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ON THE VALUE OF ACTING FROM THE MOTIVE OF DUTY

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It has quite reasonably been a source of frustration to sympathetic readers that Kant seems to claim that a dutiful action can have moral worth only if it is done from the motive of duty alone. The apparent consequence of this view—that an action cannot have moral worth if there is supporting inclination or desire—is, at the least, troubling as it judges a grudging or resentfully performed dutiful act morally preferable to a similar act done from affection or with pleasure.

In a recent article,[1] Richard Henson attempts to take the sting out of this view of Kant on moral worth by arguing (i) that attending to the phenomenon of the overdetermination of actions leads one to see that Kant might have had two distinct views of moral worth, only one of which requires the absence of cooperating inclinations, and (ii) that when Kant insists that there is moral worth only when an action is done from the motive of duty alone, he need not also hold that such a state of affairs is morally better, all things considered, than one where supporting inclination is present.

Henson's proposals seem to me both serious and plausible. I do not think that either of his models, in the end, can take on the role Kant assigns to moral worth in the argument of the *Groundwork*. But seeing the ways Henson's account diverges from Kant's makes clearer what Kant intended in his discussion of those actions he credits with moral worth. Most of the traditional difficulties with Kant's views on moral worth come from not seeing the point of that discussion.

I

The overdetermination of actions is a general phenomenon. It is quite common for us to have more than one motive for what

[1] "What Kant Might Have Said: Moral Worth and the Overdetermination of Dutiful Action," *The Philosophical Review*, 88 (1979), 39–54; hereafter cited as "Henson".

we do, and even more than one motive that by itself would be sufficient to produce a particular action. Kant never explicitly discusses overdetermined moral cases, where an action is done from the motive of duty *and* from some other nonmoral motive. Consideration of this possibility suggests to Henson a view of moral worth (he calls it the fitness-report model) according to which a dutiful act would have moral worth "provided that respect for duty was present and would have sufficed by itself [to produce the dutiful act], even though (as it happened) other motives were also present and might themselves have sufficed" (Henson, p. 48). Henson draws this view from the account of duties of virtue in the *Metaphysics of Morals.*

While the fitness-report model of moral worth does not generate the moral unpleasantness of the traditional view (on the fitness-report model, one may enjoy doing what is right), Henson finds that it is not compatible with the account of moral worth in the *Groundwork.* The center of this account, as he sees it, is Kant's insistence that a dutiful act has moral worth "only if respect for duty was the sole motive tending in the direction of the dutiful act" (Henson, p. 48). Henson suggests that this strong requirement be looked at on the model of a battle-citation: praise acknowledging a moral victory against great odds (say, powerful desires tempting one away from duty). If the conditions of action include supporting inclinations, and especially if the inclinations are sufficient by themselves to produce the dutiful act, then there is no great victory, and no reason for praise. And, as Henson remarks, in honoring a person who has struggled morally and won, "we mean of course to encourage others who find themselves in comparable straits: but we emphatically do not mean to encourage anyone to try to *bring about* such situations" (Henson, p. 50) in which this sort of praise is appropriate. It need not be a fault if one *never* earns a battle citation for one's dutiful actions.[2]

[2] The battle-citation metaphor suggests powerful, serious, difficult-to-control conflict. But the metaphor exaggerates the case. Dutiful action from a moral motive in the face of temptation is an ordinary and natural part of moral life. Indeed, the introduction of such conflict would be a necessary part of a moral education if its occurrence was not inevitable.

Henson's two-models approach to moral worth leaves Kant acquitted of the damaging charge that he believes that it is morally desirable not to want to do the action you morally ought to do. The success of this interpretive strategy, however, depends on whether the battle-citation, or even the fitness-report, conception of moral worth fits the account in the *Groundwork*.

Henson draws the *Groundwork* account primarily from Kant's example of the sympathetic man who does what is right (he helps others where he can) because he finds "an inner satisfaction in spreading joy and rejoice(s) in the contentment which [he has] made possible" (G398).[3] Kant says that while such an action is "dutiful and amiable," it has no moral worth. Henson takes his moral from the second stage of the example, where Kant imagines "this friend of man" so overcome by sorrow that he is no longer moved by the needs of others. Kant continues:

> Suppose that, when no longer moved by any inclination, he tears himself out of this deadly insensibility and does the action without any inclination for the sake of duty alone; then for the first time his action has its genuine moral worth. [G398]

The conclusion Henson draws is: "Surely the most obvious way of generalizing from this remark yields the doctrine that only when one acts from duty alone—'without *any* inclination',—does his act have moral worth" (Henson, p. 45). Although this is surely the traditional generalization taken from this passage, it should not be so obvious that it is the appropriate one. *Given* the traditional reading of the sympathy example, Henson provides a striking way out of the moral paradox it seems to produce. But if the text does not support the traditional reading, Henson's efforts may be both unnecessary and distorting.

In order to produce a well-founded interpretation, the first thing we will need to know is: what is the *matter* with doing a dutiful act from a motive other than the motive of duty? And in order to know this, we must look closely at the questions the discussion of moral worth in the *Groundwork* is intended to answer.

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[3] Quotations are from the Paton translation of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*; hereafter cited as "G". The page numbers to the *Groundwork* and the *Second Critique* refer to the Prussian Academy edition numbering.

