation that could fully expose and uncover that which enabled the legitimacy of moral commands to be at all possible.

II. Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*

It was not until 1785 that Kant published his first major work in moral philosophy, the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. In this short and eminently complex text Kant announces that his goal is “nothing more than the search for and establishment [Festsetzung] of the *supreme principle of morality*” [G 4:392]. He claims in his Preface that his manner of uncovering this “supreme principle” will be “to proceed analytically from common cognition [gemeinen Erkenntnis] to the determination of its supreme principle, and in turn synthetically from the examination of this principle and its sources back to the common cognition in which we find it used” [G 4:392]. Although Kant’s technical terminology may cause some confusion, simply stated, his method is to begin (analytically) by first unfolding those concepts that are always already contained within our ordinary moral consciousness in order to show how these elements taken together form the most basic principle of morality. Once Kant has made this foundational basis clear, his effort will then be to deduce (synthetically) the validity and justification of this principle, i.e., he will attempt to “establish” the effective reality of this supreme principle that is always already operative within ordinary moral consciousness.
Kant indicates in his Preface that his analysis of our common cognition \([\text{gemeinen Erkenntnis}]\) of morality will ultimately consist of an investigation into “pure reason” \([\text{reinen Vernunft}]\). He notes:

Everyone must grant that a law, if it is to hold morally, that is, as a ground of an obligation, must carry with it absolute necessity…therefore, the ground of obligation here 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 \([\text{G 4:389}]\)

Kant tells us here, first, that in order for a command of morality to be genuinely binding upon human conduct that command must hold without any prior conditions, i.e., it must hold \textit{necessarily} and without any exceptions. Second, Kant claims that the \textit{necessity} of such an unconditional command cannot rest upon the variable characteristics of a human being (e.g., wit, beauty, intelligence, etc.), nor in the contextual circumstances within which a human being lives. Instead, the \textit{necessity} of an unconditional moral command can \textit{only} be found within the “concepts of pure reason” \([\text{Begriffen der reinen Vernunft}]\).

In this way, Kant’s Preface already indicates that his overall project will be an attempt to ground moral obligation by investigating the precise manner by which “pure reason” \([\text{reinen Vernunft}]\) imposes and legislates unconditional moral commands \textit{upon itself}. In order to see how this investigation ultimately works let us turn to the central argument and results of his \textit{Groundwork}.

\textit{(a) Groundwork Section I – Good Will and Duty}

When we follow Kant’s “analytic” procedure of unfolding the concepts of our common rational knowledge of morality \([\text{gemeinen sittlichen Vernunfterkennen}]\) we see him begin with the idea of a good will \([\text{guter Wille}]\). Kant opens Section I of his text by
claiming that:

It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will [G 4:393]

Although many things are “undoubtedly good” (e.g., strength, courage, wit, knowledge, etc.), Kant observes that such characteristics ultimately receive their goodness not from anything that is intrinsic to themselves, but, rather, from a will that can first confer goodness upon them. To explain this point, Kant claims that although certain commonly acknowledged goods can produce good ends (e.g., knowledge can be used to educate others) such goods can also produce evil uses (e.g., knowledge can also lead to corruption). As a result, since such goods require certain conditions in order for us to consider them at all good, they cannot, by themselves, be considered intrinsically or unconditionally good. In this way, Kant observes that only a good will could be considered good “without qualification” [ohne Einschränkung], because a good will is that which can first confer goodness upon human actions, and because a good will is that which itself can never be put toward an evil or malicious use [G 3:393-394].

So what, then, is a good will? In order to answer this question Kant introduces a second concept that he claims is found within our common rational knowledge, viz., the idea of duty [Pflicht]. To explicate [entwickeln] this concept, Kant first distinguishes between actions that are done from duty and actions that are done from a “selfish purpose” [selbstsüchtiger Absicht].15 Whereas the latter action proceeds according to a

15 Kant also distinguishes a good will from a will that is naturally inclined to do something that is dutiful [G 397-398]. That is, Kant points out that a will that merely coincides with duty is not the same thing as a will that actually acts from duty. At bottom, however, the point is still that only a will acting from duty is a morally praiseworthy will.
principle that aims to *solely* satisfy one’s *own* subjective preferences, the former action operates according to a principle that contains, what Kant calls, “genuine moral worth” [*echten moralischen Wert*] [G 4:398]. In this way, Kant claims that acting *from duty* is not some matter of simply satisfying one’s *own* subjective wants or desires; it is instead a matter of acting upon a principle that attends to the *universality* of one’s own action.

That is to say, an action contains “genuine moral worth” when its underlying principle *could* be willed as a “universal law.” In Kant’s own words acting *from duty* means that:

\[I \text{ ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become universal law} \text{ [G 4:402]}\]

Since Kant’s “formula of universal law”\(^{16}\) plays such a central role within his overall

\(^{16}\) The expression “formula of universal law” is an expression that is used very commonly in the secondary literature to name Kant’s first formulation of the categorical imperative. It is worth noting that a number of variants of this formulation appear throughout Kant’s writings. Later on in his *Groundwork* Kant will slightly alter his formulation by characterizing the imperative of duty as: “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you at the same time can will that it become a universal law” [G 4:421]. A few lines later Kant says that “the universal imperative of duty can also go as follows: act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature” [G 4:421]. Several pages later Kant defines “the universal formula of the categorical imperative” as “act in accordance with a maxim that can at the same time make itself a universal law” [G 4:437]. In his second *Critique* Kant characterizes the “fundamental law of pure practical reason” as “so act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal law” [KPV 5:30]. In his *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant defines the categorical imperative as “act upon a maxim that can also hold as a universal law” [MS 6:225]. Many scholars have spent a lot of careful attention on some of the differences that obtain between these various formulations. For instance, some versions of these formulations require that the maxim of one’s action can be *conceived of* without generating a contradiction, while another version of this formulation requires that the maxim of one’s action could become a universal law of a possible universe. See especially chapter 5 of Onora O’Neill’s book *Acting on Principle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975) for a detailed treatment of some of these differences. Christine Korsgaard’s essay “Kant’s Formula of Universal Law” in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) (pp. 77-105) also considers three different senses in which the word “contradiction” should be understood when we read Kant’s “formula of universal law.” She claims that there are three leading interpretations, viz., “The Logical Contradiction Interpretation,” “The Teleological Contradiction Interpretation,” and the “Practical Contradiction Interpretation.” Korsgaard argues that “The Practical Contradiction Interpretation” fares better than the other two interpretations even though this interpretation does have some problems of its own (p. 101). She defines the “Practical Contradiction Interpretation” in the following way: “on this interpretation, the contradiction is that your maxim would be self-defeating if universalized: your action would become ineffectual for the achievement of your purpose if everyone (tried to) use it for that purpose” (p. 78). As should become clear in my own explanation of Kant’s “formula of universal law” in the body
moral philosophy it is worth examining this formula in order to better understand what Kant means by acting from duty. As the above passage claims, acting from duty means that I act so that the underlying maxim of my action could be willed as a “universal law.” This means that when I consider acting upon some proposed principle (e.g., I should make a false promise in order to obtain money) I need to ask myself whether I can conceive of a universe wherein such a principle could become a fixed law of nature, i.e., I need to ask myself whether or not this principle could be consistently adopted by every rational will. So, for example, the underlying principle “I should make a false promise in order to obtain money” would be an example of a principle that does not stem from duty, because I cannot conceive of a universe wherein people always made a false promise in order to obtain money. For, as Kant himself notes, when I will such a principle then I make “the promise itself and the end to be accomplished by it impossible; no one would believe what was promised to him but would only laugh at any such assertion as vain pretense” [G 4:422]. That is to say, it is impossible for me to conceive of a universe wherein people always made a false promise in order to obtain money, because, within such a supposed universe, it would be impossible to make a false promise

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17 Although Kant does not yet use the term “rational will” at this stage of his Groundwork, it is helpful to appeal to this term in order to best approach and explain the meaning of Kant’s “formula of universal law.” Later on in my chapter I will devote more space to fully analyzing Kant’s appeal to a “rational will” as an autonomous self-legislating will that can “give itself the law.” See especially pp. 15-17.
without everyone already knowing that that promise was in fact a lie. Since the principle
“I should make a false promise in order to obtain money” cannot be consistently willed as
a universal law for every rational will, we can see by means of this example that this
principle cannot stem from duty. This principle cannot stem from duty, because if this
principle were to become a universal law for all rational beings, then no one would be
able to achieve what they were in fact proposing to do. Since everyone would already
know that the promise was in fact a lie, the false promise would become utterly
meaningless and therefore no one would ever be able to actually receive money by means
of making a false promise. Since, then, such a principle could not be consistently willed,
this principle could not become a universal law, i.e., this principle could not become a
universal law because no rational will could ever consistently act upon this principle.

In this way, we can see how a principle such as “I should not lie” would be a principle
that does stem from duty. This latter principle does stem from duty, because it is a
principle that could be consistently willed as principle of universal law. It is a principle
that could be consistently willed by every rational will (viz., no contradiction obtains in a
universe where nobody lies), and so it is therefore a principle that every rational will
could consistently adopt.

From the above considerations we can now summarize some of the essential points
that are related to Kant’s account of acting from duty. In Kant’s own words, acting from
duty means: “I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my
maxim should become universal law” [G 4:402]. Acting from duty means ensuring that
the underlying principle of one’s action could be adopted as a universal law for every
rational will. Thus, if the underlying principle of one’s action could not be adopted by every rational will (i.e., it is a principle that makes one’s will an exception to every other will), then the underlying principle of one’s action would not be dutiful. Acting from duty, then, means refraining from acting upon those principles that could not be universally adopted by every rational will.

(b) Groundwork Section II – The Categorical Imperative

Having now unfolded, from out of the concepts of common rational knowledge [gemeinen Vernunfterskentnis], that a good will is the sole unconditioned good, and that a good will is one that acts from a principle of duty, viz., a good will is a will that acts according to a principle of universal law, Kant deepens his analyses further by exploring the interconnection between will [Willen] and law [Gesetz]. He begins this analysis by considering what must be required of a will in order for a will to be able to act in terms of a universal law. He says:

Only a rational being [vernünftiges Wesen] has the capacity to act in accordance with the representation [Vorstellung] of laws, that is, in accordance with principles, or has a will. Since reason [Vernunft] is required for the derivation of actions from laws, the will is nothing other than practical reason [G 4:412]

Here Kant begins to link reason [Vernunft] to the nature of will and law. Reason becomes central for Kant because reason is that aspect of our nature [Wesen] that can represent [Vorstellung] the universality of law. That is to say, our rational nature [vernünftiges Wesen] is what enables our will to form a principle of action that is not dominated by a need to solely satisfy our own subjective inclinations [Neigungen]. Rationality is therefore that which enables our will to consider whether or not the principle of our action could in fact be universally adopted by every rational will.
To further explain the tripartite connection between will, law and reason, Kant introduces a distinction between the structure of two general kinds of “imperative” that govern human action:\(^\text{18}\):

Now, all imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically. The former represent the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to achieving something else that one wills (or that is at least possible for one to will). The categorical imperative would be that which represented an action as objectively necessary of itself, without reference to another end [G 4:414]

Whereas hypothetical imperatives are principles of “prudence” or “skill” because they direct our will toward the technical or pragmatic means that can aid us in the achievement of some particular end that our subjective desires have urged us to pursue (e.g., if I want new clothes, then I \textit{should} go to the clothing store), a categorical imperative is an unconditional demand that imposes itself upon \textit{all} rational wills, because such a command does not depend upon the prior positing of any such particular or “hypothetical” end. Since, then, the command of universal law cannot depend upon the will’s mere arbitrary adoption of any particular end, Kant concludes that the most basic principle of morality cannot be based upon the \textit{structure} of a hypothetical imperative. Instead, the only kind of imperative that could count as an “imperative of morality” [G 4:416] would be a categorical imperative, because only a categorical imperative could determine the will \textit{universally}, i.e., only a categorical imperative could be universally binding upon \textit{all} rational wills.

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\(^{18}\) Kant’s distinction here between categorical and hypothetical imperatives repeats a distinction he already hinted at in his 1763 \textit{Preisschrift} when he said: “‘ought’ expresses a necessity of action and is capable of two meanings. That is, either I ought to do something (as a means) if I wish something else (as an end), or I ought directly to do something and make it real (as an end). The former we can call the necessity of means (\textit{necessitatem problematicam}), and the latter the necessity of ends (\textit{necessitatem legalem})” [P 2:298].
Having now uncovered the formal structure for what could count as a properly “moral” imperative [G 4:417], Kant brings together the elements of will, law and reason in order to show how they together form a “supreme principle of morality.” Kant claims that there are ultimately three ways of representing this same fundamental moral principle [G 4:436]. Like any other principle for human action, such a principle must not only possess a certain form but it must also contain a matter [G 4:436]. In 1763 Kant had criticized Wolff’s theory of moral perfectionism because its formal demand of “realizing the greatest perfection possible” had failed to tell us the precise matter for what indeed constituted perfection. Here Kant recognizes a similar deficiency. Kant has established that a will must follow a formal demand of universalizability (viz., act so that the maxim of one’s action could be willed as a universal law), but he has yet to uncover that matter that is universally good.

In order to answer this question Kant returns to his earlier conclusions concerning the good will. As he unfolded at the outset of his Groundwork, the only thing that we could consider good “without qualification” [ohne Einschränkung] is a good will, not only because a good will is the primary source that can first confer goodness upon human actions, but because a good will is that which can never be manipulated for evil means [G 3:394]. Since, then, a good will must always be considered good, a good will must be thought of as something that is always already good in-itself. Moreover, since Kant

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19 Although Kant says this explicitly, some scholars have found as many as five different formulations of the categorical imperative. Klaus Reich has argued that there are as many as six formulations. See Klaus Reich, “Kant and Greek Ethics II” (Mind: 48, 1939) pp. 452-3. In chapter 4 of his recent book Kantian Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Allen Wood has argued that we ought to think of Kant’s presentation of the categorical imperative as a “system of formulas,” of which the first formulation of universal law is simply a provisional formulation to which more content is subsequently added by the ensuing formulations.
established that a *good will* is a will that acts in terms of a principle of universal law [G 4:402], and that only a *rational being* could act in terms of such a universal law [G 4:413], he concludes that:

[T]he human being [*der Mensch*] and in general every rational being [*vernünftige Wesen*] exists as an end in itself [*existiert Zweck an sich selbst*], not merely as a means to be used by this or that will at his discretion; instead, he must in all his actions, whether directed toward himself or also to other rational beings, always be regarded *at the same time as an end* [G 4:428].

Here Kant states that the nature of humanity [*Menschheit*], understood as rational beings [*vernünftige Wesen*], constitutes the matter for the categorical imperative because rational nature itself exists as an end in itself. Rational nature exists as an end in itself because *reason* [*Vernunft*] is what ultimately enables the will to become a *good will*, i.e., *reason* enables the will to act *from duty*. In this way, since the categorical imperative requires the existence of something that is universally good [G 4:428], and since the rational dimension of human nature is capable of realizing this unconditional good [G 4:429], Kant concludes that the *reason-ability* [*Vermögen der Vernunft*] of human nature constitutes the matter of universal law [G 4:436].

Kant further explains this *material* dimension of the “supreme principle” by distinguishing between the worth [*Wert*] of that which holds a price [*Preis*] and of that which possesses dignity [*Würde*]. Whereas all human inclinations and delights can be transacted within a utilitarian economy, the dignity of human nature [*Menschheit*] as such is raised above any such price, because, as something that is unconditionally good, humanity “cannot be replaced by something else as its *equivalent*” [G 4:435]. On Kant’s telling, then, because of the *reason-ability* that orients human nature, “humanity
[Menschheit], whether in your person or in the person of the other” [G 4:429] is never to be treated solely as a means but should instead always be respected as an end in itself. This means that one should never act in a way that diminishes or compromises the dignity of human nature. So, for example, I should never ridicule another human being solely for the sake of my own personal enjoyment, because that would be using another human being as a mere means for the sake of my own personal satisfaction. Instead, I should always respect and honor humanity as an end in itself, because human nature is inhabited by the ability [Vermögen] to act from duty, i.e., human nature is oriented by the rational capacity to be unconditionally good.

These observations concerning the formal dimension of universal law and the material dimension of respect for reason lead Kant to formulate a third and final way in which the supreme principle of morality can be represented. He claims that a full consideration of the connection between universal law and a rational will opens up the “idea [Idee] of the will of every rational being as a universally legislating will” [G 4:431]. That is to say, since a rational will is not just subject to the demands of universal law but is instead that in virtue of which such a universal law is at all possible, we must think of the will of every rational being as a will who freely “gives the law to itself” [G 4:431]. In order to see the significance of this point, it is helpful if we recall Kant’s earlier difficulty with those empiricist philosophers who thought that the basis of morality rested solely upon human feeling. Kant was concerned that if feeling lies at the basis of morality then it would be impossible for the human will to be a free will, because the human will would always be at the causal mercy of how of the will felt toward the objects that were external
to the human being. But, as Kant now emphasizes, what is so decisive about a rational will is that since a rational will can represent [Vorstellung] to itself a universal law for action in terms of itself, a rational will can be the primary source of its own action. That is to say, since a rational will is subject to a moral demand that ultimately stems from its own will, a rational will is a free will, because a rational will is a will that is bound to a principle that is not external to itself.

This way of thinking about the legislation of moral commands (viz., as wholly internal to the structure of a rational will) leads Kant to introduce “a very fruitful concept” that he names a “kingdom of ends” [G 4:433]. By a “kingdom of ends” [Reich der Zwecke] Kant means to signify the “idea” [Idee] that each and every rational being must think of itself as a member within a realm of ends who freely wills and legislates the commands of universal law. That is to say, since the universal law ultimately stems from one’s own rational will, each and every rational being must think of itself as an autonomous sovereign [Oberhaupt] who both freely “gives itself the law” and whose will is also free to act in terms of the universalizing demands of the moral law.20

With these three formulations of the supreme principle of morality (viz., universal law, respect for humanity, and the autonomy of the will), Kant claims to have now fully explicated and developed the “generally received concept of morality” [G 4:445]. That is to say, from out of our common rational conceptions of a good will and duty, Kant has “analytically” unfolded those fundamental conditions that compose and enable these

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20 For a fuller description of Kant’s idea of a “kingdom of ends” see Christine Korsgaard’s essay “Creating the Kingdom of Ends: Reciprocity and Responsibility in Personal Relations” in her book Creating the Kingdom of Ends (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp. 188-221.
concepts to be at all possible. As we have observed, his discoveries amount to showing that the ground of morality must be based upon: (i) an autonomous rational will that can (ii) give itself a universal law, a law which is (iii) binding upon all rational wills, and whose material dimension is (iv) to respect the unconditional worth of rational nature.

What remains to be done now, then, is Kant must establish [festsetzen] that “morality is no mere phantom [Hirngespinst]” [G 4:445], i.e., he must now show that these moral concepts are not just “chimerical ideas” [chimärische Idee] but that they are in fact real and true. In other words, Kant must “deduce” the reality of those concepts such as autonomy and universal law in order to show that they are not simply “analytical” presuppositions for the possibility of morality, but that they instead express the “synthetic” truth that something like a categorical imperative actually exists.

(c) Groundwork Section III – A Deduction of Morality?

Kant’s efforts at a justification for the reality of the categorical imperative is often met with confusion and disappointment.\(^ {21} \) Much of this confusion stems from the fact that: (i) it is not entirely clear what Kant attempted to deduce and thus “establish” within the final section of his *Groundwork*,\(^ {22} \) and (ii) it is uncertain how his later doctrine of a “fact of

\(^ {21} \) Two very good essays that detail the confusions and disappointments to be found in Kant’s third section are Dieter Henrich’s essay “Deduction of the Moral Law: The Reasons for the Obscurity of the Final Section of Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*” in *Kant’s Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 303-341, and Karl Ameriks’ “Kant’s Deduction of Freedom and Morality” in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (vol. 19, 1981) pp. 53-79.

\(^ {22} \) Dieter Henrich perhaps sums this up best when he says: “It is characteristic of the peculiar difficulty of the third section of the *Groundwork* that even with a complete clarification of the arguments actually given by Kant the text is still not fully transparent” in his essay “Deduction of the Moral Law: The Reasons for the Obscurity of the Final Section of Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*” p. 322.
pure reason” [Faktum der reinen Vernunft] is supposed to justify, in some non-question-begging way, that the “generally received concepts of morality” are in fact real.

Whatever interpretation one may propose of the third and final section of Kant’s *Groundwork*, it is at least minimally clear that he there attempts to show how a positive condition for autonomy (viz., the freedom of the will) requires a principle of universal law [G 4:446-48]. His argument is as follows: If a will’s actions are wholly determined by sensible inclinations, then a will cannot be considered a free will (because the ground of the will would then be external to the will itself). Thus, in order for a will to be a free will, it must require a positive capacity to act in terms of a ground that is not wholly reducible to sensible interests. That is to say, a free will must have its own positive law or principle for action. Since, then, the universal moral law is a principle that the will can give to itself, “a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same” [G 4:447]. Therefore, a free will is a will that must act according to a universal law.23

So how does this argument for the reciprocity of an autonomous free will and a universal moral law amount to a “deduction” of the reality of the categorical imperative? Kant’s specific use of the term “deduction” in his moral philosophy is the subject of much scholarly debate and controversy in the secondary literature.24 For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that by “deduction” Kant means to show that if we take some reality

23 The following essays offer much fuller accounts of Kant’s argument here: see Henry Allison’s “Morality and Freedom: Kant’s Reciprocity Thesis” in *Kant’s Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 273-301; Dieter Henrich’s “Deduction of the Moral Law: The Reasons for the Obscurity of the Final Section of *Kant’s Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*” pp. 303-342; and Christine Korsgaard’s “Morality as Freedom” in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, pp. 159-187.

to be indisputable, then, based upon a close analysis of the underlying conditions that make that reality possible, we can “deduce” some other reality that must exist in order to support what we have already taken to be indisputable. In this way, we can see how Kant’s appeal to the reciprocity of freedom and the moral law can be understood as a “deduction” of the reality of the categorical imperative. For, since this particular conception of the will (viz., as a will that must act according to the moral law) offers a positive conception of a free will, Kant’s deductive procedure in this section seems\(^{25}\) to be one that argues from the incontestability of our “idea of freedom” \([\text{Idee der Freiheit}]\) to the claim that there must exist some universal moral law (i.e., a categorical imperative) that can support the validity of the indisputability of freedom. That is to say, since the common “idea of freedom” is purportedly undeniable, and since freedom necessarily requires a universal moral law, the reality of the moral law can be “deduced” from our incontestable idea of freedom. However, although Kant at times suggests that this “idea of freedom” is undeniable \([G\ 4:454-55]\), he also sometimes claims that this idea is one that simply cannot be presupposed or even ever demonstrated \([G\ 4:453, 459, 461]\), thus implying that the mere “idea of freedom” cannot of itself be sufficient grounds for establishing the reality of the moral law. This latter implication is, of course, not difficult to see because if the reality of the moral law first requires that our will be a free will, then

\[^{25}\text{I say “seems” because the debate over Kant’s specific use of the term “deduction” has led to many different interpretations concerning the kind of deductive procedure that Kant employs in section III of his }\text{Groundwork. See Henrich’s essay “Deduction of the Moral Law: The Reasons for the Obscurity of the Final Section of Kant’s }\text{Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals” for a close analysis of the different kinds of “deduction” (viz., strong and weak) that are present throughout Kant’s critical philosophy.}\]
what guarantees the truth of our “idea of freedom” if it, in turn, ultimately depends upon the reality of the moral law?²⁶

In Kant’s defense, one should notice that Kant himself appears to recognize the circular nature of his own argumentation [G 4:450]. And, since he ultimately ends his text with claims concerning the inevitable “incomprehensibility” of the grounds for “unconditional necessity,” and since he remarks that all that can ever be legitimately asked of human reason is the task of comprehending the nature of this very limitation [G 4:462-63], we could perhaps conclude that Kant has merely done everything that a critical philosophy could be asked to do. But such a way of reading Kant is still bound to be disappointing, especially when we consider that the purported task of the *Groundwork* sought “nothing more than the search for and establishment of the supreme principle of morality” [G 4:392]. We are bound to be disappointed by the final section of Kant’s *Groundwork*, because his text outlined for us the conditions for the possibility of this supreme principle of morality, but this work ultimately failed to establish whether or not such conditions actually obtained, and thus, whether or not something like a categorical imperative was actually real.

²⁶ In fairness to Kant there are of course more elements to be considered in his argument, but it is ultimately unclear how these elements can actually do the kind of work that Kant needs them to do. For example, he introduces a distinction between thinking of ourselves from two *standpoints*: (i) from the standpoint of belonging to sensible determinations (*a world of sense*) and (ii) from the standpoint of being ruled by intelligence (*a world of pure understanding*) [G 4:451]. Kant claims that since the “commonest understanding” can already make this distinction, we are justified in thinking of ourselves as members of this realm of pure intelligence wherein freedom and law are operative. But even here the question of circularity still returns: how do we know that we actually belong to this realm of pure intelligence unless we already presuppose that either our will is free or that the moral law is real?
III. Kant’s Doctrine of a “Fact of Pure Reason”

Whether we are disappointed by the conclusion of Kant’s *Groundwork* or not, he nevertheless began working on a second work in moral philosophy only two years later – his *Critique of Practical Reason*. Many indications suggest that at the time of writing his *Groundwork* Kant had no intentions of ever publishing such a work.\textsuperscript{27} However, several emerging factors motivated his decision to begin working on this second *Critique*,\textsuperscript{28} and, for our purposes, this decision amounted to what some commentators have called a “reversal thesis”\textsuperscript{29} with respect to his efforts at a deduction of the reality of the supreme principle of morality. Whereas in his *Groundwork* Kant seemed to argue from an undeniable “idea of freedom” to the reality of the moral law, Kant’s second *Critique* suggests an altogether different approach. It explicitly argues instead that freedom can never be cognized prior to our consciousness of the moral law [KPV 5:4*-5 and 5:29-32] and that only a “fact of pure reason” [*Faktum der reinen Vernunft*] could “disclose to us the concept of freedom” [KPV 5:30] and thus justify and establish the categorical imperative as a synthetically true proposition [KPV 5:31]. In order to see how this “reversal” constitutes a renewed approach, let us first observe what Kant means by this “fact of pure reason,” and let us then try to understand how he intends for this “fact” to establish the reality of the categorical imperative.

\textsuperscript{27} Beck, *A Commentary on Kant’s “Critique of Practical Reason,”* pp. 12-14

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid. pp. 14-18.

\textsuperscript{29} See Karl Ameriks’ essay “Kant’s Deduction of Freedom and Morality” for a critical discussion of this so-called “Reversal Thesis”. In his essay “The Deduction of the Moral Law: The Reasons for the Obscurity of the Final Section of Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*”, Henrich remarks that “[i]t must therefore be assumed that in the two years following the publication of the *Groundwork* Kant was forced to reverse himself on a question central to his philosophy” p. 310.
(a) Kant’s “Fact of Pure Reason”

Kant’s doctrine of a “fact of pure reason” is indeed a peculiar doctrine. On the one hand, Kant claims that this “fact” is absolutely undeniable and incontestable [KPV 5:32], while on the other hand he claims that this “fact” can never be deduced by any theoretical or empirical means [KPV 5:47]. So what is this undeniable and non-deducible “fact of pure reason”? Kant explains:

Consciousness of this fundamental law may be called a fact of reason [Faktum der Vernunft] because one cannot reason it out from antecedent data of reason, for example, from consciousness of freedom (since this is not antecedently given to us) and because it instead forces itself upon us of itself as a synthetic a priori proposition that is not based on any intuition, either pure or empirical, although it would be analytic if freedom of the will were presupposed [KPV 5:31].

The “fundamental law” that Kant is referring to here is the categorical imperative expressed as “so act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal law” [KPV 5:30]. And, as we can see from the above passage, Kant’s “fact” is here referring to our consciousness [Bewusstsein] of this moral law, namely, to our conscious awareness that such a law inhabits our thinking. The passage moreover states that this fact “forces itself upon us of itself,” thus suggesting that this “fact” is an unavoidable and non-deferrable feature of our consciousness. The inescapability of this “fact” is confirmed when only a few lines later Kant states: “the fact mentioned above is undeniable” [KPV 5:32].

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30 In his Symbolic Representation in Kant’s Practical Philosophy Heiner Bielefeldt observes: “[T]he doctrine of the ‘fact of reason,’ which Kant presents in his Critique of Practical Reason, is a peculiar doctrine. It follows from the insight that any attempt to deduce the supreme principle of morality by means of theoretical speculation (let alone empirical demonstration) is bound to fail. Nevertheless, the moral law constitutes a forceful reality within our moral consciousness, a reality that we experience as a kind of facticity” (p. 40-41).
Since, then, Kant names this “fact” as a fact of *reason*, and since he has already argued that rational beings are those beings who “give themselves” the moral law, Kant must mean by this “fact” that insofar as we are endowed with reason, we are *unavoidably conscious* of this fundamental moral law. That is to say, if nothing else, Kant’s “fact” must be claiming that it is a “fact” that rational beings are conscious of a law that demands that their will act in terms of the command of universality.

But we may wonder here why we should now accept the legitimacy of Kant’s appeal to this non-deducible “fact”? Presumably, through his earlier “analytic” unfolding of the concepts of “common rational knowledge” [*gemeinen Vernunftkenntnis*], Kant already (at least implicitly) affirmed that we were conscious of something like a categorical imperative. But was not his question in the *Groundwork* whether or not such concepts were mere “phantoms of the brain” [*Hirngespinst*], i.e., whether or not those moral concepts were in fact *real*? One needs to ask, then, how does Kant’s appeal to a non-deducible “factual” consciousness of the moral law now function to resolve that earlier problematic? Before considering Kant’s response to this inevitable question, it is worth looking at how Kant thinks that this “fact” can ultimately justify the reality [*Realität*] of the categorical imperative.

As we saw in the passage just above, Kant claimed that if the will were simply “presupposed” to be a free will, then the categorical imperative would remain an “analytic” proposition. This recalls his discussion from section III of his *Groundwork* wherein Kant had argued that the freedom of the will and a universal moral law were “reciprocal concepts” [G 4:450 and KPV 5:29]. The categorical imperative would here
remain an “analytic” presupposition if it could not be established that the will was indeed a free will. But, as the above passage indicates, Kant is now claiming that the categorical imperative is no longer a mere “analytic” presupposition, and that we are justified in thinking of the will as a free will. This move is justified, he claims, because the “fact of pure reason” furnishes [einrichten] freedom the reality of a positive concept. Following from the passage presented above Kant continues:

[The moral law] would be analytic if the freedom of the will were presupposed; but for this [viz., the freedom of the will], as a positive concept, an intellectual intuition would be required, which certainly cannot be assumed here. However, in order to avoid misinterpretation in regarding this law as given, it must be noted carefully that it is not an empirical fact but the sole fact of pure reason which, by [this fact], announces itself as originally lawgiving [KPV 5:31]

And later:

The objective reality [die objektive Realität] of a pure will or, what is the same thing, of a pure practical reason is given a priori in the moral law, as it were by a fact – for so we may call a determination of the will that is unavoidable [KPV 5:55]

By supplying the will with a universal moral command, Kant claims that the givenness of this “fact of pure reason” (i.e., our “unavoidable” consciousness of the moral law) firmly establishes the “objective reality” of freedom. It does so, because the command of a categorical “ought” must already imply that our will actually “can” act upon it [KPV 5:30, R 6:47, TP 8:287, MS 6:380]. That is to say, although we may not always act in terms of the moral law, our basic consciousness of a categorical imperative already indicates that our will is indeed free to act upon a universal principle of action ["Du kannst, denn du sollst"]. As a result, since the “fact of pure reason” justifies our thinking of the will as a free will, an appeal to a “fact of pure reason” ultimately establishes the
reality of the categorical imperative: “the most ordinary attention to oneself confirms that this idea [viz., the givenness of the moral law] is really \[\text{wirklich}\], as it were, the pattern for the determination of our will” [KPV 5:43].

