

# Autonomy, Progress and Virtue: Why Kant Has Nothing to Fear from the Overdemandingness Objection

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“No greater crime can be found than seeking to corrupt the moral law, and thus there is nothing more harmful than a lax ethics, namely when the law accommodates itself to evil opinion. The ethical law is a punctual and strict law that requires perfection in the highest degree.” (Powalski, 27: 164.5–10)

It does not bode well for an ethical theory if it inflicts unrealistic requirements on moral agents, if it strains human nature unduly, or if the price of complying with its prescriptions seems not worth paying. Classical utilitarianism is particularly vulnerable to such objections.<sup>1</sup> It is, however, a legitimate question whether other ethical systems fare any better. In this paper, I address the issue whether Kant’s ethics can be impugned or rejected on the grounds that it is overly demanding.

## §1. Two ways of asking too much: pervasiveness and radical self-denial

An ethical theory can be said to ask too much of us in at least two distinct ways.<sup>2</sup> There is, first, the allegation that morality is too pervasive, i.e. that its commands do not leave room for the non-moral pursuits that are part of a good life. This problem arises when we try to understand ethics in terms of abstract and overriding moral rules. Bernard Williams, for instance, argues that general and indeterminate obligations to advance worthy ends leave no room for merely permissible actions. Such duties

will be waiting to provide work for idle hands, and the thought can gain a footing [...] that I could be better employed than in doing something I am under no obligation to do, and, if I could be, then I ought to be: I am under an obligation not to waste time in doing things I am under no obligation to do. (Williams, 2006: 181)

It is difficult to see how any action falling under a rule of this kind should fail to be obligatory. In a world like ours, a general obligation to be helpful would keep us extremely busy, leading to an extensive altruism that threatens to sideline all of our more self-regarding interests.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as our concern for beneficence is likely to dominate our thoughts, virtue

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1. The modern debate was sparked off by Singer, 1972. It is, however, worth noting that Singer is not, strictly speaking, a ‘classical’ utilitarian but an advocate of what has been called “the Simple Principle of Beneficence” (Murphy, 1993: 268) or of “consequentialism-plus-constraints” (Pummer, 2016: 79).

2. These are separate issues. But both arise when the charge of overdemandingness is levelled against maximising consequentialism, which is probably why they are not commonly distinguished.

3. What, for Williams, makes the situation even worse is that an obligation can only be limited by

is likely to take a heavy psychological toll. This makes a life devoted to duty seem impoverished and sad.

Secondly, an ethical theory can be criticised on the grounds that it calls for too great a sacrifice on particular occasions. We may have to give up all hope of future happiness or die for an unconvincing cause. The underlying worry is once again that selfless behaviour would undermine the non-moral values that are part of a well-rounded, flourishing human life, that extreme self-denial is incompatible with human nature, or that we cannot comply with a command of this kind since we lack a motive that is strong enough to bring the prescribed action about. As ought arguably implies can, this line of argument can be used to discredit an ethical theory that contains such an exacting command.

## §2. Kant and the eighteenth-century debate

Such doubts naturally occur to anyone who reflects on the scope and authority of morality, including Kant and his contemporaries. In the spirit of the above distinction, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten labels ethical theories ‘deceptive’ or ‘chimerical’ if (i) they posit moral reasons on which the agent cannot act because he lacks a sufficient motive or if (ii) they include spurious obligations that are not incumbent upon human agents at all.<sup>4</sup> We know from Herder’s practical philosophy notes that Kant avails himself of Baumgarten’s distinction as early as 1763/64. Kant argues that the Stoics fail at the first hurdle because their ethics overtaxes the human will; and he attacks Hutcheson for taking selflessness and benevolence too far (27: 15.14–17).

In the *Critique of Practical Reason* more than two decades later, Kant criticises the fantasies of the novelists of his time,<sup>5</sup> as well as the intellectualist “heroism” (5: 86.13) of Stoicism, as expressions of “enthusiasm” (*Schwärmerei*, 5: 86.11). Both err in that they portray moral perfection as attainable, the former through sentiment (cf. 5: 155.8), the latter through

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another obligation, and as a result we we need to introduce “one of those fraudulent items”, a duty to oneself, to be allowed to do what we want to do (Williams, 2006: 182). We are allowed to pursue our own interests only at the expense of intellectual dishonesty, ceding additional ground to a morality that now also extends to our dealings with ourselves. In what follows, I shall mainly focus on the demands imposed by duties to others. The duty to cultivate one’s talents, for instance, may up to point help to contain altruism by rebalancing the moral scales; but they are still prescriptive, i.e. they do not just let us do what we would like to do. They are therefore unlikely to do much to dispel the overall worry of overdemandingness.

4. See § 7. of his *Ethica*. On the concept of a chimerical ethics in Baumgarten and Meier see Thorndike, 2008 and Dyck, 2012. The worry that his own ethical theory might be a ‘phantasm’ (*Hirngespinnst*) or a ‘chimera’ pervades the second section of the *Groundwork* and is officially laid to rest only in the third. It is also in evidence in the early lectures on ethics, and in the Canon of the first *Critique*, see Timmermann forthcoming.

