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Kant's Conception of Moral Strength

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Abstract

Most scholars assume that Kantian moral strength is needed only when it comes to following maxims. However, accounts based on this assumption can be challenged by Kant's claim that virtue, as moral strength of the human will, can never become a habit because its maxims must be freely adopted in new situations. Even some accounts that are not based on this assumption fail to meet this challenge. By drawing on my interpretation of the Kantian capacity for self-control, I propose a twofold account of moral strength that can accommodate Kant's point that maxims of virtue must always be freely adopted.

Keywords: Moral strength; virtue; moral ends; maxim; habit; self-control; moral feeling; sympathy

1. Introduction

Kant's notion of moral strength is central to his understanding of virtue. Kant argues that virtue signifies "a moral strength of the human will [*eine moralische Stärke des Willens*]" (MM 6:405) and that it can be understood as a continuous process of acquiring moral strength (6:397).¹ Moreover, he defines virtue as "the moral strength of a *human being's* will in fulfilling his duty" (6:405), as "the strength of a human being's maxims in fulfilling his duty" (6:394), and as "the strength of intention [*die Stärke des Vorsatzes*]" (6:390).² Finally, even those definitions of virtue in which he does not mention the term "strength" seem to presuppose the idea that we must "acquire [*erwerben*]" moral strength (6:397). Consider, for instance, Kant's claim that virtue is "moral disposition in struggle" (C2 5:84) and moral self-constraint (MM 6:381–83).

Kant's conception of moral strength remains elusive, however. How are we precisely to understand the strength of our maxims in fulfilling (*Befolgung*) our duties? Is it here implied that we need moral strength only when it comes to following our moral maxims and realizing moral

¹References are to *Kants gesammelte Schriften*. Ausgabe der Preussischen (later Deutschen) Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berlin: Georg Reimer, subsequently Walter de Gruyter, 1900–. Except where indicated otherwise, translations are based on the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, eds. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992–. References to Kant's works are given using the following abbreviation scheme: A = *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*; C = *Conflict of the Faculties*; C2 = *Critique of Practical Reason*; C3 = *Critique of the Power of Judgment*; G = *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*; LE = *Lectures on Ethics*; LM = *Lectures on Metaphysics*; MM = *Metaphysics of Morals*; R = *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*; TP = *On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, but It Is of No Use in Practice*.

²See also A 7:147; MM 6:392, 447; LE 27:456, 465, 492, 570–71, 662. In the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, *Vorsatz* is usually translated as "resolution" and "intention." In my opinion, both terms capture Kant's points regarding virtue. I shall use "intention"; it seems that by the strength of intention Kant has in mind a kind of sticking to our general commitment to the moral law by *renewing* our more general moral intention (*Absicht*) in new situations.

ends?³ Or is moral strength also required in the process of adopting maxims and setting ourselves moral ends? Although crucial for attaining a fuller understanding of Kant's conception of virtue, these questions have not been explicitly addressed in the secondary literature thus far.

I do not seek to give a detailed account of Kant's notion of a maxim here. Generally, I side with the idea that maxims are arranged hierarchically—a model proposed, for example, by Henry Allison (1990). It is not necessary to view more specific maxims as completely separate from more general ones, our underlying maxims. On my view, we need not draw a very sharp distinction between particular and underlying maxims, because it is through freely adopting the particular maxims of virtue (*Tugendmaximen*) that we cultivate their deep motivating subjective ground, or our disposition.⁴ Kant gives us reason to claim that the subjective motivating ground of our specific maxims is our virtuous disposition (*Tugendgesinnung*), which we cultivate through the continuous renewal of our general commitment to the moral law by purifying our incentives in different situations (MM 6:387; R 6:21–22). As will become clear, my point is that such renewal requires moral strength.

Most Kant scholars seem to assume that we need moral strength only when it comes to following already established maxims. There is some textual evidence in support of this interpretation, but it has its own pitfalls. It easily leads to acceptance of the controversial point that Kantian virtue is chiefly about compelling ourselves to perform certain actions. Furthermore, the point that moral strength is merely necessary when it comes to following fully established maxims makes it hard to make sense of Kant's link between moral strength and his insistence that the maxims of virtue, which must be freely adopted, are in an unending progression (A 7:147; MM 6:409; C2 5:32–33).

There are also accounts of virtue as moral strength which fare better in this regard because they do not seem to be based on the assumption that moral strength can only be expressed at the level of maxim observation. An example of this is Jeanine Grenberg's (2010) account, but even this does not fully clarify how moral strength might be necessary for the adoption of maxims of virtue or maxims of ends. The crucial link between the strength of intention characteristic of virtue and the idea of setting moral ends for ourselves remains vague.

After outlining key readings of moral strength (section 2), I highlight the link between moral strength and moral ends by interpreting moral strength in terms of *self-control* (section 3). In doing so, I draw on my earlier analysis of the Kantian capacity for moral self-control as *abstraction* (Vujošević, *forthcoming*). The underlying idea is that we gain *control* over the *state* of some representations in our minds by *disregarding* various sensible impressions. This ability makes it possible for us to realize our capacity for inner freedom, which is the constitutive basis of virtue. Through our capacity for self-control, we “abstract from” different sensible impressions. First we do so simply in order to prevent affects and passions. What is more, by disregarding all sensible impulses, reason controls itself while adopting morally correct maxims. Not only is self-control at this level a kind of preparatory work that makes maxim adoption or maxim observation possible, but it is also directly involved in the free adoption of our virtuous maxims. That analysis shows that Kant's conception of moral self-control involves two intimately related levels that are constitutive of virtue and need not meet the same criteria. Whereas one level is connected to our ability to freely adopt specific moral maxims and requires that we abstract from all inclinations and corresponding feelings, the other is associated with our ability to follow these maxims and does not necessarily require this radical abstraction.

³I am using Kant's term “moral maxims” as I take him to be using it when discussing the observance of “moral maxims” or their effectiveness in practice (C2 5:153, 117–18). Kant relatedly argues that the distinction between virtue and vice “is not a difference in the *degree* of practicing moral maxims” (MM 6:432). Hence, by “moral maxims,” I mean morally correct maxims *in abstracto*.

