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# KANT AND THE PRIORITY OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

by

JP MESSINA

Under the direction of Eric Entrican Wilson

## ABSTRACT

In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant claims that “the first command” of all self-regarding duties is to know our “heart.” Kant ostensibly identifies our heart with our moral disposition. Strangely, this appears to be precisely the sort of knowledge that, elsewhere, Kant claims is epistemically inaccessible to us. While the more sophisticated attempts to resolve this difficulty succeed in situating an injunction to know the quality of one’s disposition within a Kantian epistemic framework, no account is wholly successful in explaining why Kant takes self-knowledge to be a necessary condition of virtue. To make sense of the priority Kant assigns to the pursuit of self-knowledge, I argue that it is essential to understand the role of what has been called “generic” self-knowledge in Kant’s moral philosophy. I proceed to defend the place Kant grants moral self-knowledge in his moral philosophy, primarily by developing a Kantian account of such “generic” self-knowledge.

INDEX WORDS: Kant, Self-knowledge, Virtue

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by

JP MESSINA

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2013

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## INTRODUCTION

Those familiar with Kant's moral philosophy primarily through the *Groundwork* are often surprised when they learn of the extent to which Kant emphasizes the importance of self-knowledge in his later treatments of ethics. The first and most obvious reason for such surprise is that Kant does not make explicit mention of self-knowledge in his early writings on moral philosophy. The second is that, in many places in the *Groundwork*, Kant seems, to a fault, unconcerned with the complexities of human psychology and motivation.

Kant's emphasis on self-knowledge, while represented throughout his lectures and, to a limited extent, in the *Critiques*, culminates in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. There, Kant declares that self-knowledge is the “**First Command** of all duties to Oneself.” In order to address your self-regarding duties, you must attempt to

*know* (scrutinize, fathom) *yourself*, not in terms of your natural perfection (your fitness or unfitness for all sorts of discretionary or even commanded ends) but rather in terms of your moral perfection in relation to your duty. That is, know your heart—whether it is good or evil, whether the source of your actions is pure or impure, and what can be imputed to you as belonging originally to the *substance* of a human being or as derived (acquired or developed) and belonging to your moral *condition* (MM 6:441).<sup>1</sup>

This dense passage raises at least four questions: first, what is the “heart”? Second, what does it mean to “know, scrutinize or fathom” it? Third, what makes one's heart good or evil? Finally, why are we commanded, in the first place, to know ourselves? The first question concerns the proper object of self-knowledge; the second, the method by which self-knowledge is best

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, references will be made according to the following method. Citations from Kant's works will be made parenthetically according to convention: Citations from the *Critique of Pure Reason* will be located by the first and second edition pagination included in major English translations of the work, and the title will be abbreviated, KrV. Other references to Kant's work will be located by Academy pagination, and their titles abbreviated as indicated the first time they are cited. Works by other authors will be cited in footnotes. The translation of *The Metaphysics of Morals* is Gregor's: Kant, Immanuel. *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Ed. Mary J. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.

achieved; the third, the criteria by which we are to assess the information we obtain about ourselves according to the proper methods; and the fourth, the purpose of self-knowledge.

This thesis has three main parts. The first part considers each of the above questions concerning the nature and place of moral self-knowledge within Kant's philosophical framework. Toward this end, I review the small but growing body of literature on Kantian moral self-knowledge. I then argue, in the second part, that each extant account of Kantian moral self-knowledge in the literature fails to articulate a satisfying answer to the fourth question above. That is, no account is able to provide an adequate account of why Kant thinks morality requires self-knowledge at all. Finally, in the third part, I argue that only by carefully attending to what has been referred to in the literature as “generic” self-knowledge, or what Kant, in the above, calls knowledge of ourselves “as belonging originally to the substance of a human being,” can we make sense of the practical importance of self-knowledge within Kant's ethical framework. I attempt to advance an interpretation of Kant's central claims regarding the role of self-knowledge in the ethical life that is both faithful to Kant's writings and that is itself a philosophically attractive defense of his controversial position that self-knowledge is a necessary condition of virtue.

## **SECTION 1: KANT'S FIRST COMMAND**

When Kant claims that our self-regarding duties command us to know *ourselves*, what, precisely, is he telling us to know? Because Kant's first command concerns our moral lives, what we are commanded to know about ourselves must be, in some sense, morally relevant. It is reasonable to think that self-knowledge is morally relevant when it justifiably affects or serves as a basis for certain (positive or negative) moral judgments. Ostensibly, for Kant, the proper object of self-knowledge is one's disposition. I then introduce and articulate Kant's thesis of self-

opacity, a problem that is born out of Kant's epistemic and anthropological commitments. I observe that, paradoxically, on this reading, the self is opaque precisely where we are instructed, by Kant's "first command," to know it. Finally, I review the literature concerning Kant's "first command," what it requires of Kantian moral agents and how, despite the opacity of the self, Kantian moral agents might come to discharge the requirements of this odd command. This, in turn, will prepare the ground for an analysis of the important function that Kant takes self-knowledge to have in the good life.

### 1.1 "Know Thy Heart": The Object of Self-Knowledge

In the passage quoted above, Kant claims that morality commands us to know our "heart" in terms of whether it is good or evil. The metaphorical language is suggestive, but imprecise. Fortunately, in the same passage, Kant links the question of whether one's heart is good or evil to the question of "whether the source of [one's] actions is pure or impure" (Ibid). This implies that one's heart is the source of one's actions. What our self-regarding duties command us to know, then, amounts to whether the source of our actions is pure or impure.

Kant consistently holds that the source of one's actions is one's character—or, as Kant likes to put it, one's disposition, or *Gesinnung* (*R* 6:21-2, *KpV* 5:81, 5:84, 5:89, *MM* 6:393, *GMS*, 4:406).<sup>2</sup> Kant maintains that one's disposition is *either* pure or it is impure (*R* 6:23).<sup>3</sup> If one's disposition is impure, then the source of one's actions is evil. If one's disposition is pure, then the source of one's actions is good (*R* 6:36).<sup>4</sup> As Kelly Coble puts it, a pure *Gesinnung* is "a maxim

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<sup>2</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: And Other Writings*. Ed. Allen W. Wood and Giovanni George Di. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. (Hereafter *R*); Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Ed. Mary J. Gregor and Andrews Reath. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. (Hereafter, *KpV*). Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. Mary J Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. (Hereafter, *GMS*).

<sup>3</sup> This is referred to in the literature and by Kant himself as rigorism. For a defense of Kantian rigorism, see Coble, Kelly. "Kant's Dynamic Theory of Character." *Kantian Review* 7 (2003): 38-71. 27 July 2012.

<sup>4</sup> See also: Coble, pp. 39, Frierson, Patrick R. "Character and Evil in Kant's Moral Anthropology." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44.4 (2006): 623-34. Wood, Allen W. *Kant's Ethical Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP,

in which duty is the ultimate incentive, overriding self-love in all situations in which the incentives conflict,” while an impure *Gesinnung* is an underlying maxim in which self-love is the ultimate incentive, overriding the incentive of duty in situations in which the incentives conflict.<sup>5</sup> Morality requires that we make the satisfaction of our inclinations conditional upon our having fulfilled our duties.<sup>6</sup> If we fulfill this requirement, our heart is “good.” The command to know whether one's heart is good or evil is, at least ostensibly, identical to the command to know whether one has succeeded in cultivating a pure disposition.

## 1.2 Self-Opacity

That the “first command” of all duties that we have to ourselves requires that we attempt to know the status of the disposition underlying our actions has raised some eyebrows. After all, Kant is elsewhere adamant that we cannot have such knowledge. In the second *Critique*, for example, Kant writes that no example “of exact observation of the law” can be found in experience (*KpV* 5:47). In the *Groundwork*, he emphasizes that, “no certain example can be cited of the disposition to act from pure duty” (*GMS* 4:407). Finally, and dramatically, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant declares that “a human being cannot see into the depths of his own heart so as to be quite certain in even a *single* action of the purity of his moral intention and the sincerity of his disposition” (*MM* 6:392). Accordingly, we have no choice but to conclude that “the depths of the human heart are unfathomable” (*MM* 6:447).

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1999. Guyer, Paul. "The Obligation to Be Virtuous: Kant's Conception of the *Tugendverpflichtung*." *Social Philosophy and Policy* 27 (2010): 206-32.

<sup>5</sup> Coble, 39.

