Are Virtue Ethics and Kantian Ethics Really so Very Different?

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In recent years the prevalent view that kantian ethics is at serious odds with virtue ethics has been challenged from the perspective of kantian ethics, often in response to criticisms from virtue ethicists.[1] For proponents of virtue ethics, kantian ethics is still typically regarded as a cold vision of the moral life, rigidly rule-governed, unable to do justice to differences between persons and cases, or to give an adequate account of the role of motivation and virtue.[2] Indeed, some of the critics of Kant go so far as to claim that the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*[3] presents virtue as positively inimical to the ethical life.[4]

[1] *E.g.* Onora O'Neill, 'Consistency in action', in her *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 81–104; 'Kant after virtue', in *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 145–162; 'Kant's Virtues', in Roger Crisp ed., *How Should One Live?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 77–97; Robert B. Louden, 'Kant's Virtue Ethics', in Daniel Statman ed., *Virtue Ethics: a Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 286–299; Allen W. Wood, 'The Final Form of Kant's Practical Philosophy', in Mark Timmons ed., *Kant's Metaphysics of Morals: Interpretive Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 1–22; *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Christine Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[2] The best known critique of kantian ethics from the perspective of virtue ethics is Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981). The claim, from a broadly virtue ethics perspective, that kantian ethics does not take account of persons, is in 'Persons, character and morality', in Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1–19. A far more conciliatory attitude towards kantian ethics is in Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[3] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H.J. Paton (London: Routledge, 1991), henceforth abbreviated as the '*Groundwork*'. Passages cited from the works of Kant in this article are by the page numbers from the appropriate volume of the Prussian Academy of Science edition of Kant's work, *Immanuel Kants Schriften, Ausgabe der königlich preussichen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1902). Most English translations have this pagination in the margins of the texts.

[4] The examples in question are those of the three philanthropists, and are discussed later in the article. This negative interpretation of Kant is found early in the history of the reception of Kant's work. Friedrich Schiller famously mocked Kant on this point in his satirical poem in couplets, jointly published with Goethe, entitled *Xenien*, 'The Philosophers' in Friedrich Schiller, trans. Edgar Alfred Bowring, *The Poems of Schiller* (London, John W. Parker and Son, 1851), p. 287: "Scruple of Conscience: Willingly I serve my friends; but, alas, I do it with pleasure;/Therefore I often am vex'd, that no true virtue I have. Decision: As there is no other means, thou hadst better begin to despise them;/And with aversion, then, do that which thy duty commands."

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Virtue ethics can be viewed, admittedly simplistically, as an agent-centred ethics,[5] distinguished by the primacy given to the character of the agent, the sort of person he must be in order to do the right things. For virtue ethics the key determinant of the value of a given ethical approach is the kind of character it promotes and sustains. If it can be shown that kantian ethics helps promote and sustain the same sort of character as virtue ethics, then kantian ethics is, at the very least, an ethics not to be rejected out of hand by the virtue ethicist. Given the centrality of the agent's character in virtue ethics, differences in formulation and derivation should matter relatively little.

In virtue ethics it is the agent's character that enables him to do and recommend the right things. Even if the two sorts of character resulting from and sustained by following kantian ethics and following virtue ethics are similar, but in kantian ethics character plays little role in decision-making, then reasons and motivations for acting will differ from those of the follower of virtue ethics. This matters because we care not only about what people do, but why they do what they do. From the perspective of virtue ethics, it is a central concern that the motivations for acting are not extrinsic to the agent's character, his moral nature. We need, therefore, that the sort of character promoted and sustained by the following of kantian ethics play a similarly important role in actual ethical decision-making as it does in virtue ethics to show to the virtue ethicist that the two ethical approaches are appreciably closer than is commonly supposed, giving rise to similar reasons and motivations for acting, as well as to similar kinds of people.

Sensitivity to contextual variables and impartiality are often regarded as points of strong divergence between kantian ethics and virtue ethics. I argue that both ethical approaches promote and sustain the same sort of sensitivity to contextual variables and impartiality, and hence character. In both cases the agent's character plays similarly important roles in actual decision-making. I also argue that the examples usually cited as supporting the view that kantian ethics is at serious odds with virtue ethics, the three philanthropists in the *Groundwork*,[6] do not provide an obstacle to regarding kantian ethics as close to virtue ethics.

The argument partly depends on what is meant by 'kantian ethics.' The interpretations of Kant given by those who reject the traditional view of Kant's ethics as a cold vision of the moral life, ignoring a rich

[5] For a nuanced view, *c.f.* Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 25–39.