In this way, we can see how Kant’s appeal to a “fact of pure reason” is no \textit{petitio principii}. It allows Kant to establish the reality of a free will, which in turn enables him to justify the reality of the categorical imperative. When we notice that the Preface to Kant’s second \textit{Critique} had claimed that the “concept of freedom…constitutes the keystone of the whole structure of a system of pure reason” [KPV 5:3], and we later discover that the “fact of pure reason” ultimately serves to justify the reality of this “keystone” concept, it is not difficult to conclude that Kant’s doctrine of a “fact of pure reason” lies at the very heart and core of his moral philosophy.

\textit{(b) Questions Concerning Kant’s “Fact”}

But what of this “fact,” then? A healthy suspicion should lurk from several different directions. Not only does Kant now employ this purported “fact” of moral consciousness in order to justify the reality of moral obligation,\textsuperscript{31} but, by moreover claiming that this “fact” can never be deduced by either theoretical or empirical means [KPV 5:47], Kant has also precluded this “fact” from ever being properly falsified, and thus, from ever being scientifically verified or confirmed.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{31} Beck: “What was previously only a methodological standpoint, the assumption of moral consciousness, now functions as an actual premise of the argument, in spite of Kant’s having acknowledged that it might be illusory” in his \textit{A Commentary on Kant’s “Critique of Practical Reason”} p. 166.

\textsuperscript{32} Even though Popper’s criterion of “falsification” is well after Kant’s own time, I mention it here because so much of contemporary philosophy relies upon this criterion in order to justify the truth of proposed theories. In this way, since Kant’s appeal to this “fact” is immune from falsification, Kant’s “fact” would immediately signal a strong suspicion from many contemporary philosophers.
In response to these seemingly intractable difficulties one could still defend Kant by pointing out that not all forms of knowledge must conform to *theoretical knowledge*, and that instead some kinds of knowledge (i.e., *practical knowledge*) could result from our being obligated to act. This point becomes clearer when we look at a leading difference between the *theoretical* and *practical* forms of our knowledge within Kant’s overall project of a critical philosophy. For, although Kant’s first *Critique* had argued that there could be *no* knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] without the mediation of an intuition [*Anschauung*] (i.e., without the affective reception of something being given in sensibility [*Sinnlichkeit*]), it is worth noticing that the kind of knowledge that Kant there analyzed was that of a knowledge of *objects* [*Gegenstand*]. Consider:

In whatever way and through whatever means a cognition [*Erkenntnis*] may relate to objects [*Gegenstand*], that through which it relates immediately to them, and at which all thought as a means is directed as an end, is intuition [*Anschauung*] [KRV A19]

In this way, if we allow that our “consciousness of the moral law” is not that of a knowledge of an *object*, it becomes possible to see how the moral law *does not have to be* given by either an empirical or an intellectual intuition. Instead, as a “unique” fact [KPV 5:31], this fact is not *given* to us like any other kind of fact, i.e., like that of an *object*. In other words, our knowledge of the “fact of pure reason” does not stem from our being *theoretical* spectators in a world full of *objects*; it is instead a “knowledge” that results from our being *practical* participants in a world who are obligated to act.\(^{33}\) Moreover, when we further consider that Kant’s first *Critique* had made a distinction between

\(^{33}\) I am grateful to Robert Burch at the University of Alberta for bringing this important and fruitful distinction to my attention. I take full responsibility for the manner in which this distinction has been presented.
“logical certainty” and “moral certainty” [KRV A 829], we can see how a distinction between the theoretical and practical forms of our knowledge could provide a fruitful manner in which to interpret and potentially defend the consistency of Kant’s appeal to a non-deducible “fact” of moral existence.

But even when we follow Kant’s distinction between the theoretical and practical forms of our knowledge we are still left with some important questions concerning the existential veracity of Kant’s appeal to this “fact” of practical knowledge. Namely, questions would seem to emerge concerning the effective reality and legitimacy of Kant’s appeal to this foundational “moral fact.” Questions such as the following would seem to naturally arise: do we recognize an affinity with Kant’s appeal to a “consciousness of the moral law”? does “the most ordinary attention to oneself” [die gemeinste Aufmerksamkeit auf sich selbst] reveal that we are “unavoidably” aware of a non-hypothetical moral imperative? These are questions concerning the existential veracity of the basic “fact” that grounds Kant’s moral philosophy. They are not simply questions concerning the coherence or consistency of Kant’s overall critical project. They are questions that concern whether or not this foundational “moral fact,” which Kant takes to be “most common” [KPV 5:27] to our ordinary moral lives, indeed resonates with our actual moral lives.

IV. **Three Common Criticisms of Kant’s Moral Philosophy**

Although Kant answers the above questions in the affirmative, it has not always been so clear to his readers why they should accept his affirmations. In fact, a rather interesting and complex history of Kant criticism can be traced right from the time of Kant’s
publications through to the present day. The abundance of recent literature in the field of "Kantian Ethics" evidences both the intrigue and difficulties that readers continue to face with Kant’s writings. In what follows below I will briefly outline three common criticisms that have been leveled against Kant’s moral philosophy. As we will see, each

In the years immediately following the publication of Kant’s second Critique several thinkers of the time expressed some reservations about Kant’s proposed grounding of morality. Some of these early critics included August Wilhelm Rehberg (1757-1836), Christian Garve (1742-98), Johann Goittlieb Fichte (1762-1814) and Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805). In 1788 Rehberg published a critical review of Kant’s second Critique in the Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung 188 (August 6, 1788) 345-352. This review has been reprinted in Materialum zu kants kritik der praktischen vernunft, edited by R. Bittner and K. Cranmer (Frankfurt:Suhrkamp, 1975) 179-186. Selections from Garve’s 1792 Essays on Various Topics from Morals and Literature Part I can be found in Kant’s own essay “On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct In Theory But It Is Of No Use In Practice,” translated by M.J. Gregor in Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) pp. 279-309. In a letter dated August of 1795 Fichte wrote to Karl Leonhard Reinhold (1758-1823), who was an early promoter of Kant’s philosophy, that he discovered some “inadequacies” within Kant’s Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals. This letter can be found in Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings, edited and translated by D. Breazeale (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1993) pp. 406-410. In 1796 Schiller published a satirical poem entitled “The Philosophers,” which has since been read as a parody of Kant’s distinction between the inclinations and duty. This poem was published jointly by Schiller and Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) and can be found in Goethe’s Werke 1, edited by E. Trunz (Munich: Beck, 1982).

In the contemporary study of moral philosophy within Anglo-American universities the expression “Kantian ethics” has come to represent a leading philosophical position alongside “utilitarianism,” “virtue ethics,” “divine command theory,” and “relativism.” Many contemporary writers have even employed this expression “Kantian Ethics” in the title of their books. See, for example, Marcia Baron’s Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995) and Allen Wood’s Kantian Ethics. Wood devotes the opening pages of his book to an interesting discussion on the differences between the expressions “Kantian ethics” and “Kant’s ethics” (KE 1-4). Whereas “Kant’s ethics” is said to represent the theory and collected views contained within Kant’s own writings, “Kantian ethics” represents “an ethical theory formulated in the basic spirit of Kant, drawing on and acknowledging a debt to what the author of the theory takes to be his insights in moral philosophy” (KE 1). Wood claims that the primary efforts in his book are perhaps best understood under the latter heading, but he also notes that “I do not think that the most defensible version of Kantian ethics needs to depart as far from what Kant thought and wrote as most recent practitioners of Kantian ethics do. What is needed instead, in many cases, is only a better understanding of Kant’s own thoughts” (KE 2). Wood, seemingly paradoxically, but I think rightfully, suggests here that what goes by the commonly employed expression “Kantian ethics” would benefit from a better understanding of what belongs to the expression “Kant’s ethics.”

The three criticisms that I will outline should be familiar to anyone who has spent some time studying and discussing the possible merits and short-comings of Kant’s moral philosophy. The contemporary familiarity with these three criticisms can be found in a short essay written by Onora O’Neill entitled “Kantian Ethics.” In this essay, O’Neill presents us with six common lines of criticism that are often directed toward Kant’s moral philosophy. See her entry “Kantian Ethics” collected in A Companion to Ethics, edited by P. Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) pp. 175-185. The six common criticisms that O’Neill presents are titled as follows: (i) formalism, (ii) rigorism, (iii) abstraction, (iv) conflicting grounds
criticism contends that some leading feature of Kant’s moral philosophy does not properly resonate with our actual moral lives.

(a) Dogmatism

The charge of “dogmatism” represents a general reaction that many readers sense when first confronted by Kant’s foundational appeal to a “fact of pure reason.” This criticism contends that since Kant grounds his moral philosophy upon an *a priori* fact of rational autonomy, he is basing his moral philosophy upon a rational abstraction that has no basis or purchase in our actual lived experience. In other words, according to this criticism, Kant’s appeal to a purportedly “most common” [KPV 5:27] and “undeniable” [KPV 5:32] idea [Idee] of reason appears as nothing more than a dogmatic assertion. To charge Kant with “dogmatism,” then, is to say that his foundational appeal to a “fact of pure reason” is illegitimate because it does not seem to correspond to our actual lives.

The term “dogmatism” has a well-known history in western philosophy, especially in the study of epistemology since Descartes. Very often this term is used in order to refer to any statement of certainty that provides very little (if any) evidence to support or justify its claim. I use the term here because I believe this term very nicely captures a common reaction that many readers have to Kant’s pronouncement of a “fact of pure reason.” Although I have not found a critic who explicitly uses the term “dogmatism” in the context of assessing Kant’s “fact,” the basic idea behind this criticism appears to be captured in some of the pejorative references to Kant’s fact that we find in thinkers like Schopenhauer (who referred to Kant’s fact as a magical “hyperphysical fact” in *On The Basis of Morality*, translated by E. Payne (New York: Bobbs Merill, 1965) p. 79, and in Hegel’s remark that Kant’s fact was “the final undigested lump within the stomach, the revelation given to reason” in *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, translated E. Haldane and F. Simson (New York: Routledge, 1955) p. 461.)
(b) Formalism

Like the dogmatist criticism, the charge of “formalism” takes issue with the abstract and seemingly detached character of Kantian moral philosophy. The formalism charge contends that Kant’s supreme principle of morality is too abstract and general to tell us what, in the concrete particular, we ought to actually do. This criticism traces back most famously to Hegel and some elements of this critique can also be found in Mill. On

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38 See especially Hegel’s Remark at 135 in his Elements of the Philosophy of Right, translated by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) pp. 162-163. In this Remark Hegel condemns “the philosophy of Kant” for offering us an “empty formalism” and an “empty rhetoric of duty for duty’s sake” (p. 162). As Peperzak notes, however, Hegel’s criticism of Kant is not so much directed toward Kant’s “formalism” as it is directed toward what Hegel takes to be Kant’s “absolutization” of the formal perspective. See Adriaan Peperzak’s Modern Freedom: Hegel’s Legal, Moral, and Political Philosophy (Dordrecht NL: Kluwer, 2001) pp. 366-369. When we read Hegel’s criticism we should therefore not overlook the fact that Hegel integrates Kant’s principle of autonomy into his own thinking (Hegel acknowledges at 135R that “the pure and unconditional self-determination of the will” lies at the root of moral duty) and that Hegel by no means rejects the view that “duty ought to be done for duty’s sake” (at 133, for instance, Hegel accepts this very formulation). In his Rechtsphilosophie, Hegel’s complaint is that Kant’s thinking “clings to a merely moral [Moralität] point of view” (p. 162) and therefore cannot deduce a determinate content that could instantiate the concrete duties of ethical life [Sittlichkeit]. In other words, since one cannot simply will “duty for duty’s sake,” one must somehow be able to will something in particular as dutiful. Since Hegel appears to read Kant’s categorical imperative solely in terms of a principle of non-contradiction he does not think that Kant’s principle can tell us what one ought to will in particular. Kant’s principle cannot do so, according to Hegel, because Kant’s principle so understood cannot properly specify differences between good or bad maxims. As Hegel puts it: “if a particular content for action is taken into consideration, there is no criterion within that principle for deciding whether or not this content is a duty. On the contrary, it is possible to justify any wrong or immoral code of action by this means” (p. 162). Hegel thinks that the only way Kant could possibly deduce a particular duty were if Kant already accepted certain existing moral opinions or customs as justifiable. For example, it is certainly a contradictory maxim to accept a deposit that is entrusted to me without planning to return it, but it is only contradictory, according to Hegel, if we first accept the institution of “property.” Since Hegel thinks that Kant can only presuppose such institutions and customs “from the outside” (p. 162), he contends that Kant’s principle of morality remains merely formal because it has not justified the content that is required for instantiating the categorical imperative.

Hegel’s particular version of the “formalism” criticism, which is the original source of this critique, is a very difficult and complicated criticism to assess. It is made more difficult by the fact that Hegel’s criticism of Kant, as it appears in his Rechtsphilosophie, develops out of an unfolding of the immediacy of “abstract right” [abstraktes Recht] – a philosophical procedure that does not belong to Kant’s own stated aims or presuppositions in his Groundwork or Critique of Practical Reason. For these kinds of reasons, I have chosen in this study not to address the “formalism” criticism as it was specifically raised by Hegel. Kant and Hegel are both profound and original thinkers in their own right, and a proper assessment of Hegel’s particular criticism of Kant would take this present study well off of its intended course. A proper assessment of Hegel’s specific version of the “formalist” critique would require, for instance: (i) a full consideration of what Hegel says elsewhere about Kant’s moral philosophy (e.g., Phenomenology of Spirit
Hegel’s reading of Kant, Kant had rightly grounded the basis of morality in terms of the autonomy of practical reason, but Hegel contended that Kant’s universalizing commands lacked a particular content that could concretize his (purportedly) purely formal principles. Hegel therefore argued that Kant’s principle for the evaluation of maxims, understood as “absence of contradiction,” was too ambiguous and broad to tell a specific individual what they ought to do in a particular instance.

I will say much more about this criticism in later chapters, but for the moment I would like to note that this criticism seems to name (at least) two inter-connected problems. The first problem is that Kant’s supreme principle of morality cannot properly derive particular ethical duties. The second is that Kant’s principle cannot offer sufficient moral

429-431, *Natural Law* 2:462, etc.), (ii) an analysis of whether Kant’s own attempted concretization of the categorical imperative in his *Metaphysics of Morals* would satisfy Hegel’s stated concern, and (iii) whether Hegel’s own method of concretization ultimately fares any better than Kant’s. For the purposes of this present study, I believe it is sufficient to indicate and define the “formalism” criticism in a more general sense than the specific version of the criticism that was advanced by Hegel. If I am successful in defending Kant against the more general version of the formalism charge, then I can consider someday defending Kant against the more specific charge that was leveled by Hegel. Until that point, however, I will stick to the more manageable version of the “formalist” critique, especially since this is the critique that most people probably have in mind when they raise this criticism of Kant.

39 Mill remarks in the opening section of his 1861 *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957) the following: “This remarkable man [i.e., Kant], whose system of thought will long remain one of the landmarks in the history of philosophical speculation, does, in the treatise in question lay down a universal first principle as the origin and ground of moral obligation; it is this: ‘So act that the rule on which thou acts would admit of being adopted as a law by all rational beings.’ But when he begins to deduce from this precept any of the actual duties of morality, he fails, almost grotesquely, to show that there would be any contradiction, any logical (not to say physical) impossibility, in the adoption by all rational beings of the most outrageously immoral rules of conduct.” Mill does not provide any examples of these “outrageously immoral rules of conduct,” but Mill’s criticism of Kant’s failure to properly deduce “the actual duties of morality” does sound somewhat similar to Hegel when Hegel says in his 1821 *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* that “it is impossible to make the transition to the determination of particular duties from the above determination of duty as absence of contradiction, as formal correspondence with itself…and even if such a particular content for action is taken into consideration, there is no criterion within that principle for deciding whether or not this content is a duty. On the contrary, it is possible to justify any wrong or immoral code of action by this means” (p. 162).

40 Hegel characterizes Kant’s determination of duty by this expression in his Remark at 135 of his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. 
guidance to someone in a particular scenario. Although these two concerns are
interrelated, I believe a proper understanding of this criticism requires us to try to
separate out these two concerns. Whereas the first concern is directed toward an issue
concerning Kant’s ethical theory (i.e., whether or not his theory can derive particular
ethical duties), the second concern is a more practical issue concerning whether or not
Kant’s theory can properly guide an individual’s decision in a particular situation. In
other words, the former complains that Kant’s moral philosophy cannot provide us with
an adequate taxonomy of particular ethical duties, while the latter contends that, given a
certain concrete scenario, Kant cannot properly tell someone what they ought to do. I
believe that this is an important distinction to draw because whereas the first concern
presupposes a somewhat innocuous conception of what a moral philosophy ought to be
able to offer, the latter concern seems to place a more controversial expectation upon
what a moral philosophy should be providing readers. That is to say, whereas the first
concern wants Kant to present us with a taxonomy of particular ethical duties, the latter
concern seems to expect Kant to be able to tell someone exactly what they ought to do in
every given scenario. 41  When we assess the validity of this criticism it will be helpful to

41 I take this latter kind of concern with Kant’s ethics to be articulated by Sartre in his essay
“Existentialism,” translated by B. Frechtman in Existentialism and Human Emotions (Seacaucus NJ: Carol
Publishing, 1999) pp. 9-51. Sartre’s essay presents us with a scenario in which a student must decide
between staying with his sick mother or joining his comrades in the Resistance. Sartre argues that no moral
philosophy (including Kant’s) could ever tell this student what the right thing to do was. Sartre says:
treat any person as a means, but as an end.” Very well, if I stay with my mother, I’ll treat her as an end and
not as a means; but by virtue of this very fact, I’m running the risk of treating the people around me who
are fighting, as a means; and, conversely, if I go to join those who are fighting, I’ll be treating them as an
end, and, by doing that, I run the risk of treating my mother as a means” (pp. 25-26). I will address the
criticism contained in this example in chapter 4 of this study when I respond to the charge of formalism.
But suffice it to note here that Sartre is expressing the criticism that there are certain concrete scenarios in
which Kant’s ethics cannot properly guide an individual’s action.
separate out these two concerns because I believe these two concerns place different levels of expectation upon Kant’s moral philosophy.

In whatever way we might characterize the “formalism” criticism, however, the basic contention is that Kant’s supreme principle of morality is too abstract and general to tell us what, in the concrete particular, we ought to do. To charge Kant with formalism, then, is to say that his supreme principle of morality is too broadly defined to be properly instantiated in our concrete moral lives.

**(c) Rigorism**

The “rigorism” critique contends that Kant offers us a moral principle that is too strict and inflexible to accommodate the situational complexity of our actual moral lives. Kant is often portrayed on this account (especially in light of a later essay wherein he appears to defend the claim that “it would be a crime to lie to a murderer who asked us whether a friend of ours whom he is pursuing has taken refuge in our house”) as someone who was so rigidly focused upon a purely rule based view of morality that he failed to take into account the seemingly immoral implications that his universalizing

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42 One of the more well-known proponents of this criticism today is Alasdair MacIntyre. See especially pp. 41-52 of his book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981). Some feminist philosophers have criticized Kant on very similar grounds as well. In her essay “Can Kant’s Ethics Survive the Feminist Critique” Sally Sedgwick characterizes a common feminist criticism of Kant’s ethics as “a scepticism with regard to [Kant’s] claim to derive, from an abstract law of practical reason, particular duties that are adequate to the complexities of human life” p. 78 in *Feminist Interpretations of Immanuel Kant*, edited by R.M. Schott (University Park PA: Penn State, 1997).

43 In 1797 Kant published a short article in the *Berliner Blätter* entitled “On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy.” The essay has been translated by M.J. Gregor and is collected in *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) pp. 611-615. In reference to Kant’s little essay Kuehn writes: “[t]his essay, often attacked because of the alleged absurdity of its conclusions, is a good example of Kant’s rigorism” p. 403.

principles entailed. To say, then, that Kant’s moral philosophy suffers from “rigorism” is to say that the moral obligations that Kant proposes are too strict and inflexible to capture the actual everyday intuitions we have concerning how someone ought to behave.

(d) The Three Common Criticisms and Existential Veracity

All three of these criticisms take issue with what could be termed the existential veracity of Kant’s moral philosophy. In other words, each of these criticisms express the concern that the conclusions of Kant’s moral philosophy are in some sense unrealistic. The “dogmatism” critique contends that Kant’s “fact of pure reason” appears as a dogmatic assertion of an idea [Idee] of reason that is not adequate to our actual moral lives. The “formalist” critique alleges that Kant’s supreme principle of morality is too abstract and general to tell someone what they ought to do in the concrete here and now. And the “rigorism” critique charges Kant with being too rigidly insensitive and out of touch with the complex circumstances of our actual lived experience. Each of these criticisms, in different ways, questions whether or not Kant’s moral philosophy is talking about something that is effectively real. That is to say, all three of these criticisms criticize Kant on the grounds that the conclusions of his moral philosophy do not correspond or resonate with our actual moral lives.

V. An Experiential Approach to Kant’s Moral Philosophy

In the next three chapters I will attempt to defend Kant against these three common criticisms. Each of these criticisms contests the existential veracity of his moral philosophy, and I will seek to demonstrate the sense in which these criticisms are mistaken in their respective allegations. Many difficulties, of course, confront any
philosophical writing that attempts to prove whether or not something is actually real.\(^4\)

This difficulty not only holds for Kant’s moral philosophy; it confronts my own present study of Kant as well. A philosophical text can never actually deliver some reality itself at the end of its text. Since a philosophical writing can only ever write about a reality, at best, it can only reasonably hope to evoke and illustrate the reality under discussion. In some ways similar to a painter or musician who is trying to portray or share a certain experience, a philosophical text can only describe, clarify, and illuminate some given reality in the hopes that his or her reader will “see” what they are presenting. In the case of assessing the existential veracity of Kant’s moral philosophy, then, although my goal may at first appear rather ambitious, I believe that this task is instead somewhat modest. I see my task as one that must simply attend to the living sense in which we experience the phenomena that Kant presents. That is to say, in order to defend Kant against these three criticisms, I see my job as one that seeks to discover and uncover just what it is that we are supposed to “see” when we read his ethics. My working hypothesis is that an illumination of the basic experiences that underlie Kant’s ethics will help us to defend his position against these three charges.

\(^4\) The problem is furthered compounded by the fact that it is difficult to come to an agreement over what is first meant by the term “real.” According to The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 2nd edition, edited by R. Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) reality is defined as “how things actually are, in contrast with their mere appearance” (p. 775). This definition may give us an initial starting point for discussion, but it can by no means be considered definitive or non-controversial. After all, are not appearances in some sense real? And how are we to distinguish between appearances and reality? Questions concerning what counts as really real (to ontos on), as opposed to mere semblance or illusion, have a long and venerable history in Western philosophy. The difficulties involved in proving the existence of some given reality by means of a concept and / or argument is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the (so-called) “proofs for the existence of God.” As I indicate later on in this chapter, however, my goal in this present study is not to prove that something is real so much as I am trying to illuminate and visualize what Kant takes to be incontestably real for our common sense understanding of morality.
Such an experiential approach to Kant will mean the conscious adoption of a “first-person” perspective with respect to his moral philosophy. I will say more about this particular methodology in the following chapter, but suffice it to note here that the basic aim of my approach will be to try to illuminate the concrete and “living” dimension of his moral philosophy. This will mean adopting a first person perspective that asks questions such as the following: what is life like for a Kantian human being?, how does one feel and experience his “fact of pure reason”? , how does one’s lived surroundings affect one’s moral orientation in the world?, how does one perform specific ethical duties?, etc.,. I believe that such an approach to Kant will not only help us to respond to the three criticisms, but that it also has the potential of opening us up to an original way of reading Kant’s moral philosophy. That is to say, an experiential approach to Kant should not only help us to address the three criticisms, it should moreover introduce us to new ways of thinking about what Kant’s moral philosophy is saying.

My approach in the next few chapters will therefore seek to offer an experiential account of Kant’s moral philosophy. In order to frame this account, my next chapter will focus upon the topics of happiness [Glückseligkeit] and moral feeling [moralisches Gefühl] as they appear in Kant’s writings. My contention is that if we want to properly understand the sense in which Kant thinks that human beings experience the claims of morality, we will first need to illuminate these two dimensions of his moral philosophy. In chapter three, I will focus my attention upon Kant’s “doctrine of virtue” [Tugendlehre] in his 1798 text the Metaphysics of Morals. Some leading scholars in recent years have argued that this often over-looked text offers many answers to the kinds of problems that
readers have commonly experienced with Kant’s moral philosophy. My approach to this later text will be to see how an experiential characterization of Kant’s “doctrine of virtue” can help to illuminate the concrete sense in which Kant believes that we live our moral lives. In my fourth and final chapter, I will show how an experiential approach to Kant’s moral philosophy can help us to address the three common criticisms enumerated above, and I will conclude by considering how this approach to Kant can help to inform our reading and interpretation of his ethics.

VI. Conclusion

Kant’s *Groundwork* and second *Critique* are two very difficult and influential texts in the history of moral philosophy. The central line of reasoning in these two works lead to the conclusion that the basis of morality is grounded upon a non-deducible “fact” of rational autonomy. In this chapter I have explained how Kant arrived at that view, and I have outlined three common criticisms that have been leveled against Kant’s position, viz., dogmatism, formalism and rigorism. Each of these criticisms, in different ways, contests

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46 See especially Allen Wood’s recent work in *Kantian Ethics, Kant’s Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and the essay “The Final Form of Kant’s Practical Philosophy” collected in the book *Kant’s Metaphysics of Morals: Interpretive Essays*, ed. M. Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) pp. 1-21. In this essay Wood makes the following observation: “The Metaphysics of Morals ought to be both surprising and enlightening to most Anglophone moral philosophers, since their image of Kantian ethics is derived almost exclusively from the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*. Even those who have dipped into *The Metaphysics of Morals* have seldom let it shape their conception of the basic principles and standpoint of Kantian ethics that they have obtained especially from the first fifty or so pages from the *Groundwork*. They have almost never let it significantly influence their interpretation of what they have already read in those pages. Consequently, the familiar image of Kantian ethics is in serious error on some fairly basic points” (p. 4). In the preface to her book *Laws of Freedom* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), Mary Gregor drew a very similar observation when she says: “[t]he neglect of the Metaphysik der Sitten has left us with a distorted view of Kant’s moral philosophy as a whole. Had the programme of Kantian studies included, from the beginning, due attention to the Metaphysik der Sitten, the view that Kant’s position implies, for example, that the consequences, ends and circumstances of our actions are morally irrelevant, or that the test of a maxim’s morality is its freedom from logical contradiction when regarded as universal law, could never have taken root” (p. xi).
the existential veracity of what Kant’s moral philosophy purports to uncover. In the following chapters I will offer an experiential approach to Kant’s ethics in order to try to respond to these three charges, and to see what such an approach might be able to tell us about Kant’s moral philosophy.
CHAPTER TWO:
AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO KANT’S
MORAL PHILOSOPHY: HAPPINESS AND MORAL FEELING

In a word, it is respect
-Immanuel Kant

In the previous chapter we followed the central line of reasoning that Kant proposed in his two “foundational” works in moral philosophy, and we outlined three common criticisms that have been leveled against Kant’s reasoning. As we saw, each criticism contested the existential veracity of Kant’s moral philosophy, i.e., each criticism contended that Kant’s line of thinking was in some sense unrealistic.

In order to address these three allegations my proposal in this chapter will be to offer an experiential approach to Kant’s moral philosophy. By “experiential” I mean very simply an approach to Kant’s ethics that attends to the living sense by which we encounter and feel the phenomena that Kant presents. In this way, my approach to Kant may tend to employ terms like “first-person,” “phenomenological,” “lived,” as roughly synonymous with the expression “experiential.” The basic aim of my experiential

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47 By equating these terms I do not mean to claim that there are no meaningful differences between these different words. I do think that there are important differences among these terms, but I do not think that those technical differences are especially important for what I am trying to accomplish in this particular study. Each of these terms already tends to evoke the general idea and methodology of what I am trying to do, viz., to illuminate the concrete sense of Kant’s moral philosophy. Instead of confusing or over-complicating my efforts in this study with a highly specialized language or vocabulary, I prefer to employ the above enumerated terms in a rather informal and general sense. I would like to note, however, that my approach to Kant is largely inspired by the phenomenological tradition of philosophy as it has been practiced by philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Levinas, Ricoeur, Peperzak and many others. I believe that my particular approach to Kant shares in the spirit that animates much of
approach will be to illuminate and visualize the concrete sense in which Kant thinks that we actually live our moral lives. Central questions to be addressed include the following: what is life like for a Kantian human being?, how does Kant envisage the way by which we feel and experience ourselves as categorically bound to a moral imperative?, what does this experience feel like to us?, is it painful?, is it joyous?, is it both? My experiential approach to Kant will therefore attempt to clarify and evoke the concrete sense in which we live his moral philosophy. My working hypothesis is that an appreciation for those basic experiences that inform his ethics will help us to respond to those criticisms that have contested the existential veracity of his moral philosophy.

Now, of course, several obstacles immediately confront an experiential approach to Kant’s moral philosophy. At the forefront, we should first notice that Kant’s own central concern in practical philosophy was not dedicated toward offering descriptions of our concrete moral experience. As we saw in the last chapter, Kant’s foundational works began from what he called our “common rational knowledge of morality” [gemeinen sittlichen Vernunfterkenntnis], his analysis continued by seeking the conditions for the possibility of reason’s practical employment (viz., autonomy and universal law), and he subsequently justified those analyses by appealing to an incontestable “fact of pure reason” [Faktum der reinen Vernunft]. In other words, the principal concern of Kant’s foundational works sought to establish how a certain conception of pure reason [reinen vernunft] what motivates that tradition. As Merleau-Ponty characterized the aim of phenomenology in the Preface to his Phenomenology of Perception (London: Routledge and Paul, 1962): “[p]henomenology attempts to re-achieve a direct and primordial contact with the world” (p. vii). In a way, one could say that my goal in the present study is to “bring Kant’s ethical principle into contact with the world.” That is to say, to show and to uncover those fundamental human experiences that underlie his seemingly formalistic appeal to a categorical imperative.
Vernunft], and thus not experience [Erfahrung] or feeling [Gefühl], imposed and legislated unconditional moral commands. Since, then, the founding core of Kant’s moral philosophy was dedicated toward presenting a conception of pure reason that was uncoerced and self-regulating, it is perhaps not so surprising that many of his readers have complained that his reasoning seems somehow detached from our actual lived experience. But simply because the principal concern of Kant’s foundational works sought to ground morality in terms of an a priori “fact” of rational autonomy does not mean that Kant did not offer us any descriptions of how human beings actually experience the claims of morality. Paul Ricoeur notices something similar in Kant’s first Critique: although Kant’s first Critique was focused upon the a priori knowledge of mathematics and metaphysics, this does not mean that we cannot discover certain experiential descriptions that are implied and presupposed by the principal aims of Kant’s first Critique. It is therefore incumbent upon this study to offer an approach to Kant that is attuned to the concrete manner by which human beings recognize themselves as bound to, and thus oriented by, his supreme principle of morality. This way of reading

48 Paul Ricoeur, A l’école de la phénoménologie (Paris: Vrin, 1986): “On peut dire que la recherche des conditions de possibilité de l’objectivité du côté de la structure du sujet est une phénoménologie ou contient une phénoménologie, d’ailleurs médiocrement faite par Kant; elle est constituée par une investigation des actes fondamentaux de ce que Kant appelait le Gemüt; mais Kant était trop préoccupé de justifier la part a priori des connaissances mathématiques, physiques et métaphysiques pour mener à bien une investigation des “fonctions” de l’esprit, sans distinguer la part de l’a priori et celle de l’a posteriori. Il y a donc une phénoménologie implicite ou ébauchée dans le kantisme, à la fois présupposée et masquée par la probléme de l’objectivité” (p. 147). English translation: “We could say that the search for the conditions of the possibility of objectivity on the side of the structure of the subject is a phenomenology or contains a phenomenology, which was moreover done in an undeveloped manner by Kant; it is composed of an investigation into those fundamental acts of what Kant called Gemüt; but Kant was too preoccupied with the justification of the a priori knowledge of mathematics, physics and metaphysics to bring about a proper investigation of the “functions” of consciousness since he constantly had to worry about distinguishing the a priori from the a posteriori. We can therefore discover an outline or an implicit phenomenology in Kant’s philosophy that was both presupposed and masked by the problem of the constitution of objectivity.”
Kant acknowledges that his central concern in moral philosophy was not dedicated toward offering descriptions of concrete moral experience, but this study disagrees strongly with the notion that Kant’s *emphases* in his “foundational” works altogether prohibits the interpretive possibility of uncovering a first-person account of how one actually experiences and lives his categorical imperative.