5. In the lectures on anthropology, Kant frequently targets Samuel Richardson’s *History of Sir Charles Grandison*, which is bound to upset women by creating unrealistic expectations of less-than-ideal men (see e.g. Collins, 25: 48 and 98).

exaggerating powers of reason and an unjustified sense of detachment from sensuous nature (cf. 5: 127 fn.). But as human beings are made of flesh and blood, effortless virtue must remain an ideal. Kant praises Christianity for striking the right balance, subjecting human beings to a duty that flows from “the purity of the moral principle” while at the same time paying due respect to “the limitations of finite beings” (5: 86.15–17). This is not the time to assess these allegations in detail. Let us simply note that Kant himself criticises ethical ideals for ignoring the limitations of human nature, i.e. for – in this particular way – being too demanding. If so, it would be odd if he did not bear this worry in mind in devising his own moral theory.

Furthermore, Kant was also familiar with the tendency of the rules of a moral theory to encroach upon the non-moral. His attitude towards *adiaphora* depends on what is at issue. He banishes indifferents from the inner sanctum of his practical philosophy by denying that there are morally neutral states at the level of an agent’s underlying disposition or character (*Religion*, 6: 22.19–28 and fn.). Only two forces can – if we so choose – determine our conduct, inclination and pure practical reason. There are therefore only two ways of giving one of them priority over the other. Our fundamental attitude is either good or bad. In this context, Kant also denies that actions can be morally indifferent, if in a slightly non-standard sense: there can be no action that is purely mechanical, that does not stand under moral laws, that is neither obligatory nor forbidden nor permitted (6: 23 fn.). In the late *Metaphysics of Morals*, however, Kant tries to preserve room for *adiaphora* in the regular sense of what is ‘merely permitted’ (cf. 6: 223.5–9). He warns moralists against turning objects of dietary preference – whether to eat meat or fish, or to drink beer or wine (6: 409.16–17) – into moral problems, a tendency he disparages as ‘micrology’ (6: 409.18).<sup>6</sup> Moralising the amoral can lead to another, perhaps somewhat less demanding kind of fantastic virtue. Micrological principles need not be too difficult to comply with. They thereby encourage human beings to consider themselves morally better than in fact they are. But even if the ‘tyranny’ (6: 409.19) of micrological rules turns out to be comparatively benign, it is clear that Kant is aware of the danger that rules and regulations can come to dominate our lives. He would like to steer clear of that threat in his own ethical theory.

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6. Defined elsewhere as pedantry, empty pondering, excessive attention to formalities, useless subtlety (cf. *Anthropology*, 7: 221.30, *Logic*, 9: 46.31–33 and 49.11, also R 2061) and – in particular – a tendency to be overly scrupulous in matters of conscience (6: 440.15, cf. Powalski 27: 199.34). Note that we are not talking about the realm of imperfect duty, or the worry that people might try to be *too virtuous*, but attempts to include in the sphere of virtue options and choices that ought not to be included. Just as a circle can never be too round or a line too straight, a human being can never be too virtuous (cf. *Doctrine of Virtue*, 6: 433 fn.).

### §3. Duties of right and duties of virtue

Let us examine Kant's theory of obligation to see how demanding his ethics really is. The categorical imperative generates two types of duty, both of which can target either the agent himself or others. Kant draws this distinction – or closely related distinctions<sup>7</sup> – in various ways at different points in his works and lectures, contrasting 'perfect' or 'strict' with 'imperfect' or 'wide' duties, 'necessary' or 'essential' duties with 'contingent' or 'non-essential' duties, 'owed' duties with 'meritorious' duties, or juridical duties of 'right' with ethical duties of 'virtue', and so forth. In the *Groundwork*, we are told how maxims that fall foul of either class violate the first and second reformulations of the categorical imperative, but there is little detail. The full system of duties remains a topic for a future *Metaphysics of Morals* (4: 421 fn.), a promise he struggles to make good in 1797.

Fortunately, a fuller picture can be assembled from other writings, from his handwritten notes and from what we know about his lectures on moral philosophy. The 'laws' associated with strict or perfect duty prescribe actions immediately and directly. They are relevant throughout. They always result in token obligations, i.e. they always provide sufficient reason to act. They can be discharged completely. There is no casuistry. There is no discretion. They are absolute, precise and clear. Juridical duties are prime examples. Take the *Groundwork's* prohibition of fraudulent promises. If I urgently need a loan I may well be tempted to make a promise I do not intend to keep. Yet I face an unconditional, non-negotiable law not to do so. Just by itself, this law constitutes a prohibition of fraudulently promising, regardless of my actual desires, projects or purposes. It does not even matter how morally worthy they are because strict duties set the limits within which other duties produce valid obligations.<sup>8</sup> There are several such strict laws: not to murder, not to torture, not to lie etc. They admit of being unrestricted because, as omissions, they cannot conflict with each other.<sup>9</sup> We may well be tempted to dismiss such unrelenting standards, but there can be no question that the philosopher Immanuel Kant was deeply committed to the idea.