[6] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork*, 397–9. I have adopted the common terminology, referring to the three people of Kant's examples as 'philanthropists,' even though Kant does not.

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conception of the moral agent, his character and context, the very qualities that would set it at odds with virtue ethics, tend to adopt two approaches. The first is to argue that the *Groundwork* should be read in the light of the comparatively neglected *The Metaphysics of Morals*, which was published twelve years later.[7] The *Groundwork* was intended as an introduction to the later work. In this Kant discusses virtue in great detail and accords it a significant place in his ethics. The second approach is to argue that, even on its own terms, the *Groundwork* has most often been seriously misinterpreted. This position is found in the writings of Onora O'Neill,[8] Allen W. Wood[9] and Christine Korsgaard.[10]

In comparing virtue ethics with kantian ethics, John McDowell's analysis of virtue ethics has a conspicuous advantage. His virtue ethics is centred on an analysis of the agent, and not on individual virtues, unlike many traditional accounts.[11] This presents the virtuous agent in broad terms, aiding comparison between the virtuous agent and the follower of kantian ethics.

The Virtuous Moral Agent According to John McDowell

To appreciate McDowell's virtue ethics, it is necessary to start with the fundamentals of what a moral agent is, which means addressing his analysis of 'second nature.' Like Kant, McDowell regards ethics as rational. It is his aim to reconcile reason and nature in areas of

[7] *C.f.* Mark Timmons ed., *Kant's Metaphysics of Morals: Interpretive Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[8] Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), henceforth referred to as, '*Constructions of Reason*'; Onora O'Neill, 'Kant's Virtues', in Roger Crisp ed., *How Should One Live?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 77–97.

[9] Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[10] Christine Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). *C.f.* her 2002 John Locke Lectures, *Self Constitution: Agency, Identity and Integrity*. At the time of writing, the lectures were not yet published in book form, but available on Christine Korsgaard's website, http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~korsgaar/. Relevant articles by Allan W. Wood are available on his website, http://www.stanford.edu/~allenw/. The generosity of these important writers on Kant in making some of their work available to the public at no cost might well count as experimental evidence of virtue among kantians, and support the thesis being argued for in this article.

[11] *C.f.* Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*; Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae*, especially Ia IIae; and, in more recent times, Philippa Foot, *Virtue and Vices* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978).

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human life such as ethics, and he argues that it is through the formation of second nature that this is achieved.[12]

Our first nature comprises those qualities and capacities we have by virtue of being human that are not acquired and can be described in the terms of the natural sciences. Second nature is constituted by those capacities, abilities and habits that are also natural to us, but which are acquired through experience and education. Our abilities to walk or to use language, for example, manifest abilities and capacities we are born with as human beings, yet require our learning them. It is natural for a baby to learn to speak, walk upright and, more controversially, to make ethical judgements. Second nature is natural because it is natural for human beings to acquire such abilities. For McDowell, virtue in the virtuous person is part of that person's second nature, part of what he is.

McDowell is clear that first nature cannot adequately ground ethics. To maintain that would presumably be to claim that for a creature to act ethically is for it to act in such a way as to best enhance its well-being, where the creature's well-being is understood in terms of its (first) nature, and as in some way inferable from it. McDowell invites us to imagine that a wolf has acquired conceptual and reasoning capacities and the freedom to give expression to them.[13] As a possessor of what the Greeks termed, "*logos*," the wolf will be able to conceptualise its place in the world and may be considered an agent. It can consider alternatives and ask itself why it should co-operate with other wolves in the hunt. Instead of there being some imperative to co-operate in the hunt deriving from the wolf's first nature, the wolf might find the possibility of giving the impression of pulling its weight, whilst not doing so, exploiting the less intelligent wolves. In choosing such a course of action, the wolf need not deny facts about its wolf-nature, such as the need for wolves to co-operate in the hunt. Indeed, it takes advantage of wolf-nature, by masquerading as a co-operating wolf. In so doing, the wolf is acting in a way that is morally

[12] The principal sources of John McDowell's understanding of virtue ethics are as follows: John McDowell, 'Virtue and Reason', in his *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 50–73, first published in *The Monist* 62 (1979), 331–350; 'Two Sorts of Naturalism', in *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 167–197, first published in Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence and Warren Quinn eds., *Virtues and Reasons, Philippa Foot and Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 149–179; 'Values and Secondary Qualities', in *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 131–150; first published in Ted Honderich ed., *Morality and Objectivity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. 110–29; and in Lecture IV of his 1991 John Locke Lectures. These lectures were published as: John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1994), in which the fourth lecture is entitled 'Reason and Nature', and is found at pp. 66–86.

[13] John McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, pp. 169–173.