My approach to Kant will therefore attempt to offer a first person account of the experiential dimension of Kant’s moral philosophy. This particular chapter will do so by focusing upon the topics of happiness [*Glückseligkeit*] and moral feeling [*moralisches Gefühl*] as they appear within Kant’s writings. This will mean focusing our attention upon what Kant has to say about the motivating force [*Triebfeder*] of our sensible impulses [*sinnlicher Antriebe*], i.e., focusing our attention upon Kant’s account of our “naturally necessary” [*naturnotwendiges*] desire for happiness [*Glückseligkeit*]. Kant repeatedly states, throughout all of his central writings in moral philosophy, that our sensible urgings are an unavoidable and insuppressible feature of human existence.49 Thus, in order to uncover and properly develop a first person account of what moral experience is like for Kant, we will need to begin by first paying close attention to this dimension of his moral philosophy. After all, since, on Kant’s own account, one’s desire for happiness is an inescapable feature of human experience, it will be important to clarify this aspect of our lives in order to properly characterize what life is like for a Kantian human being.

49 Even though this point is sometimes overlooked in the secondary literature Kant makes this point several times. See G 4:399, 415, 418, 430, KPV 5:25, R 6:46, 135, MS 6:386-387. I will discuss this point in more detail in section I of this chapter.
After examining Kant’s descriptions concerning this dimension of sensuous striving, I will turn my attention to those passages where Kant describes how human beings become acquainted with, and feel, the command of the categorical imperative. Central to this analysis will be an examination of the attitudes of humiliation [Demütigung], respect, [Achtung] and self-contentment [Selbstzufriedenheit]. I will show, for instance, how beyond a mere formal “consciousness of the moral law” [KPV 5:31], Kant’s appeal to a “fact of pure reason” reveals itself as a complex set of feelings that humiliates our self-serving inclinations while simultaneously occasioning feelings of respect for the rational dimension of human nature [Menschheit]. An appreciation for this complex interplay of moral feeling [moralisches Gefühl] will help us to uncover the experiential dimension of Kant’s moral philosophy, and should therefore help us to address those criticisms that have contested the existential veracity of his ethics.

I. Happiness

Kant defines human happiness [Glückseligkeit] in largely hedonic terms. As the following three passages indicate, Kant understands the life of happiness as a life dedicated toward satisfying one’s own sensible inclinations [Neigung]:

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50 In the opening chapter of her study Kant on Happiness in Ethics (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994) Victoria Wike argues that one can find three different conceptions of happiness in Kant’s works, but that Kant ultimately favors a definition of happiness understood as the satisfaction of sensible needs and inclinations (p. 23-24). Although Kant sometimes characterizes happiness in terms of self-contentment [Selbstzufriedenheit] (i.e., consciousness of mastery over one’s inclinations) and bliss [Seligkeit] (i.e., complete independence from inclinations), Kant also definitively states that neither self-contentment nor bliss can be called happiness “strictly speaking” because neither involves the positive gratification of an impulse. A central passage worth examining in this context can be found at KPV 5:118. For my purposes I will understand Kant’s use of the term happiness [Glückseligkeit] as the satisfaction of needs and inclinations. I will discuss the topic of self-contentment in section II of this chapter when I examine the attitude of someone who has acted for the sake of the moral law, and I will return to the topic of Selbstzufriedenheit in the final chapter when I critically compare Kant’s descriptions with what Emmanuel Levinas invites us to notice about our moral existence.
His needs and inclinations, the entire satisfaction of which he sums up under the name of happiness [G 4:405]

All inclinations taken together (which can be brought into a tolerable system and the satisfaction of which is then called happiness) [KPV 5:73]

Happiness is the state of a rational being in the world in the whole of whose existence everything goes according to his wish and will [KPV 5:124]

Kant characterizes happiness as the *satisfied fulfillment* of our personal wishes and inclinations. A simple example can help to illustrate the phenomenon that Kant is drawing our attention toward: if I am inclined by a need for caffeine then my drinking of a cup of coffee will contribute to my happiness. Happiness is, therefore, a certain satisfied “fitting” between what my particular inclinations urge me to pursue (a need for caffeine) and the targeted reality that is pursued (drinking a cup of coffee). Happiness, then, is the *satisfied fulfillment* of our personal urges and preferences.

Kant moreover presents our desire for personal satisfaction as an insuppressible and unavoidable feature of our lives. Consider the following claims, which run consistently throughout all of his central works in moral philosophy:

[T]here is one purpose which [human beings] not only *can* have, but which we can assume with certainty that they all do have by a natural necessity – the purpose, namely, of happiness [G 4:415]

To be happy is necessarily the demand of every rational but finite being and therefore an unavoidable determining ground of the faculty of desire [KPV 5:25]

It is inevitable for human nature that one should wish for and seek happiness [MS 6:387]

On Kant’s telling, our desire for happiness is an inevitable and inescapable fact about our lives. We all want to be happy. For Kant, this means that we are all urged by our

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51 See also G 4:399, 418, 430, R 6:46, 135, MS 6:386.
respective inclinations and that we all wish to have these urges satisfied. This certainly
does not mean that we are all enticed by the very same interests, however [KPV 5:25].
Some people may like chocolate, of course, while others prefer vanilla. Meanwhile some
may wish to be politicians, while others might prefer instead to be teachers. But what is
similar to everyone is this shared desire to have their particular interests satisfied and
fulfilled. Kant’s view is that insofar as our lives are “dependent upon circumstances of
sensibility [Sinnlichkeit], our nature [Beschaffenheit] craves happiness first and
unconditionally” [R 6:46*]. In other words, as living-breathing embodied beings we are
“naturally” constituted so as to require the sustenance and nourishment of our lived
surroundings. This is why Kant calls our desire for happiness “naturally necessary”
[naturnotwendiges]. It is natural and therefore normal for us be impelled by the needs
and impulses that our environmental setting provides. After all, we are needy and
dependent beings: we need water to quench our thirst, we desire the shade on a hot
summer day, we want a place to rest when we are tired, we crave food when we are
hungry, etc.. Given our needy and impulsive nature, it is quite natural for us to want to
fulfill our particular needs and inclinations.

As we can see, then, our desire for personal satisfaction is not something that we need
to be taught or told or even commanded to do – our lives unavoidably aim at a life of
happiness anyway. Our desire for happiness is simply our natural way of being in the
world. Even when Kant introduces his readers to the attitude of morality [Moralität] he
emphasizes that our awareness of duty does not erase or abolish our naturally necessary
desire for happiness: “pure practical reason does not require that we should renounce the
claims of happiness” [KPV 5:93]. Just because we are aware of a moral command does not mean that we are no longer interested in pursuing our inclinations. This would be impossible for us because the thrusting of our inclinations is an insuperable fact about our lives. Moreover, on Kant’s own account, the categorical imperative does not command us to never pursue our inclinations. Such a command would contradict our natural way of being in the world. Instead, the categorical imperative simply demands that we refrain from pursuing those particular inclinations whose underlying maxim could not be universalized by reason [Vernunft].

A simple example should help to illustrate this point. Suppose you enjoy eating chocolate bars (inclination). Kant’s categorical imperative does not prohibit you from eating chocolate bars because eating chocolate bars does not violate the universalizing demands of rationality. But suppose that in order to pursue this particular inclination you make a false promise to repay someone money. The maxim underlying your action therefore becomes: “I should make a false promise to repay someone money in order to eat chocolate bars.” For reasons that were discussed and examined in the previous chapter, Kant would claim that this maxim could not be universally adopted by every rational will because, were it to become a universal law for everyone to follow, this false

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52 In the *Groundwork* Kant distinguishes between actions that are morally permitted and forbidden: “Morality is thus the relation of actions to the autonomy of the will, that is, to a possible giving of universal law through its maxims. An action that can coexist with the autonomy of the will is permitted; one that does not accord with it is forbidden” [G 4:439]. Since no contradiction ensues when our reason conceives of a universe wherein everyone wants to eat a chocolate bar they eat a chocolate bar, this action is permitted and therefore not forbidden. See Chapter 1, pp. 9-16, of the present study for a fuller discussion concerning Kant’s account of moral permissibility and impermissibility.

53 See Chapter 1, pp. 9-11, of the present study for a discussion concerning Kant’s account of why it is morally impermissible to make a false promise.
promise would not be able to convince anyone. Thus, since this maxim is self-contradictory, according to the categorical imperative the maxim underlying this particular behavior is morally impermissible. But this does not mean that the categorical imperative demands that you altogether renounce the inclination that prompted your false promise. That is to say, the categorical imperative is not demanding that you should never want chocolate bars, or that you should never eat chocolate bars, or that eating chocolate bars is somehow morally wrong. It simply demands that the maxim underlying your pursued inclination be a maxim that all rational beings could reasonably adopt. In other words, do not lie to someone when you want to eat a chocolate bar. The categorical imperative does not, therefore, command you to never pursue your inclinations or demand that you renounce your natural desire for inclinations. This would be an impossible demand for us given our needy [bedürftig] and impulsive nature. Instead, the categorical imperative simply commands that we refrain from pursuing those particular inclinations whose underlying maxim could not be universalized by reason [Vernunft].

This consideration of the relationship between our inclinations and the moral law brings our analysis to an important point. We should not overlook the fact that, for Kant, our lived experience is incessantly and unavoidably compelled by a natural desire for happiness. In other words, we are not simply rational beings who freely give ourselves the command of universal law. Our existence is composed of an unrelenting and insistent pursuit for personal satisfaction. As we saw above, simply because we are aware of a moral imperative does not mean that we no longer desire happiness, nor does it mean that we should no longer desire happiness. The categorical imperative not only does not ask
us to relinquish our natural urges and inclinations, it cannot do so: “[t]he human being is not thereby required to renounce his natural end, happiness, when it is a matter of complying with his duty; for that he cannot do, just as no finite rational being whatever can” [TP 8:278-279]. The sensuous and impulsive dimension of our existence simply cannot be erased. Our animalistic nature defines, at least in part, who and what we inescapably are. We should therefore not overlook the fact that our lived experience is not that of a purely rational angel or god for Kant. We are instead rational animals, or better yet, moral animals who are unavoidably inhabited by natural impulses and who recognize a moral imperative to refrain from pursuing those impulses whose underlying principle cannot be universalized by reason.

But what about this moral imperative? How does our lived experience recognize and encounter the command of this categorical “ought”? An experiential approach to Kant has showed us how our lives are incessantly impelled by a pursuit for personal satisfaction, but Kant certainly does not think that the motivational forces of this insistent pursuit is absolute. The question arises, then, how does our lived experience actually encounter and feel what Kant calls a categorical imperative?

II. Moral Feeling

As we saw in the last chapter, Kant grounds the basis of moral obligation in terms of an a priori “fact” of rational autonomy. Kant’s basic claim is that insofar as we are animals endowed with reason we are unavoidably (i.e., factually) aware of an imperative to refrain from acting upon non-universalizable maxims. Thus, the question concerning how we encounter Kant’s categorical imperative is at the same time a question
concerning how we experience this “moral fact.” If we can illuminate the sense in which we experience this particular “fact” we should be able to visualize the sense in which Kant’s categorical imperative shows itself to us.

Anyone familiar with Kant’s writings knows that one of his favorite examples in moral philosophy involve cases of lying. Kant will often appeal to examples wherein someone is confronted with the following kind of decision: they can either tell a lie, whose telling would improve their own happiness, or they can tell the truth. For example, suppose you are riding on a train and you discover a wallet full of money. Someone comes by and asks you whether or not you have found their wallet. You are faced with a decision as to whether or not to tell this person the truth about the wallet you found. Kant will readily admit that you are likely “naturally” inclined to lie to this person. You would be naturally inclined because you know that the money in that wallet could be used to purchase things that could satisfy your own personal wishes and needs. Perhaps, for instance, you know that the money in this wallet could be used to purchase a new television set that you have been desiring. Thus, lying in this case would contribute to furthering your own personal happiness. But, Kant claims, whatever decision you reach, he insists that you nevertheless recognize the “fact” that you should not lie and that you ought to tell this person the truth about the wallet you found.

Kant often laments the “historical” reality that most people act selfishly, and thus contrary to the prescriptions of morality.54 With respect to this example, Kant would

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admit that the person who found the wallet might very well lie to the individual who is inquiring about their lost wallet. But Kant would insist that such an empirical reality does not belie our own “inner experience” [inneren Erfahrung], which is common to all rational beings, that we ought not to lie to other rational beings.\footnote{Consider Kant’s response to Christian Garve’s criticism that distinctions between maxims of selfishness and duty do not apply when it comes to our actual experience: “That these distinctions…as he says, disappear altogether when it comes to acting thus contradicts even his own experience. Admittedly, it does not contradict the experience that the history of maxims drawn from one or the other presents; such experience proves, regretfully, that maxims for the most part flow from the latter principle (of selfishness); but it does not contradict the experience, which can only be inward [innerlich], that no idea so elevates the human mind and animates it even to inspiration as that of a pure moral disposition” [TP 8:287]. Kant refers to our “inner experience” [inneren Erfahrung] of duty at TP 8:284 and 8:287.} Whatever actual decision someone arrives at, Kant insists that they are nevertheless aware of an imperative to refrain from acting upon impulses that are not universally agreeable to reason.

As a first approximation what might this example, and Kant’s approach to this example, tell us about our lived experience of Kant’s “moral fact”? It is worth noticing that the “moral fact” that Kant appeals to is not simply an empirical or sociological fact about what people actually do. It is instead a fact about what people ought to do. This could help to explain why it might be easier for us to recognize the insuppressible “fact” of happiness rather than Kant’s appeal to a “fact” about morality. When we look at the behavior of those around us it is quite possible that we only see people who act solely for the sake of their own self-interest and personal satisfaction. This is a possibility that Kant certainly does not deny. After all, this is a very natural attitude to adopt. But Kant’s view is that simply because people always act selfishly does not erase the “fact” that we
are all aware of an imperative that forbids us from acting strictly upon selfish impulses. Thus, whatever we might say about Kant’s “moral “fact,” we need to bear in mind that this fact is not simply a fact about what people actually do, it is instead a fact about what people ought to do.

Second, we should notice that the moral fact that Kant refers us to is not an ordinary fact in the usual sense of the term. It is not, for example, a fact like “there is a pencil on the table” or “water is composed of H2O.” As Kant names it, this fact is instead a “fact of reason” [Faktum der Vernunft]. This is why Kant sometimes refers to this fact as a fact of “inner experience” [inneren Erfahrung]. It is a fact that we discover internally – we recognize this fact on the internal basis of our own thought. It is not, then, a fact that we discover “out” in the world somewhere. It is not, for example, found in a forest or in a lake or in the Rocky Mountains. Nor can it be found under the lens of a microscope in a laboratory setting. This fact is instead a fact that is discovered within ourselves: we are aware of this fact on the basis of our own rational thought. We should therefore notice that the “fact” that Kant refers us to is not a fact in the common sense of the term. It is an “internal” fact that we are self-aware of on the basis of our being rational beings who think.

So what, then, do we feel when we think this moral fact? In the last chapter we spent some time detailing and defining Kant’s characterization of his “fact of pure reason.”

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56 See Chapter 1, pp. 22-24, of the present study for a discussion on the unique “factual” status of Kant’s appeal to a “fact of pure reason.”

57 See especially Kant’s response to Christian Garve at TP 8:284 and 8:287. It is interesting to note that when Kant is pressed by the criticism that his moral philosophy is not grounded in our actual moral lives he refers so adamantly to the obviousness our shared “inner experience” [inneren Erfahrung].
saw, for instance, that the “fact of pure reason” is our consciousness of the categorical imperative [KPV 5:31], and that this consciousness demands that we refrain from acting upon maxims that our reason cannot universalize. But how do we experience this factual consciousness? That is to say, how do we recognize or feel this prohibition against fulfilling our sensible desires in all circumstances?

Kant’s writings in moral philosophy do not say very much about how we specifically feel or experience his categorical imperative. This is perhaps not all that surprising, especially when we consider that Kant so often emphasized that the foundation of morality could not be grounded upon feeling. But there are some passages (however brief and complex) where Kant does attempt to describe how we feel the fact of pure reason. Since he insists that reason [Vernunft] must lay at the foundation of morality, Kant characterizes these moral feelings [moralisches Gefühl] as the “effect” of our rational representation [vernünftiges Vorstellung] of the moral law. That is to say, they are feelings that are “produced” by our consciousness of the categorical imperative.

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58 See Chapter 1, pp. 4-6, of the present study for a discussion on Kant’s reasons for why the basis of morality could not be grounded upon feelings of any kind.

59 Kant’s central presentation of the topic of moral feeling [moralisches Gefühl] can be found in chapter III of Book I in his Critique of Practical Reason.

60 In chapter III Book I of his Critique of Practical Reason Kant specifically refers to these moral feelings as an “effect” [Wirkung] at KPV 5: 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 78, and 88.

61 See Kant KPV 5:76: “This feeling [of respect] (under the name of moral feeling) is therefore produced solely by reason [lediglich durch Vernunft bewirkt].” It is worth noting that this “moral feeling” in Kant is peculiar and unique insofar as it ultimately stems from reason and not sensibility. Kant must explain “moral feeling” as grounded in reason in order to avoid reducing our subjective reception of morality to pathologically determined terms. François Calori’s essay “Le dernier pas: Kant, Heidegger et la question de respect,” Kant et la pensée moderne, edited by C. Ramond (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1996) remarks upon the peculiarity of grounding moral feeling upon reason: “[L]e respect n’est pas un sentiment découvert dans notre sens interne; c’est un sentiment produit par la raison. C’est pourquoi
Kant associates several feelings with our factual consciousness of the moral law. Humiliation [Demütigung], respect [Achtung] and self-contentment [Selbstzufriedenheit] are the principal feelings that we will examine below. Although Kant’s treatment of these feelings can, at times, appear somewhat dense and convoluted, there is nevertheless a vivid picture to be uncovered and developed once we clarify what kind of a lived experience Kant is pointing our attention toward.\(^{62}\)

Since Kant characterizes these “moral feelings” as the “effect” of our own rational thought, we need to be careful not to confuse his account of “humiliation” with the kind of emotion we may experience when, for example, someone embarrasses or makes fun of us. Such an experience may indeed be humiliating, but this is not the kind of lived experience that Kant is pointing our attention toward when he is talking about humiliation as a moral feeling. He is instead referring to a feeling that ensues when our own thought compares the natural striving of our sensible inclinations to our own rational awareness of the standard of the moral law. That is to say, it is a feeling that emerges,

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internally [innerlich], when we discover that the moral law prohibits us from pursuing certain wants and desires that we might otherwise wish to pursue.

In order to better clarify and illustrate this feeling of humiliation it may be helpful to recall our earlier example involving the case of the lost wallet found on the train. In such a situation, Kant’s view is that we would likely “naturally” prefer to keep the wallet (because the money in the wallet would allow us to satisfy many of our own personal inclinations), but that we nevertheless recognize the imperative to return the wallet to its rightful owner. Such a situation is characterized by the following structure: I want to do X (tell a lie) but I should do ~X (do not lie / tell the truth). Kant’s account of humiliation as a moral feeling allows us to uncover the living sense by which we would experience such a scenario. When confronted by the decision as to whether or not to return the wallet, Kant’s account would describe how we would immediately feel a sense of humiliation and shame: “the moral law unavoidably humiliates every human being when he compares with it the sensible propensity of his nature” [KPV 5:74]. Although we would naturally prefer to satisfy our personal inclinations, we are aware of a command that demands that we refrain from acting upon inclinations that we cannot universalize for all rational beings to obey. In this way, our awareness of the categorical imperative is a rather humbling experience for us. It signifies that our personal inclinations, however much we may wish to satisfy and fulfill them, are not the exclusive end of our lives. Although our natural attitude wishes to act upon our personal inclinations at all times, we know, as rational thinking beings, that there are certain actions that are not morally permissible for us to pursue. We would therefore feel an immediate sense of humiliation
in the case of the lost wallet, because, according to Kant’s characterization, we would recognize a command that we ought to obey even though our striving for personal satisfaction wishes that we do not obey it. In other words, we would feel an immediate sense of shame, because we would be aware of an expectation that we should act upon even though our incessant urgings for personal satisfaction would prefer that we refuse this expectation.

There are two points regarding this feeling of humiliation that are worth emphasizing. First, notice how this feeling of humiliation is *internal* to our own thoughts, i.e., this feeling of humiliation is not compelled by some force that is external to our thinking. It is not as though someone is embarrassing or humiliating us, for example. This sense of shame and humiliation that Kant is drawing our attention toward resides within us. It is therefore accurate to say that we humiliate ourselves in this experience. We humble and shame ourselves when we compare our actions to the moral law, because this representation [Vorstellung] alerts us to a prohibition against certain inclinations that we might otherwise enjoy and prefer. Humiliation as a moral feeling is therefore an *inward* struggle.

Second, it is important to recognize that this feeling of humiliation is only *one aspect* of a more complex overall moral experience. Kant often refers to humiliation as the mere “negative effect” of our representation of the moral law [KPV 5:74, 5:75, 5:78] because it is a feeling that ensues when we sense the *limiting* prohibition against the natural propensity of our sensible inclinations. But Kant emphasizes that our representation of the moral law is not simply limiting and restrictive. Our awareness of the moral law is
also elevating and ennobling insofar as our consciousness of the categorical imperative opens up our existence to our freedom. That is to say, when we represent to ourselves the command of the moral law we are awoken to our ability [Vermögen] to act for the sake of universality. Herein lies our warrant [Befugnis] in thinking of ourselves as free,\textsuperscript{63} which moreover alerts our existence to an ennobling sense of respect [Achtung] for the rational dimension of our nature.

Needless to say this “positive” and elevating sense of respect is a crucial feature of Kantian moral experience, and therefore requires some clarification in order to begin evoking the living sense of this feeling. Dieter Henrich has carefully noted that prior to Kant the fundamental meaning of the German word Achtung corresponded completely with the Latin attentio.\textsuperscript{64} Thus, the primary sense of the term had meant “heed” and “attention,” i.e., the kind of word one may hear at a train station or in a military barrack (caution, step back, march!, etc.). Kant was certainly aware of this “commanding” sense of the term. However, Henrich claims that Kant discovered in this word a meaning that was closely related to the Latin reverentia as well.\textsuperscript{65} According to Henrich: “Kant was

\textsuperscript{63} See Chapter 1, pp. 17-22, of the present study for a discussion on Kant’s views concerning the reciprocity between an autonomous rational will and the moral law. In the Introduction to Part II of his Metaphysics of Morals Kant describes how our awareness of a self-constraint upon our inclinations opens our existence to the reality of freedom: “[i]f a human being looks at himself objectively (under the aspect of humanity in his own person), as his pure practical reason determines him to do, he finds that as a moral being he is also holy enough to break the inner law reluctantly; for there is no human being so depraved as not to feel an opposition to breaking it and an abhorrence in himself in the face of which he has to constrain himself [to break the law]. – Now it is impossible to explain the phenomenon that at this parting of ways (where the beautiful fable places Hercules between virtue and sensual pleasure) the human being shows more propensity to listen to his inclinations than to the law. For we can explain what happens only by deriving it from a cause in accordance with laws of nature, and in so doing we would not be thinking of choice as free – But it is this self-constraint in opposite directions and its unavoidability that makes known the inexplicable property of freedom itself” [MS 6:380*].

the first to incorporate into the meaning of respect the positive relation to something recognized by us, to which we must elevate ourselves.”

Beyond a mere authoritative command, Kant hears in Achtung the sense of a “higher” reality to which deep regard and veneration is due. This “higher” reality is, for Kant, reason [Vernunft], because as we saw in the last chapter, according to Kant reason is that which alerts our existence to a universal law that can elevate our lives “above” a merely animalistic style of living. As Kant puts it, through reason “one transfers [versetze] oneself in thought into an order of things altogether different from that of one’s desires in the field of sensibility” [G 4:454]. By directing our lives toward a dimension of meaning that is un-compelled and un-forced by sensible inclinations, the universal law-giving power of reason “raises” our animal existence “above” the totality of our sensible urges and inclinations. For Kant, since this rational capacity [Vermögen] allows us to freely legislate the principles that underlie our actions, reason elevates our existence and therefore evokes feelings of esteem and reverential respect.

On Kant’s account, then, our feeling of respect is not merely directed toward the authority of the moral law. If it were, then our experience of the command of the moral law would be simply restrictive and limiting. But Kant imbues Achtung with an elevating sense of reverence. He locates this sense of reverential respect in our rational capacity

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65 Ibid. Kant often equates the meaning of Achtung with Ehrfurcht. See, for example, Kant’s remark at MS 6:468.

66 Ibid., p.110. Henrich continues: “For us who stand in the history of the effects of Kant’s ethics, this meaning has become so self-evident that we take it to be the primary one.”

67 I have amended Mary J. Gregor’s translation here by replacing her translation of sich, eine and seiner as “he,” “his” and “himself” with “one” “one’s” and “oneself”. The German reads: “sich in Gedanken in eine ganz andere Ordnung der Dinge versetze als die seiner Begierden im Felde der Sinnlichkeit.”
for self-legislation. Consider the following passage from the *Metaphysics of Morals* wherein Kant describes this feeling of reverential awe for the law-giving powers that inhabit us:

> [f]rom our capacity for internal lawgiving the (natural) human being feels himself compelled to revere the (moral) human being within his own person, and at the same time there comes *exaltation* of the highest self-esteem for the feeling of his inner worth (*valor*), in terms of which he is above any price (*pretium*) and possesses an inalienable dignity (*dignitas interna*), which instills in him respect for himself (*reverentia*) [MS 6:436]

As animals endowed with reason [MS 6:456] we discover an *active* power within ourselves that is capable of freely legislating our action. This means, in effect, that we discover ourselves as responsible for what we do. We are not simply “things” to be used or manipulated or purchased, nor are we merely animals who solely pursue impulsive needs and interests. We are instead moral animals who are called to respect the dignity [*Würde*] of the rational dimension of human nature [*Menschheit*]. We respect this rational capacity because without reason we would not be able to freely legislate our action. In other words, “thanks to reason” we are free. This is why Kant claims that “a human being, as belonging to two worlds [*als zu beiden Welten gehörig*], must regard his own nature in reference to his second and highest vocation [*Bestimmung*] only with reverence” [KPV 5:87]. Since we belong to both the dimensions of animality and rationality, and since reason’s law-giving powers confer upon our existence the dignity of

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68 See Chapter 1, pp. 14-15, of the present study for a discussion on Kant’s distinction between the worth [*Wert*] of that which holds a price [*Preis*] and of that which possesses dignity [*Würde*]. In Chapter 3 I will turn my attention to the way by which the attitude of respect orients our relationship toward other rational animals. My focus in this present chapter is to attend to the feelings that arise when we represent to ourselves the moral law. In the next chapter I will examine more closely how this consciousness, and thus the feeling of respect, directs and guides our inter-human relations.
freedom, Kant’s observation is that we cannot help but “pay tribute” [KPV 5:77] to the rational law-giving powers that ennoble and elevate our lives.

As we can begin to see, then, our lived encounter with Kant’s categorical imperative is a rather complex experience. It is not simply some abstract or purely formalistic intellectual command. Our awareness of the moral law is instead lived as a complex assembly of seemingly opposed feelings. On the one hand, the command of the moral law provokes in us feelings of shame and humiliation, while on the other hand we sense an elevated mood of respect and reverence. We are awoken to this profound sense of respect, according to Kant, because our lived awareness of the moral law alerts us to the honor and dignity of our own rational nature. In order to render this complex picture more visible, it is perhaps helpful to relate the simultaneity of these seemingly opposed feelings to the scenario of the lost wallet.

As we mentioned above, in the case of the lost wallet Kant would describe how we would feel an immediate sense of shame and humiliation. We know that we should return the wallet, but the inevitable urgings of our personal inclinations are pushing us to keep the wallet. This is a humbling experience for us: we recognize that there is something we should do but we do not want to meet this demand. Kant’s descriptions would moreover emphasize, however, that this humbling experience is accompanied by a elevating sense of respect. We would not only respect the authority of this normative command, but in this experience we would also discover ourselves as the legislator of our own action. In other words, in this experience we are alerted toward a heightened sense of self insofar as we would recognize our agency as free. When confronted by the
question concerning the lost wallet, then, we would be reminded that we are not simply
animals who are riveted to the fate of a hedonistic style of life. We are instead aware of
an \textit{active} power within ourselves that is capable of overcoming and overriding our selfish
urges. According to a Kantian experiential account, then, we would not only respect the
authority of the command “do not lie,” but we would simultaneously feel a profound
sense of esteem for the reason within us that elevates our existence above a merely
hedonistic style of life.

Suppose, however, that despite our feelings of respect for this rational moral order we
decide not to return the wallet to its rightful owner. This is of course a very real
possibility. Kant would certainly not deny this harsh reality about human experience.
But he would insist that this refusal to return the wallet would not constitute experiential
proof of the unreality of the categorical imperative. The \textit{experiential validity} of the moral
law resides instead in our inward \textit{innerlich} feelings toward ourselves.\textsuperscript{69} When we do
not follow the command of the moral law, Kant observes how we would inevitably feel
guilty and ashamed about what we have done. We may not look ashamed to others. In
fact, the person who is inquiring about their lost wallet may not even notice that we feel
ashamed of ourselves. But, according to Kant, we would certainly feel this sense of
shame inside ourselves, no matter how much we might try to justify our action to
ourselves:

\begin{quote}
A human being may use whatever art he will to paint some unlawful conduct he
remembers as an unintentional fault…he nevertheless finds that the advocate
who speaks in his favor can by no means reduce to silence the prosecutor within
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{69} See note \#8 and \#10 in this chapter.
him, if he is aware that at the time he did this wrong he was in his senses, that is, had the use of his freedom; and while he explains his misconduct by certain bad habits...this cannot protect him from the reproach and censure he casts upon himself [KPV 5:98]

When we do not obey the command of the moral law we cannot help but feel humiliation. Even if we end up satisfying our personal inclinations as a result of our moral trespass, Kant’s view is that we could not help but feel guilty and ashamed of ourselves: “[i]f he is conscious of having cheated at play (although he has gained by it), he must despise himself as soon as he compares himself with the moral law” [KPV 5:37]. We would know, in our heart of hearts, that we were base and crude. Kant insists that we would therefore not be able to feel good about ourselves: “the propensity for self-esteem, so long as it rests only on sensibility, belongs with the inclinations which the moral law infringes upon. So the moral law strikes down self-conceit” [KPV 5:73]. We would not be able to feel good about ourselves, because we are aware of a standard that we were supposed to realize but we failed to act upon that standard.

We should be able to recognize many analogues of this kind of humiliating experience in our day to day lives. Suppose, for instance, that you are a very good tennis player and you therefore expect to beat a lesser opponent in an up-coming match. But suppose you end up losing that match. That is to say, suppose you fail to live up to an expectation that defines your ability as a tennis player. How would you feel about yourself? You would of course feel quite embarrassed and humiliated. You know that you should be able to defeat that tennis opponent and yet you failed to accomplish what you expected of yourself. This kind of experience is in some ways similar to the feeling of humiliation that Kant would point to the case of the lost wallet. You know that qua moral being you
should return the wallet, but you failed to meet that standard that was expected of you. However much you may try to justify your failure, the fact remains that you did not uphold the proper vocation of your rational nature. As a result, you cannot help but feel an inward sense of shame and embarrassment with yourself because you failed to accomplish what you knew was expected of you.