<sup>6</sup> Importantly, this doctrine does not imply that one must fulfill all of one's duties before one can satisfy any of one's inclinations. For Kant, positive duties (such as duties to help others and to develop our talents) are *wide* or *imperfect* duties; this means that they can be discharged and ordered in any number of ways, and also that what we do to discharge them is largely up to us. Kant's point is only that, when a token inclination conflicts with a token duty, persons with virtuous dispositions subordinate their inclinations to what morality requires. Thanks to Eric Wilson for pointing out this worry.

These passages are characteristic of Kant's general insistence that the self is fundamentally opaque. Our motives, and, indeed, our dispositions, are not the sorts of things that are straightforwardly accessible to us. This opacity is not just the result of the complexity of human motivation. In addition, Kant claims that, as human beings, we have a pernicious tendency to deceive ourselves. Self-deception takes many different forms, but one common manifestation of this tendency is our propensity to "ascribe to ourselves, without proof, a worth" that we do not possess (*LE* 27:610).<sup>7</sup> Our interest in appearing morally upright entices us to "throw dust in our own eyes," in order to blind us from the truth of our moral condition (*R* 6:38). For simplicity, with Owen Ware, I will refer to this general line of thought as Kant's Opacity Thesis. It is this thesis, in various forms, that has led many to question the coherence of a command that would require us to judge the constitution of the disposition that underlies our actions.

In light of the above considerations, most accounts of the Kant's first command attempt to resolve the apparent tension between Kant's insistence that we can never truly know ourselves and his claim that we are commanded to do so. That is, they attempt to answer the question of how it is that we are supposed to know our disposition—by what means are we scrutinize, or fathom our hearts—given (a) our tendency to deceive ourselves and (b) the fact that our experience "contains merely appearances of the disposition that the moral law is concerned with" (*KpV* 5:99). Having laid the ground for a discussion of Kant's perplexing complex of views, we now turn to these accounts, each of which take it that the primary (and perhaps the only) object

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<sup>7</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Lectures on Ethics*. Ed. Peter Lauchlan Heath and J.B. Schneewind. New York: Cambridge UP, 1997. (Hereafter, *LE*). It is worth noting that, even if the self-deception worry were successfully removed, the constitution of our disposition, due to Kant's transcendental epistemology, might still lie outside our grasp. This would be true if the disposition (as is plausible) were an aspect of our noumenal, rather than our empirical character. There are reasons, however, to think that noumenal ignorance is not a significant worry for Kant's views on self-knowledge. In any case, it makes little sense to consider the merits of such views until the more pressing problem of self-deception is resolved.

of self-knowledge is our own moral condition, that is, whether or not our heart is “good” or “evil.”

### **1.3 Reconciling Kant's First Command with Self-Opacity: Some Recent Attempts**

One way to resolve the difficulty delineated above is to claim that Kant does not mean to rule out the possibility that we might attain knowledge of our disposition as such. Rather, in acknowledging the possibility of self-deception, he is merely criticizing one rather straightforward account of how we might attempt to know ourselves. Generally, the view in question asserts that human beings are capable of unproblematically determining what motives they have for acting via introspection

So understood, Kant’s thesis self-opacity might be interpreted rather narrowly, intended only to guard against one naïve method according to which we might attempt to understand the source of our actions. On the introspective account, in attempting to know what motivates us, we “look inward,” and simply discern the motive we have from acting against a backdrop of other psychological and intentional states. The problem is that, in doing so, we are wont to find “just what we ourselves have put there.”<sup>8</sup> That is, rather than learning what actually has motivated us through introspection, we are prone to engage in a sort of post-hoc rationalization of what it is that we have done. Notice that if Kant’s Opacity Thesis is merely targeting the view that we have direct cognitive access to the state of our disposition, as long as we “know ourselves” by means other than introspection, the tension between Kant’s Opacity Thesis and his first command disappears. This might seem a strange solution. By what other means might we come to know

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<sup>8</sup> See esp. Wood, Allen. *Kant's Ethical Thought*. Cambridge UP: 1999; pp. 201.

the quality of our disposition? Owen Ware considers the possibility that we might know our disposition *inferentially*.<sup>9</sup>

Since we are prone to deceive ourselves regarding the quality of our intentions and the principles we consciously take ourselves to act upon, we are required to attempt to know our disposition by examining our actions over time. Such a process will gradually allow us to judge the quality of our disposition without requiring us to have what we cannot have: direct cognitive access to our disposition, or the source of our actions. Such an inferential view helps make sense of Kant's claim that self-knowledge requires the comparison “of our past actions with their dutifulness” over time (*LE* 27:608). This account avoids the psychologically naïve mistake of taking our conscious intentions to accurately represent our motivations and also seems to alleviate the tension that appears characteristic of Kant's position.

Indeed, it has been well-documented that, for Kant, principles, not actions, are the proper objects of moral judgment. In the *Religion*, Kant argues that when we judge a human being to be evil, we do not do so because he “performs actions that are evil...but because these are so constituted that they allow the inference of evil maxims in him” (*R* 6:20). When we judge our own character or that of another human being as being morally bad, we do based on the assumption that the action a person takes is indicative of something deeper: a morally deficient personal principle, or maxim. But the chain of inference does not stop with maxims. Each maxim that a person adopts is indicative, in turn, of an even more general maxim or principle, and so on, until we reach the level of one's general disposition to either subordinate one's pursuit of happiness to one's pursuit of virtue or one's pursuit of virtue to one's pursuit of happiness (*ibid*). So, on an inferential account of Kantian self-knowledge, we observe our actions over

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<sup>9</sup> Ware, Owen. “The Duty of Self-knowledge.” *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research*. LXXIX.3 (2009): 671-97.

time; from our actions, we infer our maxims; finally, from our maxims, we infer the quality of our disposition.

Initially, this looks like a promising way to reconcile Kant's First Command with his Opacity Thesis. However, Kant elsewhere observes that from a given action, an inference to any number of maxims is possible: "between maxim and deed," Kant writes, "there is still a wide gap" (*R* 6:47). Not all maxims suggested by an action will represent the principle that actually motivated the agent to act. An agent might genuinely have adopted a maxim even when such a principle is not easily "read off" of her actions. Perhaps, due to the influence of a "stepmotherly nature," she is unable to carry the principle of her will through to action (see: *GMS* 4:396). The problem with the inferential view, then, is twofold: First, actions admit of several different and conflicting interpretations. Second, the proper interpretation of a given action may be unavailable to the observer (even when the observer is the agent herself). Thus, in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, when Raskolnikov gives his last twenty roubles to the grieving family of a dead drunkard, his action is interpreted by at least one other as having represented his desire to solicit the services of a prostitute. While Raskolnikov knows this to be false, he is not entirely sure, himself, whether his giving was motivated by guilt for having committed a murder, or by his appropriate sympathy for the poor family.<sup>10</sup>

Onora O'Neill develops (though she eventually rejects) a modified inferential view that is capable of resolving these difficulties. Though Kant claims that we would be naïve to unreflectively take our consciously formulated maxims to represent our actual motivations, he never denies that we do have introspective access to maxims insofar as we consciously represent them to ourselves prior to, in the process of, or after acting. So, O'Neill observes, we come

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<sup>10</sup> Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Trans. Constance Garnett. New York: Modern Library, 1950, pp. 339-394.

closest to knowledge of our disposition by paying careful attention to the maxims that we consciously represent, *in addition to* our behavior over time.<sup>11</sup>

O'Neill's modification of Ware's inferential account helps make sense of Kant's claim that the task of self-knowledge requires "*justum sui aestimium*," or just self-assessment. Just self-assessment consists in judging our moral worth by testing the maxim of our action "by the extent to which it is undertaken, not merely in accordance with, but for the sake of the law alone" (*LE* 27:609). Clearly, for this procedure to yield the best results, we must pay attention to our states insofar as they are represented through introspection. Doing so narrows the body of eligible maxims implied by our actions, and, additionally, allows the categorical imperative to *guide* action before the fact. O'Neill's position, accordingly, requires that we alternate back and forth between testing our consciously formulated maxims according to the categorical imperative and inferring from our actions (once committed) those maxims that might have actually moved us to act. As agents, we are then able to compare and match those maxims inferred from action with those that we represent to ourselves prior to or in the process of acting. From there, we infer whether or not the maxims suggested by this procedure imply that we have made the satisfaction of our inclinations contingent upon the demands of the moral law. We are left with the necessary resources to make an evaluative judgment concerning the purity of our disposition by combining the cognitive tools of introspection and inference.

Ware argues that sophisticated inferential accounts of Kantian self-knowledge (such as O'Neill's) still sit uneasily with Kant's Opacity Thesis. Recall that the problem of self-opacity results, not only from the complexity of human motivation, but also from the human propensity for self-deception. Even if we rely on some combination of introspection and inference to

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<sup>11</sup> O'Neill Onora. "Kant's Virtues." *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues*, pp. 93. Comp. Roger Crisp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

determine our maxims and their conformity with what morality requires, it seems that we will still be prone to deceive ourselves, to see ourselves as being morally better than we actually are.