⁴The free adoption of these maxims cannot involve determining their form regardless of their content. I take their form to stand for their purely theoretical basis and their content to stand for their subjective motivating ground, which we renew in different situations by setting ourselves particular moral ends.

In the present analysis, I accordingly propose a twofold account according to which Kantian moral strength, read as the exercise of our capacity for moral self-control, is necessary not only for the observation of already adopted maxims but also for their adoption. I show that the intention, the strength of which is constitutive of virtue, is necessary not only for realizing moral ends, but also for setting ourselves moral ends.

2. Kantian moral strength thus far

There is textual evidence for the claim that Kant understands moral strength as the proper exercise of the capacity for self-control (MM 6:397). His point is that all of us have the mere capacity for self-control, but we also have a duty to acquire moral strength by constantly developing this capacity through its free exercise in accordance with moral law. Moral strength is therefore one aspect of our capacity for moral self-control—it is the state in which we have our inclinations under control.⁵

But the nature of virtue as moral strength is not usually explained this way. A telling example is Richard McCarty's account of moral strength, which even appears to exclude such an explanation. McCarty (2009, 196) claims that virtue as moral strength is the same as virtue in the formal sense. In his words, "a person's formal virtue is just the strength of her moral incentive, and the variability of this strength, from person to person, accounts for personal differences in this conception of virtue" (230). McCarty adds that everyone possesses virtue in this sense (230). On his view, moral strength seems to be the psychological force of the moral incentive that all of us happen to have (196, 230). Making the effort to acquire moral strength by properly exercising our capacity for self-control does not seem to fit this picture.

Paul Guyer (2000) does not discuss moral strength in relation to self-control either. He seems to claim that moral strength is a kind of causally produced mental state that is not required for *becoming* morally motivated. On his interpretation, moral strength is a caused product of inner freedom. As such, it is one of the three different senses in which Kant uses the term "virtue." Guyer's (304, 307) point is that virtue in the sense of moral strength is "caused" by virtue in the sense of virtuous disposition. To explain how he understands this "causal relation," he writes that virtue as moral strength results from the act of inner freedom, which is to be understood as "an agent's adoption of respect for the moral law as his fundamental maxim" (307). On Guyer's interpretation, moral strength appears merely to be a caused product of already acquired inner freedom.⁶

A notable exception is Anne Margaret Baxley's reading (2010), according to which moral strength is the strength of the power of self-control, which should not be equated with the legislative power. She argues that two separate powers are in question: the executive power (autocracy or self-control) makes possible compliance with self-legislated principles, whereas the legislative power (autonomy) is tasked with issuing these principles. According to Baxley, the legislative power is "a prior condition" for acquiring the "executive strength of will" (60). She commits herself to the view that self-control, as the executive power central to virtue, is not needed for maxim adoption. As she explains, moral strength is required "to enforce the morally good choices we legislate to ourselves as

⁵Strictly speaking, we then develop our innate capacity for self-control rather than moral strength: this capacity can become more effective through frequent use.

⁶Even if Guyer holds that moral strength is necessary for the adoption of maxims of virtue, in his explanatory framework these maxims are caused products of already adopted fundamental maxims, and their adoption is not an aspect of the process of becoming morally motivated. I shall argue that the free adoption of these maxims requires that we continually acquire moral strength precisely because this is how we become morally motivated in new situations. As will become clear in section 3.b, I disagree with Guyer's account of the relationship between moral strength and the virtuous disposition. For a general critique of the interpretations of Kant's notion of *Gesinnung* as a disposition that causally determines our choices, see Julia Peters (2018).

autonomous rational agents” (57). Moral strength of will comes into play once the task of self-legislation has been properly fulfilled.⁷

The literature also contains an alternative view according to which acquisition of moral strength does not seem to take place after we adopt maxims. Jeanine Grenberg (2010, 165) interprets moral strength as “the realization of inner freedom,” understood as keen “attentiveness” to the moral law by which we realize that we have moral obligations. She proposes that such “attentiveness” occurs via our moral feeling by arguing that it is by engaging in contemplation of the moral law that we strengthen this feeling. Grenberg (163) illustrates this by claiming that “[t]he man in the Gallows example, by recognizing a categorical demand as genuinely categorical, has recognized his inner temptation to pervert the demands of reason, and refused it.”⁸ She does not explicate the close tie between moral strength and maxim adoption.

Finally, we also find in the literature the radical claim that moral strength sometimes plays no role at all, such that we can act virtuously without it. Robert Johnson and Adam Cureton (2017) argue that it is possible for an agent to act from duty, even repeatedly and reliably, while nonetheless lacking moral strength because he fails to be tempted to act otherwise.⁹ On this view, moral strength does not appear to be essential to virtue.

Although initially appealing, the idea that acting virtuously does not always require the strength of moral self-control is inconsistent with Kant’s stern view that acting virtuously must be equated with acting from duty. For example, it seems plausible to hold that an agent does not have to control himself to perform a beneficent action when he is inclined to help someone. Nevertheless, Kant’s view is that even in this case an agent must *control* himself not to perform a morally good action simply from his natural inclination to help. If we are to fulfill the duty of beneficence, we must set ourselves the moral end of increasing others’ happiness by adopting a maxim of helping them. As Kant explains, “beneficence is the maxim of making others’ happiness one’s own end” (MM 6:452), inclination to help cannot produce any moral maxim (C2 5:118), and virtue is based on inner freedom (MM 6:408). Hence, even inclinations that do not seem to oppose performing a morally good action should be set aside so that they do not become our main incentives.¹⁰ Inner freedom is the capacity to “release [*losmachen*]” ourselves from all inclinations (C2 5:161) and moral strength (acquired by the act of disregarding all inclinations) is always needed if we are to perform an action from the motive of duty.