But suppose you do return the wallet to its rightful owner. How would you feel then? If we suppose that you are returning the wallet for-the-sake-of the moral law you would be pursuing a course of action that denies yourself the pleasure of personal happiness. This experience would have to be somewhat painful, would it not? Kant, in places, seems to agree: “[t]he moral law, as the determining ground of the will, must by thwarting all our inclinations produce a feeling that can be called pain” [KPV 5:73]. By denying ourselves the pleasure of gratifying our personal inclinations we cannot help but feel pained by the potential losses that the moral law demands of us. After all, in the case of the lost wallet, you would be sacrificing your ability to satisfy certain inclinations that you would inevitably be desiring. As I mentioned above, suppose, for example, that you had been wanting a new television set but simply could not afford one. The money found in the wallet could be used to buy a new television set. And yet, the moral law demands that you ought to return the wallet despite the compulsion of your urgings. This experience would have to include a certain degree of pain.

It is possible that one may return the wallet for the sake of some non-universalizable reason. For example, in order to receive a favor from the wallet’s owner. In this case the maxim underlying the action would be “in conformity with duty” but would not be done “from duty.” See G 4:397-398 for Kant’s treatment of this distinction and for his rationale on why only the latter contains “true moral worth.”
But would this be the whole story? Guilt and humiliation if we do not return the wallet, pain and lack of happiness if we do return the wallet? Although it may sometimes appear as though this is the cold and bitter picture of moral life that Kant is presenting us with there are some noteworthy passages where Kant describes the calming and satisfying sense of self we would feel when we do strive to obey the command of the moral law. Kant points out, in several different places, that when we strive to realize the demand of the moral law we develop a feeling of “inner tranquility” \([\text{innere Beruhigung}]\). Just like the tennis player would feel good about herself if she were successful in her tennis match, we would feel good about ourselves when we return the lost wallet. We would feel good about ourselves, according to Kant, because we would have demonstrated to ourselves that we can realize the standard that is expected of us, and that we can therefore master the urgings of our inclinations. In other words, we have proven to ourselves that our inclinations do not rule us, we can rule them. Kant names this experience self-contentment \([\text{Selbstzufriedenheit}]\):

Have we not, however, a word that does not denote enjoyment, as the word happiness does, but that nevertheless indicates a satisfaction with one’s existence, an analogue of happiness that must necessarily accompany consciousness of virtue? Yes! This word is self-contentment \([\text{Selbstzufriedenheit}]\) [KPV 5:117]

When a thoughtful human being has overcome incentives to vice and is aware of having done his often bitter duty, he finds himself in a state that could well be called happiness, a state of contentment \([\text{Zufriedenheit}]\) and peace of soul [MS 6:377]

When we follow the command of the moral law we take satisfaction in our having fulfilled our vocation \([\text{Bestimmung}]\) as rational beings. Kant distinguishes this kind of satisfaction from “sensuous \([\text{ästhetische}]\) contentment, which rests on the satisfaction of
inclinations” [KPV 5:118]. Unlike the satisfaction of our sensible inclinations, which depend solely upon the positive gratification of our impulses, self-contentment [Selbstzufriedenheit] arises from our consciousness of our mastery over the urgings of our impulses and inclinations. That is to say, we discover a kind of “inner tranquility” [innere Beruhigung] when we recognize that we have freely willed and legislated our own action. We are soothed and calmed by our awareness that our inclinations do not dominate us completely. We develop the sense that no matter what urge or temptation may come our way, we are capable of overriding its seduction. And this, on Kant’s telling, feels good to us. There is therefore no contradiction in doing good and feeling good about it in Kant’s moral philosophy. We would very likely feel good about ourselves when we return a lost wallet. Though we may have sacrificed the gratification of certain sensible impulses through our obedience to the moral law, we are nevertheless sustained by a feeling of self-contentment because we would have demonstrated to ourselves that we are not wholly determined or controlled by the urgings of our inclinations.

There are two points concerning Kant’s description of self-contentment that are worth stressing before we summarize and conclude this chapter. First, as Kant himself emphasizes when he speaks of self-contentment, this sense of moral satisfaction cannot show itself to us if we make it the “determining ground of the will” [Bestimmungsgrund

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71 See KPV 5:116-117 and MS 6:377-378. Interestingly, in both cases Kant raises this topic in anticipation of the “eudaimonist” criticism that self-contentment is the motive for acting virtuously. Kant’s view is that self-contentment cannot be the motive because virtuous action requires that the action be done for the sake of virtue itself. Therefore, as I note in the body of this chapter, Kant’s view is that self-contentment can never reveal itself to someone if they make the achievement of self-contentment the underlying motive of their action.
That is to say, self-contentment cannot arise for us if our action is motivated simply by a desire for self-contentment. For, if we are motivated by this desire for self-contentment then we are not acting out of respect for the moral law. We would instead be acting for the sake of satisfying some personal interest, in which case we would not be mastering the urgings of our inclinations. Self-contentment is not, therefore, an experience that we consciously aim at realizing. It is instead a feeling that inevitably arises within us when we act out of respect for the moral law.

Second, notice how self-contentment, along with the feelings of humiliation and respect, define and characterize our specifically human experience of morality. If we were a purely rational being, for instance, we would not encounter this feeling of self-contentment. As Kant himself describes self-contentment it is a feeling that involves “overcoming incentives to vice” [MS 6:377]. Since a purely rational being does not (and cannot) encounter the temptations of sensibility, a purely rational being cannot feel self-content about having acted dutifully. It cannot feel self-content, because as a being who is completely independent from need and inclination [KPV 5:32, 129], a purely rational being cannot, and therefore does not, sense a “mastery” over sensible impulses. For Kant, a more appropriate term for a purely rational being would instead be bliss or beatitude [Seligkeit] because, according to Kant’s definition of this term, Seligkeit is the state of a being who is completely free from the incessant urgings of sensibility [KPV 5:25]. But beatitude is not self-contentment [KPV 5:118]. Whereas beatitude is the state of a being who is completely independent from the dimension of sensibility, self-contentment arises for a being whose existence is tied to sensibility, because self-
contentment is how one feels about oneself when one overcomes and masters the demands of one’s sensible nature. Self-contentment therefore belongs exclusively to the experience of a finite rational being who, despite the unavoidable urgings of his or her sensible nature, has acted out of respect for the moral law.

Following this same line of thought we can see how the feelings of humiliation and respect specifically characterize the way we, as rational animals, live and experience the claims of morality. A purely rational being cannot feel humiliated, for instance, because they are not at all enticed or allured by sensible delights. Nor can such a being feel respect for the moral law. Kant briefly notes this curious point in passing:

[i]t should be noted that since respect is an effect on feeling and hence on the sensibility of a rational being, it presupposes this sensibility and so too the finitude of such beings on whom the moral law imposes respect, and that respect for the law cannot be attributed to a supreme being or even to one free from all sensibility, in whom this cannot be an obstacle to sensibility [KPV 5:76]

Whether we understand respect in terms of a commanding authority that we ought to obey (attentio) or whether we interpret it in terms of an elevated sense of reverence (reverentia), respect is an attitude that expresses the distinctive way in which we human beings encounter the moral law. A purely rational being does not encounter the moral law in terms of a commanding imperative that it ought to follow because such a being necessarily harmonizes its will with universal law anyway [G 4:439, KPV 5:32]. Moreover, a purely rational being does not sense the elevation that we feel when we represent the moral law because a purely rational being cannot, and therefore does not, feel as though it “rises above” a field of sensibility. For, the moral law cannot appear as though it is “above and beyond” sensibility to a being
who is completely independent from the dimension of sensibility. We may not (yet) know the bliss or beatitude of a purely rational being, but that is because our lived experience is unavoidably influenced by, and intimately tied to, the needs and interests of sensibility. As moral animals, our access to the moral law is revealed to us through feelings like humiliation, respect, and self-contentment. These feelings define and characterize the specific manner by which we experience morality, because they each express our existential tie to the dimensions of animality and reason.

III. Summary Results of this Experiential Account

(a) Summary

By focusing our attention upon the topics of happiness and moral feeling we have been able to uncover some leading features of the experiential dimension of Kant’s moral philosophy. That is to say, our analysis of these two topics have helped us to characterize and illuminate Kant’s account of how we become aware of ourselves as moral persons in the world. When we represent [Vorstellung] to ourselves the moral law, for instance, we have seen that we are not simply engaged in an intellectual exercise that abstractly “tests” the universality of our maxims. This cognitive activity of “maxim testing” certainly transpires, but this activity needs to be understood within the context of our “naturally necessary” desire for personal happiness. We are not simply rational angels or gods for Kant. We are instead rational animals who are spontaneously enticed and allured by the delights of our lived surroundings. Thus, when we become conscious of the moral law, Kant observes how we cannot help but feel humiliated by the inevitable urgings of our
inclinations. We incessantly want to pursue all of our impulses even though we know that there are some inclinations whose underlying maxim we should not pursue. Moral consciousness is therefore not simply an autonomous rational exercise for us. It is instead lived as a humbling and humiliating experience.

But Kant insists that our moral consciousness is not simply one of shame and humiliation. He presents our lived recognition of our moral vocation as an elevating and ennobling experience. Through our representation of the moral law we discover that we are not simply slaves to the incessant demands of our inclinations. Although we cannot erase or abolish the inevitable urgings of our natural inclinations, we are nevertheless aware of an active power within ourselves that is capable of legislating our action. This awareness awakens our existence to an elevated sense of respect for reason. For, as reason-able [das Vermögen der Vernunft], we discover that we are the kind of being who can “rise above” the field of sensibility and who can therefore legislate his or her own action. This is an ennobling and liberating experience for us because we discover that we are not imprisoned by the insuperable demands of our needs and inclinations. As animals endowed with reason, reason points our existence toward a dimension of meaning whose laws and commands we must strive to realize. According to Kant’s descriptions, we cannot help but feel a profound sense of respect and reverence for this higher vocation that reason has bestowed upon our lives.

Kant moreover offers us descriptions concerning how we would feel about ourselves when we strive to accomplish what the moral law demands. His view is fairly straightforward: we would feel good about ourselves. Kant’s view is that we would feel
content with ourselves when we perform our moral duty, because, through our action, we will have accomplished what was demanded of us. This feeling of self-contentment ensues because we have demonstrated to ourselves that we actually can master the urgings of our inclinations. And this happens to feel good to us. Just like a carpenter would feel good about having built a home to the best of his abilities, and just like a tennis player would feel good about being successful in a tennis match, we would feel good about doing what we know is expected of us. We would feel calmed and soothed because we would know that whatever temptation comes our way we could resist its urges. Meanwhile, if we do not follow the command of the moral law, Kant describes how we would not be able to feel good about ourselves. We would instead feel guilty and ashamed. This guilt may not manifest itself externally to others, but Kant insists that we would not be able to avoid feeling the “pangs of our conscience” internally. We would know that we had done something wrong, even if nobody around us knew about it.

_Incessant urgings for personal satisfaction, humiliation, respect, and self-contentment._

These are some of the fundamental experiences that Kant’s moral philosophy draws upon. It may be true that the central concern of his foundational works in ethics attended to the _a priori_ form of the moral law, but this does not mean that we cannot uncover these concrete lived experiences in his moral philosophy. An experiential approach to Kant’s thinking therefore shows us how, in our lived encounter with the moral law, we respect and revere the rationality that elevates our existence above a merely hedonistic style of life.
(b) A Response to the Three Criticisms?

So how does such an experiential approach to Kant help us to address those criticisms that have contested the existential veracity of Kant’s moral philosophy? We should already be able to recognize the beginnings of a response to the charge of dogmatism.

The dogmatist critique alleges that Kant’s foundational appeal to an incontestable “fact of pure reason” appears as nothing more than a dogmatic assertion. This criticism contends that since Kant grounds his moral philosophy upon an *a priori* fact of rational autonomy, he is basing his moral philosophy upon a rational abstraction that has no basis or purchase in our actual lived experience. Thus, Kant illegitimately grounds his moral philosophy upon an purportedly incontestable “fact” that does not resonate or correspond to the manner in which we actually live our lives.

Based upon what we have outlined above we can say in response to this criticism that Kant’s moral fact is not *simply* an abstract consciousness of the moral law. It is true to say, of course, that moral obligation is grounded upon an *a priori* fact of rational autonomy, but to understand Kant’s fact in these *a priori* terms exclusively fails to fully appreciate the sense in which our consciousness of the moral law inevitably “produces” experiential “effects” that can be tested against the backdrop of one’s own lived experience. As we described in this chapter, when we adopt a first person perspective with respect to the topics of happiness and moral feeling, we can see how Kant’s writings offer us a rather dynamic picture of our experience of moral obligation. I will say much more about this particular response to the charge of dogmatism in chapter four of this study, but suffice it to note here that the dogmatist criticism seems to misunderstand the
specifically human sense in which Kant thinks that this “fact of pure reason” is a “most common” [KPV 5:27] and “undeniable” [KPV 5:32] feature of our lives. As an experiential approach to Kant clearly shows, when Kant claims that this fact is a “most common” and “undeniable” feature of our ordinary moral lives he certainly does not mean to say that every human being will readily agree that our lives are governed by an abstract idea [Idee] of reason. As we have seen above, Kant does not think that human beings encounter this moral fact as a mere rational abstraction; he thinks that human beings encounter this fact by means of fundamental lived experiences such as humiliation, respect and self-contentment. I submit that these fundamental experiences are what Kant takes to be “most common” and “undeniable,” because, according to an experiential rendering of Kant’s ethics, these are the experiences that reveal the categorical command of the fact of pure reason to us. The French Canadian Kant scholar Marceline Morais draws a very similar conclusion when she claims that: “the moral law does not manifest itself to consciousness [conscience] except through a feeling of respect.”

When Kant appeals to the “undeniability” of the fact of pure reason, then, he

72 Marceline Morais. “Le sentiment moral comme condition subjective de la moralité chez kant,” Les sources de la philosophie kantienne au XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles, edited by R. Theis et L. Sosoe (Paris: Vrin, 2005), p. 217. Morais argues that Kant’s feeling of respect is a necessary subjective condition of the “fact of pure reason.” In other words, Kant’s “fact of pure reason” is not intelligible to us except by a feeling of respect. I would only add that the feeling of humiliation necessarily accompanies Kant’s feeling of respect. Morais’ full quote is as follows: “Nos précédentes analyses ont démontré que la loi morale elle-même ne se manifestait à la conscience que par l’entremise d’un sentiment, le respect, qui fournissant à la volonté un mobile, permet à la loi morale d’être à la fois le principe et l’objet de notre volonté. Il en résulte que le jugement pratique lui-même repose sur une condition subjective nécessaire en cela qu’il présuppose en nous l’existence d’une faculté, soit celle d’être affecté a priori par une loi. Autrement dit, l’affirmation suivant laquelle la loi morale comme fait de raison est une donnée qui s’impose naturellement à tous les êtres raisonnables sont dotés de la faculté d’êtres affecté a priori par une telle loi” (p. 217). English translation: “Our preceding analyses have demonstrated that the moral law does not manifest itself to consciousness except through a feeling of respect, which supplies our will with a motivational force that permits the moral law to be at the same time the principle and the object of our will. As a result, practical judgment itself rests upon a necessary subjective condition in that it presupposes within us the existence of
is not simply asserting some abstract or dogmatic claim about reason. Kant is referring instead to this complex interplay of experiences that range from hedonistic urges to humiliation to respect to self-contentment. These kinds of feelings reveal how we come to encounter the claims of morality.

I will return to this response to the dogmatist criticism in chapter four of this study. For the moment, however, let us consider whether or not this experiential approach to Kant can help us to respond to the charges of formalism and rigorism. Although this experiential approach to Kant has, in a sense, worked to “de-formalize” his seemingly abstract claims about morality, I believe that we are not yet able to fully respond to either the formalism or rigorism charge. If we recall, the formalism critique contends that Kant’s principle of morality is too abstract and general to be instantiated in our concrete lives, while the rigorism critique contends that Kant’s categorical imperative is too strict and inflexible to be applied to the situational complexity of human experience. Both these criticisms take issue with the sense in which Kant’s principle of morality is actually instantiated and applied to our human lives. To this point in this study, however, what my experiential approach to Kant has shown is the concrete sense in which we feel and experience ourselves as bound to Kant’s categorical imperative, i.e., how we become aware of ourselves as beings with moral responsibilities. We have not yet uncovered, however, the living sense by which we actually enact and practice the demands of Kant’s imperative. That is to say, although we have uncovered the experiential manner by which

a faculty, namely that of being affected a priori by a law. In other words, the command that stems from the moral law as a fact of reason is given naturally to all rational beings who are equipped with the faculty of being affected a priori by such a law.”
we discover ourselves as morally obligated, we have not yet described the concrete sense in which we ought to actually perform the claims of morality. Since we have not yet clarified Kantian descriptions concerning our actual moral practice, we are therefore not yet able to properly respond to the charges of formalism and rigorism. In other words, although we have shown how we become aware of Kant’s principle of morality, we have not yet uncovered the concrete sense in which Kant’s principle is applied to, and thus instantiated in, our human lives.

What is required, then, is an approach to Kant that can couple together the descriptions that we have already assembled with an experiential account of Kantian moral practice. That is to say, a full and proper concretization of Kant’s moral philosophy will require us to not only show how we become of aware of his categorical imperative, but how we ought to act as moral persons in the world. In order to uncover the experiential dimension of Kantian moral practice, I propose that we turn our attention toward Kant’s 1798 publication, his *Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue*. As we will see in the next chapter, this later work offers us a taxonomy of ethical duties that Kant thinks stem from his supreme principle of morality. In the next chapter we will therefore need to uncover the experiential manner by which Kant thinks that we ought to perform and enact these particular ethical duties. If we can couple together the descriptions that we have assembled in this chapter with an experiential account of

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73 *The Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue* is the name of the second part of Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals*. Part one of Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals, The Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Right*, was published a year earlier in 1797.
Kantian moral practice, then I believe we will be able to fully respond to those criticisms that have contested the existential veracity of Kant’s moral philosophy.

IV. Conclusion

In this chapter we have outlined and offered an experiential account of how one feels and recognizes oneself as bound to Kant’s categorical imperative. We have seen that Kant offers us a rather complex and dynamic picture of moral experience that ranges in description from insuperable hedonistic urges to humiliation to respectful reverence to peace of mind. We should already be able to recognize the sense in which such a concretization can help us to respond to the dogmatist critique. However, since we have not yet illuminated the experiential dimension of Kantian moral practice, we are not yet able to fully address the charges of formalism and rigorism. In order to properly respond to those charges, the next chapter will need to couple together the descriptions that we have uncovered in this chapter with an experiential account of Kantian moral practice. I propose that the best account of Kantian moral practice is to be found in his later work, Part II of his *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant’s *Doctrine of Virtue*. It will therefore be incumbent upon the next chapter to offer an experiential account of the basic conclusions that Kant derives in that text.
CHAPTER THREE:
KANT’S DOCTRINE OF VIRTUE

Virtue is, therefore, the moral strength of a human being’s will
-Immanuel Kant

The *Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue* is the title of the second part of Kant’s 1798 publication, the *Metaphysics of Morals* [*Metaphysik der Sitten*].\(^{74}\) This publication is remarkable for several different reasons. In letters dated as early as 1768 Kant claimed to be “working on a metaphysics of morals.”\(^{75}\) Even during the so-called “silent decade” of the 1770’s Kant not only repeatedly acknowledged that he was still working on a metaphysics of morals, but he also reported to be very close to publishing

\(^{74}\) All references will be to Mary J. Gregor’s translation of the *Metaphysics of Morals* in *Immanuel Kant. Practical Philosophy*, ed. A. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 353-605. The first part of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, the *Metaphysical First Principles of Right*, was published a year earlier, but the final system of the *Metaphysics of Morals* did not appear until 1798.

\(^{75}\) In a letter to Herder in the May of 1768 Kant writes: “At present my vision is directed chiefly upon recognizing the authentic determination and the limits of human capacities and limitations, and I believe I have succeeded in it as far as morals is concerned, so that I am now working on a metaphysics of morals, where I imagine myself able to provide the evident and fruitful principles and also the method according to which the very wide ranging but for the most part still fruitless strivings of this species of cognition have to be directed, if they are ever to achieve anything of utility” [C 10:74]. Three years earlier, in a letter to Lambert dated December of 1765, Kant wrote of his intention to write treatises on “the metaphysical foundations of natural philosophy and the metaphysical foundations of practical philosophy” [C 10:56]. Allen Wood notes that in 1767 Hamann reported to Herder that “Mr Kant is working on a metaphysics of morals” (see p.1 of Allen Wood’s essay “The Final Form of Kant’s Practical Philosophy”). Since Kant did not produce any original writings in the 1760’s it is difficult to know exactly what he meant by the expression “metaphysics of morals.” Wood notes that in 1768 the term “metaphysics of morals” was probably meant to denote Kant’s rejection of the moral sense theory of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, viz., that morality must be grounded in the analysis of concepts rather than in the immediacy of feeling (Wood, “The Final Form of Kant’s Practical Philosophy,” p. 2). Lewis White Beck detailed the history surrounding Kant’s plans to write a metaphysics of morals on pp. 5-18 of his book *A Commentary on Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason*.
such a work. However, Kant’s first major work in moral philosophy, his *Groundwork of a Metaphysics of Morals*, did not appear until 1785, and this text merely purported to lay the ground for a future metaphysics of morals. Kant would later publish his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), which, as we have seen, dealt with many of the foundational issues that were raised in the *Groundwork*. But like the *Groundwork*, Kant’s second *Critique* did not yet present his much promised “metaphysics of morals.” It was not until almost ten years after the publication of his second *Critique* that Kant would finally present a work under that particular heading.

What is most remarkable about this history is not that it took Kant nearly thirty years to finally publish his *Metaphysics of Morals*. What is most remarkable is that many of Kant’s readers have tended to overlook this later publication, and have therefore considered his *Groundwork* and second *Critique* to be the definitive expression of his moral philosophy. In the Preface to her 1963 interpretation of Kant, *Laws of Freedom*, Mary J. Gregor remarks that this general tendency to overlook Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* has led to some rather significant distortions of his moral philosophy. She says:

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76 In a letter to Lambert in 1770 Kant writes: “I have resolved this winter to put in order and complete my investigations of pure moral philosophy, in which no empirical principles are to be found, as it were the Metaphysics of Morals” [C 10:97]. No such work would appear, however. In 1772 Kant writes to Herz of his plan to write a book entitled “The Boundaries of Sensibility and Reason” (this would later become the book that the world would know as the *Critique of Pure Reason*). In this letter Kant writes that this book will contain two parts: one theoretical, the other practical. The part on practical philosophy will include the “first principles of morality” [C 10:129]. In yet another letter to Herz a year later Kant announced his plan to complete his “transcendental philosophy, which is actually a critical examination of pure reason, as then I can turn to metaphysics: it has only two parts, the metaphysics of nature and the metaphysics of morals. I shall bring out the latter of these first and I really look forward to it” [C 10:145]. No such writings in moral philosophy would be published during the 1770’s however.

77 In the Preface to his *Groundwork* Kant writes: “Intending to publish someday a metaphysics of morals I issue this groundwork in advance” [G 4:391]. In a letter to Schütz written five months after the publication of his *Groundwork* Kant writes that he will be “proceeding immediately with the full composition of the metaphysics of morals” [C 10:406].
While the *Grundlegung* and, to a lesser extent, the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* are widely studied today, Kant’s third major work in moral philosophy is almost completely ignored. At first glance we might regard this omission as a rather unfortunate, yet not too serious one. Since the *Grundlegung* is logically prior to the *Metaphysik der Sitten* we should be able to understand and evaluate the earlier work apart from the later one. But in fact the neglect of the *Metaphysik der Sitten* has left us with a distorted view of Kant’s moral philosophy as a whole. Had the programme of Kantian studies included, from the beginning, due attention to the *Metaphysik der Sitten*, the view that Kant’s position implies, for example, that the consequences, ends and circumstances of our actions are morally irrelevant, or that the test of a maxim’s morality is its freedom from logical contradiction when regarded as a universal law, could never have taken root.\(^78\)

What Gregor finds troubling is not simply that the neglect of Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* has led to a general misunderstanding of his moral philosophy, but that this neglect itself has led to many of the criticisms that readers have commonly experienced with Kant. Commenting almost forty years after Gregor’s book, Allen Wood has voiced a somewhat similar concern about contemporary readers of Kant’s moral philosophy. He writes:

> The *Metaphysics of Morals*…ought to surprise anyone whose image of Kantian ethics is based on the earlier, more foundational works. In effect, however, this means that *The Metaphysics of Morals* ought to be both surprising and enlightening to most Anglophone moral philosophers, since their image of Kantian ethics is derived almost exclusively from the *Groundwork* and second *Critique*. Even those who have dipped into *The Metaphysics of Morals* seldom let it shape their conception of the basic principles and standpoint of Kantian ethics that they have obtained especially from the first fifty or so pages of the *Groundwork*. They have almost never let it significantly influence their interpretation of what they have already read in those pages. Consequently, the familiar image of Kantian ethics is in serious error on some fairly basic points.\(^79\)

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\(^79\) Allen Wood, “The Final Form of Kant’s Practical Philosophy,” p. 2.
Wood here notes that the tendency to overlook Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* is still prevalent today, and, like Gregor, Wood believes that this tendency has led to some rather distorted views of what Kant is actually proposing.

In this chapter I will explore and investigate the second part of Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals*, his *Doctrine of Virtue*. My central aim in this chapter will be to offer an experiential account of some of the basic conclusions that Kant draws in this text. My primary goal will not be to offer a complete or exhaustive reading of this eminently complex work (such a worthy task lies far beyond the boundaries of this particular study). Instead, my goal will be to simply show how a first person account of Kant’s doctrine of virtue can help to illuminate our understanding and appreciation of his moral philosophy. My working hypothesis is that an experiential characterization of Kant’s doctrine of virtue will not only help to accentuate our response to the charge of dogmatism, but that such a characterization will also help us to properly address the charges of formalism and rigorism.

In order to offer this experiential account I will need to begin this chapter by first outlining some of the basic aims and arguments that are at work in Kant’s text. As Wood notes above, this text ought to surprise anyone whose only familiarities with Kant are his earlier foundational works. Thus, before I offer an experiential account of Kant’s doctrine of virtue, it will be important to first explain what Kant’s doctrine of virtue is trying to argue and achieve. After outlining some of Kant’s basic conclusions in this work, I will consider how these conclusions are to be conceptualized from a first person point of view. That is to say, I will attempt to illuminate the sense in which these basic
conclusions can be visualized from an experiential perspective. My aim will be to present this vision in such a way that it can speak to both the criticisms that are commonly levelled against Kant, and to our on-going interpretation of Kant’s moral philosophy.

I. Kant’s Doctrine of Virtue

(a) Doctrine of Virtue

Part II of Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* is entitled the *Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue*. One of the central aims of Kant’s doctrine of virtue [*Tugendlehre*] is to apply the supreme principle of morality to the human being. Kant’s conception of how this principle was to be applied to the human being seems to have undergone a number of changes during the thirty or so years in which he was working out his full system of ethics. In the Preface to his *Groundwork*, for instance, Kant distinguishes between what he calls a metaphysics of morals and a practical anthropology [*Rechtslehre* and *Tugendlehre*]. The doctrine of right concerns juridical duties that are externally coerced and can be fulfilled by someone independently of the motive of their action. The doctrine of virtue, on the other hand, concerns ethical duties that are enforced internally and whose duties can only be fulfilled in terms of the proper motive of duty. My attention in this study will be focused upon Kant’s doctrine of virtue since it is this doctrine that bears most prominently upon his moral philosophy.

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80 The text of the *Metaphysics of Morals* is divided into two main parts: (i) the Doctrine of Right [*Rechtslehre*] and (ii) the Doctrine of Virtue [*Tugendlehre*]. The doctrine of right concerns juridical duties that are externally coerced and can be fulfilled by someone independently of the motive of their action. The doctrine of virtue, on the other hand, concerns ethical duties that are enforced internally and whose duties can only be fulfilled in terms of the proper motive of duty. My attention in this study will be focused upon Kant’s doctrine of virtue since it is this doctrine that bears most prominently upon his moral philosophy.

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aim is to do so in order to derive those ethical duties that are binding upon human action in the world. Kant calls these ethical duties “duties of virtue” because virtue signifies “the moral strength of a human being’s will in fulfilling his duty” [MS 6:405]. That is to say, for Kant, virtue names the “considered resolve” [MS 6:380] of a human being to overcome the self-serving temptations of our sensible impulses.

So what, then, are those ethical duties that Kant thinks are applicable to the human being? Or, in other words, what are those duties that Kant thinks a virtuous human being would obey? In order to answer this question Kant turns our attention toward the nature of human action in the world. On Kant’s account all human action is essentially purposive [MS 6:385, cf. G 4:427, KPV 5:34 and 58, KU 5:196-197]. That is to say, every human action aims for the sake of a certain end. Since all human action is motivated by ends, Kant argues that there must exist some *dutiful* ends that a human being ought to pursue and realize. After all, in Kant’s own words, since all human action is motivated by a pursuit of ends:

> there must be some ends that are also (i.e., by their concept) duties. – For, were there no such ends, then all ends would hold for practical reason only as means to other ends; and since there can be no action without an end, a *categorical* imperative would be impossible [MS 6:385]

Kant’s view here is that actions that are commanded by the categorical imperative must have ends of some sort, otherwise all dutiful action would be a mere means for the sake of ends that are not themselves moral (e.g., for the sake of personal happiness). Since the commands of morality cannot be conditional upon the setting of arbitrary or hypothetical ends, and since all human action is end-directed, there must exist some ends that belong particular duties that are universally binding upon the general nature of the human being, whose nature is known only by experience.
to the categorical nature of the supreme principle of morality.\textsuperscript{82} That is to say, there must exist some ends that a human being ought to pursue, regardless of whether one is sensibly inclined to pursue that end or not. In order, then, to derive those ethical duties that are binding upon the human being, Kant’s doctrine of virtue will need to uncover those ends that are at the same time duties. For, those dutiful ends will be the ends that a human being’s actions ought to strive to realize in order to become virtuous.