II

Kant introduces the concept of moral worth in the *Groundwork* as part of the opening account of the good will. The paragraphs that precede its introduction present the two basic facts about the good will: that it is unqualifiedly good (and the only thing that is), and that it is good only because of its willing, and not because of its success in producing effects. With this characterization of the good will, what is needed, Kant says, is "to elucidate the concept of a will estimable in itself and good apart from any further end" (G397). That is, what is needed is to see what good willing looks like. Kant proceeds by taking up

> the concept of duty, which includes that of a good will, exposed, however, to certain subjective limitations and obstacles. These so far from hiding a good will or disguising it, rather bring it out by contrast and make it shine forth more brightly. [G397]

What follows is the discussion of moral worth and the examples of "acting for the sake of duty."

The way the examples are set up suggests that they are offered as cases in which good willing is perspicuous, rather than as the only kinds of cases in which good willing is present or can be known. If this is correct, and it is good willing in an action that "moral worth" honors, we need to see exactly what the "subjective limitations and obstacles" reveal about good willing (and so about moral worth) *before* we can generalize to correct conditions of attribution of moral worth.

Staying with Kant's presentation: the key to good willing is to be found in an examination of the motive someone has in performing a dutiful act *for the sake of duty*. Kant seems to think that what is special about this motive is revealed by contrasting it to *other* motives that, in at least some circumstances, can also lead to dutiful actions. He proceeds by looking at examples of two kinds of action that are "according to duty," but are not performed from the motive of duty, and so are said not to have moral worth: 1) dutiful actions done because they serve the agent's self-interest (the shopkeeper example) and 2) dutiful actions that are just what the agent wants to do—those for which he is said to have an "immediate inclination" or interest (the sympathy, self-preservation, and happiness examples).

The crucial question, obviously, is: *why* is it not possible that these nonmoral motives give dutiful actions moral worth? We will look at the two most famous of Kant's examples to see whether they provide a clue to what Kant thinks is of value in the actions he says have moral worth.

The shopkeeper example. We want to see whether this example makes clear what significant moral difference there is between doing a dutiful action (treating people honestly, giving inexperienced customers the correct change) from the motive of self-interest (or profit) and doing the same action from the motive of duty. One may say: when you do a dutiful action from duty you do it because it is what duty requires; when you do it from self-interest you do it for some other reason. This is hardly wrong. But it is uninformative about *why* doing an action "because it is what duty requires" is of any moral importance.

The details of the example are instructive. The dutiful action is not to overcharge inexperienced customers. When there is considerable competition, Kant points out, it is good business not to overcharge, and so the sensible shopkeeper's business interests *require* him to act honestly in such circumstances. The message is plain: while it is *always* morally correct to serve people honestly (we can assume this for the example), acting from an interest in making a profit will require honest actions in only *some* circumstances—there may be times when honesty is not the best policy.

It seems, then, that the moral fault with the profit motive is that it is unreliable. When it leads to dutiful actions, it does so for circumstantial reasons. The businessman's interest in the dutiful action is controlled by (Kant says: mediated by) his interest in his business, and whether he acts well or not depends on the paths circumstances open for the pursuit of his business goals. This example suggests the need for a motive that will guarantee that the right action will be done. But the sympathy example suggests that this is only part of the story.

The sympathy example.[4] Here is a person who would help others

[4] I consider here only the first part of the sympathy example, as it most clearly addresses the question of the moral value of the moral motive. The reading of the whole example comes after this question is resolved, and we have a clearer sense of what it is for an action to have moral worth. (See pp. 376–78).

from an *immediate* inclination: he helps others because that is what he wants to do; helping others is not the means to some further end he has. In Kant's words, "there are many spirits of so sympathetic a temper that, *without any further motive of vanity or self-interest,* they find an inner pleasure in spreading happiness around them" (G398, emphasis added). Now if, following the shopkeeper example, the issue here is the reliability of the motive (wanting to help others), we have a problem. In the shopkeeper example it seemed plausible to argue that the interest in profit was inadequate as a moral motive[5] because the likelihood of such a motive producing morally correct action was dependent on contingent and changeable circumstances. But here, where the right action is given as helping another, and that is just what the person has an immediate inclination to do, there can be no complaint that this motive will lead to other sorts of action in changed circumstances. But if the motive of sympathy yields right actions, why isn't it judged to be a motive producing actions with moral worth?

Kant says that such an action,

> however right and amiable it might be, has still no genuinely moral worth. It [sic] stands on the same footing as the other inclinations—for example, the inclination for honor, which if fortunate to hit on something beneficial and right and consequently honorable, deserves praise and encouragement, but not esteem; for its maxim lacks moral content, namely, the performance of such actions, not from inclination, but *from duty.* [G398]

The inclination for honor is criticized two ways: it is described as only "fortunate" to hit on something right; and the maxim of the action it prompts is said to lack moral content. Is the motive of sympathy only fortunate when it hits on a right action? Doesn't it necessarily prompt a person to help others? Suppose I see someone struggling, late at night, with a heavy burden at the back door of the Museum of Fine Arts. Because of my sympathetic temper I feel the immediate inclination to help him out . . . We need not

[5] "The moral motive" and "the motive of duty" I use interchangeably. In asking whether something could be "*a* moral motive" I am asking whether it could be a motive that gives an action moral worth.

pursue the example to see its point: the class of actions that follow from the inclination to help others is not a subset of the class of right or dutiful actions.