To see this, suppose my colleague is competing for a promotion. She is struggling to meet a deadline for an important assignment. If she does not meet this deadline, she is unlikely to be promoted. Since her and I have a good working relationship, I have a vested interest in seeing her promoted. (Suppose that if she is promoted, I know that she will assign me those projects that carry with them generous expense accounts.) Observing that she is struggling to meet her deadline, I consider offering to watch her children for a weekend, despite having work of my own to do. Before making the offer, I judge that this act is morally required of me. That said the act itself is not something that I *desire* to do. So construed, the maxim of my action, that which motivates me to overcome my own desire for a working weekend at home, is to “help others where I can.” Now, I make the offer. Stepping back, I consider two (of many) possible interpretations of my action. On the one hand, I might have actually been motivated to act by purely moral concerns; on the other hand, perhaps what actually motivated me to act was my more selfish (long-term) interest in seeing my colleague promoted; my maxim was, actually, to “help others when it is advantageous to me in the long run.”

Since one very important condition of my experience of self-approbation consists in my being motivated to act for the right kinds of reasons, the argument goes, I am more likely to select the former interpretation of my action. I am more likely to interpret my motives so as to represent myself as having been motivated by purely moral concerns. So, it is reasonable to think that the problem of self-deception, if mitigated by requiring that we consider both the maxims we represent to ourselves during action *and* the implications of our actions themselves when attempting to evaluate our disposition, is not thereby wholly resolved. The point is not that I have

done anything *immoral* by acting on this more self-interested principle, but, rather, that the question of whether or not I have subordinated my interests to moral considerations is left open, even after employing the methodology suggested in the early parts of O'Neill's essay.

One might worry, at this point, that the problem of self-deception is wholly intractable. Try as we might to assess ourselves impartially, our interest in appearing morally upright will *always* preclude our ability to obtain the sort of self-knowledge that Kant is after when he says that we are commanded to know hearts. In order to resolve this deeper worry, Ware invokes Kant's conception of conscience. Conscience, according to Ware, prevents the tendency of self-deception from corrupting the pursuit of self-knowledge "all the way down." In general, Ware holds that, because Kant holds an "erring conscience" to be an absurdity, agents may be said to know themselves by subjecting their disposition to the judgment of conscience.

According to Ware, Kant thinks conscience allows us to perform two main functions. First, the agent submits her behavior to the judgment of conscience. Her conscience then impels her to make a "higher order judgment of whether or not [she] has properly incorporated moral principles into her actions."<sup>12</sup> In this task, conscience makes a judgment as to whether or not an agent's maxims accord with the potential purity of her disposition. Has she successfully subordinated the pursuit of her interests to the commands of morality? In answering this question, and hence in making this sort of first-order judgment, conscience can easily lead individuals to make mistaken judgments regarding the quality of their character. Indeed, one might be mistaken for any number of reasons, and among these is that, because of the desire to be morally praiseworthy, an individual might judge that her maxims are constitutive of a pure disposition, when in fact they are not.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ware, 692.

<sup>13</sup> Ware, 691-2.

If this is the only role that conscience plays, or the only type of judgment that conscience is capable of producing, then it is hard to make sense of Kant's claim that “an erring conscience is an absurdity.”<sup>14</sup> But this is not the only role that conscience plays, nor are these the only sorts of judgments that conscience can produce. In its second role, conscience produces a judgment as to “whether I have consciously examined my duties or not.”<sup>15</sup> It is in producing these kinds of judgments that conscience cannot err. While we might deceive ourselves in attributing to our disposition a purity that it does not have in order to avoid the harsh judgment of conscience, and while we can never be truly certain that conscience, in its first function, has yielded the correct judgment regarding the quality of our disposition, we cannot mistake whether or not we have honestly subjected ourselves to its judgment.

As Ware puts it, in this task, conscience accuses or acquits a person “exactly where [she] is transparent: [her] sense of truthfulness.”<sup>16</sup> As Kant puts it, “While I can indeed be mistaken at times in objective judgment as to whether something is a duty or not, I cannot be mistaken in my subjective judgment as to whether I have submitted it to my practical reason...for such a judgment” (*MM* 6:401). While we can be mistaken about the condition of our disposition, we cannot be mistaken that we have honestly tried to judge it. So, Ware reasons, the tension between Kant’s Opacity Thesis and his command, “know thyself,” disappears because conscience is capable of making at least one species of judgment that is not vulnerable to worries about self-deception.

Notice, however (as Ware himself notices): Even when inferential accounts of Kantian self-knowledge are supplemented with Kant's conception of conscience, we remain incapable of obtaining *certainty* of the state of our disposition. We can approximate the purity or impurity of

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<sup>14</sup> Ware, 692.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Ware, 694.

our hearts, and, as Ware puts it, we can even form a justified “belief” regarding whether or not we have truly attempted to discharge our responsibility to “know” the latter, but we can never be sure that we have gotten it right, that we have not deceived ourselves in subtle ways regarding its actual constitution. This is an important implication of Kant's anthropology, not the result of flawed interpretation. The more sophisticated reconstructions of Kant’s position on moral self-knowledge (such as Ware's) gesture at a satisfying answer to the question of how we are to assess our “moral condition,” or the purity or impurity of “the source” of our actions in light of the limits that Kant's anthropological and epistemological writings place upon our capacity to derive accurate moral knowledge of ourselves. It just so happens that we are forced to conclude that obtaining certainty regarding the state of our disposition is not possible.

## **SECTION 2: THE MORAL POINT OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE**

So far, we have seen that Kant’s Opacity Thesis implies that we are unable to obtain certainty regarding the quality of our disposition. The problem of self-deception is intractable. Nevertheless, Kant asserts the importance of self-knowledge in the very same work in which he seems to most adamantly deny its possibility (that is, in *The Metaphysics of Morals*). Extant accounts of Kantian self-knowledge are committed to the view that the disposition is the primary object of moral self-knowledge. But if this is the case, and it is impossible for us to judge accurately the quality of our disposition, one might legitimately wonder why the virtuous agent is commanded to strive after something impossible. Why not give up the pursuit of self-knowledge and just *act*? In this section, I develop this line of questioning in detail. I then provide my own account of why Kant assigns fundamental importance to the pursuit of self-knowledge.

## 2.1 The Priority of Self-Knowledge

The main flaw in existing interpretations of the place of Kantian self-knowledge in Kant's moral philosophy is not that they are lacking in textual support, nor is it that they render some aspect of Kant's moral philosophy unattractive. Indeed, each account emphasizes the extent to which Kant's ethical thought is sensitive to the real limits of human knowledge and to the complexities of human motivation. Rather, the problem with even the most sophisticated accounts of the Kantian imperative to "know thyself" is that they fail to make any sense at all of Kant's claim that pursuing self-knowledge is the first command of all duties that we have to ourselves as moral beings. That is, they do a poor job of explaining the *function* that Kant envisions self-knowledge playing in the good life.

What Kant means when he says self-knowledge is the first command of all duties to oneself is not exactly clear. The claim suggests that, in some way, knowing one's heart is something one must do before one is able to fulfill one's duties to oneself. For Kant, duties to ourselves are conceptually prior to duties to others.<sup>17</sup> We must take some account of our duties to ourselves before we are in a position to address our duties to others. It is plausible to think that, when Kant calls self-knowledge the first command of our self-regarding duties, he means to claim that, just as duties to oneself must be, to an extent, pursued before duties to others can be pursued, so too must self-knowledge be pursued before duties to ourselves can be pursued. Vigilantius's notes on Kant's lectures confirm this reading: "for fulfillment of *all* moral duties, it is *first of all necessary* to know oneself" (*LE* 27:608, my emphasis). This is significant. I am not in a position to undertake the duties I have to myself *unless* I have pursued self-knowledge; I am

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<sup>17</sup> See, in particular: Denis, Lara. "Kant's Ethics and Duties to Oneself." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78 (1997): 321-48. 21 July 2012 and Timmermann, Jens. "Kantian Duties to the Self, Explained and Defended." *Philosophy* 81.3 (2006): 505-30. 2 July 2012.

not in a position to fulfill one's duties to others *unless* I have taken account of the duties that I have to myself.