This must also hold for fulfilling negatively expressed duties of virtue because Kant emphasizes that inner freedom is “the condition of *all duties of virtue*” (MM 6:406). For example, in order to avoid committing the vice of defamation or taking malicious pleasure in intentionally disclosing the faults of others, an agent must acquire moral strength not only by compelling himself to keep his judgments to himself (6:466) but also by constraining himself to adopt a maxim which is not based on his inclination to make himself feel better by expressing his negative judgments of others.¹¹

⁷Elsewhere (Vujošević, *forthcoming*), I argue against Baxley’s interpretation of the autonomy-autocracy distinction by concluding that the relevance of the Kantian capacity for self-control must reach deeper than our ability to follow already established maxims. That argument supports my present thesis that moral strength, read as the exercise of our capacity for moral self-control, is also needed for maxim adoption.

⁸In my opinion, this man is not an apt example of someone who has acquired moral strength, for he has not yet realized his inner freedom or exercised his capacity for moral self-control by refusing to give priority to love of life in his maxim. He has, rather, realized that it is possible for him to do so.

⁹Along these lines, Laura Papish (2007, 141–42) suggests that the moral worth of an action does not depend on whether one has acquired moral strength.

¹⁰If we are to be morally motivated, we must subordinate the incentives of our inclinations to the incentive of the moral law. That is to say, we ought to incorporate the moral law in its purity as “the self-sufficient incentive” of the determination of our choice (R 6:46).

¹¹Compare LE 27:365. Generally, an agent should make it his maxim not to *degrade* others by treating them as mere means to achieving the ends of his inclinations (MM 6:450). This does not imply that there is no room for moral ends in the case of duties of respect. Essentially, virtue is “free” *self-constraint* in end-setting—an agent ought to compel himself to refrain from

Although to a different extent, the available interpretations of Kantian moral strength fail to accommodate Kant's general insistence that virtue, as moral strength of the human will and maxims, should never become a habit (A 7:147) because its maxims should always be freely adopted:

[V]irtue can never settle down in peace and quiet with its maxims adopted once and for all [...]. For moral maxims, unlike technical ones, cannot be based on habit [*Gewohnheit*] (since this belongs to the natural constitution of the will's determination); on the contrary, if the practice of virtue were to become a habit the subject would suffer loss to that freedom in adopting maxims which distinguishes an action done from duty. (MM 6:409)

If understood along the lines proposed by Kant's scholars so far, moral strength can hardly be something the acquisition of which enables the *free adoption of maxims* in new situations. For example, it seems that this passage cannot be fully explained by Baxley's account, according to which virtue as moral strength amounts to firm stability in the observation of already adopted maxims.¹² What is more, Grenberg's reading also seems to face this problem. Lurking behind her valuable account is a tendency towards a passive and static account of moral strength because her account seems to fall short when it comes to explaining the role of moral strength in the process of maxim adoption and indicating how the activity of contemplation develops over time.¹³

Without an explanation of how we adopt maxims by acquiring moral strength in ever-new situations, we fail to appreciate the essential dynamic and active aspect of the moral strength of human will. I believe that we can avoid this problem if we base our analysis of moral strength on Kant's notion of moral self-control, which also accommodates the role of self-control at the level of maxim adoption.

3. A twofold account of moral strength

In his notes to the *Doctrine of Virtue* (23:394), Kant writes that moral strength is strength of intention (*Vorsatz*) and strength in action (*That*). Expanding on this claim, I shall propose my reading of Kantian moral strength. In my view, strength of intention, which is essential to Kantian virtue, must also be strength in compelling ourselves to form an intention by which we, in ever-new situations, set ourselves moral ends; as such, this intention is constitutive of our maxims of virtue, or maxims of ends (MM 6:480; 6:395).¹⁴ By strength in acting, I mean consistency in compelling ourselves to perform (or avoid) certain actions in order to adhere to our moral maxims. This aspect of moral strength is necessary for the realization of moral ends.¹⁵

3.a Strength in acting—acquired via cultivation

Kant's recurring remark that moral strength concerns following our duties calls for an explanation of virtue as the strength needed for bridging the gap between maxim and deed (R 6:47; MM 6:394, 405; A 7:147). Kantian moral strength certainly covers acting in accordance with our moral maxims. It is about being sufficiently strong in realizing moral ends.

disrespecting others "from duty" and not because he wants to improve his reputation. Kant also argues that all maxims have an end (G 4:436) and that "there can be no *will*" without "some end" (TP 8:279).

¹²If this firm stability is meant to involve stability in keeping the same maxims, it would have to be qualified in a way that captures Kant's point that adopting moral maxims can never be a mere habit.

¹³In order to solve the latter problem, Mavis Biss (2019) proposes an alternative "end-setting" model of "strengthened" inner freedom, but she does so in a completely different way than I do (e.g., by emphasizing participation in the ethical community).

¹⁴For valuable discussions of maxims of virtue and Kant's understanding of moral ends, see Onora O'Neill (1998) and Andreas Trampota (2013).

¹⁵Since an end is not simply an action but rather an aim we intend to achieve, it can also be realized by refraining from an action.

We can take care to follow our maxims by increasing our own natural perfection, i.e., by cultivating our capacities “for furthering ends set forth by reason” (MM 6:391). Natural perfection entails the cultivation of one’s natural powers as means for all sorts of possible ends (6:444). Kant’s general point is that we cultivate our natural capacities in order to use them as means for realizing ends.

On my view, cultivation involves the proper development of our capacity for self-control.¹⁶ To demonstrate how we cultivate our capacities by properly exercising the capacity for self-control, I shall focus on the cultivation of our “capacity for having pleasure and displeasure in representation,” a capacity also called “*feeling* [*Gefühl*]” (6:211).¹⁷ In doing so, I shall show that even cultivation of this capacity can be read as the activity of acquiring the strength of moral self-control.

Kant’s often discussed passage concerning our indirect duty to cultivate our natural receptivity to sharing the feelings of others is a good starting point:

But while it is not in itself a duty to share the sufferings (as well as the joys) of others, it is a duty to actively sympathize [*thätige Theilnehmung*] in their fate; and to this end it is therefore an indirect duty to cultivate the compassionate natural (aesthetic) feelings [*die mitleidige natürliche (ästhetische) Gefühle*] in us, and to make use of them as so many means to sympathy based on moral principles and the feelings appropriate to them. — It is therefore a duty not to avoid the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found, but rather to seek them out, and not to shun sickrooms or debtors’ prisons and so forth in order to avoid sharing painful feelings one may not be able to resist. For this is still one of the impulses that nature has implanted in us to do what the representation of duty would not alone accomplish. (6:457; translation modified)

Cultivation of our compassionate feelings is usually understood as involving intentional self-exposure to scenes of human misery, which is not directly related to self-control.¹⁸ As I shall explain shortly, however, by treating cultivation as a process of acquiring self-control, we see that cultivation is not simply about eliciting certain feelings by exposing ourselves to such scenes.