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7. I shall ignore the problem of strict duties to oneself, which are neither enforceable duties of right nor duties of virtue that leave latitude for the agent's choice. Also, there are quasi-juridical duties in the Doctrine of Virtue, namely duties of respect. The simplified distinction (strict-wide, juridical-ethical etc.) will do for the purposes of this paper.

8. From now on, I shall observe Kant's extraordinarily helpful distinction between 'duty' (*Pflicht*), which is general, and 'obligation' (*Verbindlichkeit*), which denotes a particular, all-things-considered occurrence of being bound to do something specific. Owing to my duty (type) to be helpful I have an obligation (token) to call a doctor when I see that someone has been badly injured.

9. Or so Kant thought. For a critical examination of this assumption see Hruschka, 1991. On moral conflict in general see Timmermann, 2013.

The 'rules'<sup>10</sup> of wide or imperfect duty obligate in a different and less straightforward manner. They urge us to adopt morally good ends – our own perfection and the happiness of others – and to realise them when the occasion arises and it is otherwise permissible to do so. This kind of duty cannot be discharged completely; but we must do what we can. Strict duties of omission provide the framework for virtuous practice. If we correctly subsume the situation we find ourselves in under such a rule – if, for instance, there is someone who genuinely needs and deserves our assistance – there is, in Kant's terminology, an 'obligating reason' or 'ground of obligation' (*Grund der Verbindlichkeit*, 6: 224.19), which turns into an actual obligation if and only if it is not defeated by other, weightier moral reasons or by sheer physical impossibility.<sup>11</sup> We may well suspect that sufficiently many such grounds survive to make Kant's ethical theory fairly demanding.<sup>12</sup>

#### §4. We must be beneficent whenever we can

Whether permissible action is really crowded out by obligation also depends on what exactly the rules of wide duty say. Let us focus on beneficence. We might be able to dispel worries that being kind to others might overstretch our abilities or condemn us to a dreary life of selflessness if moderation were built in to the maxim of beneficence that the categorical imperative urges us to adopt.

The most prominent advocate of such a lenient principle of beneficence is Thomas Hill.<sup>13</sup> According to Hill, perfect duties tell us *always* to do x, imperfect duties *sometimes* to do x. Crucially, Hill's 'sometimes' does not reduce to the minimalist reading of latitude suggested below, i.e. it does not just refer to cases in which a ground of obligation is not defeated by a weightier moral consideration or sheer physical impossibility. Hill's principle of beneficence is: "Sometimes, to some *significant* extent, promote permissible ends of others." (Hill, 2002: 207).<sup>14</sup> As a result, "we may sometimes pass over an opportunity to make others happy

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10. I say 'rules' because Kant tends to reserve the honorific 'law' for the stricter type of duty. See § 5 below.

11. It is therefore misleading to say that strict duty overrides wide duty. A weightier ground of obligation *overrides* another such ground to the effect that the latter does not turn into an obligation. By contrast, strict duty *limits* what can count as obligation right from the start. It is in this spirit that the 1803 *Lectures on Pedagogy* call for a 'catechism of right' to impress on children the priority of strict laws. Someone who should pay his creditor today should not give the sum he owes to someone in need because "I must be free if I want to perform charitable acts" (9: 490.12–13).

12. In sum, the latitude, room for play or – what comes to the same thing – the possibility of exceptions that is a feature of imperfect duties can be equated with the fact that these duties do not bind the will directly but leave room for rational deliberation, partly because they are restricted by perfect duties and by weightier cases falling under the heading of imperfect duty, partly because, as positive duties, they urge us to think about the appropriate choice of means, which is governed by narrowly instrumental as well as long-term considerations.

13. For an extended discussion of Hill's account see Timmermann, 2005.

14. Note that it is not entirely clear what the scope of the duty of assistance or beneficence is, i.e.

simply because we would rather do something else" (Hill, 1971: 59). He recoils from endorsing a stronger principle precisely because he fears it would be implausibly demanding.

But the duty of beneficence does not just tell us to promote permissible ends of others 'to some significant extent'. It tells us to adopt a straightforward maxim of beneficence, which is curtailed by other ethical principles, e.g. the laws of strict duty and the requirement not to risk one's own independence. Having such a maxim is compatible with not acting on it when it is impossible to do so, morally or otherwise; but expressions like 'sometimes' or 'to some extent' are not part of the maxim itself. In fact, they must not be included. Why this is so can be gleaned from the way the duty of beneficence is established in the *Groundwork* (6: 423). The initial reaction of a prosperous person who sees others struggle is not to help. But as he reflects on what he is about to do he realises that he cannot will that a maxim of non-beneficence be adopted universally.<sup>15</sup> The maxim is therefore to be rejected.

What principle does reason tell him to make his own instead of the one he was tempted to adopt? Is the maxim that removes the negation from the maxim rejected. The agent was tempted not to help. He then realises that helping others is a rational requirement.<sup>16</sup> There is no reason to introduce any limitation at this stage.<sup>17</sup> A principle *sometimes* to help would be arbitrary and curiously half-hearted (see Seymour, 2008: 430); it would provide little guidance; and it would actually serve as an excuse for the agent to rationalise his way out of providing assistance to those in need. The simplicity of the principle of beneficence should not come as a surprise. After all, in the first section of the *Groundwork*, Kant explicitly says that it is our duty to be beneficent "where we can" (4: 398.8).<sup>18</sup>

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whether it is confined to helping those in dire need or whether – as Hill evidently assumes – it points to a broader task of contributing to the happiness of others. See Moran, 2017: 316–321.