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wrong, violating the principle of impartiality, operating according to a standard for itself that is different from that for others.

This example is meant to show that ethics cannot be grounded solely on first-natural facts. The dilemma at this juncture is: We want ethics to be grounded in some way in nature, yet if nature is that which the natural sciences make intelligible, then how can one consider ethics to be grounded in nature, since that has already been shown to be unsatisfactory? The alternatives seem to be either subjectivism or supernaturalism. Both are deeply unattractive. Subjectivism reduces ethics to the personal whim of the subject. Ethics grounded in some supra-natural realm reduces the justification of ethics to a mystery.

McDowell proposes a third possibility: that 'natural' be understood to incorporate the personal standpoint. The example he gives is that of colour.[14] We are able to correlate wavelengths of emitted light with colour, but cannot reduce one to the other. A description of red must be in phenomenological terms, as colour is intrinsically experiential. It cannot be reduced to primary properties such as length, since such properties do not pertain to the subject's experience and hence the subjective perspective. However, this failure of reduction does not result in mere subjectivism, since colour ascriptions can still be veridical. It follows that one should not understand the subjective/objective dichotomy along illusional/veridical lines, nor as mutually exclusive. For McDowell, 'natural' cannot be understood simply in terms of impersonal scientific reductionism. If it is conceded that the subjective perspective can be legitimately incorporated into the natural, then the possibility that an ethics that makes claims to being truth valued, whilst involving the subject's standpoint, could conceivably be established. This would require that the concept of nature allow the incorporation of capacities central to ethics such as reasons, understanding, meaning and intention.

In making a case for virtue as natural, as an example of second nature, McDowell is arguing that virtue is not something artificial, extrinsic to being human. However, there still is quite a challenge for McDowell. Like Aristotle, he holds that ethics is uncodifiable due to the degree of flexibility, responsiveness and adaptability ethical judgements require, and yet ethics can still make claims to objectivity.[15] Clearly, such an ethics is not amenable to a reduction to impersonal terms, but McDowell has still to give a positive account of what this objectivity might entail.

In *Mind and World* McDowell views human beings as both animal and rational, and so subject to 'the realm of law' and 'the space of

[14] John McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, pp. 110–29.
[15] John McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, pp. 50–73.

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reasons.' 'The realm of law' refers to the kind of explanation used in the natural sciences in terms of laws of nature. In contrast to this, 'the space of reasons' refers to the structure of beliefs and concepts, and the relationships between them (inference, justification, implication, *etc*.) Human beings, as physical creatures and having first nature, operate in the realm of law. Human beings, as rational creatures, also operate in the space of reasons. We can make inferences, use concepts and engage in justification.

The concepts of 'the realm of law' and 'the space of reasons' apply to human second nature if it emerges from the interaction of the realm of law due to our first natures, and the space of reasons due to our natural capacities for reasoning. The shaping of second nature depends on the person's first nature because the innate endowment of human nature puts a limit on the shape second nature can take.[16] Human reflection also takes into account the way the world is, and hence first-natural facts or "independent facts about the layout of the realm of law."[17] However, reasons arrived at by the use of second nature cannot be reconstructed from first-natural facts alone. For McDowell, the realm of law cannot be reduced to the space of reasons or *vice versa*.[18] This is what McDowell means when he claims that rationality operates in its own sphere.[19] Thus, the reasons the wolf endowed with *logos* would have for acting ethically, to pull its weight in the hunt, are not derivable solely from its first nature, even if its first nature is relevant to its ethical decisions. First nature is necessary, but not sufficient for the ethical; in contrast to this, a formed virtuous second nature is sufficient for the ethical. The virtuous person is one whose nature it is to act correctly in ethical matters and has reasons for doing so. As McDowell puts it: "Any second nature of the relevant kind, not just virtue, will seem to its possessor to open his eyes to reasons for acting. What is distinctive about virtue, in the Aristotelian view, is that the reasons a virtuous person takes himself to discern really are reasons; a virtuous person gets this kind of thing right."[20]

This 'getting things right' for McDowell requires the virtuous agent to have sensitivity to the ethically relevant variables of the situations he finds himself in. Given the range of these variables, acting virtuously is not amenable to codification. McDowell therefore holds that virtue ethics in terms of discrete virtues is inadequate, given the range of factors needed for correct ethical judgement. The

[16] John McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, p. 190.
[17] John McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 81.
[18] *C.f.* Maxmilian de Gaynesford, *John McDowell* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), pp. 64–66 for a very clear treatment of this issue.
[19] John McDowell, *Mind and World*, p. 85.
[20] John McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, p. 189.