In acting from immediate inclination, the agent is not concerned with whether his action is morally correct or required. That is why he acts no differently, and, in a sense, no better, when he saves a drowning child than when he helps the art thief. Of course we are happier to see the child saved, and indeed, might well prefer to live in a community of sympathetic persons to most others, but the issue remains. The man of sympathetic temper, while concerned with others, is indifferent to morality. In Kant's language, the maxim of his action—the subjective principle on which the agent acts—has no moral content. If we suppose that the *only* motive the agent has is the desire to help others, then we are imagining someone who would not be concerned with or deterred by the fact that his action is morally wrong. And correspondingly, the moral rightness of an action is no part of what brings him to act.

On this reading of the sympathy example it would seem that Kant did not reject such emotions as moral motives because they could not be steady and strong, or because they were essentially partial.[6] Even if, for example, sympathy could be strengthened to the force of habit, and trained (as Hume suggests) toward impartial response, it would still generate morally correct actions only by accident. For while sympathy can give an interest in an action that is (as it happens) right, it cannot give an interest in its being right.[7]

We said of the shopkeeper example that the person's motive was to make a profit, and so his hitting upon a right action was also, in this way, a matter of luck. The economic circumstances

[6] A sharply argued version of this criticism can be found in Bernard Williams' "Morality and the Emotions," in his *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 226–28.

[7] Whether *any* emotion could give an agent a moral interest in an action is a question that must look first to an account of the emotions (of what it is to say of a motive that it is an emotion). For Kant, the answer is clearly no, as he holds that no emotion or inclination can make the moral law the determining ground of the will, since they determine the will according to the principle of happiness. (See the *Second Critique,* pp. 92–93, and G401n.) My thanks to the referee for reminding me of this important passage in the *Second Critique.*

that happened to prevail required honest actions as the necessary means to business ends. So in this example, too, the denial of moral worth to an action is intended to mark the absence of interest in the morality of the action: that the shopkeeper's action was morally correct and required was not a matter of concern to him.

This suggests a more general thesis. Even if social institutions were arranged to guarantee that profit and honesty went together (through penalties, social sanctions, etc.), the performance of honest actions, so motivated, would still be no more than "fortunate": that is, dependent on external and contingent circumstances. Maximizing the number of honest transactions is not what moral worth looks to. And a concern with moral worth will not encourage the social manipulation of circumstances so that people just find themselves doing what is right.

What can we conclude? This reading of the two examples does not (and is not intended to) give us an account of what moral worth is, or a clear idea of the conditions for its correct attribution. It does suggest why Kant thought that there was something the matter with a dutiful action performed from a nonmoral motive: Nonmoral motives may well lead to dutiful actions, and may do this with any degree of regularity desired. The problem is that the dutiful actions are the product of a fortuitous alignment of motives and circumstances. People who act according to duty from such motives may nonetheless remain morally indifferent.

Taking the limits of nonmoral motives as a guide, we can introduce a minimal claim. For a motive to be a moral motive, it must provide the agent with an interest in the moral rightness of his actions. And when we say that an action has moral worth, we mean to indicate (at the very least) that the agent acted dutifully from an interest in the rightness of his action: an interest that therefore makes its being a right action the nonaccidental effect of the agent's concern.

III

If we now see why a dutiful action does not have moral worth when done from a nonmoral motive alone, what can we say of the

dutiful actions that *are* done from the motive of duty where the agent *also* has nonmoral interests in the action. That is, can the minimal account so far given of moral worth and the motive of duty deal with the problem of overdetermined actions?

Henson argues that overdetermined actions *can* have moral worth when judgments of moral worth are understood to be assessments of the agent's moral fitness at the time of the action. So long as the motive is sufficient by itself to produce the dutiful action, it does not matter that there are cooperating nonmoral motives present. What it means for the moral motive to be "sufficient by itself" is left unclear. There are two likely readings. It could mean sufficient if alone—that is, cooperating motives were not needed to bring about the dutiful action. Or, it might be a stronger condition: if at the time of the action the agent had some conflicting motives, the moral motive was capable of bringing about the dutiful action without the aid of cooperating motives. That neither of these will support a satisfactory account of moral worth can be seen by looking at a feature of overdetermined actions that Henson does not consider.

Henson's account is concerned with cases where what is given is cooperation between moral and nonmoral motives. But what are the conditions of this cooperation? For the most part two motives will cooperate to produce the same action only by accident.[8] As circumstances change, we may expect the actions the two motives require to be different and, at times, incompatible. Then, on either reading of sufficient moral motive, an agent judged morally fit might not have a moral motive capable of producing a required action "by itself" if his *presently* cooperating nonmoral motives were, instead, in conflict with the moral motive.[9] That is, an agent with what Henson calls a sufficient moral motive could, in different circumstances, act contrary to duty, from the *same* configuration of moral and nonmoral motives that in felicitous circumstances led him to act morally.

[8] Part of the task of moral education is to shape a person's character so that the alignment of moral and nonmoral motives can be depended upon.

[9] The weaker version may not yield a dutiful action in the presence of any conflicting motive. The stronger version takes care of only motives that in fact conflict with the moral motive at the time of the action. It is not set up to deal with motives that *might have* produced conflict.

Consider a shopkeeper whose honest actions are overdetermined. According to Henson's fitness criterion, a morally fit shopkeeper will perform honest actions even if the profit motive is absent. But the fact that the moral motive was sufficient by itself in the overdetermined case does not imply that he would perform honest actions when the profit motive clearly indicated that he should *not* act honestly. What does this tell us? Looking at the possible outcome of the original configuration of motives in altered circumstances introduces the suspicion that it might have been an accident that the agent acted as duty required in the *first* case: the cause of his dutiful action might have rested on the cooperation of the profit motive. To say that an action had moral worth we need to know that it was no accident that the agent acted as duty required.