\textsuperscript{82} At a superficial glance Kant’s appeal to the “ends” of the categorical imperative may appear to be a reversal from his position in his \textit{Groundwork}. In the \textit{Groundwork} Kant describes the nature of the categorical imperative in the following way: “[t]he categorical imperative would be that which represented an action as necessary of itself, without reference to another end” [G 4:414]. In contrast from the nature of a hypothetical imperative, which is an imperative that rests upon the means for bringing about a possible end [G 4:414], Kant’s description of the categorical imperative in his \textit{Groundwork} may make it sound as though human actions that accord with the categorical imperative do not act for the sake of any end whatsoever. This way of reading Kant has led some to think that Kant has somehow reversed himself by appealing to the “ends” of morality in his \textit{Metaphysics of Morals}. I believe that this faulty way of reading Kant largely stems from a misunderstanding of Kant’s intentions in his \textit{Groundwork} and his \textit{Metaphysics of Morals}. As we discussed in chapter 1, Kant’s \textit{Groundwork} proposes “nothing more than the search for and establishment of the supreme principle of morality [G 4:392].” Thus, since the primary aim of Kant’s \textit{Groundwork} was to uncover the nature of the supreme principle of morality, it is not surprising that his analysis of that principle abstracted away any consideration from human ends. For Kant, the business of systematically applying the supreme principle of morality to the human being was to be the task of a \textit{Metaphysics of Morals}, not a \textit{Groundwork for a Metaphysics of Morals}. Since, then, Kant’s \textit{Metaphysics of Morals} aims to apply the supreme principle of morality to the human being, it is reasonable for Kant to now consider the ends of action that belong to the categorical imperative. It is reasonable, because Kant has consistently maintained throughout all of his writings in moral philosophy that all human action is end-directed [G 4:427, KP V 5:34, 58, MS 6:385]. Thus, since all human action is essentially purposive, it remains to be seen in his \textit{Metaphysics of Morals} what ends the supreme principle of morality requires the human being to pursue. From this brief discussion we should be able to see how Kant’s discussion of the “ends” of the categorical imperative in his \textit{Metaphysics of Morals} does not amount to a reversal from the position of his \textit{Groundwork}. It does not amount to a reversal, because Kant’s \textit{Groundwork} was not focused upon uncovering the human ends of morality; he was more principally concerned with the nature of the supreme principle of morality. This consideration should moreover show us that, despite the common allegation against him, Kant is by no means an arch-enemy of teleological moral philosophies. Kant in fact agrees with the view that the \textit{practice} of morality requires an appeal to the ends of action. But Kant’s considered view on this topic is that these ends of morality are to be determined on the basis of a supreme principle of morality, and not vice versa. That is to say, for Kant, in the study of moral philosophy, the ends of morality should not be determined prior to the determination of the foundational principle of morality. Thus, it is not true to say that Kant is against teleological moral philosophies. What Kant objects to instead are those teleological systems of ethics that are \textit{grounded} upon the ends of moral action, rather than upon the principles of morality.
(b) Ends That are Duties

Kant names the following two ends as duties: (i) one’s own perfection and (ii) the happiness of others [MS 6:385]. Some commentators have noted that Kant’s derivation of these two ends is not altogether straightforward. What seems clear, however, is that Kant intends to derive these two ends from the nature of the categorical imperative itself. That is to say, Kant’s dutiful ends must somehow stem from his supreme principle of morality. We know from section II of Kant’s *Groundwork* that the material end [Zweck] of the categorical imperative is rational nature [vernünftiges Wesen] because rational nature is that which can be good in-itself [G 4:436]. For Kant, then, the ends that are also duties must be ends that honor and respect the unconditional dignity [Würde] of rational nature. Since human beings are those beings that are endowed with reason [MS 6:456], we can begin to see why Kant connects the ends of morality to the two leading drives [Triebfeder] of the human being, viz., to the motives of duty and happiness. That is to say, since the human being is the material end of our concrete moral action in the world, we can see why Kant thinks that one is under the obligation to set the leading ends of the human being as the ultimate ends of one’s own morally oriented life. One is under obligation to make these two ends the ends of one’s life, because those actions that aim to pursue these two ends will be actions that respect and honor the dignity of humanity. For

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83 Even sympathetic commentators have remarked that Kant’s reasoning on this point seems a bit “hurried” and at times “sketchy” (see, e.g., Gregor, *Laws of Nature*, p. 88). In recognition of certain perceived shortcomings in Kant’s argumentation, Allen Wood has emphasized that we should not expect Kant to be offering us a rigoristic deduction of these two ends [see KE 60-65]. A rather unsympathetic reading of Kant’s reasoning states that: “[t]here is one serious defect in Kant’s ethics of ends: he never demonstrates the existence of obligatory ends. Without giving any reason, he names two such ends, the perfection of oneself and the happiness of others. This is a glaring gap in his theory of virtue,” T.K. Seung, *Kant's Platonic Revolution in Moral and Political Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994) p. 144.
Kant, then, a virtuous human being will be someone whose conduct expresses respect for humanity by acting for the sake of those duties that ultimately aim to perfect oneself and to promote the happiness of other human beings.  

84 Since many 18th Century readers of Kant would have been familiar with the writings of Christian Wolff, it is perhaps worth noting that Wolff thought that the perfection of oneself included the happiness of others, i.e., Wolff thought that the duty of self-perfection required that everyone ought to do as much as possible for the happiness of others.  See C. Wolff, Reasonable Thoughts about the Actions of Men, for the Promotion of their Happiness, translated by J.B. Schneewind in Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 1:333-50.  I mention this point because it may help to explain some of Kant’s motivation in deriving these two particular ends of morality.  Such an explanation would by no means justify Kant’s reasoning, but it may help us to better understand the context in which Kant derived these two ends.  A fuller exploration of why Kant adopted these two ends may lead us to consider how Kant’s account of the highest good bears upon these two ends of morality.  Nelson Potter has explored this point in his essay “Kant on Ends That Are At the Same Time Duties,” in Pacific Philosophical Quarterly (66: 1985, pp. 78-92).  Potter argues that since Kant’s highest good involves the twin components of moral virtue and happiness, we can begin to see how one’s duty to promote the highest good in the world parallels one’s duty to promote the dutiful ends of morality.  In Potter’s view, our duties to these twin components depend upon whether we are willing the highest good for ourselves or the highest good for others.  As Kant himself argues, with respect to our own person, we have a duty to perfect our will, but we cannot have a duty to promote our own happiness because we naturally strive for happiness anyway [MS 6:386].  Meanwhile, since we cannot formulate maxims on behalf of other human beings, we cannot be under obligation to perfect the will of others [MS 6:386], but since we are not naturally inclined to promote the happiness of other human beings we do have an obligation to promote the happiness of others [MS 6:393].  On Potter’s account, the duty to realize the obligatory ends of morality therefore parallels one’s duty to promote the highest good in the world: if we are willing the highest good for ourselves, then we are willing our own moral virtue, but if we are willing the highest good for others, then we are willing their happiness.  This is an interesting and illuminating way of interpreting Kant’s derivation of the ends of morality.  A potential shortcoming of this interpretation, however, is that it is difficult to find passages where Kant explicitly talks about the willingness of the highest good for other human beings.  We could respond by saying that Kant’s reasoning is simply implicit on this point, but if we take Potter’s interpretation to the limit then it may have to mean constraining our duty to promote the happiness of others in terms of the narrow sense of their worthiness to be happiness.  However, Kant’s discussion of our duty to promote the happiness of others does not appear to be contingent upon whether or not they deserve to be happy.  Thus, in order to make Potter’s interpretation work, we would at the very least require a broader conception of one’s pursuit of the highest good for other human beings.  In any event, as we should be able to notice, Kant’s derivation of these two particular ends of morality is perhaps not as rigorous and straightforward as we might like, but it is by no means disconnected from what Kant’s general line of reasoning has argued throughout his moral philosophy.  For Kant, we have a duty to respect rational nature.  Since we cannot formulate maxims on behalf of other human beings [MS 6:386], we cannot be under obligation to perfect the will of another human being in the same way that we are under obligation to perfect our own person.  Thus, since one is under obligation toward others, and since one cannot be under obligation to perfect the will of others, one ought to therefore promote an end that: (i) all other human beings do in fact desire and (ii) it is possible for someone to actually realize that end.  From this line of reasoning, we should be able to see how and why Kant thinks that one’s duty to respect humanity means that one is under obligation to promote one’s own self-perfection and the happiness of others.  This line of reasoning may not be deductive, but it is by no means contradictory or implausible.  See John Atwell’s book Ends and Principles in Kant’s Moral Thought (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986)
Kant’s taxonomy of the numerous ethical duties that follow from these two ends is rather lengthy and detailed. However, since the charges of formalism and rigorism are specifically addressed toward Kantian moral practice, it will be helpful for our purposes if we briefly indicate the structure and nature of Kant’s overall system of ethical duties.

Just as the ends of morality are divided into two parts so too is Kant’s taxonomy of ethical duties. Basic to Kant’s classification is a division between: (i) duties to oneself and (ii) duties toward others. Under the heading of “duties to oneself” Kant distinguishes between perfect and imperfect duties [MS 6:390, cf. G 4:421*]. Whereas perfect duties require a specific action that admits of no “playroom” [Spielraum], an imperfect duty allows for some degree of latitude. So, for example, it is a perfect duty not to commit suicide [MS 6:422], while it is an imperfect duty to cultivate one’s own natural talents [MS 6:444-446]. The latter is an imperfect duty because the specific manner by which one actualizes this end depends upon a host of considerations that are particular to the individual (e.g., one’s particular natural talents or capacities). Perfect duties to oneself are further divided into duties toward oneself as an animal being and as a moral being [MS 6:421-442]. Kant names the following (all negative) duties as duties toward oneself as an animal being: do not commit suicide [MS 6:422], do not misuse sex [MS 6:424] and do not stupefy oneself by gluttony [MS 6:427]. He names the following duties as duties to oneself as a moral being: do not lie [MS 6:429-430], do not deny oneself the means for a good life [MS 6:432-433], and do not be servile [MS 6:434-435]. Under the heading of imperfect duties to oneself Kant names “natural” and “moral perfection” [MS

for a study that devotes close attention to the topic of whether not there is an inconsistency between Kant’s appeal to foundational principles and the ends of moral action. See especially chapter 5, pp. 87-104.
Since imperfect duties to oneself admit of latitude, Kant does not name any particular duties that one ought to follow under these headings. That is to say, although one ought to set one’s natural and moral perfection as the end of one’s action, it is incumbent upon the particular individual to actualize one’s own natural and moral perfection in terms of one’s own relevant skills, resources and circumstance.

Under the category of “duties toward others” Kant draws a distinction that closely resembles perfect and imperfect duties. He distinguishes between duties of respect (which correspond to the strictness of perfect duties) and duties of love (which correspond to the latitude of imperfect duties). Each duty of respect for others that Kant describes is characterized as a negative prohibition: do not be contemptuous [MS 6:463], do not be scandalous [MS 6:464], do not be arrogant [MS 6:465], do not defame [MS 6:466], and do not ridicule [MS 6:467]. The duties of love are as follows: be beneficent [MS 6:452-453], be grateful [MS 6:454-456], be sympathetic [MS 6:456-457]. Unlike duties of respect for others, these latter duties of love admit of latitude. For example, when acting beneficently one needs to take into consideration and accommodate the particular desires of another human being (e.g., is he rich?, is she sad?, what does he want?, etc.) as well as one’s own relevant resources and capabilities (e.g., what can I offer?, how can I help this person? is there a cure?, etc.). Therefore, although one is under the obligation to “be beneficent,” the particular manner by which one actualizes this command depends upon a host of considerations that may include one’s own relevant natural capacities and lived surroundings, as well as the particular desires of the one who one ought to help and love.
(c) Kant’s Derivation of Ethical Duties

As we can see, Kant’s system of ethical duties is rather extensive. It is easy to become lost in all of the details and distinctions that Kant’s application of the categorical imperative introduces. For our purposes, however, it is important to understand how Kant’s reasoning derives this system of ethical duties. Since, for example, the formalism critique contends that Kant cannot adequately provide us with a set of concrete ethical duties, it will be helpful to understand just how Kant’s reasoning arrived at this particular set of ethical duties.

In order to answer this question it is worth noticing that Kant himself never tries to derive the basic division between duties to oneself and duties toward others in terms of his first formulation of the categorical imperative, his formula of universal law: “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become universal law” [G 4:421].\(^{85}\) Kant’s fundamental division of duties instead

\(^{85}\) We might be tempted into thinking that the four examples of duties that Kant enumerates in section II of his *Groundwork* [G 4:421-24] represents an effort on his behalf to actually derive ethical duties on the basis of his formulation of universal law. This can be a tempting way of reading Kant for a variety of reasons: (i) Kant appeals to these four examples of duties after introducing his formula of universal law, (ii) Kant’s discussion of these examples specifically considers how that formulation of the categorical imperative relates to these four examples of duties, and (iii) immediately following his consideration of the fourth duty, Kant remarks that: “[t]hese are a few of the many actual duties, or at least of what we take to be such, whose derivation from the one principle above is clear” [G 4:424]. But, as Wood notes, when we read these four duties in Kant’s *Groundwork* we should be careful not to think that Kant’s aim was to actually derive these duties on the basis of the formula of universal law. Wood argues, and I think correctly, that Kant’s principal aim instead was to show how these four duties (duties which Kant probably thought his readers would find uncontroversial) cohered with the formulation of the categorical imperative understood as universal law. That is to say, Kant was simply trying to show his readers that when they violate a duty, they are typically trying to make themselves an exception to some principle that ought to hold universally for all rational beings [KE 71-75]. I believe that it would be an irresponsible reading of Kant to think that his treatment of these four examples actually amounted to a derivation of ethical duties. It would be an irresponsible reading of Kant for a variety of reasons. First of all, before Kant enumerates these four duties he makes the following remark in the margins: “I reserve the division of duties entirely for a future *Metaphysics of Morals*, so that the division here stands as one adopted at my discretion (for the sake of arranging my examples)” [G 4:421]. This remark clearly indicates that Kant’s treatment of these duties
follows rather naturally from his second formulation of the categorical imperative, his formula of respect of humanity: “so act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” [G 4:429]. Allen Wood has succinctly captured Kant’s derivation of ethical duties by means of this second formulation in the following way: “a duty \(d\) is a duty toward \(S\) if and only if \(S\) is a finite rational being and the requirement to comply with \(d\) is grounded on the requirement to respect humanity in the person of \(S\)” [KE 168]. Kant’s taxonomy of should be understood as merely provisional and incomplete. Thus, it should not be understood as Kant’s actual derivation of ethical duties. Two, as Kant indicates in the Preface to his *Groundwork*, instead of attempting to derive ethical duties, the primary goal of his *Groundwork* will be an attempt to search for and establish the supreme principle of morality [G 4:392]. Thus, since it does not belong to the scope and goal of Kant’s *Groundwork* to offer a derivation of ethical duties, it would be irresponsible to think that his text has actually presented us with one. Three, at this particular point in the text of the *Groundwork* Kant has not yet even considered the other formulas of the categorical imperative (viz., the formula of humanity and the formula of autonomy). Thus, since Kant has not yet even considered the other formulas of the categorical imperative, it would be irresponsible to presume that Kant’s first formulation of the categorical imperative is in fact the formula for deriving particular ethical duties. Four, where the text reads “[t]hese are a few of the many actual duties, or at least of what we take to be such, whose derivation from the one principle cited above is clear” [G 4:423] the word “derivation” is in some sense problematic. According to Allen Wood [KE 289n6], in both the 1785 and 1786 editions of Kant’s *Grundlegung* the text reads *Abteilung* (“partition,” “classification”) instead of *Ableitung* (“derivation”), which suggests that Kant perhaps meant to say that it is the classification of duties that is clear from the formula of universal law. This meaning is probably unlikely, however, especially since (as Wood notes) Kant probably would have used a word like *Einteilung* instead of *Abteilung* in order to make such a point. But at the very least this ambiguity suggests that it is not altogether obvious and clear what Kant means to say in his remark that immediately follows his treatment of the four duties. Fifth, and perhaps most importantly, for Kant the task of deriving ethical duties belongs to the goal of a *Metaphysics of Morals*, not to a *Groundwork of a Metaphysics of Morals*. Thus, to think that Kant’s *Groundwork* had already provided this derivation would be to not only overlook Kant’s own stated intentions in these two works, but it would also mean that the central task of his *Metaphysics of Morals* was in some sense superfluous. I mention all these considerations in order to highlight the fact that, although it may appear as though this particular section of Kant’s *Groundwork* derives ethical duties on the basis of his formula of universal law, such an appearance is simply an illusion. Kant was not trying to derive ethical duties in this particular section of the *Groundwork*. In this section of the *Groundwork*, Kant was simply trying to show how certain common examples of duties do in fact cohere with his first, and to that point merely provisional, formulation of the categorical imperative.

86 See also p. 325 of Allen Wood’s *Kant’s Ethical Thought*. In this latter text Wood offers the exact same formulation as he does in *Kantian Ethics* with the exception that the formulation in *Kantian Ethics* includes the modifier “finite” in its denotation of “rational being.” I believe that this modifier is a more adequate representation of Kant’s considered views since his *Metaphysics of Morals* does not attempt to derive any
ethical duties follows from his second formulation of the categorical imperative insofar as each ethical duty is a duty that aims to respect and honor the dignity of embodied rational nature. Thus, particular Kantian duties, for example, do not commit suicide, do not lie, develop one’s talents, refrain from ridicule and arrogance, engage in active sympathy with others, be grateful, etc., are each grounded in the requirement to respect the dignity in either one’s own person or in the person of another. Kant’s derivation of specific ethical duties, then, follows from his formulation of the categorical imperative understood as respect for humanity. In other words, for human beings, our concrete moral lives are oriented and guided by a set of ethical duties that each aim to respect and promote the dignity of humanity.

(d) Summary of Some Key Conclusions from Kant’s Doctrine of Virtue

As Wood noted at the outset of this chapter Kant’s doctrine of virtue ought to surprise anyone whose only familiarity with Kant’s ethics are his *Groundwork* and second *Critique*. Kant’s doctrine of virtue does not contradict his conclusions in those foundational works, but his manner of applying the categorical imperative introduces us to a number of considerations that are not easily anticipated on the basis of those earlier texts. For instance, it is not uncommon to read Kant’s earlier works and think that Kant’s principal formulation of the categorical imperative is his formula of universal law.  

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87 This tendency to treat Kant’s formula of universal law as his principal formulation of the categorical imperative is a very easy thing to do. Since the formula of universal law is the first formula of the categorical imperative that Kant presents in his *Groundwork*, and since his second *Critique* defines the “fundamental law of pure practical reason” as “so act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal law” [KPV 5:30] it is very tempting to think that Kant’s formula of universal law is his leading formulation of the categorical imperative. Allen Wood has argued...
Thus, one might expect that Kant would attempt to derive his system of ethical duties on the basis of that particular formulation of the categorical imperative. But not only does Kant nowhere attempt to derive his system of ethical duties on the basis of that first formulation, a “universalization test” is seldom mentioned in the numerous pages of Kant’s doctrine of virtue. Instead, since the ends that are also duties follow from Kant’s formulation of respect for humanity, Kant’s application of the moral law seems to overwhelmingly prefer the second formulation of the categorical imperative as the formula in terms of which particular ethical duties are to be derived. Thus, it may surprise some readers that Kant’s own application of the moral law gives priority to the formula of respect for humanity over the formula of universal law.

Moreover, unlike his emphases in his earlier works, Kant’s reasoning in his doctrine of virtue relies heavily upon the teleological language of ends. For Kant, since human action is essentially purposive and end-directed, the application of the moral law to human beings requires the introduction of ends that are at the same time duties. As we

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88 Wood remarks: “it is almost universally supposed that Kant’s conception of ordinary moral reasoning is that, when considering a course of action, we should formulate the appropriate maxim and decide whether it can be universalized. Kant’s admirers, in fact, as well as his critics, tend almost by reflex to think of the universalizability test as his most (or even his only) significant contribution to moral reasoning. But a universalizability test is used very seldom in the Metaphysics of Morals” (Wood, “The Final Form of Kant’s Practical Philosophy,” p. 4). Indeed, of the sixteen ethical duties that Kant lists in his doctrine of virtue, a test of universalizability is employed in connection with only one duty: the ethical duty of beneficence to others [MS 6:393, 453].

89 Of the sixteen ethical duties that Kant lists, the formula of humanity is explicitly named in connection with nine duties [MS 6:423, 425, 427, 429, 436, 444, 454, 456, 459, 462]. Four other duties are based on this formula by implication, since they are derived from the imperfect duty of acting from the motive of duty, which is based on the dignity of humanity [MS 6:392, 444].
saw above, Kant’s reasoning derives these two ends from the matter of the supreme principle of morality. Thus, when we read Kant’s moral philosophy it may be helpful to distinguish between his supreme principle of morality and the kind of moral deliberation that the application of this principle demands of human beings. That is to say, when applied to human action in the world, the commands of morality do not simply show themselves to us as an abstract principle of universal law giving. Instead, the commands of morality present themselves to us more prominently as obligatory ends that we ought to pursue and realize through our particular dutiful actions.

Another striking feature of Kant’s doctrine of virtue is the language of latitude [Spielraum]. Many of Kant’s ethical duties do not require the strict performance of a determinate action in order to be considered morally meritorious. Instead, many of Kant’s duties simply require that one sets a certain end to one’s action (e.g., develop one’s talents, be charitable to others, etc.), which therefore allows for a great deal of latitude in the actual manner by which someone can realize a particular ethical duty. Once again, it may be helpful to distinguish between Kant’s supreme principle of morality and the application of that principle to human existence. The nature of Kant’s supreme principle may indeed be categorical, but the actual practice of Kant’s ethics need not consist solely of a set of inflexible and exceptionless moral prohibitions. As Kant’s reasoning in his doctrine of virtue clearly suggests, a virtuous human being will largely have to decide for herself how to best actualize those ends that are at the same time duties. That is to say, a virtuous human being will be someone who will strive to realize the ends of self-perfection and the happiness of others in a way that is best suited to a
number of factors that may include one’s own individual skills, upbringing, surrounding economy and cultural practices.

Like his *Groundwork* and second *Critique*, Kant’s *Doctrine of Virtue* can be a very difficult text to interpret and understand. But certain basic conclusions do present themselves, and these conclusions help to inform the position that Kant’s moral philosophy is advancing. In order to better illuminate and visualize this position, I propose that we consciously adopt an experiential perspective with respect to these conclusions. That is to say, in order to better visualize the concrete character of Kantian moral practice, it will be helpful to ask ourselves how the basic results of Kant’s doctrine of virtue show themselves to us from the perspective of our lived experience. Such an approach to Kant will not only help to illuminate the standpoint of his ethics, but it should also help to defend him against those critics who have contested the existential veracity of his moral philosophy.

**II. An Experiential Approach to Kant’s Doctrine of Virtue**

*(a) A Picture of Kantian Moral Life*

Kant’s doctrine of virtue presents us with a picture of moral life that is not commonly associated with Kant’s ethics. The common picture of Kantian moral life, which largely stems from his *Groundwork* and second *Critique*, is that of a human being who fastidiously tests his maxims for universalizability. Indeed, the example that we used in the last chapter concerning the lost wallet followed that basic image. When confronted by the question concerning the lost wallet, we saw how a Kantian human being would have to consider whether or not lying (however much he may prefer or desire the
consequences of a lie) would be a universally agreeable maxim. I characterized the command of morality in that particular example in terms of the principle of universal law, because when Kant specifically treats of the topic of moralisches Gefühl in his second Critique he overwhelmingly describes the demands of morality in terms of law. And, since that very same text defines the “fundamental law of pure practical reason” as “so act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in the giving of universal law” [KPV 5:30], it is quite natural to presume that Kant pictures our felt encounter with morality in terms of the testing of our maxims for universalizability. That is to say, when one tries to illuminate the experiential sense in which we feel the commands of Kantian morality, it is common to picture our lived encounter with those commands in terms of a principle of universal law giving.

Kant’s doctrine of virtue by no means contradicts that picture of moral experience, but it does amplify and clarify this picture in a number of informative ways. First of all, Kant’s doctrine of virtue shows us how the commands of morality are not simply encountered by us as an infringement or resistance upon our insuperable pursuit of personal happiness. Moral commands certainly place checks and limitations upon our pretensions toward self-love, but Kant’s doctrine of virtue presents us with a much broader vision of moral life in which such a test of universalization is merely a partial element.

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90 In chapter III of book I of Kant’s second Critique (“On the incentives [Triebfeder] of pure practical reason”) Kant appeals to the word law [Gesetz] an astounding seventy-four times. In order to get a sense of the proportion of this number, consider the fact that he uses the word respect [Achtung] (arguably the central topic of the chapter) thirty-eight times and the word humanity [Menschheit] only twice.

91 When I say that Kant’s doctrine of virtue does not contradict that common picture of moral life my point is that Kant’s doctrine of virtue does not discount or erase the experience of testing one’s maxims for universalizability. As I will attempt to show in the following pages, Kant’s doctrine of virtue certainly includes such an experience, but it presents us with a much broader vision of moral life in which such a test of universalization is merely a partial element.
broader picture of moral life that also involves the active positing of ends. That is to say, a morally oriented life is not simply one wherein our moral consciousness places side constraints upon our subjective pursuit of happiness. If that picture were accurate, then a Kantian moral life would be nothing more than a constant testing of whether or not the maxims underlying one’s inclinations were indeed permissible. But Kant’s doctrine of virtue asks us to conceive of a morally oriented life in a much wider and broader light. It shows us how morality is not simply a set of negative prohibitions and condemnations of our self-serving maxims. It asks us to conceive of a virtuous human life in terms of an active engagement in, and promotion of, those ends that respect and honor humanity.

It may be helpful to visualize this point in terms of some specific examples. It is of course true to say that Kant’s moral philosophy enjoins us to obey a number of negative prohibitions (e.g., do not lie, do not misuse sex, do not be arrogant, do not ridicule, etc.,). Thus, on the surface, it may appear as though a moral life is nothing more than a life that submits and conforms to a number of negative commands that constrain our self-serving desires. For example, I may wish to misuse sex in some capacity, but morality demands that I refrain from treating the human body as a mere means to my selfish ends. According to the picture that such an example suggests, a morally oriented life seems to involve nothing more than a solemn obedience to a series of negative commands to refrain from pursuing courses of action that one might otherwise wish to pursue. But Kant’s application of the moral law emphasizes that a morally oriented life is one that must also involve the active setting of ends. That is to say, Kant’s doctrine of virtue presents the moral life as one wherein the projects and contents that motivates one’s life
must somehow include one’s own perfection and the happiness of others. Thus, when one reflects upon how to live a virtuous life, Kant’s view is that one ought to endorse a style of living that prominently includes a consideration of the ultimate ends of humanity. The content of such a moral life can be specified in many different ways. One may choose to become an educator, for instance. Or perhaps one may specialize in the art of filmmaking. Or maybe both. Since education contributes to the happiness of others, and since excellence in film-making may promote and develop particular natural skills, in both instances the content that is guiding one’s life would be furthering the moral ends of humanity. In whatever way one may choose to promote the dutiful ends of humanity, however, Kant’s view is that in order to become virtuous one ought to actively pursue those ends that further one’s own perfection and the happiness of others. Thus, a morally oriented life is not simply one that solemnly obeys a number of prescriptive rules and moral prohibitions. A virtuous human life more broadly involves the active pursuit of projects and goals that contribute toward the promotion of the dutiful ends of humanity. The picture of Kantian moral life that begins to emerge here is one where specific moral actions need to be visualized within the larger context and horizon of an individual’s setting and life plan. In other words, the performance or non-performance of specific ethical duties should be seen as part of an individual’s on-going pursuit to realize the dutiful ends of morality. The duty to refrain from lying, for instance, is simply one duty within a larger constellation of duties that one ought to obey in order to live a life that aims to become virtuous. When we try to conceive of Kantian moral practice, then, we need to make sure that we do not altogether abstract particular instances of moral
action from an individual’s on-going pursuit to promote the dutiful ends of humanity. 

Each instance of dutiful action should instead be visualized within the context of an individual’s perpetual striving toward the ends of morality.

From this angle we can even see how the negative prohibitions of morality can ultimately receive a positive signification in our actual moral practice. When we consider, for instance, that the duty to refrain from lying belongs to an individual’s on-going pursuit of moral self-perfection, we can see how one’s obedience to such a command is not simply a negative act of abstention. According to the picture of moral life that Kant’s doctrine of virtue presents, the duty not to lie falls under the general heading of one’s duty to oneself to strive toward moral self-perfection. Thus, when one refrains from lying one is, in effect, positively contributing toward one’s own moral perfection, i.e., one is acting “for-the-sake-of” bringing about the dutiful end of self-perfection. This positive dimension of moral action may be difficult to observe if we simply abstract and isolate the performance of a negative prohibition from an individual’s pursuit of moral ends. However, when we think about Kant’s negative prohibitions from the perspective of our lived experience, we can see how one’s obedience to a negative command ultimately receives a positive signification. It receives this positive signification, because when we visualize Kantian moral practice we need to conceive of specific moral actions within the larger context of an individual’s striving toward the ends of morality. Once conceived within this larger horizon, the performance of any ethical duty (positive or negative) is one that ultimately aims to promote either the ends of self-perfection or the happiness of others. Thus, since one’s actual moral practice
ultimately aims to realize the positive ends of morality, the performance of a given negative prohibition can be seen as a positive act that intends to promote the dutiful ends of humanity.

As we should be able to see, then, an experiential approach to Kant’s doctrine of virtue presents us with a picture of moral life that is much broader and more illuminating than a mere testing of our maxims for universalizability. By elucidating the ends for which all dutiful action ultimately aims, Kant’s doctrine of virtue shows us how particular instances of moral behavior belong within the larger horizon of an individual’s orientation in life. Instead of simply obeying a series of negative prohibitions, a morally oriented life ought to actively engage in projects and goals that further the ends of humanity in one’s own person and the person of another. The specific manner in which a human being will give content to these dutiful ends will, of course, vary from individual to individual. But what remains constant, for Kant, is one’s obligation to positively engage in those activities that develop one’s own perfection and that promote the happiness of other human beings.

(b) Self-Other Asymmetry

Not only does an experiential approach to Kant show us how our moral lives involve much more than an abstention from non-universalizable maxims, it moreover introduces us to a curious form of “self-other asymmetry.” That is to say, since Kant insists that the ends of “perfection and happiness cannot be interchanged” [MS 6:385] in one and the same person, one’s experiential pursuit of these two dutiful ends reveals a fundamental asymmetry between the ends one ought to pursue in one’s own person and the person of
another. For, although the other (you) and I (me) are both moral animals whose rationality warrants the dignity [Würde] of unconditional worth, one’s consciousness of the categorical imperative introduces certain differences in how one ought to orient oneself toward one’s own person and the person of another. According to Kant’s own division of dutiful ends, whereas I have a duty to live a life that strives to perfect and cultivate my own moral capacities, I am not under direct obligation to perfect your personal moral vocation. Meanwhile, whereas I am under obligation to realize the permissible ends of your pursuit of happiness, I have no such direct duty to satisfy my own desire for happiness. Although you and I are the same kind of being (viz., an

92 Kant sometimes qualifies one’s duty to promote the happiness of others by the adjective “permissible” [MS 6:388], but he does not, so far as I can tell, ever explain what this adjective intends to signify. Presumably Kant means that there are certain moral limitations upon the extent to which one can promote the happiness of others. So, for example, if promoting the happiness of another human being conflicts with one’s perfect duty to oneself then the happiness that another human being is pursuing would not be permissible. Therefore, according to this interpretation, one is under obligation to promote the happiness of another human being provided that this pursuit of happiness does not conflict with one’s own duty to oneself.

93 I include the qualifier “direct” to modify the word “duty” because Kant does allow for the possibility of an “indirect” duty to promote one’s own happiness [cf. G 4:399, MS 6:386]. Kant does not anywhere systematize his account of “indirect duties,” but his view seems to be that we may be “indirectly” obligated to promote our own happiness if our doing so helps us to better perfect the integrity of our own moral virtue: “to seek prosperity for its own sake is not directly a duty, but indirectly it may well be a duty, that of warding off poverty insofar as this is a great temptation to vice. But then it is not my happiness but the preservation of my moral integrity that is my end and also my duty” [MS 6:386]. As the second sentence of this passage clearly indicates, however, when we consider one’s own happiness as an indirect duty the end of one’s action nevertheless remains one’s own self-perfection. Thus, an indirect duty to pursue one’s happiness is ultimately reducible to one’s direct duty to strive for self-perfection. Kant’s point seems to be that the dutiful ends of morality do not exclude the pursuit of one’s own happiness as morally meritorious. Indeed, the duty not to commit avarice [MS 6:432] in large measure requires us to satisfy our own needs and desires in order to promote the virtuous end of self-perfection.

It is noteworthy that Kant does not, so far as I have been able to discover, discuss one’s indirect duty to promote the moral perfection of others. We might presume that there is an obvious parallel here with Kant’s account of one’s indirect duty to promote one’s own happiness. That is to say, just as Kant thinks that we have an indirect duty to promote our own happiness we have an indirect duty to perfect the will of another human being. But if such a parallel exists, Kant does not explicitly refer to it. I think that the explanation for why Kant does not speak of an indirect duty to perfect the will of another human being stems from the fact that, unlike one’s own pursuit of happiness, one cannot actually perfect the will of another human being. As Kant himself puts it: “it is self-contradictory to require that I do (make it my duty
embodied rational being), our concrete moral interaction reveals a fundamental *dissymmetry* between you and me, because the end toward which I am obligated to promote in your person (viz. happiness) is an end that I am not under obligation to promote in my own person, meanwhile my dutiful end toward my own person (viz., perfection) is an end that I am not under direct obligation to promote in your person.

In order to avoid any confusion on this point, this asymmetry should not be understood as the empirical inequality of certain social forces that, Kant would admit, is often operative in our inter-human relations. This self-other asymmetry is not, for example, a

to do) something that only the other himself can do” [MS 6:387, my italics]. A leading reason for why one cannot be under obligation to perfect the will of another human being is because only the other himself can perfect his will because he is the only one who can formulate the maxim of his action. The perfection of others is therefore an end of action that is different than one’s own pursuit of happiness, because unlike the perfection of others, one’s own pursuit of happiness is an end that one can realize. Thus, unlike the indirect duty to promote one’s own happiness, one simply cannot, by definition, have an indirect duty to promote the perfection of another human being. This most likely explains why Kant nowhere discusses the prospects of an indirect duty to perfect the will of another human being.