Marcia Baron touches upon the link between cultivation and self-control. Nevertheless, on her view, cultivation simply “entails seeking out situations that will elicit such feelings” and presupposes the activity of controlling our feelings (1995, 217). Baron’s point is that proper cultivation of the feelings that are already under our control can make us more sensitive to situations where our help is needed. If cultivated, these feelings “help to prompt us to perform specific acts of helping others” (220).¹⁹

In her excellent discussion of the problem of how to interpret our duty to cultivate our sympathetic impulses so that it fits with Kant’s rigid stance on impurity, Baron stresses that it cannot be the case that we must fulfill this duty in order to secure a source of motivation in addition to the motive of duty, because that would amount to the cultivation of an impure will. Indeed, the problem is that these impulses, which are generally presented as obstacles at the level of maxim adoption, now require intensification because they are meant to be aids to acting morally.

¹⁶Kant argues that it is through a kind of self-governing activity (characteristic of virtue) that we gain control over all our capacities and inclinations (MM 6:408), and the lecture notes suggest that Kant thought that the cultivation of our capacities by which we achieve moral ends belongs to the duty to govern ourselves (LE 27:627).

¹⁷For a contrasting account according to which Kant does not hold that we should try to cultivate our feelings, see Krista Karbowski Thomason (2017).

¹⁸See, for instance, Paul Guyer (2010, 146–47), Nancy Sherman (1990, 158–59) and Randy Cagle (2005, 458).

¹⁹This claim seems to suggest that we should cultivate our compassionate feelings simply because they enable us to efficiently follow our maxims, but Baron does not explicitly discuss this issue in relation to maxim observation and maxim adoption. In a similar vein, Sherman (1990, 158) argues that sympathy and compassion “enable us to apply moral principles by alerting us to circumstances that have a moral dimension and may require moral action.” See also Barbara Herman (1993, 81–82).

Nonetheless, I still hold that Baron's account does not fully capture the nature of cultivation. The cultivation of our natural compassionate feelings must involve more than merely exposing ourselves to situations in which our natural compassionate feelings will be intensified or elicited; it must involve the activity of controlling "our sensitive intake" in such situations. Were we, as Baron (1995, 220) suggests, to cultivate just those feelings that are already under our control, we would be cultivating not our natural feelings but rather refined versions of them.

Consequently, I think that Baron's account of why the cultivation of our sympathetic feelings is needed is not completely satisfying either. The cultivation of our sympathetic feelings can also be necessary for *following* maxims in a way not suggested by Baron. When Kant advises us to cultivate our natural compassionate feelings by visiting places of human misery, I take him to mean that we ought to control these feelings so that they do not turn into affects, or strong feelings that cause us to lose our composure. Kant argues that an affect is a "surprise through sensation" (A 7:252) and that we have a duty to prevent affects (7:253; MM 6:408). On my reading, we ought to control our natural sympathetic feelings by disregarding the sensible impressions that would otherwise make them so intense as to overpower us. Controlling ourselves at the level of following maxims need not require that we disregard all sensible impressions. Since affects paralyze us, they cannot serve as means of efficiently following our maxims. But sympathetic feelings that do not overwhelm us may help us to realize moral ends. Kant does not exclude the possibility that sensible desires, which are based on such feelings and understood as inclinations "to what conforms with duty," can "facilitate the effectiveness of moral maxims" (C2 5:118). Hence, at least indirectly, sympathetic feelings that are under our control can make it easier for us to follow our moral maxims.

Melissa Seymour Fahmy (2009, 39–40, 43) pays more attention to self-control by arguing that the cultivation of our compassionate feelings serves as a means to fulfilling the direct duty of "active sympathetic participation," which entails "directly engaging with others."²⁰ I generally agree with this interpretation but take a step further in highlighting the close tie between the cultivation of our natural sympathetic feelings and self-control.

On my view, cultivation is at base the activity of acquiring the strength of moral self-control by "abstracting from" certain sensible impressions, i.e., by diverting attention from them as if they did not exist and by becoming, at the same time, conscious of, or attentive to, certain representations.²¹ When cultivating our natural compassionate feelings, we then exercise our capacity for self-control not simply by compelling ourselves to visit places of human misery but also by controlling the influence of forceful sensible impressions, such as the sight of blood or someone's being seriously hurt.

For Kant, the duty to cultivate our natural compassionate feelings cannot simply be a duty to passively share in the suffering of others—"allowing oneself to be affected in a merely passive way, is silly and childish" (A 7:236). If, for example, I cannot alleviate someone's suffering, then I should not let myself "be infected by his pain (though my imagination)," for in doing so I would only increase the amount of suffering in the world by making myself suffer too (MM 6:457). Kant thought that one suffers with others by means of the power of imagination (A 7:238–9). In this case, I therefore also ought to *control* my power of imagination, which synthesizes various impressions that sensible objects impose on me. In this way, I can avoid being weak in the situation, or I can strengthen my natural sympathetic feelings further by cultivating or gaining control over my sympathetic power of imagination (7:179, 203).

The duty to cultivate our natural susceptibility to compassionate feelings requires not that we become indifferent to all suffering by making these feelings disappear but that we strengthen them

²⁰In a similar vein, Allen Wood (2008, 176–77) points out that the duty of active "sympathetic participation" means "taking part in the life of another."