This is a strong claim. It seems to be an especially odd position to take if (a) the object of self-knowledge is our disposition, and (b) we can never achieve certain knowledge of our disposition. If we are commanded to strive know the state of our disposition before we can pursue our duties to ourselves (and, by extension, to others) and knowing the quality of our disposition requires observation of our acts over time, we might never reach a point at which it is appropriate for us to attempt to discharge our duties.<sup>18</sup> Even if we do reach such a point, it is not sufficiently clear why knowledge of our character is necessary in order that we may act as morality requires.

Indeed, in light of Kant's *own* views about how one is supposed to act, it is hard to see why he would take attaining knowledge of our disposition to be so important. In the *Groundwork*, for example, Kant seems to claim that we should approach our duties by (a) testing our maxims against the categorical imperative, and then (b) adopting or refraining from adopting any maxims that are required or forbidden by this process (*GMS* 4:421-424).<sup>19</sup> And, as O'Neill notes, there's no reason that I need to know the quality of my disposition in order to strive to act according to morally required maxims.<sup>20</sup> To put the worry simply, it is far from clear why we would need to know *anything* about our disposition in order to strive to fulfill our duties by the process that Kant lays out in the *Groundwork*. Indeed, it might seem that the opposite is true. Attempting to know our disposition might distract us from what matters in the ethical life: acting as duty requires. The central question becomes, then, not whether Kant, in light of his sensitivity

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<sup>18</sup> Denis, 334. (In the end, Denis defends Kant against this and related charges.)

<sup>19</sup> Leave aside the question of whether this is the correct way to read Kant on the categorical imperative. It is sufficient to recognize that this interpretation has plenty of support in the literature, and that it is not without textual evidence.

<sup>20</sup> O'Neill, 94.

to the complexity of human motivation, can affirm some sort of responsibility to attain self-knowledge, but rather *why* Kant would claim that such an obligation is, in some sense, a necessary condition for the fulfillment of our other duties given his other claims about moral deliberation and action.

Since Kant *does* take the position that our duties require self-knowledge, there must be something about self-knowledge that renders us fit to do what morality requires of us. Each account of self-knowledge outlined above fails to shed light on this peculiar feature of Kant's claims about self-knowledge. The problem is not simply that extant accounts of Kantian self-knowledge do not mention why Kant takes self-knowledge to be so important; they do. They almost universally quote passages from *The Metaphysics of Morals* where Kant claims that self-knowledge precludes arrogance and prevents misanthropy and self-loathing (*MM* 6:441). Yet, provided self-knowledge has the object (and only the object) that these authors claim it has (our disposition), this is odd. Why should I think that knowledge of my disposition will lead to me to be more modest, while preventing misanthropy and self-hatred? It seems that no plausible answer can be given to the question. If I find, on self-examination, that my disposition is pure, I am likely to feel good about myself. This seems more likely to lead to pride than arrogance (especially since Kant must countenance that this judgment might be mistaken). On the other hand, if I find that my disposition is impure, I may well start to hate myself. So the question remains: Why would we need to *know* whether or not we are good in order to bring it about that we become better human beings?

Until this point, we have been working under the assumption that the point of self-knowledge is to *evaluate* the quality of our disposition. However, this assumption is dubitable. Indeed, Emer O'Hagan develops an account of the purpose of Kantian self-knowledge that

begins by explicitly rejecting this assumption.<sup>21</sup> O'Hagan recognizes that "In moral deliberation a focus on the quality of one's will interferes with the moral project of judging what is required."<sup>22</sup> As a result, he concludes that self-knowledge, for Kant, is not intended to be an evaluative enterprise; its function is not to assess one's own moral goodness. Rather, echoing Kant, he claims that "[t]he moral point of self-knowledge is to help to avoid self-illusion and to develop moral objectivity."<sup>23</sup>

We are to know our heart, according to O'Hagan, not in order to evaluate our disposition, but, rather, in order to understand our particular inclinations and the way in which they will induce us to act immorally: "if I know that I have certain tendencies to pride or pleasure then this knowledge enables me to select casuistical possibilities which will reveal, and may rule out of play, those tendencies."<sup>24</sup> By comparing these tendencies with the requirements of the moral law, we avoid self-illusion. So-conceived, self-knowledge "is a cognitive capacity developed by keeping the theoretical foundation of Kantian ethics in mind. The theoretical foundation is used as a kind of compass which allows the agent to locate herself in the moral landscape."<sup>25</sup> By keeping the theoretical requirements of Kantian ethics firmly in mind, we are able to subvert self-deception.

The novelty and appeal of O'Hagan's suggestion should be apparent. On O'Hagan's view, self-knowledge is not precluded by self-opacity, but is rather the *solution* to the problem of self-opacity. By paying attention to our inclinations and behavioral tendencies, we are less likely to place the motive of self-interest where the moral law belongs; self-knowledge aids us in

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<sup>21</sup> O'Hagan, Emer. "Moral Self-Knowledge in Kantian Ethics." *Ethical Theory, Moral Practice*. 12 (2009). 525-537.

<sup>22</sup> O'Hagan, pp. 531.

<sup>23</sup> O'Hagan, pp. 529

<sup>24</sup> O'Hagan, pp. 532

<sup>25</sup> O'Hagan, pp. 533

directing ourselves toward virtue in light of the particular drives to which we are susceptible. While much recommends this account, it has at least two serious problems.

First, the notion that self-knowledge requires that agents reflect upon the theoretical requirements of Kantian ethics is deeply implausible. Most human beings will never encounter Kant's theoretical apparatus, and any claim that human beings are, generally, required to make explicit use of Kant's moral framework sits uneasily with Kant's own characterization of his project as falling out of "common human reason" (*GMS* 4:393).

Second, though O'Hagan's account of Kant's first command provides a clear rationale for the priority Kant assigns to self-knowledge, it does so only by begging the question. That is, O'Hagan's account *assumes* that we can have easy knowledge of our moral condition and those inclinations that threaten it in situations in which it is threatened. But this is precisely what is at issue when attempting to resolve the tension between Kant's Opacity Thesis and his injunction to know thyself. O'Hagan, accordingly, owes us an account of why self-deception does not block us from making use of the knowledge of our tendencies to guide us in developing a pure disposition.

Despite these problems with O'Hagan's view, his overall characterization of the point of Kant's first command points us in the right direction. O'Hagen is right to suggest that part of the reason that Kant assigns priority to self-knowledge is that self-knowledge conduces to moral objectivity. From the above, it is now clear that O'Hagan fails to provide a non-question-begging answer to the question of *why* it is that self-knowledge is likely to help moral agents to develop objectivity, and *how* this sort of objectivity is possible in light of the problem of self-deception. Although O'Hagen's concern with objectivity does not (as we will see) capture the full reason for Kant's insistence that self-knowledge is a necessary condition of virtue, he does well to bring

the issue of objectivity into view. On the face of it, it is plausible that, insofar as our moral duties require that we be objective, or impartial (as Kant holds that they do), they also require that we take the necessary steps to bring it about that we are capable of impartiality. If we have an account of moral self-knowledge that gives us reason to believe that having moral self-knowledge is a necessary condition of impartiality, then we would appear to have the start of an answer to the question of why it is necessary to obtain this sort of self-knowledge before we undertake to discharge our responsibilities.

In what follows, I argue that, while moral self-knowledge does require attention to our disposition, this sort of self-knowledge is not doing much (if any) explanatory work in grounding Kant's claim that self-knowledge is a necessary condition of virtue. Rather, the sort of moral self-knowledge that aids us in developing objectivity is what is referred to in the literature as "generic" self-knowledge.<sup>26</sup> I argue that generic self-knowledge is a necessary condition of virtue because it (a) aids us, in a clear way, in developing moral objectivity and (b) requires that conceive of ourselves as moral agents.

### **SECTION 3: SELF-KNOWLEDGE, OBJECTIVITY AND AGENCY**

Recall that Kant's first command to know our heart requires that we understand "what can be imputed to [us] as belonging originally to the *substance* of a human being" (*MM* 6:441). It is not immediately clear what this strange sentence is supposed to tell us about the requirements of self-knowledge. I think it is plausible to think that to understand what is imputable to us "as belonging to originally to the *substance* of a human being," is to understand ourselves as members of the human species. When we understand ourselves in such a way, we infer that we

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<sup>26</sup> See Grenberg, Jeanine. *Kant and the Ethics of Humility: A Story of Dependence, Corruption and Virtue*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005, pp. 224

(ourselves) partake in those attributes that characterize the “substance” of humanity in general.<sup>27</sup> If this is correct, there are two ways of reading Kant’s claim that we must understand “what can be imputed to [us] as belonging originally to the *substance* of a human being.”