There are two paths that can be taken here. (1) If the moral motive would have prevailed in altered circumstances (where the presently cooperating nonmoral motive instead indicated some other, incompatible, course of action), then the success of the moral motive was not dependent on the accident of circumstances that produced cooperation rather than conflict. This suggests a move to a greater-strength interpretation of sufficiency. While it solves the problem with the fitness model, it would pose a serious difficulty to Henson's argument for two models of moral worth.

On a greater-strength interpretation of the fitness model, an action can have moral worth only if the moral motive is strong enough to prevail over the other inclinations—without concern for whether they in fact cooperate or conflict. Henson's battle-citation model of moral worth differs only in that the moral motive has had to prevail. We do give different praise to the man who we know would be courageous than we do to the man who is (though why we do is a matter of some puzzlement), but there is no difference in the structure and strength of the two men's motives. Henson is right to point out that it is not morally desirable to be in circumstances where the moral motive has to win out, and so we are under no moral requirement to put ourselves in situations where we will earn such praise. But it is hardly plausible to see this difference in praise marking a distinct notion of moral worth—since there is no difference in moral motive in the

two cases. The only difference is in the accident of cooperation or opposition of the nonmoral motives in the presence of an overpowering moral motive. A greater-strength interpretation of sufficiency would then undermine the claim that there were *two* notions of moral worth in Kant, and leave us with just the battle-citation model's powerful moral motive.

There are more substantive questions raised by a shift to a greater-strength interpretation of sufficiency, however. It is not at all clear that we should require of the moral motive that it be stronger or be able to prevail in altered circumstances in order to attribute moral worth to a given action. Even if circumstances tomorrow are such that the alignment of moral and nonmoral motives breaks down, and the dutiful action is as a result not done, it is surely possible that the dutiful action that *is* done today, when the motives are aligned, has moral worth.[10] (In much the same way, succumbing to temptation only *raises* a question about motives in past cases.) Moral worth is not equivalent to moral virtue.

The problem is this: The experiment of imagining altered circumstances while holding a given configuration of moral and nonmoral motives fixed suggests that a dutiful action's being performed may be an accident of circumstances even with the presence of a sufficient moral motive (in Henson's original sense). If it seems reasonable to credit an action with moral worth only if its performance does not depend on an accident of circumstances, it seems equally reasonable to allow that failure in different circumstances does not require denial of moral worth to the original performance. With strength its only variable, the sufficiency account cannot satisfy both reasonable requirements.

(2) Both conditions can be met if we require that the configuration of moral and nonmoral motives be such that in acting dutifully it is the moral motive itself on which the agent acted. When this configuration holds we *can* say that it was no accident that the dutiful action was done, as it was just the agent's concern to act as duty required that determined his acting as he did. In different circumstances, if the configuration remains the same, the agent will again act dutifully. If he does not, it can only be from a

[10] I am indebted to the referee for bringing out the importance of this objection.

different configuration of motives—one in which he is acting from some motive other than the motive of duty. But this failure to act dutifully would provide no reason to discredit the dutiful action in the original case. Thus the difficulties that emerge with the notion of sufficiency support a literal reading of Kant's requirement that dutiful actions be done *from* the motive of duty: the presence of a moral motive sufficient to produce the dutiful action does not show that the interest that in fact determined the action was a moral one.

Henson does suggest such an account as a third alternative to his fitness and battle-citation models of moral worth (Henson, p. 44), but rejects it because he believes that there are no adequate criteria for deciding the factual question of which of a number of available motives an agent actually acted on.

Suppose we couldn't find adequate criteria to decide which of two sufficient motives an agent acted on. I can't see why this should matter, unless the very idea of having two sufficient motives but acting on only one of them is incoherent. But it clearly is part of the moral data of our lives that we sometimes need to insist that a motive was present in us but not acted on. Unless this were so there would be little room for moral insincerity.

Moreover, the fact that we may be unable to tell which motive we have acted on indicates just the condition Kant thinks we are in:

> after the keenest self-examination we find nothing that without the moral motive of duty could have been strong enough to move us to this or that good action . . . ; but we cannot infer from this with certainty that it is not some secret impulse of self love which has actually . . . been the cause genuinely determining our will. [G407]

If we could have *no idea* of which motive we acted on, then the third alternative could not provide an account of moral worth. But Kant says only that we can never be certain. That sort of failure no more undermines our ability to judge the motives we have acted on than skeptical arguments undermine our ordinary judgments about ordinary objects.

Direct support for the third alternative can be found in the

Second Critique (pp. 92–93),[11] where Kant denies any necessary opposition between moral and nonmoral motives and claims that there is no moral requirement "that we should renounce the claims to happiness." What is required is that whenever duty is in question, we take no account of the nonmoral motives present. For an action to have moral worth, the nonmoral motives (which are empirical and therefore belong to the principle of happiness, not the moral law) "must be separated from the supreme practical principle and never be incorporated with it as a condition." That is, when an action has moral worth, nonmoral motives may be present, but they may not be what moves the agent to act.