²¹Note that Kant speaks of cultivation in terms of attentiveness (e.g., MM 6:401) and explains abstraction as a specific way of becoming conscious of certain representations (e.g., A 7:131).

so that they cannot affect us against our will. A kind of equanimity (*Gleichmüthigkeit*) is required: by disregarding certain sensible impressions in ever-new situations, we can choose not to become a plaything of our feelings. This is why Kant argues that sensitivity (*Empfindsamkeit*), unlike the *weakness* of sentimentality (*Empfindelheit*), is not opposed to this kind of equanimity: sensitivity “is a *capacity* [*Vermögen*] and a *strength* [*Stärke*], which either permits or prevents the states of both pleasure and displeasure from entering the mind” (7:236; translation modified).

This reading supports the conclusion that fulfilling the indirect duty to cultivate our natural compassionate feelings plays a necessary role not only in facilitating the very actions by which we alleviate others’ suffering but also in our ability to fulfill the duty to “sympathize actively” with the fate of others (MM 6:457). Cultivation of our natural sympathetic feelings can be a means of facilitating both the observation and the adoption of virtuous maxims. In all likelihood, Kant argues that the wise man must not be in an affective state of compassion as a reaction to the misfortune of his best friend (A 7:253) not only because this state makes him incapable of using the powers necessary to help his friend, but also because it makes him incapable of engaging in free reflection on principles (C3 5:272).²² By letting his natural sympathetic feelings turn into affects, the wise man renders himself incapable of forming the intention by which he sets himself the particular moral end of helping his friend in a given situation—the intention that I take to be constitutive of our virtuous maxims. Since affective sympathetic feelings make us lose control, they cannot serve as “means to sympathy based on moral principles [*Theilnehmung aus moralischen Grundsätzen*] and the feelings appropriate to them” (MM 6:457).²³

If seen from this perspective, cultivation can serve a further function that usually escapes scholarly notice: our cultivated sympathetic feelings can also be means of maxim adoption, such that they need not be understood as sources of motivation that the representation of duty requires. By facilitating free reflection, these feelings enable proper maxim adoption.

Furthermore, the activity of disregarding sensible impressions, or the activity by which we cultivate our feelings, may also be directly involved in the process of maxim adoption. Through this activity, we also seem to cultivate or strengthen moral feelings, but this cultivation requires that we take a step further by disregarding all of our inclinations and the feelings on which they are based. The cultivation of our natural susceptibility to moral feeling might also be understood as an aspect of acquiring control over the condition of certain representations in our minds. In a calm state of mind, moral feeling, as the genuine moral motive, gains its full motivational strength.

We enter into this calm state of mind by fulfilling the duty of apathy, and Kant argues that virtue necessarily presupposes *apathy* as *strength* (6:408). But Kant also holds that virtue is a kind of governance that surpasses the fulfillment of the duty of apathy—“[s]ince virtue is based on inner freedom it contains a positive command to a human being, namely to bring all his capacities and inclinations under his (reason’s) control and so to rule over himself” (6:408). Accordingly, he

²²In order to become virtuous by fulfilling the duty of “active” sympathy (*Theilnehmung*), the wise man must then avoid descending into the state of affective sympathetic sadness.

²³On my interpretation, the final aim of the cultivation of our natural sympathetic feelings is their refinement into moral sympathetic feelings, that is, into feelings of which we become conscious in a new light once we have decided to act as the moral law demands. By disregarding our natural sympathetic feelings in the process of adopting moral maxims, we facilitate the adoption of maxims of virtue, which makes us aware of these feelings as being in line with moral principles, or as being based on them. Our sympathetic feelings are then no longer mere “instinctual” fellow feelings; since they are also mediated by moral reasoning, they can be called moral feelings (LE 27:677). These cultivated feelings are constitutive of the virtue of “active” sympathy or our active concern for the well-being of others. For this reason, we have a duty to cultivate our ability to sympathize with others by visiting the places in which we can best exercise this power. And we should not, for example, engage in an analogous exercise with regard to our feelings of envy, for these feelings can never be based on moral principles and cannot help us perform moral actions. Unlike sympathetic feelings, they cannot even serve as “a temporary surrogate of reason” before reason achieves “the necessary strength” (A 7:253). Although we should also control feelings of envy in the sense of preventing them from becoming affects, strictly speaking this controlling activity cannot be called cultivation; our aim is rather to subdue them.

emphasizes that “true strength” of virtue is not only “a tranquil mind” but also “a considered and firm resolution [*Entschließung*] to put the law of virtue into practice” (6:409). As such, the account just given does not yet provide a full picture of moral strength.

3.b Virtue as the strength of intention

A. Why not only the strength of intention to follow established maxims?

As noted, Baxley holds that we only need moral strength to compel ourselves to follow established maxims. On her interpretative framework, a specifically virtuous intention seems to be a kind of firm intention to consistently perform actions in accordance with one’s already adopted maxims.

However, understanding Kantian *strength* of intention in this way makes it very hard to account for Kant’s idea that maxims of virtue must be freely adopted in different situations—that they cannot be adopted once and for all because that would make virtue a mere habit.

Kant scholars who hold that virtue as moral strength presupposes that the activity of prescribing maxims to ourselves has been completed seem to take for granted the idea that we have a prepared set of maxims, some of which we simply “take off the shelf” as they are and apply to real-life situations. And they fail to accommodate Kant’s claim that even judging how to apply a maxim “provides another (subordinate) maxim” (MM 6:411).

Generally, such accounts fail to accommodate the main ground for Kant’s rejection of the model of virtue as “a long-standing *habit* of morally good actions acquired through practice” (6:383). Defining virtue as the skill of consistently acting in accordance with a fixed set of previously established moral maxims is problematic for Kant because the way of thinking (*Denkungsart*) characteristic of virtue or the way of thinking according to moral laws (C2 5:160) can never become habitual. It requires that we *abstract from* all natural determinations in new situations: none of our inclinations may influence our way of thinking and making decisions (5:161).