One way to read Kant’s claim above would be to suggest that the requirement to know what is imputable to us as members of the human species is reducible to the requirement to know what is imputable to us as individuals. On this reading, knowing what is imputable to us as human beings, generally, allows us to distinguish our unique contribution to our moral condition—how much of our character we are responsible for—but it does *not* require us to know anything over and above our own disposition. Perhaps it is better put like this: on this reading, knowing what can be imputed to us qua substance serves as a helpful, perhaps necessary, *means* toward knowing to what extent we have cultivated our disposition, which remains the proper (and only) object of self-knowledge.

Another way to read this aspect of Kant’s first command would be to maintain that knowing what is imputable to us qua substance is a unique requirement of the command to know ourselves, *not* reducible to the requirement to know our contribution to our disposition. In this case, we are required to know our contribution to our disposition *in addition to* what we are like as members of the human species. Read in this way, attaining knowledge of ourselves, qua human being, is necessary if one is to fully “know” one’s “heart.” Fully knowing your heart requires both knowledge of the type of person *you* are, as well as knowledge of the types of things *persons* are, or, better, of the types of hearts that persons have. Since the former type of

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<sup>27</sup> Given the fact that *The Metaphysics of Morals* was written after Kant’s first *Critique*, it seems best to read the talk of “substance” in a deflationary, rather than deeply metaphysical, way. After all, in the first *Critique*, Kant claims that our concept of substance can only apply to the world as it appears, and never as it is in itself. So, rather than looking for some deep account of what constitutes the human being in its substance (like Spinoza and Descartes undertake to do), we should rather be looking for those properties that appear essential to the concept of a human being.

knowledge is unable to explain why self-knowledge might be a necessary condition of virtue, it is worth considering whether or not the latter requirement of Kant's first command is in a better position to offer such an explanation.

We have seen that Kant holds that we need to know ourselves before we are in a position to cultivate a virtuous disposition. In what follows, I argue that understanding the full import of this claim requires developing an account of what I will hereafter refer to as "generic" self knowledge. By generic self-knowledge, I simply mean knowledge of oneself as a human being. What we are required to know about ourselves, *qua* human being, provides a clear rationale for Kant's controversial position that we must know ourselves before our duties to ourselves and to others can be pursued.

### 3.1 Generic Self-Knowledge

Surprisingly, other commentators<sup>28</sup> have distinguished between these two potential objects of self-knowledge (our disposition, on the one hand, and the characteristics of humanity in general, on the other). Most conclude that generic self-knowledge is, at best, of secondary importance. Its importance derives from its function as a backdrop against which we can discern the quality of our idiosyncratic hearts. In this way, generic self-knowledge serves as a sort of measuring stick for discerning the extent of our moral progress. If we know where we began, we are in a better position to know how far we have come. Only Jeanine Grenberg has undertaken to explicate what it would look like to take seriously the notion that we are supposed to know ourselves as human beings in general, as a unique requirement of self-knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps the tendency to relegate the second aspect of Kant's first command to derivative status is understandable. It seems admittedly strange to count knowledge about ourselves as

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<sup>28</sup> See Ware, 678-681; Grenberg, Jeanine, esp. pp. 222-226; see also: Wood, Allen W. *Kant's Ethical Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. 196-201.

<sup>29</sup> See Grenberg

human beings as *self*-knowledge at all: What we are as selves is what sets us apart from other creatures like us. But, it is worth remembering the extent to which Kant saw his “critical” philosophy as an exercise in self-knowledge, despite the fact that it does not concern itself at all with the idiosyncrasies of individual persons.<sup>30</sup> If I am correct in arguing that knowledge of what can be imputed to us as belonging to the “substance” of the human being is basically knowledge of ourselves as members of the human species, we must next determine which attributes of the human species are relevant to Kant's inquiry. Human beings without congenital defects are featherless bipeds, but surely this is not the sort of attribute that Kant has in mind.

I take it that, generally, knowing ourselves, qua human being, will require us to understand ourselves in light of (a) what Kant calls the “radical propensity to evil” that inheres in human nature, and (b) what he calls the human “predisposition to the good.” Kant holds that each of these is, in some sense, a universal attribute of human beings. There is strong reason to believe that this is the sort of knowledge Kant has in mind when he asserts that we must know what is imputable to us as belonging to the “substance” human being. This is because Kant explicitly mentions (b) and alludes to (a) immediately after introducing the first command itself (*MM* 6:441).

In what follows, I argue that Kant's inclusion of this kind of generic self-knowledge in his first command provides a clear rationale for Kant's claim that self-knowledge is conceptually prior to our other moral responsibilities. I argue that (1) understanding the human predisposition to evil helps us to develop moral objectivity in moral deliberation and (2) understanding ourselves as predisposed to the good is a necessary condition of conceiving of ourselves as moral agents.

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<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in the Preface of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes that, in order to “institute a court of justice by which reason may secure its rightful claims while dismissing all its groundless pretensions,” we must “take on anew the most difficult of all...tasks, namely, that of self-knowledge” (*KrV*, Axi). Kant, Immanuel.

### 3.2 The Propensity to Evil and the Inducement to Objectivity

After claiming that we are commanded to attempt moral cognition of ourselves, Kant writes that doing so will “counteract that *egotistical* self-esteem which takes mere wishes...for proof of a good heart” (*MM* 6:441). This should remind us of O’Hagan’s claim that one function of self-knowledge is to ward off self-conceit and self-illusion. Self-knowledge, it turns out, is likely to have this effect because, on Kant’s conception of virtue, as Vigilantius records, “The attainment of a total agreement [between an individual’s disposition and the pure disposition that morality requires] is a thing that man is far removed from” (*LE* 27:609). When we cognize ourselves, we *necessarily* perceive “the insignificance of our moral worth in consciousness of its inadequacy to the law” (*LE* 27:610). However, as we have seen, merely attempting to know our disposition is unlikely to counteract egotistical self-esteem in this way.

Indeed, when attempting to cognize ourselves in terms of our unique contribution to our moral condition, we will not always notice the insignificance of our moral worth. Sometimes, we will search only to find just what we hoped that we would find— that our disposition is pure. But clearly, insofar as it is by forcing us to recognize our lack of moral worth in comparison with the moral law that self-knowledge counteracts “egotistical self-esteem,” the assumption is that everyone, when cognizing herself, will notice such a lack of worth. Notice the contrast between the conclusions we are *supposed* to draw (as we attempt to discharge Kant’s first command) and the conclusions that we are *likely* to draw (if the sole object of self-knowledge is our disposition). To understand why Kant thought self-knowledge an antidote to moral arrogance, we must understand that, for Kant, self-knowledge requires understanding what he calls the “propensity to evil” (*R* 6:29-44).

Kant holds that the propensity to moral evil “belongs to the human being universally” (*R* 6:29). Recall that, for Kant, evil consists in the subordination of the commands of morality to one's inclinations. Kant holds that because experience furnishes us with so many examples of this tendency, we can “spare ourselves the formal proof that there must be such a corrupt propensity rooted in the human being” (*R* 6:32). Kant’s first command includes a requirement to understand ourselves in terms of the human propensity to evil. This requirement of self-knowledge is doing most of the work to support Kant’s claim that self-knowledge is antithetical, in a strong sense, to “egotistical self-esteem.”

Understanding ourselves in light of the human propensity to evil requires that we make the inference that, as human beings, we, too, are marked out by this propensity.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, generic self-knowledge is instrumental in allowing us to develop objectivity. In particular, because we understand, by inference from facts we know about the species to which we belong, that we are “far removed from” the ideal of virtue, we will (a) reject any conception of ourselves as being fully virtuous (as might result from other attempts to evaluate ourselves) and, accordingly, (b) conceive of our duties objectively. Thus, generic self-knowledge impels us to assume, when evaluating the quality of our disposition, that we have almost certainly not achieved virtue, and that, in this regard, there is much work to be done.

Now, one might plausibly think that, because one does not need proof (or even a very discerning eye) to understand that humanity is characterized by a general propensity to evil, knowledge of this propensity cannot be required at all. Hence, the argument goes, it certainly cannot be a component of Kant’s “first command.” Owen Ware makes precisely this argument. Ware writes that, because “the notion we have of humanity's corruption arises necessarily in

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<sup>31</sup> For Kant, evil is merely a tendency to subordinate the commands of morality to the satisfaction of our inclinations. Evil comes in three forms: (1) frailty (2) corruption (3) diabolical evil

experience... a duty to know it would be vacuous.”<sup>32</sup> Since we must recognize in experience that human beings are generically evil, it would be redundant to say that we have a duty to know that, as members of the human species, we are, *ourselves*, generically evil as well. However, from the fact that we recognize that human beings, in general, tend to treat their own happiness as weightier than the commands of morality, it plainly does not follow that we recognize this fact about ourselves.