15. This is how Barbara Herman argues against Hill's approach: "[T]he idea of an obligatory end that gives us a 'do something sometimes' cannot be right." Latitude is "not about frequency of acting for the end, but a space for judgment as to how (and how much), in appropriate circumstances, the end might be promoted" (Herman, 2007: 214–215).

16. Hill's toned-down maxim to help would, if universally adopted, lead to a world in which it is more likely that one misses out on receiving help, which is something the agent cannot want. A maxim of making exceptions in the interest of inclination fails the categorical imperative test.

17. The *principle* of beneficence does not determine what needs to be done a priori and by itself in the way the law of truthfulness does, which (for Kant) requires no weighing of competing considerations to be applied. But it is illegitimate to conclude that it leaves us any significant discretion once all the relevant contingent data have been factored in. In that sense, the agent – and not the law – determines what should be done, depending to circumstances.

18. I take this to be a sufficient and not just a necessary condition. Trivially, there is no obligation to help if help is not required or if helping is impermissible. Note also that, in the Doctrine of Virtue, Kant introduces a clear limit that our efforts to help others must not breach: our own poverty, which would make us reliant on the help of others ourselves (6: 454.2–4, in a similar vein: 6: 451.6–19). Kant is not advocating complete self-denial.

## §5. Latitude, room for play, exceptions

Kant repeatedly emphasises that, as a result of the complicated picture painted above, the norms of imperfect or ethical duty do not determine what ought to be done with precision, most notably perhaps in the introduction to the Doctrine of Virtue:

[W]hen the law can command only the maxim of actions, not the actions themselves, that's a sign that it leaves room for play<sup>19</sup> (*latitudo*) for the free faculty of choice<sup>20</sup> in following (observing) it [...]. (6: 390.4–7).

The Vigilantius notes make essentially the same point. Unlike the laws of strict duty,

laws of wide obligation determine only the type of obligation to the action, not its degree, so that some room for play is left for its fulfilment, as the one who is obligated retains the freedom to behave in this or that way; [...]. (27: 536.28–31)

Can passages like these be squared with the fairly demanding account of imperfect duty presented so far? Do they give virtuous agents permission occasionally to opt out of a duty like beneficence when they feel like doing something else, or when the burden is just too heavy? In particular, what exactly does Kant mean when he says that a law leaves the agent 'latitude'?

The first of the two sources provides the following explanation: An ethical law “cannot determinately state in what way and to what extent the action ought to effect the end that is at the same time one’s duty” (6: 390.7–9). In a similar vein, Kant demotes laws of wide obligation in lectures given around the time the *Groundwork* was published: They are not, strictly speaking, laws in the honorific sense because “they do not determine a priori<sup>21</sup> what and how much is to be done”. In particular, it cannot be determined “how much I could do without and what part of my means I might therefore expend on acts of beneficence” (*Moral Mrongovius II*, 29: 633.9–12). The decisive point is that the *abstract rule or law* derived from the categorical imperative does not determine these details.<sup>22</sup> That is not to say that they are wholly undetermined or underdetermined once the agent has taken all relevant circumstances into account, let alone that helping others is optional, arbitrary or permits of discretion. When I notice someone in need and it is not too difficult for me to help it is clear that I

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19. *Spielraum*. The metaphor is mechanical. The OED’s first quotation illustrating this sense of the English word ‘play’ is taken from Henry Mainwaring’s *Sea-mans Dictionary* of 1644: “In a storm it is dangerous to let the Mast have any play.”

20. *Willkür*. Gregor says that it leaves “a playroom (*latitudo*) for free choice [*sic*] in following (complying with) the law”, which makes imperfect duty look optional or arbitrary.

21. There may still be a hint of the original sense of ‘a priori’ here: details are not determined *in advance*.

22. In contrast with juridical duties, where the law determines what needs to be done with mathematical precision, see e.g. 6: 233.20. At least in part, our difficulties understanding Kant’s limited conception of latitude derive from the fact that we do not share his belief in the exactitude of juridical legislation.

need to do something – even if there are several justifiable options that I need to narrow down or if another agent who is situated differently can be expected to do something else. That is also the lesson to be learnt from our second primary source, the Vigilantius lectures on the metaphysics of morals:

E.g., the duty of beneficence determines only that I should use my means to support the other, but how much remains reserved to the measure of my needs, my means and the need of the other person. [...] So too with the duty to advance one's perfection [...]. (27: 536.31–37)

So, what about the feature of ethical duties often mentioned in the same breath as latitude, that – unlike juridical duties – they *admit of exceptions* (cf. VI 233.19–23, XXIX 618.3–4)? Kant clarifies the matter<sup>23</sup> in the introduction to the Doctrine of Virtue:

But a wide duty is not to be understood as a permission to make exceptions to the maxim of actions, but only as one to limit one obligatory maxim by another (e.g. general love of one's neighbour by the love of one's parents), by which the field for the practice of virtue is indeed widened. (6: 390.9–14)

The kind of case he has in mind is once again explicitly stated in the Vigilantius notes:

Here is the case where departures from the rule, or so-called exceptions, occur when the law does not have true universality or absolute necessity (which is unlikely to be found in any ethical law); e.g. beneficence lapses [*bleibt weg*] when one's own poverty or family needs have to be met. (27: 537.3–8)

In other words, exceptions occur when – because of another, weightier *moral* concern, or if for whatever reason we lack the means to support both causes – we cannot respond to a deserving cause that would otherwise have led to an obligation. It is because of such cases that the principle of love of one's neighbour or beneficence towards strangers lacks universality, not because agents are sometimes allowed to neglect their duties when philosophers think they are overburdened. This is a far cry from Hill's 'sometimes' clause. The limitations of imperfect duty are the result of moral decision making, not a premise that feeds into it. One of Kant's drafts for the Doctrine of Virtue provides an excellent summary:

[A]ll obligation presupposes a law. If this law aims determinately and immediately at the action so that the manner how? and the degree how much? is to be performed in it is determined in the law, the obligation is perfect (*obligatio perfecta*) and the law obligates in the strict fashion: there remains for us no choice, neither for exceptions, as to when the law is valid in its universality, nor for the degree of following it. But if the law just does not command the action immediately, but merely the *maxim* of the action, if it leaves the subject's judgement free with regard to the kind and the measure to which degree what is commanded is to be performed, *commanding only that as much as under the given conditions is possible to do is necessary* [emphasis J.T.], then the obligation is imperfect and the law is not of narrow but only of wide obligation, *late obligans*. (23: 394.1–13)

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23. The clarification is needed because there is a footnote in the *Groundwork* that gives the misleading impression that imperfect duties permit exceptions *in favour of inclination* (cf. 4: 421 fn.).



The *kind* and *measure*, i.e. how and how much I do, is to be determined in the situation at hand, not *whether* I respond to the call of duty. And this must be done in a reasonable and responsible manner. In sum, appealing to latitude does next to nothing to refute the allegation that Kant's imperfect duties will keep us extremely busy.

#### §6. First rejoinder: demanded *by* whom?

So far, Kant's complex system of duties holds little comfort for those who worry that it might be too demanding.<sup>24</sup> The gaps left open by laws of perfect duty – which can themselves require self-sacrifice in unfavourable circumstances – are filled in by cases falling under rules of imperfect duty in just the way Williams envisages. If, as we must, we go through life with open eyes, duties like beneficence will reliably provide 'work for idle hands'. So, does Kant's demanding moral philosophy fall prey to the overdemandingness objection?<sup>25</sup>

To see how the threat of overdemandingness can still be defused, consider the fact that ethical theories do not themselves issue demands. What we mean when we say that they do is that they contain a conception of obligation on which human decision making is influenced by an appropriate normative authority. In Kant's ethics, the obligating authority is the agent's own will, subject only to laws it imposes upon itself. In this it is crucially different from consequentialist theories. The value that ought to determine choice in, e.g., utilitarianism is external to a will that by nature is at odds with it: the greatest happiness of all.

Now, it is at least in part the picture of an authority alien to our will and beyond our control that makes us feel uncomfortable about demanding moral requirements. As Elijah Millgram notes in the closely-related context of the freewill debate:<sup>26</sup>

Words like 'Necessity' (or 'determination') make you think of coercion; that is, they are associated with something on the order of images of yourself being dragged around by a rope attached to your neck, or perhaps having your arm twisted behind your back by the schoolyard bully. (Millgram, 2009: 196)

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24. I have been embracing the position that Mary Gregor dubs 'the rigorist view' in her classic *Laws of Freedom* (Gregor, 1963: 105). For a critical discussion of Gregor's rejection of this form of rigorism see Baron, 1995: 88–107. Much more needs to be said to argue, exegetically and philosophically, for some specific version of rigorism in the sphere of imperfect duty. But for the purposes of this paper it will be enough to assume that imperfect duties generate a host of rather demanding obligations. If we can defend a radical view against the accusation of overdemandingness less radical views will *a fortiori* be cleared of the charge as well.

25. Note that overdemandingness is a bigger worry for Kant than for the utilitarian because Kant is much less of a revisionist. He prides himself on grounding his theory on common human reason. But that means that he will struggle to dismiss overdemandingness 'intuitions' on the strength of his theory (which is always an option for hard-nosed utilitarians).

26. I should also like to thank Helen Small of Pembroke College, Oxford, for drawing this passage to my attention.

But on Kant's picture, we are not pushed around by the happiness of others. We decide to respond appropriately, applying our own formal standards.<sup>27</sup> Also, as the duty of beneficence is an ethical duty, the people we decide to help do not have a right to our assistance; nor is the obligation to help backed up by external force. Failing to help may, in one sense, be the wrong thing to do; but in another it is not wrong because no one is wronged, and in that regard it is permissible. We do not even owe someone in need an explanation if, for good reasons or bad, we decide not to help (though it may be unkind not to offer one). But the fact that an act cannot be demanded of me by others does not mean that I cannot demand it of myself. So, if I do help, I do so voluntarily and of my own accord.