These kinds of considerations raise interesting questions about the role and purpose of moral pedagogy in Kant’s moral philosophy. Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* certainly includes a section on moral education [MS 6:477-84], but it is unclear whether or not one in fact has an ethical duty to teach another human being virtue and, if there is such an ethical duty, what the nature of that duty is, and what the end of such a duty is. It is worth noticing that none of the ethical duties that Kant lists in his doctrine of virtue state that one ought to teach another human being how to become virtuous. This seems counter-intuitive to Kant’s view that one ought to express respect for humanity in and through one’s actions. One would think that if moral pedagogy were properly construed (i.e., as a non-paternalistic imposition), then it would naturally follow from the view that one ought to respect humanity through one’s actions. But, given that Kant thinks that one cannot be under obligation to perfect the will of another human being, it is difficult to see the sense in which Kant understands the role and purpose of moral pedagogy. Presumably, moral education would have to somehow belong to one’s duty to promote the happiness of other human beings. This might then mean that the happiness of others includes the moral self-contentment [*Selbstzufriedenheit*] of others. Kant seems to even suggest this line of thinking when he says that: “the happiness of others also includes their moral well being [*Moralische Wohlsein*]” [MS 6:394], but Kant characterizes this duty as "only a negative one" because "it is my duty to refrain from doing anything that, considering the nature of the human being, could tempt him to do something that his conscience could afterwards pain him” [MS 6:394]. But surely moral pedagogy is not "only a negative duty” to refrain from tempting other human beings to trespass the commands of morality. At the very least we can say that Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* does not sufficiently explain the sense in which moral pedagogy belongs to the ends of a morally oriented life. For, in order to be considered morally meritorious, the teaching of virtue must either belong to the ends of self-perfection or the happiness others. But Kant does not list any duties of moral pedagogy under either of these two ends. Such a duty would seemingly have to somehow belong to the end of the happiness of others, but this would require having to construe the meaning of the happiness of others in a way that is broader than what Kant’s own doctrine of virtue seems to claim about it.
relationship between the rich and the poor or the stronger and the weaker. Nor is this asymmetry an association wherein one person becomes more dependent upon the other, or those relationships wherein one human being dedicates more love than he or she receives. Kant would certainly agree that these kinds of inequalities between human beings can and do happen in our day-to-day lives. The self-other asymmetry that is worth noticing here, however, is not the empirical inequality of certain social relations or emotional dynamics. It is a dissymmetry that obtains instead in the vision of morality that Kant’s categorical imperative necessarily introduces into our inter-human relations. Namely, it is the asymmetry that one ought to make the happiness of other human beings and one’s own moral perfection the end of one’s moral life, even though one is not under direct obligation to pursue one’s own happiness or the moral perfection of others.

This structure of self-other asymmetry can be difficult to observe from the perspective of Kant’s foundational works in moral philosophy. It is difficult to recognize this moral dissymmetry because in those texts Kant characterizes the human being in terms of one’s individual relationship to the purity of the categorical imperative. Thus, according to the stresses placed in those works, each human being simply shares certain fundamental characteristics with one another. For instance, each human being is inescapably impelled by particular sensible impulses and each human being is conscious of a moral law that one’s rational will can freely act upon. When one reads Kant’s foundational works, then, it is not uncommon to think of our relationship to one another as one of strict egalitarianism. After all, each human being is a co-equal self-legislator whose rational capacities confer upon each human existence the dignity of unconditional worth.
And this would not be an incorrect reading of Kant. Kant clearly thinks that all beings who are ruled by reason are of equal moral dignity [G 4:434-439]. But what is not as apparent in those works are the concrete differences that the application of the categorical imperative introduces into our moral interaction with one another. It is difficult to notice, for instance, that a moral life demands that one prioritizes the happiness of other human beings over one’s own pursuit of happiness. In other words, from the perspective of one’s embedded moral relations, another human being’s happiness calls out as a duty to promote while one’s own happiness does not show itself as a direct moral obligation. Although the other and I are both similarly impelled by an insistent pursuit of happiness, morality nevertheless reveals an inequality between our respective desires for happiness. Moreover, although one has a duty to perfect the reason in one’s own person, one is not under obligation to perfect the reason of another. Once again, although the other and I are similar (i.e., we are both endowed with rational capacities), one’s ethical orientation toward one’s own reason is concretely different than one’s relationship to the reason of another human being.

This asymmetrical structure can be difficult to observe if we think about Kantian interhuman relations exclusively from a third-person perspective. That is to say, if one “overlooks” (as if from a “mountain-top” or “ivory tower”) the moral dynamic between two human beings it is very likely that one will only see the symmetry of duties that obtain between two rational human beings. And, once again, that would not be an incorrect observation, nor would it be a faulty reading of Kant’s moral philosophy. After all, according to Kant’s own conclusions, both human beings would be commanded by
exactly the same duties as one another. But when one concretely pictures oneself within the inter-human relation one can begin to see how the meaning of another human being’s happiness is imbued with a moral signification that one’s own pursuit of happiness does not reveal. Moreover, from within the inter-human relation, although one’s own moral rationality calls out for perfection, one is not under direct obligation to perfect the moral rationality of another. From a experiential perspective, then, we can see how Kantian inter-human relations are informed by an asymmetry in the meaning of the happiness and rationality in one’s own person and the person of another.

This self-other asymmetry is worth highlighting because it helps to characterize the concrete sense in which our moral lives are oriented with respect to one another. When we think about Kantian moral experience and practice, then, we need to recognize that one’s ethical orientation toward oneself is qualitatively different than one’s ethical orientation toward other human beings. Kant’s basic division between duties to oneself and others not only produces a different set of ethical duties, it moreover shows us how, even though all human beings are deserving of the same equal dignity [Würde], one’s moral orientation in the world reveals differences between how one ought to relate toward oneself and toward other human beings. This self-other asymmetry may not be easy to visualize on the basis of Kant’s foundational works, but an experiential approach to Kant’s doctrine of virtue shows us how this asymmetry is fundamental to our inter-human relations in the world.
(c) Kantian Moral Life

In order to get a fuller picture of Kantian moral life it will be helpful to pair together some of these observations from Kant’s doctrine of virtue with our conclusions from the last chapter. If we recall, in chapter two we began to uncover Kant’s account of our lived experience of the categorical imperative. We did so by exploring Kant’s account of happiness [Glückseligkeit] and moral feeling [moralisches Gefühl]. In that chapter we saw how Kant characterizes our moral experience in terms of an incessant pursuit of personal happiness that is inescapably aware of an imperative to refrain from non-universalizable maxims. According to Kant’s account of moralisches Gefühl, one’s representation [Vorstellung] of this moral imperative produces subjective “effects” that humble our self-serving inclinations while simultaneously occasioning feelings of respect for the rational dimension of our nature. Kant moreover describes how we cannot help but feel humiliated and ashamed of ourselves when we fall short of the commands of morality. But Kant also describes how our striving to realize the commands of morality involves a feeling of inner tranquility that Kant calls self-contentment [Selbstzufriedenheit]. According to Kant’s account of our felt encounter with morality, we respect and revere the rationality that elevates our existence above a merely hedonistic style of life.

Kant’s doctrine of virtue helps us to amplify and enlighten this picture of moral experience in a number of noticeable ways. As we have seen, when Kant applies the categorical imperative to human action in the world his reasoning introduces us to the two dutiful ends of morality: (i) one’s own perfection and (ii) the happiness of others. By
introducing these two ends for which all moral action strives, Kant presents us with a picture of moral experience that is much broader than the mere testing of maxims for universalizability. Instead of simply testing whether or not one’s maxims are universally agreeable, Kant’s doctrine of virtue asks us to conceive of a virtuous life in the wider sense of one’s active promotion of the dutiful ends of morality. A morally decent life will of course include a conscientious abstention from non-universalizable maxims, but Kant’s doctrine of virtue makes clear that abstaining from such maxims is simply one element in the horizon of what constitutes a virtuous human life. For Kant, a virtuous human being is more broadly conceived as someone who actively engages in projects and goals that ultimately further the ends of one’s own perfection and the happiness of others. A virtuous human life will therefore involve balancing and weighing how one’s specific actions bear upon those duties whose performance will promote the dutiful ends of humanity.

A more vivid picture should begin to emerge here when we pair together the conclusions from our last chapter with the results of Kant’s doctrine of virtue. For Kant, someone whose life fails to include the ends of morality will inevitably lead a life that is fraught with feelings of guilt and humiliation. Suppose, for example, someone who makes the accumulation of self-serving wealth the central goal in one’s life. Kant’s view would be that such a life would inevitably feel plagued by feelings of shame and dishonor. These feelings may not manifest themselves externally to others, but Kant’s view is that such a person could not help but experience these feelings internally. Even if one were to achieve enormous gains in wealth, Kant would claim that such a person
would nevertheless feel burdened by the sense that one’s life had failed to honor and respect the vocation of humanity.

Since Kant’s doctrine of virtue asks us to conceive of the virtue of a human life in terms of the broader ends that give a human life meaning and direction, it may be helpful if our examples considered the virtue of individuals from a perspective that looked at human beings in terms of the various goals and projects that they pursue over the course of their life-time. Since good literature and film can often offer us a rich and vivid characterization of the lives of individual human beings, it may be helpful to turn our attention to the cinema in order to help better illuminate the principles of Kant’s doctrine of virtue. I believe, for example, that the recent Oscar winning film There Will Be Blood presents us with a character (Daniel Plainview) that can help us to better visualize the kind of life that we have just described in the above paragraph. In this film, the audience follows as Daniel Plainview pursues capital by means of the burgeoning oil business in early 20th century America. We watch as he develops the skills and technologies that allow him to dig for oil, and we follow him as he and his son travel from town to town in search of fertile oil producing lands. In his pursuit of wealth and capital, Daniel invariably tricks and manipulates town-folks. He even murders those who get in his way. By the end of the film, Daniel tells his son that he only loved his son to the extent that his son could help him to secure more wealth. In these final heart-

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94 There Will Be Blood was released in 2007 by Paramount Village films. It was produced, written and directed by P.T. Anderson. Daniel Day-Lewis won the Oscar of best actor for his portrayal of Daniel Plainview in this film.
wrenching moments, it becomes clear that Daniel’s entire life had been consumed and oriented by a self-serving greed.

The life of Daniel Plainview is clearly an instance of the kind of life that Kant’s moral philosophy would condemn. Instead of developing his talents for the sake of dutiful ends, Daniel had employed his skills for his own selfish pursuit of capital. Instead of dealing with people honestly, Daniel had manipulated and lied to others in order to get his way. Daniel even treated his loving and adoring son as nothing more than a means to his own selfish ends. Daniel Plainview did not see other human beings as beings whose happiness he ought to promote. Instead, Daniel saw other human beings as a mere means for his own pursuit of self-serving happiness. We could therefore say that Daniel’s life denied the “self-other asymmetry” that Kant’s doctrine of virtue enjoins us to pursue in favor of an asymmetry that purely sought to benefit his own pursuit of happiness over that of other’s. That is to say, unlike the moral asymmetry of Kant’s doctrine of virtue, the ends of Daniel’s life gave priority to his own pursuit of happiness over the happiness of others. From an audience’s perspective, what makes Daniel’s actions so disturbing is that by the end of the film we realize that everything Daniel had pursued in his life was pursued solely in the name of satisfying his own self-interest.

Not only would Kant condemn this kind of life, his account of moral feeling would moreover describe how such a life would be burdened by feelings of shame and humiliation. Even though Plainview had succeeded in securing enormous gains in wealth, Kant would say that such a life would not be altogether content or harmonious. It could not be content, because such a life would be tormented by a sense of moral failure
and corruption. Indeed, in one of the film’s concluding moments, when Plainview listlessly makes his way down the spiraling staircase of his opulent mansion, the audience is afforded a brief glimpse into the tortured depths of this lonely man’s soul.

The flip-side of Daniel’s life, however, can be equally instructive for our present purposes. For, what if Daniel had employed his skills and talents for different ends? What if, for example, Daniel had used his skills to benefit others? Instead of deceiving his son and the towns-folk, what if Daniel had treated them with honesty and respect? Instead of pursuing wealth solely for his own self-interest, what if Daniel had pursued the riches of oil for the sake of communal gains in wealth, e.g., for the creation of schools, churches, roads, etc.? Kant’s doctrine of virtue certainly does not condemn the pursuit of wealth. What Kant’s doctrine of virtue condemns, however, is a life that dedicates itself solely to self-serving purposes. Thus, had Daniel pursued gains in wealth for the sake of the happiness of others, Kant would find in this life something virtuous and meritorious. Had Daniel set ends to his life that treated humanity with love and respect, Kant would say that his life would have participated in the peace of mind that he calls Selbstzufriedenheit. Such a life would not feel burdened or tormented by feelings of guilt and shame. Such a virtuous life would instead find peace of soul [Seelenruhe] in the knowledge that one had lived a life that had aimed to promote the dutiful ends of humanity.

The life of Daniel Plainview should help us to visualize and illuminate the experiential dimension of Kant’s moral philosophy. For Kant, a virtuous human life needs to be conceived within the larger horizon of the ends that give an individual’s life meaning and
direction. A virtuous human life is therefore one whose actions ultimately strive to promote the ends of self-perfection and the happiness of others. Since Daniel Plainview had failed to include these dutiful ends in the ends that gave his life meaning, Kant’s view would be that Daniel’s life was plagued by feelings of shame and humiliation. But had Daniel chosen to give his life meaning by pursuing dutiful ends, Kant would say that his life would have discovered self-contentment and inner tranquility.

III. Conclusion

In this chapter we have explored the experiential dimension of Kant’s moral philosophy by means of some of the basic conclusions from his doctrine of virtue. In Kant’s doctrine of virtue he applies the categorical imperative to human action in the world, and he reasons that all dutiful action ultimately aims to promote the ends of self-perfection and the happiness of others. An experiential approach to Kant reveals that a virtuous human life is therefore not simply an obedience to a series of negative prohibitions and commands. A morally oriented life is instead more broadly conceived as a life wherein a human being actively engages in projects and goals that aim to promote the dutiful ends of humanity. An experiential approach to Kant moreover reveals a curious form of “self-other asymmetry” between oneself and other human beings. Although all human beings are worthy of the same equal dignity [Würde], one’s living pursuit of these dutiful ends introduces an asymmetry in the meaning of the happiness and moral rationality in one’s own person and the person of another. We also saw how when we pair together Kant’s account of moral feeling with his doctrine of virtue we are able to develop a more robust and illuminating picture of Kantian moral life. Kant’s view is that a life whose leading
ends are dedicated toward promoting one’s self-perfection and the happiness of others will be a life that participates in self-contentment and peace of mind. However, as in the life of Daniel Plainview, a life that fails to set these ends would be a life that is burdened and tormented by a inner sense of guilt and shame.

In the next chapter I will attempt to show how these accumulated results of an experiential approach to Kant can help us to respond to the charges of dogmatism, formalism and rigorism. I believe that the picture of moral experience that we have developed will show how these criticisms are, at the very least, mistaken in their concerns about Kant. In the next chapter I will begin by briefly outlining these three criticisms, and I will show the sense in which an experiential approach to Kant can help us to respond to these three criticisms.
CHAPTER FOUR:
A REPLY TO DOGMATISM, FORMALISM AND RIGORISM

Since they fancy that they understand matters better than he, they seek to banish him to his school (illa se iactet in aula!)
-Immanuel Kant

In the previous two chapters I have attempted to offer an experiential account of Kantian moral life. Although Kant’s better known works in moral philosophy (viz., his 
*Groundwork* and second *Critique*) tend to stress the cognitive and theoretical dimension of his categorical imperative, I have attempted to show how these points of emphasis should not obscure the living sense in which one feels and experiences the command of his categorical imperative. In this chapter I will attempt to show how this experiential approach to Kant should help to counter a number of criticisms that have been commonly raised against his moral philosophy.

Before showing how such a lived approach can serve to respond to these common allegations, it will be helpful for my response to first distinguish between three *inter-connected* levels of interpretation concerning Kant’s moral philosophy. I believe that each of these levels designates a prominent dimension of Kant’s thinking that any critical reader and interpreter of his ethics should keep in mind when they assess Kant’s conclusions. Allow me to first indicate what these three levels are, and then I will explain the purpose and significance of my introduction of these three levels for the purposes of my study.

115
The first level of interpretation is what I call the *foundational level*. This level of interpretation concerns Kant’s explication and derivation of the supreme principle of morality. Kant’s *Groundwork* and second *Critique* are the principal texts for understanding and evaluating Kant’s foundational claims about morality. The second level of interpretation is what I call the *application level*. This level of interpretation concerns Kant’s application of the supreme principle of morality to the human being. As we saw in the last chapter, Part II of Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* (his “Doctrine of Virtue”) represents his most systematic treatment of those duties that follow from the application of the categorical imperative to the human being. The third level of interpretation is what I call the *experiential level*. This level of interpretation concerns the living manner by which human beings experience and feel the commands that follow from the application of the supreme principle of morality to the human being. It is this dimension of Kant’s moral philosophy that the present study has attempted to properly uncover and illuminate in the previous two chapters.

Each of these three “levels” refers to some aspect or component of Kant’s overall moral theory. In other words, each level refers to some register or domain within which a particular kind of Kantian claim or argument is being offered. When we simply stand back and reflect upon the entirety of Kant’s practical philosophy we should be able to notice that Kant offers us claims and arguments under these different, albeit interconnected, principal levels. That is to say, he offers us claims about the *foundation* of morality, he offers us claims about how these foundational elements are *applied* to the
human being, and he offers us claims about how human beings actually experience these foundational elements in their personal moral lives.

My reason for drawing attention to these three levels is for the purposes of highlighting my thesis that many of Kant’s critics mistakenly confuse the level or sense in which Kant is offering us a particular kind of claim or argument. That is to say, the criticisms of dogmatism, formalism and rigorism are based solely upon what Kant has to say under one register (i.e., either the foundational or applicatory level) when in fact each criticism should instead be addressed toward what Kant has to say about the experiential dimension of our moral lives. In other words, one of my central claims in the following chapter will be that the charges of dogmatism, formalism and rigorism have, by and large, mistakenly conflated either the foundational level or the application level of Kant’s moral philosophy for his account of the experiential level. That is to say, these three criticisms have each in their own way mistakenly presumed that certain foundational or applicatory claims about morality must also be serving as Kant’s account of how human beings actually live and experience the commands of morality. My central effort in this chapter will be directed toward demonstrating how a proper understanding of the experiential dimension of Kant’s moral philosophy shows us how the criticisms of dogmatism, formalism and rigorism are ultimately mistaken in their respective criticisms of Kant.

My manner of proceeding in this chapter will be as follows. I will treat each of the three criticisms separately. Each of my treatments will begin by recalling the general
nature of the criticism, and will then attempt to show how an experiential approach to Kant’s ethics can help us to respond to that particular criticism.

I. An Experiential Reply to Dogmatism, Formalism and Rigorism

(a) Dogmatism

As we saw in chapter 1 of this study the dogmatism critique contends that Kant’s appeal to a “fact of pure reason” is illegitimate because this purportedly “undeniable” [KPV 5:32] and “most common” [KPV 5:27] idea [Idee] of reason does not resonate with our actual lived experience. That is to say, this criticism alleges that since Kant grounds his moral philosophy upon an *a priori* fact of rational autonomy he is basing his moral philosophy upon a rational abstraction that has no basis or purchase in our lived experience. According to this criticism, then, Kant’s appeal to a “fact of pure reason” appears as nothing more than a dogmatic assertion because it cannot be verified or tested against the backdrop of our actual lives.

As we have seen in the last two chapters, however, Kant’s writings do offer us a rather rich and dynamic picture of how we live and experience the command of his supreme principle of morality. Although it is certainly true that Kant’s moral philosophy is grounded upon an *a priori* fact of rational autonomy, this should not obscure or suppress Kant’s descriptions concerning the concrete manner by which he thinks that we experience and feel this “fact of reason.” As we have seen, Kant describes how our consciousness of this moral fact inevitably “produces” certain experiential “effects” that elevate the sense of our existence above a merely hedonistic style of life. On Kant’s telling, we not only feel *humiliated* when we prioritize our selfish impulses over the
expectations of the moral law, but we moreover recognize an elevated sense of respect for that aspect of our person that allows us to freely overcome and override such self-centered urges. In our consciousness of the moral law, then, we recognize that our lives are not simply riveted to a mechanistic fate of hedonistic inclinations. We recognize ourselves instead as the author and framer of our particular actions, and hence, as responsible for those principles that we freely endorse and act upon. Thus, when we read Kant’s appeal to an “undeniable” and “most common” idea of reason, I submit that we should not interpret Kant’s claim as a mere dogmatic assertion that has no basis or purchase in our lived experience. For Kant should not be understood as simply claiming that all finite rational beings are conscious of some abstract rational idea. Instead, when Kant claims that this “fact of pure reason” is an “undeniable” and “most common” feature of human existence he is referring more broadly to the sense in which human beings recognize themselves as autonomous persons who are bound to moral obligations. As we have seen, Kant’s ethics includes in this “most common” experience a complex host of feelings that involve a humbling sense of humiliation that is coupled with a reverential feeling of respect. I submit that these experiential significations are what Kant has in mind when he claims that his “fact of pure reason” is an “undeniable” and “most common” feature of the life of a human being, because these significations constitute the living sense in which human beings recognize themselves as moral persons in the world.

From this angle we should be able to see how the dogmatist criticism rests upon a mistaken conflation of the foundational level of interpretation with the experiential level.
That is to say, the dogmatist criticism mistakenly confuses Kant’s foundational claims about morality for his account of how we actually experience the commands of morality. The dogmatist critic contends that Kant’s foundational appeal to a “fact of pure reason” does not resonate with our actual lived experience, but this criticism presumes that the experience underlying Kant’s appeal to a “fact of pure reason” is nothing more than an abstract idea of reason. The dogmatist criticism overlooks the dynamic sense in which Kant’s fact is actually encountered and felt by human beings. It is certainly true that Kant claims that an a priori fact of rational autonomy grounds the basis of moral commands, but this does not mean that he thinks that human beings experience the commands of morality simply as some abstract idea of reason. To think that Kant does is to mistakenly confuse Kant’s foundational claims about morality for his claims concerning how human beings actually experience and feel the commands of morality. As we have seen, when Kant appeals to the “undeniability” of the “fact of pure reason” he is not simply referring to some abstract consciousness of the moral law. His reference includes a complex host of experiential significations that involve feelings like humiliation and respect. Thus, Kant’s foundational appeal to a “fact of pure reason” should not be dismissed on the grounds that Kant has somehow failed to support this fact in our actual lived experience. Kant does indeed present us with an account of how this fact shows itself to us in our day to day lives. Instead of treating Kant’s arguments concerning the ground of morality as descriptive claims about the human experience of morality, the dogmatist criticism would do better to ask whether or not the descriptions that Kant offers resonates with our own actual lived experience.\[95\]

\[95\] It may be objected that what is missing from my own presentation is some kind of “proof” that Kant’s
(b) Formalism

The formalist criticism states that Kant’s supreme principle of morality is too abstract and general to tell someone what, in the concrete particular, they ought to do. As I indicated in chapter 1 of this study there are at least two leading concerns presented by this formalist allegation. The first concern claims that Kant’s supreme principle of morality cannot derive particular ethical duties. The second concern claims that Kant’s supreme principle of morality does not offer sufficient guidance to tell someone what they ought to do in a concrete scenario. Although both concerns are united in the view that Kant’s principle of morality is too abstract and general, I believe that they nevertheless state two different problems. Whereas the first concern is directed toward an issue concerning the extension of Kant’s ethical theory (whether or not his moral theory can properly derive ethical duties), the second criticism raises the issue of whether or not Kant’s ethics can actually tell someone what they ought to do in a given situation. In other words, the former complains that Kant’s moral philosophy cannot properly provide us with a taxonomy of particular ethical duties, while the latter contends that when presented with a concrete scenario Kant’s ethics cannot sufficiently guide and direct an individual’s action.

descriptions are actually accurate. However, as I indicated in section IV of chapter 1 of this study, my goal here is not to somehow prove that Kant has indeed accurately described our moral experience. Such a claim would require and presuppose that I already knew what those descriptions must contain. My goal is instead much more modest: I simply wish to clarify and illuminate the experiential dimension of Kant’s ethics. If nothing else, it is incumbent upon the reader to test Kant’s descriptions against the backdrop of their own lives. My claim against the dogmatist critic is simply that this critic does not properly consider what Kant himself has to say about our actual moral experience.

96 See Chapter 1, pp. 25-26.
An experiential approach to Kant is not especially required in order to counter the first concern raised by the formalist charge, but in order to fully respond to this allegation it will be helpful to see how we can respond to this aspect of the formalist criticism. I believe that this dimension of the formalist criticism ultimately rests upon a misunderstanding of Kant’s moral philosophy. This misunderstanding, I believe, rests upon overemphasizing Kant’s “formula of universal law” by failing to appreciate Kant’s own manner of deriving ethical duties in his Tugendlehre. If we recall, this aspect of the formalist criticism claims that a principle of non-contradiction cannot sufficiently derive a set of ethical duties. However, as we saw in chapter 3 of this study, when Kant attempts to derive a set of ethical duties his derivation does not chiefly follow this “formula of universal law.” Rather than drawing upon his “formula of universal law” Kant’s derivation relies heavily instead upon his second formulation of the categorical imperative, viz., his “formula of humanity.” Allen Wood has succinctly characterized Kant’s derivation of ethical duties in the following way: “a duty $D$ is a duty toward $S$ if and only if $S$ is a finite rational being and the requirement to comply with $D$ is grounded on the requirement to respect humanity in the person of $S$” [KE 168]. As we saw in the last chapter, by means of his “formula of humanity” Kant draws a qualitative distinction between duties to oneself (perfection) and duties toward others (happiness), and he derives a number of particular ethical duties that follow from the content of this distinction, e.g., do not lie, be sympathetic, do not ridicule, develop one’s talents, etc.,.

Thus, it simply is not correct to say that Kant’s moral philosophy cannot sufficiently

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97 See notes #37 and #38 in Chapter 1 of this study for a discussion concerning how both Hegel and Mill interpret Kant in these terms in their respective “formalist” criticisms of his moral philosophy.
derive a set of ethical duties. By means of his “formula of humanity” Kant’s Tugendlehre does indeed derive a host of concrete ethical duties that aim to respect the humanity in one’s own person and in the person of another.

I believe that the error in this criticism can be clarified and explained by reference to the interpretational divisions that I outlined at the outset of this chapter. This aspect of the formalist criticism mistakenly conflates what I called the foundational level of Kant’s moral philosophy with what I called the application level. That is to say, this criticism presumes that the foundational emphasis that Kant had placed upon his “formula of universal law” must also serve as his account of how the claims of morality are to be properly applied to the human being. For, according to this criticism, it is claimed that Kant’s “formula of universal law” cannot derive particular ethical duties because a formal principle of non-contradiction cannot adequately derive ethical duties without first presupposing a given matter or content. However, as we saw in the last chapter, when Kant himself derives a taxonomy of ethical duties in his Tugendlehre he does not principally rely upon his “formula of universal law.” Kant instead derives his taxonomy of ethical duties by means of that formula that Kant had initially termed the “matter” of the categorical imperative in his Groundwork, viz., his “formula of humanity” [G 4:436]. And, as we outlined in the last chapter, Kant is able to derive a number of ethical duties on the basis of the matter of this latter formula. Therefore, instead of presuming that Kant’s derivation of ethical duties must somehow stem directly from his abstract formula of “universal law,” Kant’s formalist detractors would do better to follow Kant’s own line of reasoning as he had presented it in his Tugendlehre. That is to say, instead of
presuming that Kant’s arguments for the justification of the foundation of morality and autonomy must also serve as his account of how the claims of morality are to be applied to the human being, Kant’s critics would do better to analyze the manner in which Kant himself derives the particular ethical duties that are binding upon the human being.

With regard to the second concern raised by the formalist charge I believe that an experiential approach to Kant can be very helpful and instructive. By means of an experiential approach to Kant we can see that, when confronted by a particular scenario, Kant is not simply saying “do your duty for duty’s sake” (which would amount to an empty formalism), nor is he simply claiming that one ought to test the universality (i.e., non-contradiction) of one’s maxim of action. At best, the latter claim could only ever tell someone what is morally permissible or impermissible, which would not offer us very much guidance for positive moral action in the world. As our reading of Kant’s Tugendlehre helps to make clear, however, ordinary moral living does not require one to simply fastidiously test whether or not one’s maxims are indeed universalizable. Instead, as we saw in the last chapter, ordinary moral life for Kant is better characterized as a life that acts in those ways, and engages in those projects, that can best promote the ends that respect and honor humanity, viz., the ends of one’s own perfection and the happiness of others. Therefore, instead of a mere abstract testing of the coherence of maxims, concrete moral life for Kant involves living a life that weighs and considers how one’s various courses of action in the world can best promote and further these twin ends of morality.
I believe that the error in this criticism once again resides in a mistaken conflation of levels of interpretation. The formalist critic claims that Kant cannot offer sufficient guidance to an individual because the criterion of non-contradiction cannot of itself provide the content that is necessary for guiding a moral action. This criticism, however, presumes that Kant’s foundational claims concerning the supreme principle of morality must reflect his account of how we actually experience and orient ourselves as moral persons in the world. That is to say, this criticism presumes that our everyday moral lives simply consist of testing whether or not the maxims of our actions are indeed universalizable. An experiential approach to Kant reveals, however, that our ordinary moral lives are more accurately characterized by the particular ways in which our respective courses of action can best promote the twin ends of morality, viz., self-perfection and the happiness of others. That is to say, according to an experiential rendering of Kantian moral life, when one reflects upon a certain course of action one needs to ask oneself whether or not such an activity accords with those ethical duties that properly further and promote the ends of morality in one’s life.

Now, of course, even when we follow this line of thinking it is still true to say that Kant’s ethics cannot tell someone exactly what they ought to do in every particular situation, but I submit that such an inability should not be considered a shortcoming of Kant’s moral philosophy. In order to explain this point consider, for instance, the Kantian duty of beneficence. On Kant’s account all human beings ought to “be beneficent.” However, Kant himself would admit that the exact manner in which a particular individual ought to “be beneficent” will depend upon a host of considerations
that are unique and circumstantial to an individual’s given situation. For instance, in order to realize the duty of beneficence relevant questions that would need to be considered include: what do I have to offer?, what am I good at offering?, what does “this” other person truly want or need? The point worth noticing is that the proper realization of the duty of beneficence will necessarily require a situational familiarity that cannot be anticipated in advance by any philosophical theory. As a philosopher, the best that Kant can offer his readers is a framework of universal duties and ends within which particular individuals can reflect upon how to best realize these obligations within the circumstantial complexity of his or her situation. That is to say, as a philosopher, since Kant cannot anticipate the multitude of contingencies that may inform a given individual’s situation and place in the world, the best that Kant can offer us is an account of those universal duties and ends that particular individuals ought to strive to realize within his or her given circumstances.

Perhaps a consideration of another Kantian duty will help to illuminate this point further. Consider the duty to “develop one’s talents.” Once again, according to Kant’s derivation, such a duty is universally binding upon all human beings. However, the concrete instantiation of this duty will inevitably depend upon the circumstantial particularity of the individual in question. One would have to honestly ask oneself questions such as: what am I good at?, what am I capable of achieving?, how can I best develop and progress in this chosen vocation?, etc. As we should be able to notice, for Kant, the actual performance of this ethical duty is intimately related to the resources and capabilities of a given individual’s particular circumstance. Perhaps, for instance, a given
individual is good at playing the violin, or perhaps they are better suited for a sport like boxing. The point is that Kant’s moral theory may not be able to tell everyone exactly how to “develop one’s talents,” but I submit that to criticize Kant on these grounds has less to do with a shortcoming of Kant’s thinking than it has to do with placing an unreasonable expectation upon his moral theory. Given the circumstantial complexity of individual human lives I believe that it is unreasonable to expect any philosophical theory to be able to dictate and determine exactly what an individual human being ought to do in every given situation. As a philosopher, the best that Kant can reasonably offer his readers is a general guideline for orienting one’s life amidst the manifold complexity and particularity of human experience.