Kant argues that virtue as moral strength cannot even be the kind of willing expressed in the sentence “I will [*will*] this, because duty commands it” (A 7:147; translation modified) if this willing is understood as “a certain degree of will, acquired through the frequently repeated use of one’s faculty” (7:147):

Therefore one cannot explain *virtue* as *skill* in free lawful actions, for then it would be a mere mechanism of applying power [*blos Mechanismus der Kraftanwendung*]. Rather, virtue is *moral strength* in adherence to one’s duty, which never should become habit [*Gewohnheit*] but should always emerge entirely new and original from one’s way of thinking [*immer ganz neu und ursprünglich aus der Denkungsart hervorgehen soll*]. (7:147)

Here, Kant contrasts virtue as *moral strength* with the mere skill of compelling ourselves to consistently perform certain actions. This skill may even involve “a certain degree of will[ing]” to act as the moral imperative demands, but this kind of willing still amounts to “a mere mechanism of applying power.” It is still determined by our natural impulses. For this reason, Kant argues that virtue, as moral strength in following our duty, should never become a habit.

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant defines virtue as a moral or “free skill (*habitus libertatis*)” (MM 6:407), but the core of his argument for why virtue cannot be a mere habit is the same: we would then have to embrace the unacceptable claim that virtue results from natural necessity. Virtue would be a kind of “mechanism” that is “neither armed for all situations nor adequately secured against the changes that new temptations could bring about” (6:384). For these reasons, virtue must be “the effect of considered, firm and continually purified principles” (6:384). This is why it can be understood as a kind of skill only if we add the adjective “free.” As a free skill, virtue involves free maxim adoption or freely determining our choice in ever-new situations (6:409).

Moreover, if we were to hold that strength of intention merely concerns an intention to follow our established maxims, we would sidestep the very essence of virtue. Nothing and no one can constrain us to determine our choice by the pure incentive, understood as “the internal determination” of our will (6:380). Even we ourselves cannot do this by adopting moral maxims once and for all, or by setting ourselves particular moral ends in advance. Because of the inner freedom necessarily involved in internal lawgiving, becoming virtuous requires that we continuously acquire moral strength. As Kant emphasizes, virtue always “starts from the beginning” because human beings’ sensible nature prevents them from adopting maxims once and for all (6:409), and moral strength is practical wisdom (6:406).

Moral strength is then also necessary for the very process of becoming morally motivated by adopting maxims of virtue. To freely adopt our maxims, we must repeatedly acquire moral strength by exercising our capacity for self-control through which we set ourselves moral ends by diverting our attention from inclinations and focusing it on moral ends.

B. The intention that is constitutive of maxims of virtue

The above argument tells us that the strength of intention that characterizes virtue must be involved in the process of adopting moral maxims of virtue. It is not yet completely clear, however, how this intention is to be understood and why its strength is necessary for the adoption of maxims of virtue. One may shy away from the view that moral strength is necessary for the adoption of moral maxims because one believes that it commits one to the view that in performing the universalization test, agents must first acquire moral strength by actually overcoming their own psychological obstacles. Indeed, Kant seems to reject this view.

But how are we then to understand the *strength of intention* that is constitutive of virtue (MM 6:390)? By “strength of soul [*Stärke der Seele*],” as Kant explains, we generally mean:

[S]trength of intention [*Stärke des Vorsatzes*] in a human being as a being endowed with freedom, hence his strength insofar as he is in control of himself [...] and so in the state of *health* proper to a human being. (6:384)

In all likelihood, this strength is meant to involve the elementary form of self-control, which moral strength presupposes, and which is required for maintaining sound mental health. For instance, Kant held that ill feelings can be mastered merely by a firm intention [*festen Vorsatz*] (C 7:98, 103).

But Kant here primarily has in mind the strength of a pure moral intention, for he continues by arguing that it is improper to ask whether great crimes require more strength of soul than virtues do (MM 6:384). On Kant’s view, moral strength is the state in which we have control over our desires and can freely use our capacities, whereas the person committing a crime is a plaything of his natural impulses even if there is a certain sense in which he controls himself to form and follow certain rules. The main problem is that various sensible influences still hold sway over that person’s way of thinking such that he still does not freely employ his reasoning capacity. As Kant explains: “the basis of great crimes is merely the force of inclinations that *weaken* reason, which proves no strength of soul” (6:384). It follows that even if an agent has a firm intention to follow his own rules, he still might be said to lack moral strength because his maxims are based on inclinations.

In the *Groundwork* (4:398), Kant confirms this connection between moral strength and maxims by helpfully pointing to the moral *content* of maxims:

[I]f an unfortunate man, strong of soul [*stark an Seele*] and more indignant about his fate than despondent or dejected, wishes for death and yet preserves his life without loving it, not from inclination or fear, but from duty, then his maxim has moral content [*moralischen Gehalt*].

Despite his powerful aversion to life, this man shows moral strength by deciding to preserve his life by being motivated by the representation of duty. This is why his maxim can probably be said to have “pure moral content [*reiner moralischer Gehalt*]” (MM 6:393), or to be genuinely moral.²⁴

However, this example need not lead us to the conclusion that Kant thought that someone who loves life does not need moral strength to adopt moral maxims. Since we can only measure strength by the magnitude of the obstacles it can overcome (6:397, 228), we judge the man with a moral maxim who hates his life as being stronger than the man with a moral maxim who loves his life.²⁵ However, the latter also needs moral strength to adopt his maxim because his “immediate inclination to life” cannot stand for the pure moral content of his maxim. If he is to adopt a genuinely moral maxim, he must “abstract from” all “impure” incentives.

As Kant remarks, the strength of the moral law consists in its being recognized and presented in its purity (6:217). Accordingly, we incorporate the moral law into our maxims as a pure and self-sufficient incentive by acquiring moral strength—that is, by setting aside all our inclinations and focusing our attention on moral ends. This point suggests that moral strength is necessary for the adoption of maxims with moral content or the maxims of virtue (6:480)—that is, for the adoption of maxims with the pure incentive, which is sufficiently strong to determine choice to an action.

Given Kant’s overall emphasis on the *form* of maxims and the universalization test, discussions regarding the *content* of our maxims may appear irrelevant. But Kant claims neither that our maxims lack content nor that their content is irrelevant. He relatedly argues that incentives are the *matter* of our maxims (R 6:36). Furthermore, when he argues that we should begin with “the form of the will, the *law*, in order to determine duties” rather than “the matter of the will, the end” (MM 6:376–77), he simply seems to be claiming that the matter should be conditioned by the form. Even more, Kant states that *every* maxim of action “contains an end [*Zweck*],” or “the matter of choice” (MM 6:395; G 4:436).