This does not, of course, mean that we always effortlessly comply with the commands of reason that we realise flow from our own rational will. There will be motivational obstacles. This is precisely why virtue is needed, which helps us view our inclinations with a sense of detachment. Nor am I saying that virtuous action does not require personal sacrifice. But Kant seems to think that the restrictions imposed by moral laws are comparatively benign. Reflecting on the autonomy of the human will can help us avoid at least some of the negative aspects that very demanding conceptions of moral obligation are commonly perceived to have. This is clear from the arguments against a 'lax' ethics we find in Vigilantius' discussion of Schiller's criticisms in *On Grace and Dignity*.<sup>28</sup> There can be no doubt, we learn, that the moral law constrains the will.<sup>29</sup> But moral constraint, Vigilantius argues, is different from "pathological" or "physical" constraint, which would generate "fear and at the same time aversion" [*Furcht und zugleich Widerwillen*, 27: 623.36]. We also learn that moral constraint is an expression of freedom and spontaneity, "and this commands respect, not servile submission" (27: 623.39). Vigilantius even calls the feeling of respect "voluntary" (27: 624.3); and he concludes: "Harshness [*Härte*] is therefore inconceivable [*garnicht denkbar*]" because of the awe-inspiring dignity of the law (27: 624.4). That is why, quoting Matthew, Kant says in the second *Critique* that the "yoke" of duty is "easy" because it is imposed on us by reason (5: 85.2–3). This may seem exceedingly optimistic; but it was clearly Kant's view.

Moral progress goes hand in hand with the – gradual, and maybe initially painful – realisation that morality is an expression of our own rational will. That is why autonomy is equated with freedom. Kant provides a remarkable description of a moral agent in full control early on in the Doctrine of Virtue. In his example, the agent has his eyes firmly set on a risky amusement. The risk does not deter him. But as soon as he realises "that

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27. Kantian autonomy is not a form of voluntarism. The legislator is the author of the obligation, not the author of the law of obligation. Self-legislation is first and foremost legislation *by* the self in the sense that the laws of impartial reason are normatively imposed upon (made authoritative for) the human faculty of choice, a role previously occupied in Kant's ethical theory by God. See Timmermann, forthcoming.

28. See Kant's official response in the contemporaneous *Religion*, 6: 23–24 fn.

29. This is tantamount to an admission that the moral law can be demanding.

he would thereby fail in one of the duties of his office or neglect a sick father”, he abandons his intention not joyfully, yet without giving it much thought (*unbedenklich*), and thereby “proves his freedom in the highest degree by being unable to resist the voice of duty” (6: 382 fn.).

## §7. Second rejoinder: virtue and merit

Utilitarianism is driven by an external conception of the good, but in practical terms it centres on the notion of right action. The overdemandingness objection is usually formulated in terms of right and wrong: We ought to do what is right. If not, we do wrong and deserve blame. But it is well-nigh impossible to get things right if the right is that which produces the greatest happiness. That is why simple versions of utilitarianism seem so unfair.

It should be obvious, however, that Kant’s theory is immune to this kind of objection. The notions of right and wrong play no significant role in his ethical works. Like the *Groundwork*, the Doctrine of Virtue is all about good action. Unsurprisingly, what is right – what, if breached, deserves blame, censure or punishment – is the fundamental category of the Doctrine of Right. As Onora O’Neill notes, Kant “can effectively classify acts under two headings”: “obligatory, merely permissible and forbidden” on the one hand and “morally worthy, lacking moral worth or morally unworthy” on the other (O’Neill, 2013: 194). The category of the supererogatory is missing. But virtue and vice, goodness and badness, merit and demerit are scalar and therefore permit of degrees. As Kant himself says in one of his handwritten reflections, “a good action could be better, but a right one not be righter” (R 7036). His own conception of duty encompasses both dimensions.

This is an important point, not a terminological nicety, because it provides us with the resources to say of two actions that one is better than the other without implying that the latter is in any substantive sense wrong.<sup>30</sup> As Kant says in the introduction to the Doctrine of Virtue, fulfilling imperfect duties is meritorious, but their non-fulfilment is not a culpable offence but rather mere lack of moral worth or goodness. He adds the important qualification that failure to satisfy duties of virtue must not be the result of a wicked maxim not to yield to such duties at all.<sup>31</sup> Again, having a maxim of imperfect duty is compatible with not acting on it out of weakness or a lack of virtue, which is not to be equated with wickedness. Wickedness or vice is principled lack of responsiveness to the laws of virtue (see 6: 390.18–29). Crucially, the meritorious is defined as that which “is done *more* in the way of duty than

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30. We have already seen that a wilful omission to help can, in a sense, be the wrong thing, but that this description is too thin to be helpful. Surely, it is the wrongness that – if done consciously and willingly – signifies wickedness and a breach of rights that we should worry about.