Kant's concern that we might deceive ourselves makes it clear that we might (and, indeed, that we often will) affirm, simultaneously, that (a) humanity has a general propensity to evil and (b) that we, ourselves, are exempt from that generalization. If one thinks this implausible, one need look no further than contemporary empirical psychology. Psychologists continue to find evidence for what they have deemed the optimism bias: individual persons remain incredibly optimistic about themselves, even while simultaneously holding negative views about human nature, generally.<sup>33</sup> As we have seen, we can never fully get beyond our tendency to self-deceive and attribute to ourselves purer motives than we actually have. The reason that self-knowledge requires us to make inference from the generic human propensity to evil, to our own evil tendencies, then, is to provide us with a constant reminder that, for creatures like us, “virtue is always in progress.” Beings like us can “never settle down in peace and quiet with [our] maxims adopted once and for all” (*MM* 6:409). Virtue is an ideal that we must constantly strive to fulfill, no matter how good we might judge our “moral condition” to be at any given time.

To summarize, if we take Kant's claim that we must know what can be “imputed to us originally as belonging to the *substance* of a human being,” to be a unique requirement of self-

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<sup>32</sup> Ware, pp. 678.

<sup>33</sup> See for example, Sherot, Tali. “The optimism bias.” *Current Biology*. Vol. 21 (23). December, 2011, pp. 941-5. For a compelling account of the ways in which empirical psychology seems to be confirming this tendency see: Haidt, Jonathan. “The Emotional Dog and his Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment.”

knowledge (not reducible to the command to know one's disposition) it becomes clear why self-knowledge will help us to develop objectivity, why self-knowledge will "counteract egotistical self-esteem." After claiming that our duties command us to know ourselves, Kant observes that, in striving toward virtue, we must attempt to remove "an obstacle" that inheres in every human heart. It is now clear that the obstacle to which Kant refers is just the human propensity to evil (see *MM* 6:441). This, in turn, sheds light on why it is that self-knowledge helps us fulfill our duties. Simply put, understanding the general facts about human beings, and about ourselves, as members of our species, makes us less likely to take our duties to ourselves and others lightly. Even when we evaluate our disposition as pure, the universality of the propensity to evil will induce us to assume that we have not yet succeeded in subordinating our inclinations to the requirements of morality, that we have not done enough to warrant the judgment that we have set obligatory ends. Having come to this realization, we will continue to strive, as best we can, to effect a change, or "revolution," within.

While developing objectivity by understanding the implications of the human propensity to evil is bound to be helpful to us as we attempt to discharge our duties to self and others, one might object that this is not sufficient to warrant Kant's strong conclusion that self-knowledge is a *necessary* condition of virtue. While objectivity might place us in a better position to fulfill our duties, it simply is not the case that we are *unable* to address our duties prior to obtaining the self-knowledge that makes objectivity possible. Kant's position does not suggest merely that we will be *better* able to do what duty requires of us if we know ourselves. He argues that if we do not undertake to know ourselves, we will be incapable of addressing our duties at all. To understand why Kant takes the stronger position here, it is crucial to understand the second requirement of generic self-knowledge: The human predisposition to the good.

### 3.3 The “Predisposition to the Good” and Moral Agency

Importantly, if it were the case that the only thing imputable to the human species were radical evil, Kant’s moral psychology might be justifiably condemned as overly pessimistic (as Goethe worried it had become). But Kant clearly did not intend for his moral psychology to engender in us a sense of contempt for the species to which we belong. Indeed, Kant writes that, in addition to helping us to dispense with “egotistical self-esteem,” attempting to know oneself dispels “fanatical contempt for oneself as a human being (for the whole human race)” (*MM* 6:441).

Though we have been focusing so far on the extent to which self-deception entices us to see ourselves as better than we actually are, Kant thinks that this is far from the only way that we commonly deceive ourselves. Sometimes, we are prone to seeing ourselves as worthless, pushed and pulled by our inclinations, wholly lacking agency, or worse. On Kant’s account, this latter tendency involves just as much an error, perhaps even graver an error, as does the tendency toward moral arrogance. Kant’s claim that the human race is characterized by a propensity to evil does not license misanthropy precisely because it is not to be understood in isolation.

Instead, Kant emphasizes that, even more important than understanding the implications of the propensity to evil, is understanding ourselves as beings whose constitution is characterized by a predisposition to the good (*MM* 6:441). Kant’s contention is that, by paying attention to our capacities as rational beings, and in particular, to the extent to which human beings are, as he puts it, “predisposed to the good,” we necessarily conceive of ourselves as moral agents. Conceiving of ourselves in this way is antithetical to “fanatical self-contempt” because it reveals to us the full extent of our moral potential. Conceiving of ourselves and those around us as moral agents makes us less likely, in light of our moral failings (indeed, in light of the evil we see all

around us), to give up on virtue. These considerations begin to bring into view Kant's complete answer to the question of why Kant claims that self-knowledge is first command of all duties to oneself.

Briefly after introducing his first command, Kant explicitly claims that he views contempt for humanity as a contradiction. He then reminds us that it is only “through the noble predisposition to the good in us, which makes the human being worthy of respect, that one can find one who acts contrary to it contemptible” (*ibid*). There are at least two things of importance to note here. First, in the above, Kant claims that the predisposition to the good is what makes human beings worthy of respect; second, he claims that it is by virtue of the predisposition to the good that we are capable of understanding the difference between good and evil. In this section, with these central claims in mind, I elaborate on Kant’s conception of the predisposition to the good, tying it together closely with what Kant calls “the fact of reason,” in the second *Critique*. In particular, I claim that Kant's fact of reason (shorthand, I take it, for phenomenology Kant has already laid out in the *Groundwork*) is what enables us to understand ourselves in terms of the “predisposition to the good.” I then argue that it is only by virtue of what this “fact of reason” tells us about ourselves that we are capable of seeing ourselves as moral agents. Finally, I argue that this is the primary reason Kant thought self-knowledge so important. Quite literally, if we fail to know ourselves, we will fail to see ourselves as moral agents. If we do not see ourselves as moral agents, we will be incapable of (as opposed to merely unskilled at) cultivating virtue.

In the *Religion*, Kant breaks the predisposition to the good into three distinct predispositions: the predisposition to animality, the predisposition to humanity, and the predisposition to personality. Recall that, in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant claims that it is the “noble predisposition to the good in us” that makes human beings the proper objects of respect

(*MM* 6:441, emphasis added). Strikingly, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant makes the same observation regarding our ability to respect the “moral law” as an incentive: It is by virtue of our ability to respect the moral law and treat it as an incentive that we are worthy of respect (*KpV* 5:87). Again, strikingly, Kant defines the predisposition to personality as our “susceptibility to respect... the moral law as of itself a sufficient incentive to the power of choice” (*R* 6:28). Hence, it is reasonable to think that when Kant claims that it is the distinctly *noble* predisposition to the good in us that makes human beings worthy of respect, he has in mind that component of the predisposition to the good that he deems the predisposition to personality. In the simplest possible terms, the predisposition to personality is what marks as out as the types of creatures that are susceptible to the commands of morality in the first place.

I take myself here to be attributing to Kant a stronger claim than the one that Jeanine Grenberg attributes to him in her recent book, *Kant and the Ethics of Humility*. There, Grenberg writes that generic self-knowledge requires that we recognize ourselves as “dependent and corrupt but capable and dignified rational agents.”<sup>34</sup> Conceiving of ourselves in such a way, according to Grenberg, is likely to remind agents to be humble when assessing their worth and prevent them from becoming discouraged that they are incapable of fully attaining virtue. I take it that this is an important insight. But it is not merely that Kant's first command requires that we view ourselves as a particular type of agent (though it does require this). Commanding us to recognize and understand ourselves as predisposed to the good is what enables us to see ourselves as agents in the first place. And it is for this reason, above all others, that pursuing self-knowledge is a requirement of virtue.