One might object that even on this account of moral worth it remains a matter of luck or accident that an agent acted in a morally worthy way. The strength of competing inclinations, the presence of circumstances that evoke competition, the strength of the moral motive itself may be affected by chance. The effect of chance, however, is on *who* is able to act in a morally worthy way. It poses a distributive problem that belongs to the theory of moral virtue and not to moral worth. It is *actions* and not agents that are credited with moral worth.[12] And although it may be a matter of luck *whose* actions have moral worth, what moral worth expresses is the relation of a motive to an action (through its maxim). When an agent does act dutifully from the motive of duty, when his maxim of action has moral content, it is not a matter of luck that the *action* has moral worth.

IV

The scope of the motive of duty is not restricted to morally worthy actions. It applies as well to actions that are merely correct or permissible: actions whose maxims satisfy the conditions set

[11] See also G400–01 and *Theory and Practice* Ak. viii pp. 278–79.

[12] This may not seem so clear, for the moral worth of an action is said to be in its maxim (G399): the expression (in rule form) of an agent's volition (what the agent is moved to do and for what reason). Thus there is a sense in which moral worth *is* about agents—it is about their willings. The point of saying that it is actions that are credited with moral worth is to highlight the relationship between *an* action and *its* motive (via the action's maxim), which is where moral worth resides (and not in the permanent structure of an agent's motives: that is the matter of virtue (see *The Doctrine of Virtue*, tr. Mary J. Gregor, p. 46)).

by the categorical imperative. Since it is possible to act in accordance with duty, but not from duty, it is obviously possible to have a morally correct action and only a nonmoral motive for acting on it. But for an action not required by duty, what can the moral motive add when the maxim already passes the categorical imperative's tests?

Our discussion of why *dutiful* actions should be done from the motive of duty suggests an answer: in acting from the motive of duty the agent sets himself to abide by the moral assessment of his proposed actions. Suppose you have something you want (for whatever reason) to do. What the motive of duty provides is a commitment to do what you want only if the maxim of your action is judged morally satisfactory.[13] If it does pass the test, you are free to act, and the motive of duty as well as your original motive is satisfied. The difference introduced by the motive of duty is that one would *not* have acted on the original (nonmoral) motive had the maxim of action it prompted been morally unsatisfactory (failed the categorical imperative).

This aspect of the motive of duty fits a general pattern of motives that do not themselves have an object (in the ordinary way), but rather set limits to the ways (and whether) *other motives* may be acted upon. For example, a concern for economy is a motive that, by itself, does not normally lead one to do anything. It leads one to consider whether something that is wanted for other reasons is also a good value. That is, the motive to economy does not have a role to play unless there is already another motive to action present. Then it says to act as you plan to only if what

[13] Motives other than the motive of duty can appear to produce this result: someone might believe that the road to salvation lies in satisfying the categorical imperative. This is a case that differs from one where the motive of duty prompts obedience to the categorical imperative *only* in its motive: the end (satisfying the categorical imperative), and so the actions taken, will be the same. That is, the difference is in the nature of the agent's attachment to his end. In the one case, Kant could argue, it is the realization through the categorical imperative of the agent's dignity as a rational being; in the other, the attachment to the categorical imperative depends on a desire to be saved. Giving up the idea of an afterlife might require that such a person remotivate his attachment to morality. The attachment to the categorical imperative that comes from the motive of duty does not depend on the maintenance of such extramoral beliefs (although such beliefs may be needed to reinforce the moral commitment).

you would do is economical (as well as whatever else it is). If there is conflict between my desire for something and my more general concern for economy, that does not indicate what I will do: motives like that for economy may be easily (and sometimes appropriately) set aside for the satisfaction of other desires. (We often experience this as a kind of quasi-moral guilt; sometimes it is a release from inhibition.)

Following Kant, let us say that such motives provide *limiting conditions* on what may be done from other motives (usually primary, or initiating, motives).[14] Cooperation is then seen as the case in which the limiting condition sanctions acting on the primary motive; it does not merely, and independently, push along with it. Similarly, conflict does not consist in opposing tugs, but in the action suiting the primary motive failing to satisfy the limiting condition. What, in the end, will be done, does involve an issue of strength. But the strength metaphor alone masks the complexity of the interaction.

When the motive of duty functions as a limiting condition, there is no lessening of the agent's moral commitment if he acts from the motive of duty *and* nonmoral motives, so long as the motive of duty is effective: its satisfaction is decisive in the agent's going on with his proposed action. Rather than posing a moral obstacle, the nonmoral motive is in most cases necessary if the motive of duty (as a limiting condition) is to have an object of interest. As Kant sees it, moral deliberation characteristically begins with a nonmoral interest or motive that prompts consideration of an appropriate course of action.[15] Ordinary moral life is embedded in desires for ordinary things, desires that lead to different kinds of action in different circumstances. My need for money may send me to the bank, to work, or to a deceitful

[14] A primary motive is one that can, by itself, produce action. Limiting conditions may also be directed at other limiting conditions—lexically, or in some other structure (with or without conflict among them). Insofar as a motive functions as a limiting condition, all it can require is that the actions prompted by *other* motives satisfy its condition.