I believe that this experiential approach to Kant can help to crystallize these circumstantial particularities that inform the content of our concrete moral behavior in the world, and can therefore help us to respond to the formalist allegation that Kant’s ethics cannot provide us with a sufficient guide for moral action. It is true that Kant’s writings cannot tell someone exactly what they ought to do in every particular scenario, but, as I have stated, I believe that this kind of a criticism has less to do with a shortcoming of Kant’s thinking than it has to do with placing an unreasonable expectation upon his moral philosophy. As a moral theory, what Kant offers his readers is a general framework for individuals to reflect upon how to best promote the ends of morality amidst the multitude of particularities that inform the content of one’s life. As an experiential approach to Kant helps to illuminate, ordinary moral life for Kant does not simply consist of fastidiously testing whether or not the maxim of one’s action is non-contradictory.
Instead, ordinary moral living in the world is better characterized as one that must weigh and consider how one’s particular courses of action can best promote those duties that are associated with the ends of self-perfection and the happiness of others. Since an experiential approach to Kant can help to illuminate the sense in which individuals are to mold and shape the content of their lives for the sake of the ends of humanity, such an approach helps to respond to the allegation that Kant’s prescriptions amount to nothing more than an empty formalism. For Kant, concrete moral life involves a concerted attention toward how, given the situational particularity that informs the content of one’s life, one can best promote and realize the universal ends of self-perfection and the happiness of others.

**(c) Rigorism**

As we saw in chapter one of this study the rigorism allegation claims that Kant’s moral philosophy is too strict and rigid to accommodate the situational complexity of our everyday moral lives. To claim that Kant’s moral philosophy suffers from rigorism, then, is to claim that Kant’s moral philosophy is too inflexible to capture the everyday intuitions we have concerning how someone ought to behave in the world.

I believe an experiential approach to Kant can once again help to respond to this criticism. An experiential approach is instructive because it can help to illuminate the living sense in which Kant’s moral philosophy admits of a great deal of latitude [Spielraum] in moral life. As we discussed just above, everyday moral living for Kant involves balancing and considering how certain courses of action can best promote and further the ends of morality. This means that Kantian individuals, if they wish to be
decent and moral, must attune themselves to the circumstantial particularity of the situation that confronts them. For, if an individual is not attentive to the particulars that are operative within a given situation, then he or she will not be able to properly execute the ethical duties to which he or she is bound. For example, in order to realize the universal duty of gratitude one needs to familiarize oneself with a host of particularities that are operative within a given situation, viz., to whom ought one to be grateful?, what ought one to be grateful for?, how does the recipient of gratitude prefer to be treated? Perhaps, for instance, the person to whom one should be grateful prefers only a private note of thanks. Or, perhaps a public announcement of gratitude would be more suitable for the occasion. From the perspective of Kantian moral experience, the proper realization of a given ethical duty necessarily requires a situational familiarity of the relevant particularities at hand, because such particularities help individuals to mold and shape the appropriate ways in which they can best realize the universal duties to which they are bound.

Now, for the purposes of addressing the allegation of rigorism what is worth noticing is both the significance of situational familiarity for Kantian moral experience and the fact that there is often more than one way in which to realize the ethical duties that Kant derives. As Kant himself puts it: “the [moral] law cannot specify precisely in what way one is to act and how much one is to do by an action” [MS 6:390]. That is to say, the duties that stem from Kant’s categorical imperative do not, of themselves, dictate exactly how a particular duty ought to be performed or realized. Kant’s ethical duties are indeed universally binding, but the concrete actualization of a duty often admits of what Kant
calls “playroom” [Spielraum]. This means that it is ultimately up to the individual to
determine, on the basis of his or her situational familiarity, how to best actualize the
universal duties to which he or she is bound. For example, one may actualize the duty of
sympathy by listening carefully and attentively to someone, or one may do so simply by
means of a card or by sending flowers. As Kant puts it, the duty itself does not specify
precisely how the duty should be realized, only that the duty ought to be realized. As we
should be able to see, then, when it comes to actually performing the ethical duties that
Kant’s ethics derives he ultimately leaves it up to individual moral judgment in order to
reflect upon the most fitting way in which these duties are to be fulfilled. Although this
kind of flexibility may sound rather unfamiliar to many of Kant’s rigorist critics, this
consequence should not be all that surprising for a moral philosophy that esteems the
significance of human freedom and autonomy. An experiential rendering of Kant’s
moral philosophy shows us how the actual performance of an ethical duty allows for a
certain degree of flexibility and latitude on behalf of the individual who is reflecting upon
how to live as a moral person in the world.

Now, the rigorism critic will likely respond by pointing out that this kind of Spielraum
may indeed hold for what Kant terms “imperfect duties” (e.g., the cultivation of a moral
will [MS 6:446-47], the development of one’s talents [MS 6:444-46], etc.,) and “duties of
love” (e.g., beneficence [MS 6:452-54], gratitude [MS 6:454-56], etc.), but that this kind
of latitude simply does not hold for those duties that Kant calls “perfect duties” (e.g., do
not lie [MS 6:429-31], do not stupefy oneself by the excessive use of food or drink [MS
6:427-28], etc.) and “duties of respect” (e.g., do not be arrogant [MS 6:465-66], do not
Thus, according to this line of criticism, since Kant derives a set of duties that require a definite kind of action, Kant’s moral philosophy still remains far too strict and rigid to accommodate the situational complexity of our everyday moral lives.

In order to address this response from the rigorism critic I believe that it will be helpful to think about “perfect duties” and “duties of respect” from an experiential perspective. As we should be able to see, perfect duties and duties of respect certainly do demand a specific kind of action on behalf of an individual, but it is worth noticing how the realization of these duties still require a situational familiarity that can appropriately weigh and consider how the relevant particularities within a given situation best allow one to realize the duties to which one is bound. Consider, for example, the perfect duty of “do not stupefy oneself by excessive use of food or drink.” Kant terms such a duty “perfect” because any failure to obey such a duty would be considered morally wrong, i.e., for Kant, one ought to always refrain from stupefying oneself by excessive use of food or drink. Notice, however, that this perfect duty itself does not specify how much food or drink is in fact excessive. In order to properly obey and realize this duty, then, an individual needs to familiarize himself or herself with a host of considerations that include, for example, one’s personal tolerance for alcohol, what kinds of food are not nutritional, how much alcohol is contained in certain drinks, etc. Some individuals may have a low tolerance for alcohol, while others may have a rather high tolerance. Such differences will inevitably lead to different ways in which given individuals can obey the perfect duty that Kant has claimed to derive. Or, maybe an individual who has a high...
tolerance for alcohol recognizes that he or she has not eaten very much on that day. In order to avoid stupefying oneself by drink, such an individual will need to appreciate the fact that his tolerance for alcohol may be lower at that given time.

The point that is worth noticing is that even when we consider perfect duties, which do oblige a specific kind of action or omission, such duties still require individuals to weigh and consider how the particularities that are operative within a given situation bear upon one’s ability to properly realize the duties to which one is bound. Perfect duties themselves do dictate a specific kind of action (e.g., never stupefy oneself by excessive use of drink), but such duties do not prescribe exactly how that specific kind of action is to be performed by every individual. That is to say, even when we consider perfect duties, it is still incumbent upon each individual to reflect upon how, given the various particularities that are involved in his or her circumstance, such duties are to be properly fulfilled and realized within that situation. The point that Kant’s rigorism critics may want to recognize is that, although Kant’s perfect duties do demand a specific kind of action, the actualization of such a demand nevertheless allows for flexibility and difference from individual to individual and from situation to situation. It allows for this flexibility because the specific manner in which a given individual realizes these duties will depend upon the variables that are operative within that given individual’s situational circumstance.

What such considerations help to illuminate is that the duties that Kant derives are not only sensitive to the situational complexities of our everyday moral lives, but that the execution of these very duties necessarily require individuals to familiarize themselves
with the situational complexities that are involved in any given circumstance. To claim, then, that Kant’s ethics is too strict and inflexible to accommodate such situational complexities is to distort the experiential sense in which a Kantian human being must comport himself or herself as a moral person in the world. A Kantian human being is not, as is sometimes caricatured, someone who simply follows a number of abstract universal rules and laws without regard to the particularity of his or her circumstance. Instead, as an experiential approach to Kant helps to illuminate, a Kantian human being must familiarize themselves with the particularities at hand in order to properly realize those ethical duties to which he or she is bound. For, even the execution of those duties that Kant had termed “perfect duties” and “duties of respect” (which do demand a specific kind of action or omission) require that individuals be attentive to the situational particularities of their given circumstance.

These kinds of considerations likely help to explain why Kant appends a section entitled “Casuistical questions” to the majority of the duties that he enumerates in his *Tugendlehre*. Such questions typically consider situations in which it is not evidently clear how an individual ought to act given the complexity of the particulars that are involved in a given circumstance. In these sections Kant rarely offers any kind of a determinate answer to the questions that he raises. Instead, he often concludes these sections with a series of questions that tend to further problematize the very difficulties that are involved in knowing how to act dutifully within the circumstance that is under consideration. The very raising of these kinds of questions, I believe, coupled with a lack of determinate responses from Kant, at the very least indicates that Kant acknowledges
that there are certain concrete scenarios in which a strict rule-following formula is not sufficient for determining how to act dutifully. This is not a shortcoming of his moral philosophy, however. What Kant is acknowledging in this section is that there are certain situations wherein an individual must thoughtfully reflect upon the multitude of possible actions available to him or her, and then must ultimately decide upon the most fitting manner in which a duty could be realized within such a complex circumstance. For, in order for an individual to realize the ethical duties that Kant derives, an individual needs to be aware of all the differing opportunities for promoting a duty while also being sensitive to all of those dangers that may threaten the achievement of a duty. The requirement of such a situational familiarity reveals that Kantian moral judgment must be flexible enough to accommodate the wide range of possibilities that are operative for living as a moral person in the world.

I believe that the error in this allegation can once again be explained in terms of the interpretational divisions that I outlined at the beginning of this chapter. I believe that the rigorism charge rests upon mistakenly conflating either Kant’s foundational or applicatory claims about morality for his account of how we actually experience and live the commands of morality. It is certainly true that the foundational structure of a categorical imperative binds a human being unconditionally, but this does not mean that the actual performance of our ethical duties permit of only one possible manner of performing a given duty. Instead, given the manifold complexity of our individual human lives, our concrete manner of executing our various ethical duties reveals a multitude of ways in which generalized commands can be instantiated in our particular
actions. Moreover, even though Kant’s application of the categorical imperative to the human being derives a set of duties that demand a specific kind of action (e.g., “perfect duties”), the actual manner of executing such duties will often vary from individual to individual and from situation to situation. As an experiential approach to Kant helps to illuminate, being a moral person in the world necessarily requires a situational familiarity that is flexible enough to accommodate the wide range of possibilities for realizing the ethical duties to which one is bound. That is to say, from the perspective of Kantian lived experience, a virtuous human being will be someone who is not only attentive to those projects and activities that can best promote the ends of morality, but it will also be someone who is sensitive to those potential obstructions that may impede the realization of such ends.

Kant’s rigorism critics commonly characterize a virtuous Kantian as someone who is woefully out of touch with situational particularities because of an excessive and undue obedience to abstract universal rules and moral prescriptions. As an experiential approach to Kant should help to demonstrate, however, a virtuous Kantian is simply not as rigid and detached from concrete particularities as he or she is commonly portrayed. Rather than being excessively rigoristic and detached from the concrete here and now, Kantian moral life instead involves a great deal of flexibility in moral judgment, and it involves a concerted attention toward the particulars that are involved in one’s given circumstance. As we should be able to see, Kant’s moral philosophy combines together a flexibility in judgment with an attention to concrete detail, because his thinking largely leaves it up to given individuals to decide upon the best manner in which to live a
morally oriented life. An experiential approach to Kant therefore helps to respond to the charge of rigorism, because such an approach helps to illuminate the living sense in which his moral philosophy admits of a great deal of flexibility and latitude, and because it shows how virtuous Kantians are those persons whose moral judgment is properly attentive to the situational particularities that inform their concrete circumstance.

(d) Summary of the Experiential Reply to Dogmatism, Formalism and Rigorism

The basic idea underlying my reply to Kant’s critics is that a proper attention to the experiential dimension of Kant’s moral philosophy should reveal how these criticisms are ultimately mistaken in their respective allegations. The view that I am advancing is that each of these criticisms presupposes a certain distorted conception of Kantian moral experience and subsequently criticizes Kant in terms of that distorted vision. My

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98 Given this emphasis upon latitude and flexibility in moral judgment it may seem as though my experiential approach to Kant reveals him to be some kind of a relativist. I do not think that this is the case. What I think it shows instead is that there is much less stricture in Kant’s moral philosophy than is commonly supposed. Although the duties associated with the ends of self-perfection and the happiness of others do not prescribe definite actions in advance, these duties nevertheless serve to anchor, in an objective manner, a morally oriented life. In other words, our obligation to realize the duties associated with these moral ends are universally binding upon us even though their proper execution inevitably requires a familiarity with the situational particularities that inform our relative position in the world. But just because our moral judgment must attune itself to these situational particularities does not absolve us from our obligation to realize certain universally binding ends. In his book *Kantian Ethics* Allen Wood has noticed something similar. After discussing Kant’s notion of latitude in moral judgment he remarks: “[t]hese thoughts might lead us to a surprising conclusion. There seems to be much less rigor and system to our duties than we might have expected from Kant, based upon his notorious reputation for moral strictness… I think it is true that Kantian ethics, as compared with many fashionable theories, is far more permissive and leaves a lot more to the free volition of individuals… In short, Kantian ethics (contrary to its reputation) is in greater danger of being too lax than of being too strict” [KE 169-70]. Kant may appear as though he is in danger of being too lax, but, as I indicate above (and as Wood would likely agree), demonstrating that Kant is less strict than is commonly supposed is not the same as considering him to be too lax or even relativistic. Kant’s ethics still maintains an objectivist perspective on duties that are universally binding upon all rational beings. What an experiential approach shows, however, is that the actual execution of these duties requires a judgment that is flexible enough to accommodate all of the differing opportunities we encounter for realizing a morally oriented life.
experiential approach to Kant is an attempt to reveal these distortions in order to demonstrate the sense in which these common criticisms are ultimately mistaken.

To see this point consider the vision of Kantian moral experience that each of these three criticisms seemingly implies and presupposes. The dogmatist critic conceives of a Kantian human being as someone who is bound to an abstract and experientially unverifiable idea of reason. The formalist critic understands Kantian moral life strictly in terms of a fastidious testing of maxims for internal contradiction. And the rigorism critic characterizes a Kantian as someone who is out of touch with situational particularities because of an excessive obedience to inflexible universal rules and prescriptions. As my experiential approach to Kant’s moral philosophy has demonstrated, these three conceptions of Kantian moral life ultimately rest upon distortions and misunderstandings. Kant is not saying that human beings are bound to some abstract idea of reason whose command can never be felt or experienced, and that our moral lives are simply characterized by an inflexible testing of maxims for internal contradiction. Instead, as we have seen throughout this study, when we focus our attention upon the moral life of a Kantian human being we discover someone who, on the basis of the multitude of concrete particularities and possibilities that inform one’s given circumstance, strives to act in those ways that further and promote the ends of self-perfection and the happiness of others. Kant moreover presents us with someone who feels ashamed of himself when he fails to realize those duties that are associated with these ends, and someone who feels good about himself [Selbstzufriedenheit] when he performs these duties to which he is bound. An experiential rendering of Kant’s moral philosophy does not, therefore, reveal
someone who simply cognizes some theoretical idea of reason and who simply obeys universal rules without regard for any situational complexities. Instead, an experiential approach to Kant reveals someone who must be intimately attuned to the particularities that shape and frame her concrete circumstance, and someone who feels an elevated sense of respect [Achtung] for that aspect of her person that allows her to freely override her self-centered urges for the sake of honoring the morally oriented ends of humanity.

These various distortions and misunderstandings of Kant ultimately stem, I believe, from mistakenly thinking that Kant’s claims concerning either the foundation or application of his supreme principle of morality are identical in scope to his descriptions concerning how human beings actually live and experience themselves as moral persons in the world. That is to say, these mistaken conceptions of Kantian moral experience are inferences that readers draw on the basis of their understanding of Kant’s claims concerning the justification of the moral law and how that law is to be applied to the human being. I believe, however, that such inferences remain uninformed if they do not properly attend to what Kant himself says about our living our moral lives. Although the texts that we commonly study when we read Kant’s moral philosophy are principally focused upon the foundation and application of the moral law, such points of emphasis should not suppress or obscure the kinds of lived experiences that Kant has in mind when he refers to the moral life of a human being in the world. The present study has sought to illuminate these elements and features that characterize the moral life of a Kantian human being, and I believe that this experiential approach to Kant helps to show how the
criticisms of dogmatism, formalism and rigorism ultimately rest upon misunderstandings of what Kant invites his readers to reflect upon and consider.
CHAPTER FIVE:
TWO APPLICATIONS OF THE EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO KANT’S MORAL PHILOSOPHY

The proximity of the neighbor does not only strike up against me, but exalts and elevates me -Emmanuel Levinas

In the last several chapters I have demonstrated how an experiential approach to Kant’s moral philosophy can help us to defend him against the criticisms of dogmatism, formalism and rigorism. We might now ask: can this experiential approach to Kant offer us anything else in our reading and understanding of his ethics? In this concluding chapter I would like to indicate two prominent ways in which an experiential approach to Kant can help to inform our interpretation and evaluation of his moral philosophy. The first manner of application concerns pedagogy, while the second concerns a critical comparison with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas.

1. Teaching Kant’s Moral Philosophy

Very often undergraduate students are introduced to Kant’s moral philosophy strictly in terms of his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. This text certainly appears as an appropriate place to begin the study of Kant’s ethics. After all, in this work Kant develops and articulates fundamental notions such as a good will, duty, autonomy and the dignity of rational nature. This text is no doubt extremely important for the study of Kant’s moral philosophy, and I would not disagree with any instructor who presents and
teaches Kant’s thought in terms of this foundational work. However, one leading shortcoming appears to burden the prospect of introducing Kant’s thought by means of this short, and rather difficult, text. A leading shortcoming is this: the arguments and claims that Kant advances in this work are often mistakenly expected to provide us with his entire moral theory. Although Kant’s stated goals in this text are strictly foundational in nature: “[t]he present groundwork is…nothing more than the search for and establishment of the supreme principle of morality,” [G 4:392] many of Kant’s first time readers expect this complex text to be offering answers to questions that this particular work never explicitly raises. For example, even though this text is principally focused upon those core elements that constitute the foundation of the supreme principle of morality (e.g., autonomy, universality, rationality, etc.), many readers tend to presume that this text also presents us with Kant’s developed account of how the supreme principle of morality is to be applied to the human being, and how this application is supposed to derive particular ethical duties. It is often moreover expected to be

99 Some readers are led to think that Kant’s introduction and discussion of his famous “four examples” from his *Groundwork* [see G 4:421-5] somehow represent his account of a deduction of our ethical duties. For reasons that I offer in note #12 from chapter 3, I strongly believe that this reading is mistaken. After remarking “[w]e shall now enumerate a few duties in accordance with the usual division of them into duties to ourselves and duties to others and into perfect and imperfect duties,” [G 4:421] Kant explicitly remarks: “[i]t must be noted here that I reserve the division of duties entirely for a future *Metaphysics of Morals*” [G 4:421*]. As I demonstrated in chapter 3 of this study, Kant’s proper derivation of duties is to be found in his *Metaphysics of Morals*, not in his *Groundwork*. It is a mistake to infer, for instance, that Kant deduces a taxonomy of ethical duties on the basis of his *Groundwork* because his *Groundwork* is not focused upon performing such a deduction. Allen Wood describes Kant’s discussion of the “four examples” in his *Groundwork* as “only heuristic aids” [KE 71]. That is to say, Kant introduces these examples in order to illuminate the sense in which his provisional and abstract formulations of the moral law might resonate with an already generally accepted account of what our duties must involve. This aim in Kant’s *Groundwork* needs to be carefully distinguished from the aim of explicitly deducing a taxonomy of duties from these foundational formulations. See note #12 in chapter three of this study for a further discussion of this point.
somehow providing us with a descriptive account of what moral experience is actually like for a Kantian human being.

I believe, however, that such presumptions tend to lead many readers to the kinds of distortions and misunderstandings that have been addressed in this study. That is to say, being introduced to Kant strictly in terms of the arguments forwarded in his *Groundwork* tends to promote the idea that his foundational claims about morality must somehow be representative of the whole of his moral philosophy. By approaching Kant in this way readers tend to generate distorted conceptions of what moral experience must be like for a Kantian human being. As a result, such first time readers naturally suspect that Kant’s contributions to moral philosophy are far too abstract and detached from their own moral lives, and therefore tend to lead readers toward a rather superficial dismissal of his conclusions.

I believe that the experiential approach to Kant that I have outlined in my study can help to remedy this kind of pedagogical situation. Instead of introducing Kant to students exclusively in terms of the fundamental elements that compose his supreme principle of morality (i.e., good will, duty, autonomy, etc.), I think it is much more fruitful to artfully combine such elements with the kinds of Kantian lived experiences that have been illuminated in this study. Introducing Kant to students in terms of relatable experiences such as, e.g., humiliation, respect, self-contentment, etc., allows first time readers to better enter into the framework of Kant’s thought without being burdened by the heavy weight of his rather scholastic sounding terminology. Once these basic moral experiences have been clarified and illuminated for first time Kant readers, students will
be better positioned to understand and evaluate the governing perspective that is orienting
Kant’s moral philosophy. I believe, for instance, that his critical methodology in ethics
will become much more accessible to students once they become familiar with the
experiential picture of moral life that Kant is drawing upon. That is to say, the basic
question that Kant’s critical methodology raises concerning the conditions for the
possibility of obligation will become much more accessible to students once they are
familiar with the kinds of moral experiences that Kant is trying to account for and
explain.

I therefore believe that the experiential approach to Kant that I have presented in my
study can not only help to dispel certain distortions and misconceptions of Kant’s thought
before they entrench themselves, but that this approach to Kant can moreover offer first
time Kant readers a perspective that is accessible and relatable. In this way, I believe that
this experiential approach to Kant can provide instructors with a helpful manner of
introducing Kant’s moral philosophy to students, because the accessibility of this
approach will better enable students to understand and evaluate the theses and
conclusions that Kant offers.

II. Critical Comparison with Emmanuel Levinas

I also believe that this account of Kantian moral experience can help to bring the insights
of Kant’s moral philosophy into fruitful conversation with the increasingly influential
philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas [1906-1995]. Although the philosophies of these two
thinkers were guided by differing methodologies and points of emphasis, I believe that
my experiential approach to Kant can help us to critically consider and evaluate Kant’s
conclusions from a perspective that closely approximates the guiding aims and efforts of Levinas’ thought.

My interest in comparing these two thinkers is motivated by several reasons. To begin with, Levinas’ thought has no doubt become progressively more influential in philosophical conversations in the last several decades. There is something about Levinas’ thought that is clearly resonating with a wider and wider audience. Since Kant is a central figure in debates in contemporary moral philosophy, and since Levinas offers us descriptions of moral life that have resonated (in some manner or another) with contemporary readers, I believe it is therefore worth considering what these two thinkers might have in common with one another. After all, a critical encounter that compares the insights of one of the great moral philosophers of western civilization with a philosopher that has been capturing the attention of many contemporary readers should reveal intellectually stimulating results.

Now a number of scholars in recent years have examined many of the points of affinity and difference that obtain between Kant and Levinas, and a lot of very good scholarly

100 As Critchley notes in his “Introduction” to the Cambridge Companion to Levinas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) one clear sign of Levinas’ ascent from relative obscurity to prominence can be observed from the fact that Vincent Descombes’ otherwise excellent presentation of the history of French philosophy from 1933-77 barely mentioned Levinas at all, and yet Jean-Luc Marion, Professor of Philosophy at the Sorbonne (Paris IV), was able to write in 1996 that “if one defines a great philosopher as someone without whom philosophy would not have been what it is, then in France there are two great philosophers in the twentieth century: Bergson and Levinas” (Critchley, p. 2). Levinas’ two major works were published in 1961 [TI] and 1974 [OBE], and yet the significance of Levinas’ thought was hardly noticed until several decades later. Interest in Levinas’ thought has clearly travelled across the pond as well. A recent look at an APA newsletter will reveal that North American departments in philosophy are looking for scholars to teach Levinas. Even philosophers with a strong background in “analytic” philosophy have argued that Levinas’ thought deserves close attention. See, for example, Hilary Putnam’s essay “Levinas and Judaism” in The Cambridge Companion to Levinas, pp. 33-62.
work has been done on this topic. In my survey of the literature that compares Kant and Levinas, however, I have found that one of the great obstacles that tends to face the prospects of bringing these two thinkers into a meaningful conversation is the fact that they begin their respective analyses from such different philosophical perspectives. For, as we have seen in this present study, Kant’s central efforts in his moral philosophy involved a concerted attempt to legitimize the autonomous exercise of practical reason.

In order to achieve this goal, Kant’s methodology aimed to first deduce the fundamental principles and elements that enable the possibility of uncoerced practical reason.

Levinas, however, under the influence of leading phenomenologists such as Husserl and

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Heidegger,\textsuperscript{102} presented his analyses from a rather different philosophical perspective. His philosophical approach tended to adopt what could be termed the “phenomenological attitude.”\textsuperscript{103} That is to say, Levinas’s thought was principally focused upon presenting truthful descriptions of those realities that showed themselves to us from the perspective of our lived experience. Like phenomenologists before him, Levinas believed that traditional philosophical methodologies had tended to prioritize a theoretical attitude that distorted the living sense in which concrete realities manifested themselves to us in meaningful ways.\textsuperscript{104} Levinas’s writings, then, like other phenomenologically oriented

\textsuperscript{102} Levinas was a student of both Husserl and Heidegger at Freiburg during the years 1928-1930. His 1930 prize winning dissertation \textit{The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology} (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995) was not only the first major publication on Husserl’s phenomenology, but it is also widely considered to be the work that introduced Husserl to the Parisian intellectual scene. Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, and Derrida are all said to have been introduced to Husserl in and through Levinas’ influential text. In Ricouer essay’s “L’originaire et la question-en-retour dans le \textit{krisis} de Husserl” in \textit{Textes pour Emmanuel Lévinas}, edited by F. Laruelle (Paris: Place, 1980) he remarks: “Je ne saurais oublier ma première rencontre approfondie avec Husserl: ce fut en lisant \textit{la Théorie de l’intuition dans la Phénoménologie de Husserl} par Emmanuel Levinas. Ce livre tout simplement fondait les études husserliennes en France.” (p. 167). \textit{English translation}: “I will never forget my first detailed encounter with Husserl: it happened when I read Emmanuel Lévinas’ \textit{The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology}. Simply speaking, this book founded Husserl studies in France.” In the mid 1930’s Levinas was working on a book length study that defended Heidegger’s phenomenology against Husserl’s, but he later abandoned the project amidst news of Heidegger’s affiliation with the National Socialist party. Although still inspired by many of Heidegger’s insights, much of Levinas’s philosophical career after that point was devoted toward uncovering, and correcting, certain unjustified presuppositions that were underlying Heidegger’s phenomenology.

\textsuperscript{103} For an excellent detailed account of what is often termed the “phenomenological attitude” see R. Sokolowski’s \textit{Introduction to Phenomenology} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See especially chapter 4 where Sokolowski distinguishes very clearly the “phenomenological attitude” from what is termed the “natural attitude.”

\textsuperscript{104} Martin Heidegger most definitely influenced Levinas in this direction. Heidegger’s \textit{Sein und Zeit} (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1953), which Levinas heralded as one of the top five works in the history of western philosophy (e.g., \textit{Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo}, translated by R. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985) p. 37), sought to illustrate the sense in which our various theoretical and intellectual determinations about beings were preceded by an existential familiarity with the readiness-to-hand [\textit{zuhanden}] of our surrounding world. That is to say, for Heidegger, prior to examining and talking about “beings” in terms of “substantive objects” to which a free-standing and separated “subject” seeks to “know” and “comprehend,” we always already find ourselves immersed and engaged within a context of meaning (“openness” \textit{[Offenheit]}) that reveals to us how beings are to be handled, cared
philosophers, sought to reacquaint our thinking with those concrete meanings that informed the content of our lived experience, and Levinas attempted to do so by offering us honest and truthful descriptions of that which shows itself.

As this first approximation between these two thinkers should already indicate, Kant and Levinas presented their analyses and conclusions from rather different philosophical perspectives. Kant’s central concern aimed to uncover the fundamental conditions for the possibility of pure practical reason, meanwhile Levinas was largely focused upon describing the sense in which concrete realities manifested themselves to us. Given these differing philosophical perspectives, the task of bringing these two thinkers into conversation is often problematized right from the very outset. As even Jacques Derrida has remarked: “les rapports à Kant soient très compliqués chez Lévinas.” For, if we

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105 This idea of aiming to “re-acquaint” readers with fundamental realities can be found in Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of the goal of phenomenology in the Preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception* “[p]henomenology attempts to re-achieve a direct and primordial contact with the world” (p. vii).
consider Levinas from the perspective of Kant’s guiding questions, then we might be led to ask Levinas questions that he himself never specifically addressed. For example, we might ask how his phenomenology accounts for the possibility of autonomous practical reason, or we might ask Levinas for his “supreme principle of morality,” or we might even wonder about his “applied ethics” and the kinds of duties that Levinas’ thinking derives. Anyone familiar with Levinas’s publications would know, however, that Levinas’s works very rarely (if ever) attempted to answer these kinds of questions. The same problem would seem to plague the prospects of approaching Kant’s moral philosophy from the perspective of Levinas’s phenomenology. For instance, if anything at all is known about Levinas it is that Levinas had focused upon drawing our attention toward the reality of being in proximity to another human being [Autrui]. When one reads through the collected works of Kant’s practical philosophy, however, one quickly discovers that Kant’s writings did not dedicate very much consideration to the topic of how human beings look and appear to one another.

Given these kinds of interpretational difficulties that confront the prospects of comparing Kant and Levinas, I believe that the experiential approach to Kant that I have offered in my study can help to bring these two thinkers into a fruitful and meaningful

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106 Derrida, Jacques et Labarriere, Pierre-Jean. Altérités (Paris: Osiris, 1986) p. 73. Jacques Derrida makes this comment after reflecting upon the sense in which Levinas must consider the facing relation as a universal relation: “Levinas n’est pas une penseur de singularité par opposition à la loi ou à l’universalité; il affirme la loi dans ce qu’elle a d’universel, de rationnel même; de ce point de vue-là, il a aussi un discours très grec, qu’il assume comme tel, parce que sa pensée du visage de l’autre, est une pensée universel; ce n’est pas la loi formelle au sens kantien, encore que les rapports à Kant soient très compliqués chez Lévinas” in Altérités (p. 73). English translation: “Levinas is not a thinker of singularity who is in opposition to law or universality; he affirms law insofar as it is universal, even rational; from this point of view his discourse is also very Greek, which he takes on as such, because his thought of the face of the other is a universal thought; this thought is not that of a formal law such as we find in the Kantian sense of the term. The relations between Kant and Levinas, however, are very complicated.”
conversation. For, as I have tried to emphasize throughout my study, although Kant’s central efforts in moral philosophy were dedicated toward legitimizing the autonomous exercise of practical reason, such foundational efforts should not obscure or subtract away from the experiential descriptions that provide content to many of Kant’s foundational claims about morality. As I have tried to illuminate in this study, Kant’s moral philosophy does offer us descriptions of moral experience, and I believe this experiential dimension of Kant’s thought can allow for a rewarding conversation to emerge between Kant and Levinas. After all, if a critical engagement between two thinkers from different intellectual climates is to be informative, that engagement needs to present the contributions of one of the thinkers in such a way that can best approximate the intentions of the contributions offered by the other thinker. Since my study has attempted to uncover the experiential dimension of Kant’s ethics, and since Levinas’ thought attempts to present us with descriptions of our concrete lived experience, I believe that a critical engagement that compares Kant’s experiential descriptions with Levinas’s own descriptions should reveal intellectually fruitful results.