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agent requires a number of virtues at any time. Thus, kindness as attentiveness to the feelings of others, will not always lead to right conduct if there is insufficient attention paid to, say, fairness or justice, which may require telling a person that he cannot have what he wants. This is why McDowell does not proceed by analysing 'the virtuous person' in terms of individual virtues, but a single "sensitivity."[21] Consistent with the classical tradition of virtue ethics, this sensitivity cannot be understood merely in cognitive terms, but as that which will affect the virtuous person's motivations: He acts because he is motivated by what he perceives due to his ethical sensitivity.

Rationality allows a conceptualisation of one's place in the world, and so enables a stepping back from any motivational impulse and a questioning of its rational credentials: "Thus it effects a kind of distancing of the agent from the practical tendencies that are part of what we might call its first nature."[22] This is a Neurathian scheme; like a sailor who overhauls his ship while it is afloat. This questioning may be radical, involving the abandonment of earlier ways of thinking, for new concepts. McDowell's talk of "sensitivity" implies that one has entered into such a relationship with the world. This is a process exhibited in ethical formation, the development of second nature. As is worthy of being considered a "nature," the virtuous person exhibits the stability that allows for ethical formation. This distinguishes him from the person who acts correctly, though in an unreliable and haphazard fashion. For McDowell, therefore, in speaking of virtue as second nature, he is recognising that virtue is an integral part of what the virtuous person is. His understanding of ethics is clearly consistent with the classical tradition of virtue ethics of Aristotle and Aquinas, which conceives of virtue in terms of habits: durable characteristics of the agent by which we act and live rightly.[23]

Looking Again at Kant: (I) maxims and the categorical imperative

The very first statement in the first chapter of Kant's *Groundwork* is agent-centred: "It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without

[21] *C.f.* John McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, p .53.
[22] John McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality*, p. 188.
[23] For example, *c.f.* Aristotle, *Categories* 8b28–9a4, and *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105a34–35, 1152a29–33; and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia IIae q.49 on the concept of 'habit', and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia IIae qq.55–6 on the concept of 'virtue'. Interestingly, in arguing that virtue be understood in terms of a single sensitivity, McDowell is also agreeing with Thomas Aquinas' controversial "unity of the virtues": that to fully possess a virtue, one must possess them all.

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qualification, except a good will."[24] Kant understands the good will as the will that wills to act from the motive of duty, with 'duty' defined as "the necessity to act out of reverence for the law."[25] Instead of that which helps bring happiness, the law that the good will follows is that of universalizability: acting in such a way "that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law."[26] This is the first formulation of the categorical imperative.

Even from such a brief outline of the beginning of Kant's ethical system, it can be seen how the traditional picture of Kant's ethics as a cold vision of the moral life, rigidly rule-governed and unable to do justice to the complexity of the agent's context, arose. Since happiness or well-being are not central to Kant's ethical formulations, one can see why he is often thought of as treating these as being of little concern. The charge of being rigidly rule-governed and being unable to do justice to the agent's context arises from the language of duty and universalizability, which seems to flatten out the particularities of individual lives and histories. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that maxims ignoring personal contexts as idiosyncratic or arbitrary as 'Always eat mussels on Mondays in March' pass Kant's universalisability test, since its universalisation does not involve inconsistency.[27]

However, Kant's conception of contradiction in ethical universalisation is much thicker than MacIntyre seems to be aware of. Kant has two sorts of contradiction in mind: contradiction in formulation (or conception) and contradiction in the will.[28] Contradiction in conception arises when we attempt to universalise a maxim and this leads to conceptual contradiction if we adopt the maxim. 'Always eat mussels on Mondays in March' is conceptually consistent and passes the contradiction in formulation test. Contradiction in the will occurs when attempts are made to universalise a maxim that cannot be rationally willed. 'Always eat mussels on Monday in March' fails this second test. To insist that one eat mussels on Mondays in March would be to insist that others be subject to arbitrary laws, which would not be consistent with the desire that they be available for other activities on Mondays in March. In O'Neill's terms, maxims that cannot be volitionally willed as universal laws do not meet the standards of rationality specified by the "Principles of Rational Intending."[29] These are principles arising from the nature of intending that must be followed in order that the intending be coherent. Examples are Kant's principle of hypothetical imperatives, that he who

[24] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork*, 393.
[25] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork*, 400.
[26] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork*, 402.
[27] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 44–45.
[28] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork*, 421–5.
[29] Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, pp. 91, 98.