[15] This is clear in the way he presents instances of moral deliberation. For example: "[A person] finds himself driven to borrow money because of need. He well knows that he will not be able to pay it back; but he sees too that he will get no loan unless he gives a firm promise to pay it back . . . He is inclined to make such a promise; but he still has enough conscience to ask 'Is it not unlawful and contrary to duty to get out of difficulties in this way?' " (G422)

promise, depending on the situation in which I must act to meet my need. Whether I will be tempted to act in a morally impermissible way will likewise depend on contingent and variable circumstances. If we follow Kant, it is what happens next that is the crucial moment for the moral agent. Once I am aware of what I want to do, I must consider whether it is morally permissible. If I have an effective motive of duty, I will act only when I determine that it is. I then act in the presence of more than one motive, satisfying both my nonmoral desire *and* the motive of duty. This is the normal state of affairs for someone with a sincere interest in doing what is right.[16]

Although as a limiting condition the motive of duty can enter only when there is a proposed course of action based on another motive, it is unlike many other motives that impose limiting conditions since it can, by itself, move an agent to act. The clearest case of this is, of course, in morally worthy actions. There are also certain kinds of action that cannot be done at all unless done from the motive of duty (as a primary motive). For example, not every act of bringing aid is a beneficent act. It is beneficent only if the agent conceives of what he is doing as an instance of what *any* moral agent is required to do when he can help another, and acts to help for that reason. For Kant, only the motive of duty could prompt someone to act on a maxim with such content—for no other motive responds to a conception of action that regards the agent himself impersonally or is impartial in its application.

The motive of duty cannot, by itself (as a primary motive), prompt merely permissible actions, for it is, by definition, a matter of moral indifference whether they are performed. (We might say, with Kant, that the maxims of permissible actions have no moral content.) The role of the motive of duty here can only be in the background, as an effective limiting condition, requiring that the agent not act contrary to duty. If the agent loses interest in his proposed course of action, the motive of duty can have nothing to say about what he should do until another course of action is proposed (other things morally equal). In other

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[16] Such actions can be described as overdetermined in the sense that they satisfy more than one motive. They are not overdetermined in Henson's sense, where each motive must be sufficient by itself to produce the action.

words, permissible actions *cannot* be done "from the motive of duty." Therefore, merely permissible actions, even when they are performed on the condition that they are permissible (that is, even when the motive of duty is effective as a limiting condition in them), cannot have moral worth.[17]

For an action to be a *candidate* for moral worth, it must make a moral difference whether it is performed. (Only then is it even possible for the action to be done from the motive of duty.) For an action to *have* moral worth, moral considerations must determine how the agent conceives of his action (he understands his action to be what morality requires), and this conception of his action must then determine what he does. (It is when this condition is satisfied that a maxim of action has moral content.[18]) That is, an action has moral worth if it is required by duty and has as its primary motive the motive of duty. The motive of duty need not reflect the only interest the agent has in the action (or its effect); it must, however, be the interest that determines the agent's acting as he did.

Earlier we noted that the discussion of moral worth was introduced by Kant to illuminate the nature of good willing (good of itself, without regard to any further end). Now we can see why good willing is found in actions that have moral worth: in them, the

[17] One might want to say that in permitting myself to act only when and because my maxim satisfies the categorical imperative I *am* doing an action that has moral worth, since it is done from the motive of duty. But it is the permitting and not the action permitted that would have moral worth. (In permitting myself another glass of wine I am not acting on the same motive I will be acting on when I drink it.) Since it is not clear to me how there can be a *duty* to act on maxims that satisfy the categorical imperative (the categorical imperative tells you what your duty is), I would rather treat the permitting as acting on the moral motive in its limiting condition function, thereby indicating an attitude of virtue rather than moral worth.

[18] Thus a dutiful action performed on the condition that it is permissible (that is, from the motive of duty as a limiting condition only), will not have moral worth, even if it is no accident of circumstances that the dutiful action is done. Its not being an accident is only a necessary condition for moral worth. In the case of a perfect duty, for example, only those maxims of inclination that include the required action will be permissible (G401n). So an agent with a policy of never acting impermissibly will (nonaccidentally) act as perfect duty requires. When inclination and duty coincide, however, he may act with no other conception of his action than as a permissible means of satisfying inclination. That is, he may act dutifully, with no sense that his action is required, from a maxim that has no moral content.

agent need not be concerned with anything other than the morality of what he does in order to have sufficient motive to act. If the maxim of an action is an expression of an agent's will in acting, to say that the maxim of a dutiful action done from the motive of duty has moral content is to say of the agent's will that it is ultimately determined by "that preeminent good which we call moral" (G401).

It is clear that the role of the motive of duty is considerably more extensive than the illustrative examples in the *Groundwork* might lead one to believe. This is especially important as we get some idea from it of what kind of moral cast is given to ordinary action in the theory. Although we should never act contrary to duty, the function of the motive of duty is not to press constantly for *more* dutiful actions, or to get us to see the most trivial actions as occasions for virtue: rather it is to keep us free of the effects of temptations in ordinary situations that can suggest morally prohibited courses of action. It is only in its function as a primary motive that one acts *from* the motive of duty at all, and only those actions that are required (by the categorical imperative) *can* have the motive of duty as a primary motive. As a limiting condition, the motive of duty can be present in (or satisfied by) an action, and yet that action have no moral import. Thus we can preserve the sense in which, for Kant, the motive of duty is ubiquitous—governing all our actions—without having to accept the view that all of our actions must be seen as matters of duty.

V

At this point we need to return to the sympathy example to see how our account of moral worth and the moral motive fares interpretively. That is, we want, in its terms, an analysis of the value of acting with moral worth that satisfactorily explains Kant's assertion that only the action done from the motive of duty alone has moral worth.