An end is not simply an action but rather its intended effect (G 4:427–28): it is an aim we intend to realize through the performance of a particular action.²⁶ Consequently, the strength of intention that characterizes virtue cannot simply be the strength of an intention to perform a particular action. The intention the strength of which is properly called virtue must also be an intention by which we set ourselves a *particular moral end* that motivates us to perform a morally correct action. As such, this intention is constitutive of our virtuous maxims of ends.

If morally worthy action is to be possible, we must “take an interest” in ends. In order to ground our particular maxims in a pure interest in ends, our “lawgiving reason” sets moral ends “against the ends of inclinations” (MM 6:381).²⁷ The activity of intending moral ends is then something that our lawgiving reason does, and this activity must involve a continuous effort to put aside all inclinations. Intending a particular moral end requires that we acquire moral strength by properly exercising our capacity for self-control such that we avoid adopting maxims for the sake of the ends of inclinations.

On this basis, we can argue that moral strength is required if we are to secure the purity of the *subjective motivating ground* of our maxims of virtue in new situations. As Kant argues: a maxim is a “rule that the agent himself makes his principle on subjective grounds” (6:225). This subjective

²⁴Note that Kant here explains the close relation between moral strength, the moral content of a maxim, and a strict duty to refrain from suicide. Hence, Kant discusses moral motivation (pure incentives and moral ends) even in the case of some duties of omission.

²⁵This is to say that we can assess strength or firmness of character only subjectively. Moreover, from our own perspective, the development or cultivation of our character is always gradual (compare R 6:48). We build our moral character or our virtuous disposition by repeatedly acquiring moral strength or by mastering our inclinations in different situations, but we can never really reach moral perfection (MM 6:446, 387, 409; C2 5:32).

²⁶I think that an end can also be realized by avoiding a morally incorrect action. For the sake of clarity, I stick here to the performance of morally correct actions.

²⁷This reading implies not that we should somehow get rid of the ends we naturally have but that we should set aside these ends by subordinating them to the ends we ought to have if we really are to act virtuously.

ground makes our maxims, as our subjective principles of acting, different from objective principles—practical laws or imperatives. Our maxims are based on “subjective causes” and they “do not of themselves conform with these objective principles” (6:214). The objective principles can serve us “subjectively as the practical principles” only if reason actually gains *control* over the faculty of desire (G 4:401n). Where one does not exercise the capacity for moral self-control, one’s self-imposed rules cannot function as subjectively practical, volitional principles that actually motivate one to act morally.²⁸ Acquiring moral strength in ever-new situations can be conceived of as a necessary activity by which we purify the subjective motivating ground of our more specific maxims by setting ourselves particular moral ends.

The underlying thought is that we continuously renew our general commitment to the moral law, or our general moral intention, by purifying our incentives in new situations.²⁹ In other words, it is through the adoption of our particular moral maxims that we cultivate their subjective motivating ground or our underlying maxim. To this extent, moral strength is also involved in the adoption of our fundamental maxims. Importantly, this account does not imply that we need completely new, differently *formulated* maxims all the time; rather, it tells us that their subjective, motivating ground must be renewed in different situations.

Moreover, the point that moral strength is necessary for such renewing, purifying activity does not necessarily commit us to the claim that a person who has yet to acquire moral strength cannot check whether the moral imperative “holds objectively” for him by subjecting one of his maxims to the universalization test (MM 6:225). Roughly speaking, moral agents of all stripes can check in advance whether a maxim would qualify as a universal law. On its own, following the universalization procedure can tell us which maxims of actions generally are duties.³⁰ This purely cognitive, *theoretical basis* of our maxims does not depend on our constantly acquiring moral strength by properly exercising our capacity for self-control.³¹

But since our maxims are our own *subjective volitional* principles, which must be made on subjective grounds, we must *also* make the categorical imperative “subjectively practical.” As Kant explains: without incentives, moral laws are grounds of appraisal that are not at the same time “subjectively practical” (LM 28:317). We seem to make moral laws “subjectively practical” by setting ourselves particular moral ends, or by *actually* determining our choices by the pure moral incentive.³² This must be done in a given situation and requires that we acquire moral strength. If we are to become morally motivated to perform an action, we must acquire moral strength in order to adopt a maxim of virtue by which the moral law becomes our motivationally sufficient incentive (MM 6:480).

This interpretation of moral strength in terms of self-control also finds support in Kant’s description of how we acquire moral strength:

For while the capacity (*facultas*) to overcome all sensible impulses can and must be simply *presupposed* in man on account of his freedom, yet this capacity as *strength (robur)* is something he must acquire through [a process in which] by contemplation [*Betrachtung*] (*contemplatione*) of the dignity of the pure moral law in us, the moral *incentive* (the thought of

²⁸As I elaborate elsewhere (Vujošević, 2019), although the morally weak agent sets himself moral ends in an abstract way, he fails to exercise his capacity for self-control to form an intention by which he sets himself particular moral ends. Without such an intention, his maxims remain impotent in practice.

²⁹In another paper (Vujošević, 2014), I show that Kantian conscience reassesses incentives by approving or disapproving of them. Conscience, then, might be said to facilitate the process of setting ourselves moral ends.

³⁰This corresponds to Kant’s first element of lawgiving: a law, which “makes an action a duty” by representing it as “*objectively necessary*” (MM 6:218).

³¹In Kant’s treatment of the autonomy-autocracy distinction, this description matches up with autonomy, whereas autocracy concerns our capacity for self-control and moral motivation.

³²This corresponds to the second element of lawgiving that Kant views as being required for actual self-determination: an incentive (MM 6:218).

the law) is elevated [*erhoben*], but at the same time also through exercise [*zugleich aber auch durch Übung*] (*exercitio*). (6:397; translation modified)

Kant is first arguing here that we must assume that all of us have an innate capacity for self-control because “ought” implies “can.” He further suggests that this capacity is to be called “strength” if we think of it not as simply given to us but as acquired or exercised by us. Kant continues by explaining that it is through contemplation of the dignity of the moral law, but at the same time through the exercise of our capacity for self-control, that we acquire moral strength.