At this point, one might wonder by what means we are to know ourselves in terms of the predisposition to the good. Recall that the propensity to evil, as a requirement of generic self-

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<sup>34</sup> Grenberg, 222. cf. Ware, pp. 675-681.

knowledge, is readily knowable. In fact, one cannot spend much time among human beings *without* noticing that they frequently fail to act as morality requires them to act. Evidence for the predisposition to the good, on the other hand, appears to be somewhat harder to find. Not only are there certain philosophers (Hobbes and Mandeville are good examples) that call into question the notion human beings are capable of anything like moral agency, it appears that, in observing ourselves and our fellows, we seldom have a very hard time seeing our way to a selfish interpretation of even the most apparently dutiful action. In light of this, Kant needs to provide us with an account of how it is possible to undertake to know oneself in terms of the predisposition to good which does not readily show itself. It is my view that Kant's answer to this question can be found in his second *Critique*.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant argues that we are, in some sense, aware of “the moral law” as a “fact of reason.” (*KpV* 5:30, 5:31, 5:32, 5:42, 5:43, 5:44, 5:47). Kant cannot mean that the moral law, which he calls the categorical imperative in the *Groundwork*, is something that human beings universally and necessarily represent to themselves during deliberation in abstract form. Besides being highly implausible, Kant straightforwardly denies that these abstract principles play any explicit role in our everyday practical reasoning (see: *GMS* 4:403).

Though we may never consciously represent the categorical imperative in the abstract during deliberation, we are phenomenologically familiar with the sometimes unpleasant pull of obligation toward certain ends, in spite of the fact that we incline toward others. I take this to be a more phenomenologically apt way of saying that in deliberating and acting, we are aware of the moral law as binding. This awareness that moral imperatives ought to trump imperatives that result from our desires, if we pay sufficient attention to it, allows us to cognize ourselves as free.

Reflection on the capacities that enable us to be free allows us to understand ourselves as beings predisposed to the good, whose “highest practical vocation” is to develop a disposition in conformity to virtue. In this way, Kant's fact of reason becomes an important means through which we are able to see ourselves as predisposed to the good, in other words, as moral agents.

For Kant, beings like us have “two standpoints from which [we] can regard [ourselves] and cognize laws for the use of [our] powers” (*GMS* 4:452). From the first standpoint, we view ourselves as objects of the “sensible world,” and our wills determined by our inclinations “under laws of nature,” hence, heteronomously (by external forces). From the second standpoint, we view ourselves as members of the “intelligible world,” and our wills determined “under laws which, being independent of nature, are not empirical but grounded merely in reason,” hence, autonomously (by our selves) (*ibid*). Our capacity for autonomy, a robust sort of positive freedom characterized by “freedom and independence from the mechanism of the whole of nature,” is possible only because we are capable of determining our wills according to “special laws.” These special laws are *moral*, rather than causal, laws. Reflecting on the fact of reason compels us to see ourselves as free. We are never totally at the mercy of our inclinations. In turn, the fact that our freedom is possible only in virtue of our being bound forces us to recognize ourselves as moral agents. This connection between morality and freedom (which Kant thinks is one of reciprocal implication, see: *KpV* 5:29) compels us to regard our “own nature in reference to [our] second and highest vocation...and its laws with the highest respect” (*KpV* 5:87).

We understand as a fact of reason that morality *requires* that we subordinate our interests to its commands. Accordingly, when given the choice between two acts, one of which satisfies our inclinations and is immoral and the other of which requires the frustration of our desires, it is not open to us to appeal to the strength of the latter as an excuse. This sort of freedom *from*

sensibility, made possible by our ability to act according *to* moral imperatives, is precisely what constitutes autonomy, for Kant (*KpV* 5:31). If we replace this purely formal condition with other conditions external to us (including our inclinations), then our will is no longer autonomous—its determining ground lies in some sought-after object, in our desires, and hence, not in law-giving reason. Despite this, by virtue of the predisposition to good that is present universally in human beings, we always have the *capacity* for autonomous action, if only we recognize how our rational capacities bind us. For Kant, therefore, if we are to properly understand ourselves and the reasons for which we act, it is of the utmost importance to maintain the purity of the moral law which “elevates a human being above himself...[and] connects him with an order of things that only the understanding can think” (*KpV* 5:86-7).

Kant holds that, were it not for our awareness of the moral law, and for the autonomy that the latter makes possible, we would not have any duties at all, nor would we be able to discern good from evil (*MM* 6:417-8; 6:441). The primary reason that Kant holds self-knowledge to be a necessary condition of virtue is that, if we do not look inward and recognize among the major implication of this fact of reason (that we are predisposed to the good), we will fail to view ourselves as properly having duties at all (*LE* 27:357).

The second requirement of generic self-knowledge, therefore, requires that we cognize ourselves in our innate capacity to attribute “a free person” to ourselves to whom “all duties that are incumbent on [us]...take account of” us as beings that act “in freedom” (*LE* 27:626). It requires that we see ourselves as capable of placing ourselves under obligation, and it requires that we see ourselves as capable of doing that which we're obligated to do. All of this is simply to say that self-knowledge requires that we understand ourselves as predisposed to the good. We are to understand ourselves as predisposed to the good by “cognizing” our intelligible selves,

which is possible only in “morally practical relations,” that is to say, I think, by paying attention to how we exercise our faculties during practical deliberation (*MM* 6:418).

Kant’s claim that self-knowledge is a necessary condition of virtue begins to look much more plausible with these considerations in view. Our very recognition of the difference between good and evil can be explained only in view of our being aware of the pull of obligation as a “fact of reason.” Were we not the types of creatures endowed with such an awareness, we would not be capable of seeing the human propensity to evil as a regrettable fact about us, or even as something interesting, much less something that *we* should be striving to overcome.

One might object to this, however. If the commands of morality, and through them, the conditions of our freedom, assert themselves upon us involuntarily—if we “must” conceive of ourselves as free during rational deliberation—in what sense does it make sense to command us to know them? Kant’s claim concerning the availability and necessity of our conceiving of ourselves as autonomous moral agents seems to render a command to know it rather vacuous (recall Ware’s worry about the propensity to evil, now, though, from a different angle). Not only does Kant call “the moral law” a fact of reason: in the *Groundwork*, after arriving at the first formulation of the categorical imperative, Kant remarks that common human reason always has the moral law “before its eyes and uses [it] as the norm for its appraisals” (*GMS* 4:403-4). But if the moral law is found in even the most common human beings, even in “scoundrels,” it is insufficiently clear why our duties command that we understand its implications.

I take it that a plausible answer to this compelling objection can be made only by remaining sensitive to Kant’s worries that our understanding of the moral law might be contaminated by the pervasive influence of self-interest. Later in the *Groundwork*, Kant notes that because we are needy creatures with powerful inclinations, there arises within us a “*natural*

*dialectic*,” which Kant further characterizes as a “propensity to rationalize against [the] strict laws of duty and to cast doubt upon their validity” (*GMS* 4:405). Given the strength of our desires, we are prone to make exceptions for ourselves against what morality requires. What's worse is that sometimes this dialectic contaminates our understanding the moral law itself by locating the metric of moral worth elsewhere, perhaps in the quality of our inclinations, rather than in the extent to which we have a “disposition in accord with” the requirements of the moral law” (*KpV* 5:73).

Kant writes that “we find our nature as sensible beings so constituted that the matter of the faculty of desire (objects of inclination, whether of hope or fear) first forces itself upon us, and we find our pathologically determinable self... striving antecedently to make its claims primary and originally valid just as if it constituted our entire self” (*KpV* 5:74). The command to know ourselves, then, requires that we refuse to view our desires as constituting our entire self.<sup>35</sup> We are required to recognize that our desires and our past might go a long way in *explaining* why we've done what we have done. But, if we are only honest with ourselves, we understand that the latter are unable to act as the sorts of considerations that would ultimately *excuse* what we have done (*KpV* 5:99).

If one takes the above considerations seriously, the inconsistency between Kant's claim that the all human beings operate with an implicit understanding of the nature of morality and my argument that we are commanded to understand the implications of the latter disappear. We are commanded to know ourselves, and, in doing so, to view ourselves as moral agents, because so much in us recoils from the implications of the conclusion that we are autonomous. On this

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<sup>35</sup> As Eric Wilson notes in a 2008 paper, Kant's conception of moral autonomy requires that we “draw the boundaries around our proper selves by disavowing the incentives provided by our inclinations and desires, by refusing to endorse them as sufficient reasons for action...by not ascribing them to our proper selves.” Wilson, Eric Entrican. “Kantian Autonomy and the Moral Self”. *The Review of Metaphysics*. Vol. 62, No. 2. 2008. pp. 371.

point, Kant's position concerning moral self-knowledge has an illuminating analogue in his discussion of enlightenment.

Kant characterizes enlightenment as "man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage;" where nonage is then characterized as a special kind of immaturity consisting in our refusal to think independently (*E* 1).<sup>36</sup> According to Kant, many fully grown human beings refuse to shake off this immaturity because of cowardice or laziness. Indeed, Kant writes, "If I have a book to serve as my understanding, *a pastor to serve as my conscience*, a physician to determine my diet for me...I need not exert *myself* at all" (*E* 1, my emphasis).