Earlier (pp. 363–365) we suggested that the problem with the natural motive of sympathy is that the interest it gives an agent in his action is not a moral interest. The man of sympathetic temper is one whose helpful actions, however steady and genuinely beneficial, are motivated by his natural response to the

plight of others. He acts because he is, literally, moved by others' distress. There need be no moral component in his conception of what he does. Therefore, nothing in what motivates him would prevent his acting in a morally impermissible way if that were helpful to others, and it is to be regarded as a bit of good luck that he happens to have the inclination to act as morality requires.[19] What is missing is an effective and motivating moral interest in his action: the source of the action is not the moral motive itself (he is not acting beneficently), nor is he committed to refraining from helpful actions that are not permissible. That is to say, his action neither has moral worth nor indicates an attitude of virtue.

If the moral motive *is* effective and motivating, it would seem that the presence of a nonmoral motive should have no effect on the action's moral worth. That is, even if the moral motive expresses but *one* kind of interest that the agent has in the helpful action, so long as it is the moral motive the agent acts on, the action should have moral worth. Indeed, what is morally valuable in actions judged to have moral worth seems prominently displayed in cases of this type: the dutiful act is chosen without concern for its satisfying other motives the agent may have.

What, then, can we make of Kant's supposed insistence that only when there is no natural inclination to help can the helping action have moral worth? The key to the sympathy example is found in attending to the fact that it describes the moral situation of the *same man* in two different circumstances: the "friend of man," no longer moved by the needs of others, is the man of sympathetic temper with whom the discussion begins. Straightaway we should ask why Kant would think *this* change of circumstances for *this* man is revelatory. At the least, the emphasis on an individual should make us cautious about how we generalize from the case.

Let us follow Kant. The first part of the sympathy example looks at the helping act of the man of sympathetic temper. We

[19] One might, of course, cultivate an inclination because of its recognized moral utility. In the *Doctrine of Virtue* (p. 125), Kant distinguishes between what we might call "natural" and "moral" sympathy: the latter appears to be the moral motive making use of our natural propensity to care about the welfare of others to promote "active and rational benevolence." The message for us is in the clear subordination of the natural to the moral motive. We are not morally better off without natural sympathy.

concluded that there is good reason to find moral fault in the dutiful action done from inclination alone. Kant says that this action has no moral worth. In the second part of the example, we are to suppose that things change for the man, and his natural concern for others becomes ineffective. We need not imagine that his character changes—he is still a man of sympathetic temper; changed circumstances have called forth other, more powerful inclinations, which have made him unable to feel for others, or disinclined to concern himself on their behalf. Looking to inclination *alone* for motivation, then, he cannot act to help. Kant supposes that he does act in the face of this "deadly insensibility," from the motive of duty. That such an action is judged to have moral worth is in no way problematic. What has seemed unwarranted is the claim that in acting "without any inclination—then for the first time the action has its genuine moral worth." And it would be if it were an instance of the generalization "only when there is no inclination to a dutiful action can it have moral worth." We come to a quite different conclusion, however, if we see the passage as a set of remarks about one (kind of) person, a man of sympathetic temper who normally helps others because he is stirred by their need, but sometimes when his feelings are dimmed, helps them because that is what duty requires. Of *him* it is then said: only when the inclination to help others is not available does *his* helping action have moral worth. For of him it was true that when he acted with inclination he did not also act from the motive of duty. This does not imply that no dutiful action can have moral worth if there is cooperating inclination. Nor does it imply that a sympathetic man could not act from the motive of duty when his sympathy was aroused. The account is of a kind of temperament we are tempted to value morally, designed to show how even dutiful actions done from apparently attractive motives might yet be morally wanting.

We should expect confirmation of this interpretation in the other examples Kant offers in this section, and it will be worth reminding ourselves of their detail to see it.[20] Immediately after

[20] It is unfortunate that such exclusive attention has been lavished on the sympathy example, for it is difficult to see its point given the obvious attractiveness of the kind of person it criticizes. The striking similarity of detail in

the shopkeeper example, which describes an action "done neither from duty nor from immediate inclination," Kant considers the duty of self-preservation:

> ... to preserve one's life is a duty, and besides this everyone has also an immediate inclination to do so. But on account of this the often anxious precautions taken by the greater part of mankind for this purpose have no inner worth, and the maxim of their action is without moral content. They do protect their lives in conformity with duty, but not from the motive of duty. When on the contrary, disappointments and hopeless misery have quite taken away the taste for life; when a wretched man, strong in soul and more angered at his fate than fainthearted or cast down, longs for death and still preserves his life without loving it—not from inclination or fear but from duty; then indeed his maxim has a moral content. [G397–98]

I think that one reads this as *obviously* supporting the "no-inclination" generalization only by ignoring what Kant seems to be taking elaborate pains to say. That is: most of the time people act to preserve their lives with no regard to its being a duty (and often with no regard to morality at all), simply because they have an inclination to self-preservation. This seems true enough. *If* it is a duty to preserve one's life, then Kant would surely be right in saying that most self-preserving acts have no moral worth. Here, as before, we could point to a lack of interest in the morality of such actions. There is a willingness, from the point of view of the inclination to self-preservation, to act in a morally impermissible way; and with the absence of such inclination, "when disappointments and hopeless misery have quite taken away the taste for life," no reason remains to preserve the life no longer cared about. The conclusion is that actions motivated by the inclination to self-preservation alone have no moral worth. And since, as a matter of fact, most self-preserving actions come from this source, "the often anxious precautions taken by the greater part of mankind for this purpose have no inner worth."