This interpretation highlights the points at which my account departs from Grenberg’s. On my reading, without reference to the exercise of our capacity for self-control, contemplation does not suffice for explaining how we acquire moral strength. Our way of acquiring moral strength cannot be reduced to mere awareness of the categorical nature of the moral law—“the realization of inner freedom” must involve more. If it is to suffice as a characterization of Kantian moral strength, Grenberg’s “keen attentiveness” to the moral law must be conceived as an activity with a more dynamic and active aspect: it must go hand in hand with the activity of developing our capacity for self-control over time and incorporating “the law in its purity” into our maxims (MM 6:217). By properly incorporating the incentive of the moral law into our maxims, or by freely adopting our maxims of virtue, we make the moral law a self-sufficient moral incentive that actually moves us to perform a certain action. Via self-control, we divert our attention away from our inclinations and focus it on the moral ends that maxims of virtue must contain.

Consequently, I am happy to agree with Grenberg that we acquire moral strength through self-constraint, which occurs via *moral feeling*, but only if we explain how this happens through the adoption of our virtuous maxims. On my interpretation, we do not cultivate our moral feelings simply by engaging in contemplation or merely by becoming aware of the demands of the moral law. A person who does not cultivate moral feeling knows what duties are generally, but he does not really accept these as *his own* duties: his mind remains unaffected by the concepts of duty. As Kant suggests: our own concept of duty is “*constraint* to an end adopted reluctantly” (6:386), and it is through moral feeling that “one makes one’s object every *particular* end that is also a duty” (6:387). If we could not cultivate moral feeling, we would not be able to constrain ourselves to adopt moral ends, i.e., we would fail to act morally by accepting that the constraint present in the concept of duty really holds for us. On my reading, we accept this constraint by adopting the moral maxims on which we really act.

This reading is in perfect agreement with Kant’s emphasis on the intimate relationship between the notion of self-determination and moral feeling that, according to the lecture notes (e.g., LE 27:361), seems to be equivalent to the executive power or autocracy. In the Mrongovius lecture notes, Kant has been reported as equating the autocracy of reason with moral feeling by suggesting that autocracy involves self-determination (29:626). In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he argues that moral feeling, which is said to be related to possible actions, is required for the determination of our choice by the moral law (MM 6:399). Furthermore, he explains that moral laws command morally necessary actions for which then “arises the concept of a duty, observance or transgression of which is indeed connected with a pleasure or displeasure of a distinctive kind (*moral feeling*), although in practical laws of reason we take no account of these feelings (since they have nothing to do with the *basis* of practical laws but only with the subjective *effect* in the mind during the determination of our choice [...])” (6:221; translation modified). Hence, although moral feeling is not the objective condition of morality or the cognitive basis of practical laws, it may still be essential when it comes to the adoption of our virtuous maxims—subjective principles through which we *actually determine* our choice.

Further analysis of the connection between moral feeling, moral ends, and the intention the strength of which Kant calls “virtue” helps us understand both the nature of this intention and its role in the process of maxim adoption. On Kant’s view, the end of moral perfection, as one of the moral

ends that we ought to set ourselves, consists in purity of moral disposition. He states that the purest virtuous disposition is “inner morally practical perfection” (6:387) and that moral perfection “consists subjectively in the *purity* (*puritas moralis*) of one’s disposition to duty [*in der Lauterkeit* (*puritas moralis*) *der Pflichtgesinnung*], namely in the law being itself alone the incentive, even without the admixture of aims derived from sensibility” (6:446). A virtuous moral intention must be an intention by which we set the end of moral perfection, and we strengthen this intention by “abstracting from” sensible impressions or by setting them aside by exercising our capacity for self-control.

It is through the activity of acquiring moral strength then that we acquire a virtuous disposition or moral perfection. Kant claims that the duty to increase one’s own moral perfection includes “the cultivation of one’s will (moral way of thinking) [*seines Willens* (*sittlicher Denkungsart*)]” (6:387; translation modified), and that a person has a duty to carry the cultivation of his will “up to the purest virtuous disposition, in which the law becomes also the incentive to his actions that conform with duty and he obeys the law from duty” (6:387). Acquiring a virtuous disposition therefore actually consists in cultivating our will (or our moral way of thinking) by adopting the maxims in which the pure moral law becomes an incentive for us.

Importantly, Kant also suggests that moral feeling is this pure virtuous disposition (6:387). By setting the cultivation of moral feeling as our end, we intend to determine our choice by the thought of the moral law alone. Moral feeling is the subjective motivating ground of our maxims, which we cultivate through adopting maxims of virtue.

By identifying the subjective ground of these maxims, the above analysis makes it possible to consistently argue that moral strength plays an important role in the process of adopting maxims of virtue: it is due to moral strength that the categorical imperative becomes “subjectively practical” for us. This is how we make the moral law a powerful, self-sufficient incentive in new situations. Hence, we need not argue that following the universalization procedure requires that we actually have our inclinations under our control, but we can still claim that we always have a duty to acquire the strength of the intention that is constitutive of our virtuous maxims. Without moral strength, our moral maxims would not be the principles that actually guide our actions in practice.

4. Conclusion

The treatment of moral strength as a proper exercise of our capacity for self-control has shown that Kantian moral strength is necessary not only when it comes to compelling ourselves to realize the particular moral ends contained in our virtuous maxims, but also when it comes to setting ourselves these ends in the process of maxim adoption. Consequently, the intention the strength of which is constitutive of virtue cannot be a mere intention to realize already adopted moral ends. It must also be the intention by which we set ourselves particular moral ends. We acquire this strength of intention by exercising our capacity for abstraction in ever-new situations. This is how we deal with the temptation to base our maxims on the ends of inclinations.

This reading can capture the active and dynamic aspect of Kantian moral strength. It can explain why Kant speaks of the moral strength of the human will and maxims, and it can accommodate Kant’s insistence that virtue cannot be a mere habit because its maxims must be freely adopted in new situations.

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