31. A point emphasised by Baron, 1995 and explored in detail by Pinheiro Walla, 2015.

someone can be forced to do by the law" (6: 227).<sup>32</sup> Once again, it is important that virtuous action is voluntary in a sense in which complying with strict right is not.<sup>33</sup>

Terms like merit and demerit apply to individual actions. By contrast, the related categories of virtue and vice assess the morality of persons. Let A be a hardened criminal who never comes to the aid of anyone. B is a truthful person who respects the lives and property of others; she regularly helps her friends; each month she donates £100 to charity. C also adheres to strict duty, but unlike B he is incredibly thoughtful and kind in daily life and donates half his net salary to worthy causes. Let us assume that both B and C act from duty when they do good. A does wrong. He is a bad person. B and C are not. They are not guilty of any crime and do not deserve censure or blame. They are, as a matter of fact, fairly decent human beings. Nevertheless, Kant would say that C is a better (more virtuous) person than B, and common sense would agree. C has progressed further on the path to virtue because he takes imperfect duty more seriously than B. As Kant puts it in the Doctrine of Virtue:

The wider the duty, the more imperfect therefore a human being's obligation to do the action, the closer he nevertheless brings the maxim of observing it (in his disposition) to *narrow* duty (of right) the more perfect is his virtuous action. (6: 390.14–17)

And that is what constitutes moral progress. All obligation is strict,<sup>34</sup> but the way agents consider and respond to obligation differs. A virtuous person will give priority to cases that less virtuous people might consider less important, optional or even a nuisance.<sup>35</sup>

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32. Equity may be an exception, see 6: 234–235.

33. I acquire merit with regard to the beneficiary (who owes me gratitude), though not necessarily *per se*, which is why it is still a matter of duty from the point of view of the good agent. See §§ 8 and 9.

34. In one of his handwritten notes from the 1780s, Kant asserts that "all obligation is strict" and explains this in terms of there being no exception from obligation. But that does not mean that all laws or rules of obligation are strict; some are wide "because they do not determine the actions but contain the motivating ground, albeit with limitations" (R 7270).

35. I should like to thank an anonymous referee for raising the question whether acting on imperfect duty is laudable, and whether failure to act would be criticisable. It is difficult to say what Kant's response would be. I suspect that he would reject the use of these terms as unanalysed one-place predicates. As with demands, we must first determine the appropriate authority. Whose task is it to praise? Whose role is it to criticise? If what is at issue is not the violation of right but the more or less of virtue, it would seem to be the job of the autonomous agent (or the rational part within him). If one is uncertain whether one would do something oneself it is inappropriate to criticise others. What is more, words like 'laudable' and 'criticisable' are incomplete in that, to be informative, they need to be spelt out further. Does 'laudable' mean anything other than 'is a good thing'? Does 'criticisable' mean anything other than 'is not such a good thing'? Trivially, even if it is not the task of others to tell me so, I can say to myself that appropriately responding to an obligation of imperfect duty is good and not responding is not so good – though not, by and large, wicked, malicious, evil, bad etc. There is no such thing as 'laudable' and 'criticisable' *simpliciter*.

## §8. Third rejoinder: demanded *of* whom?

Now that we have a clearer sense of the nature of Kant's theory of obligation, let us turn to the Kantian agent. We know him to be someone who, of his own accord, takes an interest in acting on the laws of autonomous practical reason. Even so, the question remains whether he might experience duties of virtue, particularly beneficence, as unduly demanding. Moral laws often conflict with what we are inclined to do. Besides, Kant willingly concedes the possibility of psychological conflict. The spectre of overdemandingness still haunts his moral theory.

The idea of moral progress once again softens Kant's perfectionism. Virtue need not and cannot be achieved from one moment to the next. What agents can reasonably be expected to do depends on how much progress they have made already. Aristotle's warning not to confuse the ethical mean with the arithmetic mean can serve to illustrate this point. Ten pounds of food is a large daily ration for anybody. Two pounds is very little. Aristotle argues that we should not conclude from this that six pounds is the right ration for everyone. It is a small ration for a champion wrestler like Milo of Croton, but too much for a novice (*NE* 1106b3 ff.). The same applies to how much exercise we – the couch potato, the amateur runner, the Olympic athlete – should do. Or consider playing a musical instrument. A perfect rendition of Bach's partitas is an impossible task for the beginner. After years of patient practice, Hilary Hahn can play them in her sleep. Similarly, even on a suitably demanding conception of ethics, the amount of virtuous activity we can expect depends on the developmental stage of the agent in question. Virtue will appear daunting at first. Kant assumes, controversially perhaps, that everyone can be expected not to violate perfect duty. But the degree of beneficent activity will vary in that a novice on the path to virtue will do less than an ethical Milo who is the ideal. Virtue goes hand in hand with reshaping sensibility under the guidance of reason. It is hardly surprising that this will take – in fact: infinite – time.