In these closing pages I would like to indicate one promising way in which my experiential approach to Kant can be applied to Levinas’ descriptions. I would like to

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A critical study that compares an experiential approach to Kant with Levinas’s phenomenology could pursue many other topics and directions. For instance, both Kant and Levinas draw our attention toward an ethical asymmetry between the other and me. As I demonstrated in chapter 3 of this study, for Kant, although you and I are the same kind of being (viz., an embodied rational being), our concrete moral interaction nevertheless reveals a fundamental dissymmetry between you and me, because the end toward which I am obligated to promote in your person (viz. happiness) is an end that I am not under obligation to promote in my own person, meanwhile my dutiful end toward my own person (viz., perfection) is an end that I am not under direct obligation to promote in your person. It would be interesting to compare and contrast Kant’s form of ethical asymmetry with the inter-personal asymmetry that Levinas’ phenomenology draws our attention toward [cf. TeI 236-8 / TaI 215-6]. Both thinkers recognize, for instance, that from the
demonstrate how an experiential approach to Kant can help to reveal certain important similarities between Kant and Levinas on the topic of what happens to a human being when he or she learns of himself or herself as a moral person in the world. My goal in drawing attention to these similarities, however, will not be to simply to highlight these affinities. On the basis of my comparison of Kant and Levinas I would like to draw attention toward a deeper (and often unnoticed) point about our moral life, viz., that being a moral person in the world can feel good.

(a) Kant and Levinas on Moral Feeling and Happiness

In chapter 2 of this study I characterized Kant’s account of moral feeling [moralisches Gefühl]. If we recall, on Kant’s telling, our experiential awareness of moral obligation involves a complex of seemingly opposed feelings: on the one hand, we feel humbled and humiliated by our awareness of a normative command that restricts our spontaneous desire for personal happiness, while on the other hand we simultaneously feel exalted and elevated by a feeling of respect for that aspect of our person that alerts us to the possibility of actively willing an end that is un-compelled by self-centered inclinations.

That is to say, on Kant’s account, in our experiential awareness of moral obligation we
respect and revere the rationality that elevates our existence above a merely hedonistic style of life. Kant’s descriptions moreover describe the sense in which we feel a certain elevated form of happiness, viz., self-contentment \([\text{Selbstzufriedenheit}]\), when we adhere to the normative commands that our reason prescribes.\(^\text{108}\) In other words, we feel good about ourselves, and our lives, when we strive to realize the proper ends and vocation \([\text{Bestimmung}]\) of our nature.

Now, when we turn our attention toward Levinas we, of course, discover different points of emphasis, but certain interesting points of parallel nevertheless begin to emerge. In his very challenging major work, *Totality and Infinity*,\(^\text{109}\) Levinas focuses his attention upon describing a host of differing realities. As I mentioned already, like many phenomenologists a leading purpose behind offering these descriptions was to retrieve, and therefore re-direct our attention toward, those basic meanings that inform the content of our lives. For our present purposes what is most noticeable in Levinas’s account are

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\(^{108}\) I initially discussed the topic of “self-contentment” \([\text{Selbstzufriedenheit}]\) in chapter 2 of this study (pp. 69-72). In his second *Critique* Kant describes self-contentment as an “analogue of happiness” \([\text{Analogon der Glückseligkeit}]\) [KPV 5:117]. Although not strictly identical to \(\text{Glückseligkeit, Selbstzufriedenheit}\) nevertheless shares certain similarities with what Kant calls happiness. For instance, Kant often defines \(\text{Glückseligkeit}\) as a “contentment \([\text{Zufriedenheit}]\) with one’s condition…with what nature bestows” [MS 6:387, cf. MS 6:480, R 6:67], which clearly suggests that “happiness,” for Kant, involves a sense of contentment with some aspect of oneself. In other words, a sense of “feeling good” about something that has to do with oneself. However, whereas \(\text{Glückseligkeit}\) proper involves a contentment that stems from the satisfaction of our sensible inclinations [G 4:405, KPV 5:73], \(\text{Selbstzufriedenheit}\) involves a contentment that stems from a virtuous disposition [KPV 5:117]. Since \(\text{Glückseligkeit}\) and \(\text{Selbstzufriedenheit}\) both share the property of contentment \([\text{Zufriedenheit}]\), and since \(\text{Glückseligkeit}\) concerns what we might call our “lower” faculties (i.e., sensible impulses) and \(\text{Selbstzufriedenheit}\) our “higher” possibilities (virtue), I think that it is suitable to refer to \(\text{Selbstzufriedenheit}\) as an “elevated form of happiness.”

his descriptions concerning what happens to a human being when he or she recognizes himself or herself as a moral person in the world. As I will attempt to show, like Kant, Levinas also describes a complex of seemingly opposed feelings. That is to say, he too points our attention toward a phenomenon that, on the one hand, is akin to a feeling of shame and humiliation while simultaneously exalting and elevating our sense of our place and orientation within the cosmos.

In order to understand Levinas’s account on this point it will helpful to begin by briefly summarizing his account of the attitude of egoism. In the spirit of phenomenological philosophy, Levinas concentrates his attention upon a specific kind of attitude (such as egoism) in order to better uncover the various shades of meaning and dimension that are operative within that given attitude. Concentrating upon phenomena in this way involves what phenomenologists call “bracketing.” Bracketing is a concerted method of focusing closely upon one attitude in isolation from other ways of being related to phenomena in order to better uncover the intentionalities and meanings that might be operative in that modality under consideration. *Totality and Infinity* follows this phenomenological procedure by first bracketing and analyzing the attitude of egoism, and then continues by analyzing how the intentionalities contained within that modality are transformed as differing realities present themselves to the perspective of the ego.

So how does Levinas describe the attitude of egoism? In section II of *Totality and Infinity*, entitled “Interiority and Economy,” Levinas begins his analysis of the life of the ego by describing enjoyment [*jouissance*]. He describes *jouissance* as a way of being in the world in which the ego, or “I,” simply “lives from…” [*vivre de…*] the terrestrial fund
of his or her elemental surroundings: e.g., I breathe the air, the earth supports my step, the
sun warms my neck, a cool breeze refreshes me, etc,. These elemental realities (viz.,
earth, air, water, etc.) all serve to support me and nourish me as I stand embedded and
immersed amidst my terrestrial immediacies. This manner of holding myself [me tiens]
in the world is both spontaneous and immediate. I simply find myself absorbed by my
elemental surroundings. In the egoistic attitude of enjoyment I simply consume and take
pleasure in these elemental realities as they appear to me.

Levinas continues his analysis of this attitude by noting that although my terrestrial
surroundings may be enjoy-able, they can also appear to me as dangerous and
threatening. A fire may warm my chilled body, but it could also burn and scold my skin.
A waterfall may be beautiful and awe inspiring, but it could also fill my lungs and drown
me. In order to better enjoy my surroundings, I learn to adopt a more aggressive attitude
toward my lived surroundings. That is to say, I assert a level of dominance and control
over the plenum of my enjoyable environment. Through the activity of laboring upon my
surroundings, for instance, I can transform my environment into a setting that can better
serve the wants and needs of my egoistic proclivities. In other words, the work of my
labor can actively transform the immediacy of enjoy-able realities into determinate
“things” that can be possessed, owned and controlled by me. Through labor and
planning, for example, the expanse of a forested region can be transformed into
determinate “homes” to live in or “papers” for me to write on or “bridges” for me to
travel on. Moreover, this way of being in a world that dwells in a home [maison] enables
me to master and enjoy my lived surroundings in an enhanced manner: a home not only
shields me from adverse conditions, a home also provides me with a central location from which I can [je peux] “go out” into the world in order to return with the “things” that I have labored upon and collected. My home therefore becomes a centripetal point from which I feel grounded and centered in the world. A home, whether it be a tent or a mansion, provides me with a personalized site wherein I can store my goods and belongings so that I can better enjoy these “things” at my own leisure.

These curious (and rather intriguing) descriptions become relevant for our purposes when Levinas further describes how this egoistic attitude is “called into question” [mise en question] by the appearance of another human being [Autrui]. In section III of Totality and Infinity (“Exteriority and Face”) Levinas describes how the appearance of another human being does not show itself to me as a mere “thing” to be owned or controlled. Of course, as our collective history of slavery and colonialism evidences, human beings certainly can objectify and exploit one another, but Levinas invites us to notice something extra-ordinary about the phenomenon of being faced\(^\text{110}\) by another human being. Unlike the appearance of “things,” a facing other signifies a certain resistance and prohibition against my egoistic tendencies of consumption, exploitation

\(^{110}\) When reading Levinas refer to words like face it is tempting to understand these references in the purely empirical sense in which these terms are often associated, e.g., the color of one’s eyes, the shape of one’s nose, the curve of one’s chin. However, when Levinas draws our attention to the facing relation he is intending to evoke certain meanings that are broader than the mere empirical characteristics and properties that we typically name on a human face. That is to say, he is referring more broadly to the experience of “being addressed by” or “in proximity to” another human being. These latter senses encompass and presuppose an empirical encounter with a face without being exhausted by those empirical features and characteristics that we can enumerate on a human face. For instance, Levinas draws our attention to the “defenselessness” that is signified by the address of a facing other. This defenselessness is not, strictly speaking, a “property” that belongs to the possibly enumerated characteristics of a human face. Rather, defenselessness is a meaning that is signified from within the proximity of a face-to-face encounter. In other words, defenselessness is a meaning that arises when one is addressed by another human being, but defenselessness is not a property that we would use to define the face of a human being were we to objectively determine the characteristics that constitute the face of a human being.
and ownership. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas describes this resistance upon my egoistic attitude in the following way:

The face resists possession, resists my powers... The expression the face introduces into the world does not defy the feebleness of my power, but my ability for power *[mon pouvoir de pouvoir]* [TeI 215 / TaI 197-98]

The facing other does not resist my consumptive powers by altogether eliminating or erasing my powers to dominate; instead, the other who faces me alerts me to a meaning that my ego-centric powers are not appropriate to this reality who appears before me. This resistance upon my ego-centrism is not something that the other who faces me actively wills. A facing other does not, for example, employ techniques of manipulation in order to thwart the spontaneity of my egoistic tendencies. Instead, this resistance placed upon my ego-centered way of being in the world results from nothing more than the fact of being addressed by another human being. When I am faced by another human being, Levinas describes how I cannot help but notice the following normative prohibition against my ego-centrist attitude: “you shall not commit murder” [TeI 217 / TaI 199], that is to say, a facing other calls out to me and demands that I refrain from consuming or exploiting this other who faces me. Without any explicitly announced words exchanged between us, a facing other signifies this prohibition against treating another human being as a mere “tool” or “thing” to be used or manipulated for my own egoistic wants and desires.

Levinas’ account of the facing relation, however, should not simply be understood in these negative or prohibitive terms. On Levinas’ telling, the “revelation” of a human other also reveals a positive meaning:
The “resistance” of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical. The first revelation of the other, presupposed in all the other relations with him, does not consist in grasping him in his negative resistance and in circumventing him by ruse. I do not struggle with a faceless god, but I respond to his expression, to his revelation [Tel 215 / TaI 197]

The other who faces me does not simply signify negative prohibitions such as “do not hurt me” or “do not manipulate me”; the other also calls out for my positive response: “serve me…help me to live.” Now, of course, one’s manner of responding to another human being can take many shapes and forms: for example, I may choose to simply walk away from the other or I may choose to welcome the other into my home. I can ridicule the other or I can try to educate him. But for Levinas, what I cannot do, and this is “presupposed in all the other relations with him” [Tel 215 / TaI 197] is I cannot not respond to the other who faces me. That is to say, one must respond to the appeal signified by another’s address. Levinas describes this unchosen signification, expressed by the other, in the following way:

The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity – its hunger – without my being able to be deaf to that appeal. Thus in expression the being that imposes itself does not limit but promotes my freedom, arousing my goodness [Tel 218 / TaI 200]

Whether rich or poor, lawyer or athlete, governor or waiter, the bare “nudity” of the other who faces me, stripped of all “social role,”\(^{111}\) calls out for my positive ethical response. A human other “promotes my freedom” and “arouses my goodness” by

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\(^{111}\) Levinas often uses the expression “social role” in order to refer to the sense in which we appear to one another “as” something or someone within society, e.g., as a teacher, as a judge, as a politician, as a police officer, etc. These kinds of titles and significations refer to one’s “social role,” viz., the role and place that someone plays and holds within the operation of a given society. By pointing our attention to the facing relation, however, Levinas is trying to uncover a fundamental meaning of the human being that underlies these social roles and titles.
awakening me to an orientation in the world that supersedes my self-centered activities. That is to say, the appearance of another human being offers my existence the possibility of goodness by presenting me with the opportunity to serve him or her. How I should respond to another human being will, of course, always depend upon a host of differing circumstances (e.g., what does this other truly need?, what can I offer?, how many others are there?, etc.) but what is “presupposed in all relations” with a human other, and any other possible other to whom I might encounter,¹¹² is this appeal for my ethical response. This unchosen appeal for my ethical response, which manifests itself from within the facing relation, not only commands against treating other human beings as mere “things,” it moreover “promotes my freedom” by presenting me with the possibility of helping others to live and to enjoy their lives.

¹¹² In my brief presentation of Levinas in this study I have intentionally avoided a thorough treatment of how Levinas explains the relationship between the singular other and “other others.” Since my overall study is on Kant, and since this chapter simply wishes to indicate a promising direction in which Kant could be critically compared to Levinas, I have chosen to avoid over-complicating matters by turning my attention toward very difficult and technical aspects of Levinas’ thought. For an excellent reading and interpretation of Levinas’ views on the connection between a singular other and other others please see Peperzak’s To The Other, pp. 166-84, 229-230 and the closing pages of Peperzak’s more recent essay “Ethical Life” in Research in Phenomenology (vol. 33, 2003) pp. 141-154. Following Peperzak, I believe that the only relevant difference between the singular other who faces me and “other others” is that the former involves an actual encounter in space and time, whereas the latter is a possible as yet unrealized encounter. Since, on Levinas’ own terms, my dedication to the latter would not differ from my dedication to a singular other, that which makes me aware of my responsibility to unknown others need not differ from that which makes me aware of my responsibility to a singular other. Therefore, although “other others” may be less visible and less present to me, these circumstances should not diminish the sense in which I am also responsible to other others. Leading passages in which Levinas discusses the connection between the other and “other others” can be found here: Tel 187-91 / Tal 212-216; OBE 16, 191 n.2, 81-82 n.33, 157-161; Entre Nous: On Thinking of the Other, translated by M. Smith and B. Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) pp. 25-52; Collected Philosophical Papers, translated by A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998) pp. 25-45.
Now what might any of these rather curious and remarkable descriptions have to do with Kant’s practical philosophy? Clearly there are prominent differences between Kant and Levinas. As I mentioned above, a survey of Kant’s collected works finds scarce to little mention of how human beings appear to one another. Moreover, if Kant were to read Levinas he would no doubt stress that ethical responsibility is grounded upon the autonomy of pure practical reason. That is to say, on Kant’s telling it is our *reason* [*Vernunft*], and therefore not the appearance of a human other [*Autrui*], that grounds the moral obligations of (and between) human beings. For our purposes, however, I would like to draw attention to their respective accounts of what happens *to* a human being when they become aware of themselves as moral persons in the world. As I indicated already, in many ways that are similar to Kant, Levinas’s descriptions also describe a two-fold moment of seemingly opposed feelings. That is to say, Levinas also describes how our ethical awareness in the world humiliates our egoistic spontaneity while simultaneously elevating our sense of purposive orientation in the world.

I believe that these similarities are most clearly visible in the succinct summary of *Totality and Infinity* that Levinas presented to the “Société Française de Philosophie” very shortly after the publication of *Totality and Infinity*. In this presentation, which was later published as “Transcendence and Height,” Levinas describes the emergence of ethical signification in terms of an “event” [*événement*] in which the egoistic tendencies of the I are “put into question by the Other” [*mise en question par Autrui*] [TH 17]. In

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very straightforward terms, Levinas describes this “event” in the following way: “the event of putting into question is the shame of the I for its naïve spontaneity” [TH 17]. As we can already see, in a way that is noticeably similar to Kant’s experiential account, Levinas describes our awareness of moral responsibility in terms of a feeling of shame and humiliation. That is to say, it is a feeling of shame that stems from a restriction (a “calling into question”) that is placed upon our spontaneous egoistic tendencies. Much like Kant, then, who describes how a feeling of humiliation accompanies our awareness of a prohibition against our “naturally necessary” [naturnotwendiges] desire for happiness, Levinas also observes how we feel ashamed of ourselves when our spontaneous egoistic tendencies discover that they are not absolute.

This feeling of shame and humiliation, however, by no means exhausts the complexity of our awareness of ethical responsibility. Like Kant, Levinas also describes how a positive and ennobling sense of elevation accompanies our awareness of a moral orientation in the world:

The putting into question of this wild and naïve liberty is not reduced to a negative movement… the face challenges us from the greatest depth and the highest height – by opening the very dimension of elevation… The putting into question of the I by the Other is ipso facto an election, the promotion to a privileged place on which all that is not-I depends. This election signifies the most radical possible engagement, namely, total altruism… Such an engagement is happy; it is the austere and noncomplacent happiness that lies in the nobility of an election. [TH 17-18, cf. OBE 124]

I believe that this very challenging passage points us to a rather curious and interesting point of affinity between Kant and Levinas. As we can see here, Levinas also points our attention toward a sense of “elevation” that accompanies our ethical responsibility. By means of this passage we should be able to notice how both Kant and Levinas describe
our ethical awareness in the world in terms of a two-fold simultaneity of humiliation (what we could call the “negative” moment) and elevation (what we could call the “positive” moment). On Levinas’ telling, my awareness of morality on the one hand shames the monopolizing tendencies of my spontaneous egoism, while on other hand simultaneously promotes and elevates my place within the cosmos by “electing” me to serve the other. That is to say, for Levinas, morality releases me from my narcissistic tendencies by opening me up to the “elevated” possibility of being-for-the-other. Now, of course, my pointing to these similarities between Kant and Levinas is not meant to deny the differences between Kant and Levinas. As I have already mentioned, for Kant, this sense of elevation is explained in terms of the autonomy of pure practical reason, whereas for Levinas this elevated dimension of “height” is aroused and awoken by my proximity to a human other. But I think that these differences should not obscure the remarkable points of similarity that nevertheless obtain between them. Both Kant and Levinas observe how our living awareness of moral obligation involves a two-fold moment of simultaneous humiliation and elevation. For both thinkers, morality alerts me to an unchosen humility that simultaneously promotes my sense of my purposive orientation in reality above a merely hedonistic style of living.

My reason for drawing attention to these similarities, however, is not simply for the sake of noticing certain similarities. On the basis of these two philosophers I would like to make a deeper point that goes beyond mere comparative philosophy. I think that a close analysis of what both these thinkers describe here reveals to us a dimension of moral experience that is often overlooked, especially in discussions that are related to
these two philosophers. This dimension that is often overlooked is this elevated sense of ourselves that accompanies our awareness of being moral persons in the world. In Kantian terms, it is that sense of ourselves that Kant had tried to name when he introduced the term Selbstzufriedenheit.\textsuperscript{114} It is an elevated form of happiness / self-contentment that results from recognizing ourselves as moral persons in the world. I have found that in much of contemporary philosophy this notion of an elevated form of moral happiness is often left to the margins, if discussed at all. I find this to be a rather unfortunate state of affairs because I believe that this notion of an elevated form of happiness contains a very important wisdom about our ethical lives. In these next few pages I would like to show how the descriptions offered by Kant and Levinas may offer us a clue of sorts for further investigation and analysis into this feeling.

At a first glance it might appear as though Kant and Levinas would be the wrong figures for uncovering a form of happiness that results from our moral lives. Kant is, for instance, well-known as a moral philosopher who had emphasized the importance of doing one’s duty for the sake of duty alone. However, as we saw in chapter two of this study, there is no contradiction in Kant’s thought between doing one’s duty and subsequently feeling good about it. In fact, on Kant’s own experiential account a feeling of self-contentment inevitably belongs to the individual who acts in dutiful ways.\textsuperscript{115}

Some readers, moreover, may find it surprising to hear that a similar idea of an elevated

\textsuperscript{114} At KPV 5:117 Kant asks: “Have we not, however, a word that does not denote enjoyment [Genuß], as the word happiness [Glückseligkeit] does, but that nevertheless indicates a satisfaction with one’s existence, an analogue of happiness that must necessarily accompany consciousness of virtue? Yes! This word is self-contentment [Selbstzufriedenheit].”

\textsuperscript{115} See KPV 5:117 and MS 6:377. See also pp. 69-72 in chapter 2 of this study for an explanation of these passages.
form of happiness can be found in Levinas’ thought as well. Given Levinas’ well-known emphasis upon one’s responsibility and dedication to the other, one might be tempted to assume that the only relevant form of happiness in Levinas’ thought is the happiness of other human beings. However, as we can see from the passage indicated just above, Levinas observes how an “austere and non-complacent happiness lies in the nobility of an election.” [TH 18]. That is to say, on Levinas’ own account, a distinctive form of happiness (beyond that of mere egoistic jouissance) accompanies our awareness of being responsible for (i.e., “elected” to serve) the other. For Levinas, the other not only awakens me to an unchosen humility, the other moreover opens up my existence to the possibility of improving and enhancing the life of another human being. This means that ethics, for Levinas, is not simply a negative resistance upon my egoistic temptations and desires. Beyond this restriction, my possibility of serving the other simultaneously endows my existence with a purposive meaning. And as Levinas observes, “such an engagement is happy” [TH 18]. To be given the opportunity to make a difference in the life of another human being is an honor that is worthy of wonder and celebration. In simple terms, it feels good to be a moral person in the world.

In order to help illuminate this point further I would like to take this opportunity to once again draw upon a cinematic character. I believe that the cherished American classic It’s a Wonderful Life\footnote{It’s a Wonderful Life (1946) was directed by Frank Capra and was produced by his production company Liberty Films. The story was loosely based upon the short story “The Greatest Gift” written by Philip von Doren Stern.} presents us with the life of an individual, George Bailey, who embodies the very heart of what Levinas is inviting us to recognize and appreciate.
Although the countless showings of this film during the holiday season may lead us to dismiss this film as mere Christmas sentimentalizing, I believe that this film nevertheless presents us with a very deep, and often challenging, vision of what makes our lives worth living. As the film progresses our hero George Bailey becomes increasingly frustrated and depressed by his life. His personal hopes and dreams of leaving the small town of Bedford Falls never materialize. He watches on, for instance, as his younger brother Harry goes off to experience what life outside Bedford Falls has to offer, while George must stay at home in order to tend to the family business and its customers, and to be with his wife and three children. In a moment of despair, while contemplating suicide, George reflects upon the purpose of his existence and wonders aloud whether or not the world would have been better off without him. Clarence, George’s guardian angel, soon visits George in order to show him what life would have been like if George had not lived. George’s eyes soon begin to open: he learns, e.g., that a pharmacist would have lost his license and gone to jail, his war-hero brother would have never lived past his 9th birthday, his affable uncle Billy would have been sent to an insane asylum, his loving wife Mary would have lived a lonely existence, etc. The list goes on and on as Clarence continues to show George what the life of the numerous residents of Bedford Falls would have been like if George had not lived. Now, of course, it goes without saying that the lives of others would be different if some one person did not in fact live. But the point of the film goes deeper than this banal platitude. What George realizes by the end of the film is that his life was wonderful all along because of the very simple fact that he had improved the lives of so many others. As Clarence puts it to George near the end of the
film, “you see George, you've really had a wonderful life after all.” In his moment of frustrated despair George did not realize the underlying significance of his life, but his life had had a purposive meaning all along. That purposive meaning was “re-discovered” in the positive difference that George had made in the lives of so many others. George was, so to speak, “there” to “be-for-the-other.” Near the end of the film George pleads to Clarence to return him to his unique place in the universe (“I want to live again”), i.e., his place as “I,” George Bailey, who is “there” for countless unique others who need him.

Now I hope I am not sounding overly sentimental or corny here, but I truly believe that what the angel Clarence shows George is in many ways similar to what Levinas is trying to show us. A leading ingredient for what makes our lives worth living is this opportunity we are given to improve the lives of others. To-be-for-the-other, to help others to live, is, in fact, a wonderful and joyous phenomenon. We did not choose to be given this opportunity to serve others; instead, this opportunity to improve the lives of others was given to us. As the despairing George evidenced, it is easy to overlook this purposive significance in our life, but the possibility of this moral orientation in the world nevertheless offers us an opportunity to endow our lives with meaningful direction. As Levinas recognized, ethics is not simply a puritanical restriction and prohibition against our egoistic wants. Beyond egoistic restriction, ethics involves that joyous “nobility of an election” [TH 18]; ethics involves an elevated form of happiness that stems from our being given the opportunity to improve the lives of others.

The parallel that I am here trying to draw and emphasize between Kant and Levinas is this (often unnoticed) idea that ethical service can feel good. I believe that what Kant
calls Selbstzufriedenheit finds a curious affinity with what Levinas calls the “austere and non-complacent happiness that lies in the nobility of election” [TH 18]. Once again, these two thinkers are not saying the exact same thing, but their respective differences should not obscure this profound idea that they intimately share: viz., that ethical responsibility in the world involves an elevated form of happiness. It may sometimes be difficult to find this idea expressed in their respective works, but as active readers and

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117 Kant and Levinas may be themselves to blame since they tend to present these insights only minimally and on the margins. For instance, in my reading of Levinas’ major and rather lengthy work Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence I have found only one passage where Levinas draws any kind of attention to what might be called an “elevated form of happiness.” See OBE 124: “the proximity of the neighbor in its trauma does not only strike up against me, but exalts and elevates me, and, in the literal sense of the term, inspires me. Inspiration, heteronomy, is the very pneuma of the psyche. Freedom is borne by the responsibility it could not shoulder, an elevation and inspiration without complacency.” If someone were to study Levinas’ thought solely in terms of this major work they would no doubt have great difficulty seeing Levinas as someone who draws attention to an elevated form of happiness. A similar problem seems to face the prospects of discovering this notion within Kant’s practical philosophy. Selbstzufriedenheit appears nowhere in either Kant’s Groundwork or Metaphysics of Morals, and only three times in his second Critique [KPV 5:38, 5:79-80 and 5:117-118]. Once again, if one blinks, one might not see it. However, just because this notion is only minimally presented in their respective works does not mean that it is unimportant or unworthy of our further investigation. I believe that it is precisely intriguing notions such as this one that warrant our further examination. However, leading recent work on Kant studies suggests that his notion of self-contentment is not worthy of our consideration. Allen Wood’s otherwise excellent, and no doubt influential, recent book Kantian Ethics does not refer to Kant’s notion of Selbstzufriedenheit even once. Moreover, even very good text-books that are supposed to introduce Kant to first-time readers very rarely (if at all) mention this notion of self-contentment. For instance, Lara Denis’ Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals (Peterborough: Broadview Editions, 2005) accompanies the text of Kant’s Groundwork with a 31 page introduction, four appendices from Kant’s other writings (i.e., selections from KPV, MS, TP and R), and four appendices from critics of Kant (viz., Fichte, Schiller, Hegel and Sidgwick). Denis explains that the portions of Kant’s works appended were “chosen to give the reader a fuller sense of Kant’s ethical theory as a whole, the better to appreciate the place of the Groundwork within it” (Denis, p. 12]. Although I wholeheartedly endorse Denis’ intentions, and I find her text to be a very good introduction to Kant (I currently order this text for my own classes on ethics), it disappoints me that Kant’s notion of self-contentment appears nowhere in this very text that aims to present a “fuller sense of Kant’s ethical theory as a whole.” Simply because an idea is not presented at the forefront of a philosopher’s thought does not mean that that idea should not be analyzed or investigated by readers of that philosopher, especially if that idea concerns a topic like human happiness – a topic that has captured the attention of philosophers since the very dawn of western philosophy. It is worth noting in this context that one of the world’s leading contemporary ethicists, Peter Singer, has been trying to work out a notion of moral happiness as a motivational justification for moral action. In many different works Singer has tried to show the sense in which someone can, with moral justification, receive happiness and purposive meaning from living a morally oriented life. I find this to be a very intriguing and worthwhile philosophical project. It disappoints me, however, when I read Singer present his pursuit of this project as
interpreters of their philosophies I believe that this idea should be pursued further and
deepen. That is to say, as active readers (and even teachers) of their philosophies, I
believe that we should aim to bring these insights into the forefront in order to help to
develop them further. For, when Kant and Levinas point our attention to the moral
dimension of our lives, we need to be careful not to overlook the deepened sense of
happiness that accompanies our awareness of ourselves as moral persons in the world.
Morality, on their respective accounts, certainly contains a “negative” moment of
restrictive and prohibitive humility, but as Kant and Levinas both observe, it also
contains a “positive” moment of elevation and purposive orientation. I propose that in
our future readings that compare Kant and Levinas we aim to develop further this sense
in which these elevated feelings of moral happiness are aroused. That is to say, following
this idea that can be found in the thought of Kant and Levinas, I suggest that we aim to
bring this notion of an elevated form of happiness into the forefront in order to help
deepen our own understanding of the purpose and meaning of our moral existence.

a rejection of what he calls the “Kantian conception of ethics” in which moral action has no end or goal
beyond that of “doing one’s duty for duty’s sake.” Singer writes: “[T]aken as a view of ethics as a whole,
we should abandon this Kantian notion of ethics” p. 325 in Practical Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 2009). Like many Kant critics and readers before him, Singer appears to overlook the
sense in which Kant’s moral philosophy contains very rich notions of moral happiness and self-
contentment. Instead of treating the conclusions of Kant’s ethics as an obstacle to be overcome and
abandoned, I believe that we would do better to take a deeper look at Kant for insights into the sense in
which a morally oriented life can in fact confer purposive meaning and orientation onto our various actions
in the world.
CONCLUSION

This study has offered an approach to Kant that attends to the living sense in which we actually experience the phenomena and realities that his moral philosophy presents. This approach was offered in response to the predominant tendency to interpret Kant’s ethics solely in terms of the cognitive and foundational dimension of his categorical imperative. As I demonstrated in chapter one of this study, such a predominant manner of interpreting Kant has given rise to various criticisms that claim that his ethics is too far removed from the actual way in which human beings live and orient themselves as moral persons in the world. My study outlined three such criticisms (viz., dogmatism, formalism and rigorism). My experiential approach to Kant aimed to show how a close attention to the experiential dimension of Kant’s moral philosophy allows us to see how these various criticisms ultimately rest upon distortions and misunderstandings. When we examine Kant’s ethics from the perspective of our lived experience we discover, for instance, that Kant is not saying that our moral lives are characterized by some abstract moral command that prescribes an inflexible “universalization test” that is insensitive and / or disconnected from concrete particulars. What we discover instead is someone who is spontaneously motivated by a desire for happiness, and who senses feelings of humility and respect that urge him or her to realize the ends of self-perfection and the happiness of others. We moreover discover someone who, contrary to Kant’s reputation for offering
us a cold and bitter picture of moral life, feels good about themselves, and their place within the cosmos, when they strive to act virtuously.

My study has shown how an experiential approach to Kant’s moral philosophy can serve to defend him against the charges of dogmatism, formalism and rigorism. My experiential approach moreover offers instructors a way of presenting Kant to first-time readers that is much more accessible and relatable than simply outlining Kant’s abstract formulations of duty. And I believe that this way of reading Kant can also help to bring Kant’s insights into fruitful conversation with the increasingly influential philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. As I demonstrated in my final chapter, an experiential approach to Kant reveals a number of interesting and illuminating similarities with Levinas. Most significantly, both thinkers recognize that being a moral person in the world involves an elevated form of happiness. I strongly believe that this is an idea that should be pursued and developed further by our contemporary readings and reflections.
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Currently, Christopher is an Instructor of Philosophy at both the University of Alberta and Grant MacEwan University in Edmonton, Alberta, where he lives happily with his wife Pam and their shamefully spoiled two cats and dog.