Human beings, especially in an age of ever increasing communication and commerce, have at their disposal a vast array of resources, which, in various respects, make life easier. While an easier life is surely, on balance, a positive development in human history, it is just as sure that ease is attended with certain dangers. Insofar as individuals take their beliefs from their environment, from their church and from their education, and do not attempt to take an active role in the process of belief-formation, they fail to live up to their moral potential. Insofar as beliefs formed in such a way concern morality, the result is heteronomy of the will. Since the content and origin of beliefs are each surely relevant to moral practice, this is especially problematic.

If we merely take our beliefs from the world outside and then act on them, there is no guarantee whatsoever that we are actually pursuing the same ends we would pursue if actively laying down the law for ourselves. Indeed, on Kant's account of action, it is not sufficiently clear that our behavior will even qualify as "action," as it may not follow from the adoption of principles at all. Thus, J.B. Schneewind observes that the "failure of courage to use our own

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<sup>36</sup> Kant, Immanuel. "What is Enlightenment?" Trans. Mary C. Smith. 1784.

reason is a moral failure.”<sup>37</sup> The solution to the problem of nonage that Kant identifies in his essay on enlightenment is to employ courage in facing the facts about one's own intellectual freedom. As a heuristic, he suggests that we ask ourselves whether “everyone could believe” on grounds such as we believe. If not, we are failing to face courageously the burden that our capacities as rational beings place upon us. Kant considers reflection on the requirements of our own reason an antidote toward this self-imposed problem precisely *because* such requirements assert themselves upon us involuntarily.

Concerning our intellectual responsibilities as well as our moral responsibilities, Kant displays a strong (perhaps too strong) degree of confidence that, if only human beings are honest with themselves in assessing the types of creatures that they are in light of the sort of capacities that they make use of, they will realize that their passivity exhibits a form of bad faith. Far from implying that a duty to understand the implication of what Kant calls “the fact of reason” would be vacuous, the fact that awareness of the moral law is undeniable for creatures like us provides a solution to the problem of self-imposed immaturity in moral, as well as intellectual matters.

#### **SECTION 4: SELF-KNOWLEDGE, EPISTEMIC HUMILITY AND VIRTUE**

The first command of all duties that we have to ourselves requires that we understand ourselves in terms of our capacities and in terms of our constitution as finite, rational beings. One might claim that this conjecture is deeply implausible. Kant is clear that we are commanded to know our disposition, and that is the claim he should have made. To call knowledge of ourselves as substance self-knowledge is a category mistake. If Kant thought that generic self-knowledge was so important, he would not have proclaimed that the first command of all duties to oneself is to “know thy heart.” Surely there is something to this objection. But, it seems undeniable that

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<sup>37</sup> Schneewind, J.B. "Toward Enlightenment: Kant and the Sources of Darkness." *The Cambridge Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*. Ed. Donald Rutherford. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006. 328-53.

part of what it will mean to know our heart is to know what *type* of heart we possess. In our case, our human heart's makeup is rather simple. It consists of a strong desire to be happy and a strong desire to be *worthy* of happiness.

We recognize, along with even the most “common human reason” that morality consists essentially in the constitution of our will (*GMS* 4:393). When we attempt to know our disposition, that is, how our will is constituted, we are forced to recognize that our own contribution to its quality is beyond our reach. We cannot be sure, due to the presence of countervailing incentives, that we have ever successfully acted for purely moral reasons. The fact that morality requires that duty be the “sufficient incentive” that determines the will, in other words implies we can never therefore know if we have fulfilled our duty. Recognition that we are needy, finite beings whose interest in being happy is often placed ahead of our interest in being worthy of happiness suggests to us that we probably have a long way to go in cultivating the pure disposition that virtue requires. Recognition that we are moral agents endowed with the capacity to determine our will autonomously impels us to recognize our moral potential. In light of the epistemic limits that our complex psychology imposes upon us, knowledge of our generic human hearts keeps us oriented toward our “highest practical vocation.”

One cannot help but notice the Socratic character of Kant’s First Command.<sup>38</sup> After all, it was Socrates, serving as Plato’s mouthpiece in *The Republic*, who first called our philosophical attention to the inscription at Delphi, which reads, “Know Thyself.”<sup>39</sup> It was Socrates, too, that stressed, during his trial, that the hallmark of human wisdom (*sophia*) is constituted, in large part, by the recognition of one’s own ignorance.<sup>40</sup> Self-knowledge, for Kant, serves as a reminder

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<sup>38</sup> For an illuminating discussion of the ways in which Kant sees himself continuing in the Socratic tradition, see: Velkley, Richard. “On Kant’s Socratism.” *Being After Rousseau*.

<sup>39</sup> Plato. “The Republic.” *Plato: Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper. N.p.: Hackett, 1997.

<sup>40</sup> Plato. “Apology.” *Plato: Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper. N.p.: Hackett, 1997.

of our ignorance, our tendency to infer too quickly that we have attained knowledge, on the one hand, and an injunction to strive to fulfill our potential, on the other. This is, after all, why Kant claims that “[m]oral cognition of oneself” is “the beginning of all human wisdom” (*MM* 6:441). And, indeed, Kant's Socratism shows through here as well. Recall that for Socrates, wisdom is constitutive of virtue. For Kant, as well, “the ultimate wisdom... consists in the harmony of a human being's will with its final end,” which, for Kant is to cultivate virtue (*ibid*).

If we believe, after inspection, that our disposition leaves no space for blame, and is hence pure, recognition of our ignorance, that is, of the extent to which our selves are opaque to us, will humble us. Understanding ourselves as human, and hence as having a certain propensity to evil, reminds us that judgments of ourselves as wholly virtuous are likely mistaken. Because we cannot exempt ourselves from what we take to be the universal condition of our species, we are humbled by this recognition. Through humility, we become more objective.<sup>41</sup> One might worry that this inability to know anything about our moral worth is likely to entice us to give up on the project of virtue. This worry turns out groundless. Generic knowledge of our hearts, of the types of creatures that we are requires us to come up against the moral law and through it, our moral potential. In light of all the evil that inheres in human nature, we are moral agents precisely because we recognize the authority of a law laid down for us by the activity of our own rational faculties. Each requirement of generic self-knowledge enables us to fulfill the principal duty that falls out of Kant's First Command: that we are to be sincere in appraising our inner

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<sup>41</sup> See Grenberg, *Kant and the Ethics of Humility*. Notice that this account does not commit me to Grenberg's stronger claim that Kant's ethics is *essentially* an ethics of humility. For a compelling refutation of this strong claim see: Loudon, Robert B. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 75(3), 632-639, 8 p. November 2007. It is worth noting, however, that in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant appears to *identify* self-knowledge with humility. See: *KpV*

worth in comparison with our duty (*MM* 6:442). As J.B. Schneewind puts it, “In moral matters we are all equally failures; but we all have essentially the same ability to get things right.”<sup>42</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Self-knowledge, finally, is a necessary condition of virtue because if we do not attend to the sorts of creatures that we are, we will fail to be the sorts of agents that morality requires us to be. We will be prone to overestimate or underestimate our moral potential, which will lead us to prematurely judge that we have discharged all of our duties on the one hand, or give up on them completely on the other. Worse: if we remain completely ignorant of ourselves and the types of creatures that we are, Kant holds that we will not recognize that we have duties at all. Part of Kant's injunction to “know thy heart” requires that, as individuals, we strive to understand ourselves as members of the human species. Our membership in this group carries with it certain baggage that, if we are honest with ourselves, we must infer belong also to us as individuals.

Kant's first command requires that we understand the extent to which virtue is, for beings like us, an ideal to strive after, that we are unlikely to fulfill. But it also requires that we keep in clear view our potential as autonomous moral agents. Attention to the propensity to evil achieves the first goal, and understanding ourselves as predisposed to the good achieves the second.

In the end, it seems Kant's injunction, *know yourself*, is both simpler and more complex than it might at first have appeared.

In the Preface of the first *Critique*, Kant quotes a piece of verse written by Persius. It reads: “Dwell in your own house and you will know how simple your possessions are” (*KrV* Axx). It is in this spirit that I think we should read Kant on the issue of moral self-knowledge. It is easy to get distracted by Kant's claim that the object of self-knowledge is our disposition,

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<sup>42</sup> Schneewind, pp. 347.

which he has situated beyond our epistemic reach. But if we attend carefully to that which Kant claims is achieved by attempting to know our hearts, it becomes apparent that much of what we need to understand about ourselves is not, after all, idiosyncratic to us, and, in understanding this, we will know, indeed, just how simple our possessions are.

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