Let us dwell for a moment on what happens to the Kantian agent as the internal tension between reason and sensibility eases on the path to perfection.<sup>36</sup> There is, first, negative moral contentment. Being morally content with oneself is not a feeling of pleasure – which would reintroduce the threat of eudaimonism – but increasing detachment from the urges of sensibility and a sense of being fully in charge of one's life (*Critique of Practical Reason*, 5: 117–118). This goes hand in hand with a growing recognition that the commands of duty are indeed one's very own demands, and that what one is doing is genuinely worthwhile. Morality is the human 'ground project'. Secondly, Kant thinks that beneficence in particular will,

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36. It is worth noting that, in the *Groundwork*, Kant rejects (Wolffian) perfectionism as vacuous, not because he considers it too demanding. In fact, he concedes that if he had to choose "between the concept of a moral sense and that of perfection" he would "settle for the latter", since at least it makes morality a matter of pure reason (4: 443.20–24). The argument for immortality in the second *Critique* would get nowhere without the assumption of a duty to be morally perfect.

with time, foster a positive sense of love for those we benefit (*Metaphysics of Morals*, 6: 402.14–16). We will rejoice with them when their condition improves, as a result of our good deeds. In short, a life that is increasingly responsive to the demands of virtue is likely to be fulfilled and flourishing rather than dreary, even if that were the impression a novice might get. And like anything we do well it might be rewarding in the end.<sup>37</sup>

The lesson to be learnt from this is that simple statements like ‘beneficence is too demanding’ need to be relativised to the agent. What is far too demanding for one person may be easy and fulfilling for another. Crucially for Kant, it lies within our power to improve. We do not have to be perfect, let alone produce perfect results (which we cannot do). We just need to do our best (which we can). In this obvious sense Kant’s ethics, however demanding, cannot be said to be *too* demanding. The old adage that practice makes perfect applies to Kantian and Aristotelian ethics alike.<sup>38</sup>

## §9. Conclusion: an asymmetry explained

Kant’s description of the morally good person – as someone who, without a great deal of fuss, responds to moral considerations less virtuous agents decide to ignore – not only matches our everyday moral judgements, it also explains a striking asymmetry.<sup>39</sup> Some human beings do extraordinary things at great cost to themselves, particularly in times of crisis. Moral philosophers often succumb to the temptation to call such acts heroic, saintly or supererogatory – paradigms of morally good actions that cannot be required. Kant breaks ranks. As we have already seen, the passive construction is not very helpful here because agents can make themselves do what others have no right to ask of them.

In fact, they are unlikely to see their exceptional deeds as supererogatory or heroic.<sup>40</sup> A soldier who saves the life of another at great risk to his own will say that he had to help his comrade, that he was just doing his duty or that the other soldier would have done the same thing for him. In other words, what seems optional from the outside perspective of the theorist may well present itself as obligatory from the perspective of the agent; and this is just what Kant’s theory of moral progress predicts, which involves taking obligations of less-

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37. Moreover, a morally good agent can, if Kant is right, hope that sacrifice in this life will be rewarded in another. Belief in a just and kindly God would undermine the overdemandingness objection at one stroke.

38. Overstretching the limits of human nature the only clear standard for what can be considered *overly* demanding; and it should be clear by now that Kant can avoid this charge. Beyond that we are left with vague ‘intuitions’ that likely to be expressions of our own imperfections.

39. According to Kaehler’s notes on moral philosophy, Kant suggests that we ought to judge ourselves more harshly than others (Kaehler ms. 126–127).

40. See Colby et al., 1992: 70. Anne Colby and William Damon report that moral exemplars, as they call them, typically consider perceived risks to be “inevitable companions” of living up to one’s moral standards.

er weight ever more seriously.<sup>41</sup> In this clash of conflicting perspectives, Kant would argue that we should take the side of the practitioner rather than the (non-Kantian) moral theories.<sup>42</sup> If those who do demanding things judge that this is something they have to do, who are we to distrust their judgement? In the final consequence, the so-called overdemandingness objection says much more about the moral condition of the speaker when levelled against Kant's ethics than about the theory criticised.<sup>43</sup>

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41. According to Vigilantius (27: 558.17–24), the importance of the resulting obligation (and our assessment in the case of failure to respond to it, in terms of our distance from moral perfection) depends on the strength that 'grounds of obligation' possess in cases of conflict. Acting contrary to weightier or less weighty reasons one is at fault to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the motivating ground (or reason) that is thereby left unfulfilled.

42. In R 7038, Kant seems to suggest that our active obligations to others are meritorious with regard to them and at the same time owed – though non-enforceable – duties (*schuldige, obzwar nicht zwangspflichten*) to oneself.

43. I am indebted to audiences at Brandeis University, the University of Sussex, the University of St Andrews, Keele University, Radboud University Nijmegen, the University of Münster, Leiden University, Harvard University and the University of Bayreuth. I am particularly indebted to Allen Wood, Onora O'Neill, Marcia Baron, Melissa Seymour Fahmy, Sorin Baiasu, Alix Cohen, Thomas Mertens, Bettina Schöne-Seifert, Michael Quante, Ludwig Siep, Marcel van Ackeren, Martin Sticker, Brian McElwee, Eric Boot, Amelie Rorty, Andreas Teuber, Pauline Kleingeld, Theron Pummer, John Skorupski and my wife, Kate Moran, for comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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