Now the contrast. We imagine a person who normally acts to

the self-preservation and happiness examples is easily overlooked once one is convinced that Kant has made the "if inclination, no moral worth" argument in the sympathy case.

preserve his life because he wants to keep living. Circumstances change, his "taste for life" is gone; death appears as a more attractive alternative to continued life.[21] If inclination were all that now prompted his actions, what once led him to self-preserving actions would now lead him to act contrary to duty. He then acts to preserve his life from the motive of duty; *that* self-preserving action has moral worth. The conclusion: for most of us, most of the time, self-preserving actions stem from inclination alone and have no moral worth. Sometimes, some people, when they have no inclination to preserve their lives, may yet do so from the motive of duty. For such a person, only then, and for the first time, would his self-preserving action have moral worth. Nothing in this account speaks against the possibility of an action with more than one motive having moral worth. As with the sympathy example, what is being examined is the dutiful act done from immediate inclination *alone*. The point of the discussion is to reveal what is added, morally, when a person acts from the motive of duty. It is easier to see what is added when all inclination is taken away.[22]

We can see this structure of argument again in Kant's discussion of the indirect duty we have to promote our happiness.[23] He begins with the observation that the motive for most of the actions that conform to this duty is the ordinary desire to be happy ("the universal inclination towards happiness"). Such actions, plainly,

[21] There is surprising subtlety in this example. Why, one might wonder, does Kant insist on someone "strong in soul" and angered by his fate, rather than someone depressed or weak? Is it that a weaker person might turn to morality as a comfort? Or, perhaps, he is interested in cases where the choice against morality seems strongest, most rational. The resolution of this does not affect the larger interpretive question. The presence and the quality of the detail does suggest a kind of concern with a particular type of case that should quickly warn one off easy and large generalizations.

[22] Beck notes that when Kant discusses the use of examples in the *Second Critique* (pp. 92-93) he compares himself to a chemist separating a compound (of motives) into its elements: Kant's purpose in using cases that present conflict between moral and nonmoral motives is merely to precipitate the motive of duty, and not to present conflict as a condition for moral worth. (Lewis W. Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* (Chicago, 1960), p. 120n) My thanks to the referee of this paper for bringing Beck's remarks to my attention.

[23] This example follows directly after the sympathy example; the self-preservation example preceded it.

have no moral worth. As with the sympathy and self-preservation examples, the argument looks at the actions of a particular man (in this case someone suffering from gout), whose altered circumstances direct an inclination that ordinarily conforms to duty away from it. The gout sufferer is in the odd situation where he cannot act according to the (indirect) duty to promote his own happiness unless he acts from the motive of duty. This is so because the inclination towards happiness *in him*, in his special circumstances, is distracted by present pleasure, when, for the sake of happiness, he ought to abstain, and seek good health. If he follows inclination, *in these circumstances,* he will act contrary to duty, although ordinarily he would not. (Pleasure and happiness frequently coincide.) Kant concludes that when the gout sufferer acts to promote his happiness from the motive of duty (choosing health over pleasure), "for the first time his conduct has a real moral worth." Here again, the example directs us to refrain from giving moral value to inclination, however likely it is to promote dutiful actions, because of the accidental nature of the connection between *any* inclination and duty. When the inclination alone prompts a morally correct action there is no moral worth, because in Kant's terms, there is no moral content or interest in the volition (maxim). Nothing in the example forces the reading that it is the mere *presence* of the inclination that is responsible for the denial of moral worth. The moral failure is seen when, in the absence of the motive of duty, and so of a moral interest in the action, circumstances may be such that inclination alone gives the agent no reason to do the dutiful action. Indeed, in acting from inclination alone, the agent *never had* a reason to do what morality required.

What can be said in summary about these three examples? They concern men motivated to dutiful actions by different kinds of inclination.[24] Exactly what normally motivates their acting according to duty leads them to act impermissibly when changed circumstances direct the inclination to something other than a dutiful action. It is said of *these* men that their dutiful actions

[24] Each of the examples deals with a different category of inclination: the inclination to self-preservation is an instinct; a sympathetic temper is a natural (to human beings) disposition; the desire for happiness is based on an empirically determined Idea.

have moral worth only when, in the altered circumstances (where inclination does not in fact support a dutiful action), they nonetheless act, from the motive of duty alone. Then, for the first time, they show a moral interest in their action. For it is only then that they act from the motive of duty at all. If there is any obvious generalization to be taken from these cases, it has to do with the moral inadequacy of nonmoral motives.

If an agent does not have an independently effective and motivating moral interest in an action, although he may act as duty requires, there remains a dependence on nonmoral interests that compromises his ability to act morally. One need not be indifferent to the possible satisfactions that a dutiful action may produce. It is just that the presence of such possibilities should not be the ground of the agent's commitment to acting morally. Overdetermined actions *can* have moral worth so long as the moral motive has priority over the satisfaction of inclination. Morality is not to be merely one of the things, among others, in which we have an interest.

The fault in Henson's analysis is not in his attention to overdetermination, but in his failure to see that overdetermination is not a simple phenomenon. The interaction of motives tending toward the same action can be complex and highly structured. Henson's notion of moral fitness ignores the relationship between the motive of duty and the nonmoral motives that is at the heart of Kant's account of moral worth.

When someone acts from an effective and primary moral motive, it could well be said that such a person is morally fit. But the nature of this fitness includes more than the presence of a moral motive sufficient to produce a dutiful action. It expresses a kind of independence from circumstances and need, such that in acting from the motive of duty, we are, as Kant saw it, free.[25]

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