6. Some Speculation about Where Kant Goes Wrong

Solipsism is no new charge against Kant, though it is more commonly leveled against his transcendental idealism rather than his ethics. But I want to suggest that there is a deep connection here, that Kantian ethicists cannot so cleanly ignore, as they often seem to do, Kantian metaphysics. Consider a famous, crucial passage from the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, part of Kant’s derivation of the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative:

An action from duty has its moral worth *not in the aim* that is supposed to be attained by it, but rather in the maxim in accordance with which it is resolved upon; thus that worth depends not on the actuality of the object of the action, but merely on the *principle of the volition*, in accordance with which the action is done, without regard to any object of the faculty of desire. It is clear from the preceding that the aims we may have in actions, and their effects, as ends and incentives of the will, can impart to the actions no unconditioned and moral worth. In what, then, can this worth lie, if it is not supposed to exist in the will, in the relation of the actions to the effect hoped for? It can lie nowhere else *than in the principle of the will*, without regard to the ends that can be effected through such action; for the will is at a crossroads, as it were, between its principle *a priori*, which is formal, and its incentive *a posteriori*, which is material, and since it must somehow be determined by something, it must be determined through the formal principle in general of the volition if it does an action from duty, since every material principle has been withdrawn from it....[[1]](#footnote-1)

This is not an easy passage, and I have no intention of going through it with a fine-toothed comb, though I certainly concede the worthiness of such an enterprise. I find, moreover, much in this passage with which I am inclined to agree. I do want to suggest, however, that Kant is guilty of a certain conflation here.

The conflation I see is one that is all too natural and easy to make, but it is a mistake nonetheless. This conflation is just what the theme of the present paper is, *viz.* a conflation of what I ought to do with what action would be in keeping with a virtuous character. Kant here blurs the line between these two notions by speaking of the “moral worth” (moralischer Werth) of actions. So whether I agree with Kant in this passage depends on how this phrase is to be understood. If he is speaking of what constitutes virtuous action, I am quite in agreement. If he is speaking of what one ought to do, I am very much not in agreement.

Notice that this conflation is all the more enticing given the idealism of Kant’s metaphysics. That Kant should be guilty of a kind of solipsism in his ethics may surprise us less, that is, when we recall his idealist metaphysics (which of course became a hugely influential view on the European continent in the nineteenth century). If Kant is right, I have access to others only via their phenomenal properties. But the will is a noumenal object, and so, as I categorize the world around me, I have a kind of reality in that world that others do not. And just as Kantian metaphysics has this curious sort of self-centeredness, so too does his ethics.

Consider that for us it is natural to think of what the virtuous action is as somehow more private than what one ought to do. The intuitions here are vague, but the notion of the virtuous action seems bound up with acting for the good of *one’s own soul*, while the notion of what one ought to do seems bound up with a more outward-looking consideration of *all the parties involved* in each of the available actions. But it is precisely this awareness of others as on an equal footing to one’s own that Kant’s metaphysical picture precludes. For it is my mind alone that can be the object of my inner sense. And if it is only through spatial intuition that I can be aware of other agents, then, because of the transcendental ideality of spatial objects, I can never certainly know the existence of other minds. And so my “world” is ideal, centered on me. Thus it would make sense, on this picture, to think of what I ought to do in terms of my own virtue. Indeed, it may make sense in no other way. But if so, then so much the worse for idealism. And indeed, many ethicists are no longer tempted by that metaphysical view.

If I genuinely recognize you, just as I recognize myself, as an end, then it would seem that I ought to care just as much about your upholding—or transgression—of the moral law as I care about my own upholding—or transgression—of the moral law. This is not to deny your *agency*, not to deny that I must respect your status as an autonomous being. On the contrary, I am concerned that *you respect yourself* as an agent. For, plausibly, a necessary condition of respect for others is a healthy respect for oneself. Thus a lack of self-respect would entail a lack of respect for others. And it is just this that I am concerned to prevent.

Aristotle says something quite striking when describing his own ethical theory. He says:

For if a man were always bent on outdoing everybody else (πράττειν μάλιστα πάντων) in acting justly or temperately or in displaying any other of the virtues, and in general were always trying to secure for himself moral nobility (τὸ καλὸν ἑαυτῷ περιποιοῖτο), no one will charge him with love of self (φίλαυτον) nor find any fault with him (ψέξει).... Persons therefore who are exceptionally zealous in noble actions (τοὺς περὶ τὰς καλὰς πράξεις διαφερόντως σπουδάζοντας) are universally approved and commended; and if all men vied with each other in moral nobility (ἁμιλλωμένων πρὸς τὸ καλόν) and strove to perform the noblest deeds, the common welfare would be fully realized (κοινῇ τ’ ἂν πάντ’ εἴη τὰ δέοντα) ...[[2]](#footnote-2)

It is an interesting question whether virtuous action and right action can diverge even in cases where no one has acted wrongly or viciously. For it is a conspicuous feature of the cases (i) of Jim and the Indians and (ii) of the murderer at the door—cases, that is, where I have suggested just such divergence—that someone involved has acted wrongly. In the former, it is *Pedro*, in acting wrongly, who is responsible for the divergence of Jim’s virtuous action and Jim’s right action. And in the latter, it is of course the murderer at the door, in acting wrongly, who is responsible for the relevant divergence. But if, as I say, this divergence that is the theme of the present essay could come about without any such wrong action preceding it, then Aristotle is wrong.

1. REFERENCE [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *NE* IX. viii. 5-7, 1168b25-69a10 (trans. Rackham). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)