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wills a specific end must also will any indispensable means to the end; and, that the various specific intentions we adopt in acting on a given maxim in a certain context be mutually consistent.[30] Rational willing requires taking into consideration the bigger picture or context, going beyond looking at acts in atomistic terms. In rejoinder to traditional criticisms of Kant, this is to take into account the context of the agent, the kind of person he is and the situation he finds himself in.

Kant defines 'maxim' in a footnote as "the subjective principle of volition."[31] This is ambiguous, and is not much expanded upon by Kant. On traditional readings, a maxim is a principle to be acted on, some intention. This neglects what is implied in the contradiction in the will test; the maxim must in some way also contain the reason for acting.[32] One needs to furnish a reason in order to stipulate rightly that one must eat mussels on Mondays in March. In O'Neill's definition, maxims are: "those underlying principles or intentions by which we guide and control our more specific intentions."[33] If this reading is right, then there are strong reasons for regarding Kant's ethics as being much closer to virtue ethics than is usually supposed. Our underlying intentions are closely related to the lives we lead and the sorts of persons we are.

O'Neill gives two arguments in support of her interpretation of maxims. First: the intentions we are most likely to be aware of are those for the future, intentions that would underlie our acts. Yet Kant insists that agents can never know for sure what their real intentions are, even though some knowledge of maxims is needed to carry out contradiction tests.[34] Second: Kant holds that, apart from mere reflex actions, we always act on a maxim, even in the case of unplanned, negligent, absent-minded acts. To illustrate her point, O'Neill gives the example of giving a visitor a cup of coffee to make her feel welcome: "The specific intention of offering and making coffee was subordinate to the maxim of making the visitor welcome . . . In another context, for example, in a society where an offer of coffee would be understood as we would understand an offer of hemlock, the same or similar specific intentions might have implemented a maxim of making unwelcome."[35]

[30] Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, p. 92. This is the fourth of five Principles of Rational Intending O'Neill gives.

[31] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork* 400n.

[32] *Cf.* Christine Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, p. 13.

[33] Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, p. 84.

[34] Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, p. 151.

[35] Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, p. 84. *C.f.* p. 151. However, O'Neill is not claiming that maxims are always long term intentions. They can also be short term in nature: *c.f.* Robert B. Louden, 'Kant's Virtue Ethics', in Daniel Statman ed., *Virtue Ethics: a Critical Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 290–2. She expresses this in: "Underlying intentions to a *considerable extent* express the larger and long-term goals, policies and aspirations of a life." (Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, p. 92. Italics added.)

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If maxims are underlying intentions, then their correct implementation requires of the follower of kantian ethics sensitivity to the context of his actions comparable to that required of the follower of virtue ethics. The charge that kantian ethics is rigidly rule-governed seems misplaced. Indeed, it can be plausibly claimed it is no more codifiable than virtue ethics. As O'Neill puts it, "For the very fact that underlying principles must be acted on in ways that reflect specific situations and institutions suggests that we may not be able to generate any rules of action that are morally required regardless of context."[36] Similarly, if maxims are underlying intentions, then the wider goals, policies and aspirations of life are incorporated into the decision-making of the follower of kantian ethics, just as in the case of virtue ethics. In McDowell's understanding of virtue ethics, the agent must sometimes step back from his immediate motivational impulses and examine their rational credentials. This requires some degree of self-analysis, which in turn requires an analysis of one's perspective, which includes one's wider goals, policies and aspirations. Kantian ethics and virtue ethics seem concerned to a comparable degree with issues of sensitivity to the variables of the immediate and wider contexts the agent finds himself in.

McDowell's conclusion, that first nature is insufficient to ground ethics, was premised on the position that an agent (*e.g.* a wolf with *logos*), in making itself an exception, and thereby violating impartiality, is morally wrong in so doing. Upholding impartiality is also one of the key aims of the categorical imperative, and is typically seen as a central plank of kantian ethics. As O'Neill puts it: "The intuitive idea behind the thought that a universality test can provide a criterion of moral acceptability may be expressed quite simply as the thought that if we are to act as morally worthy beings, we ought not single ourselves out for special consideration or treatment."[37] This is not to be understood as stipulating that all people be treated in precisely the same fashion. The acts towards each person may vary. It is the standards, rather than the particular acts, that remain constant. Treating people with impartiality might require taking each person's case individually and evaluating it with the same standards applied to others. This kind of evaluation requires sensitivity to contextual variables. The criticism that kantian ethics, with its emphasis on universalizability and impartiality, does not do justice to the differences between persons and cases now appears considerably weakened.

[36] Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, p. 153.
[37] Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, p. 94.

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Looking again at Kant: (II) examples of acting in conformity with duty and acting from the motive of duty

It could be claimed that even if the above argument gives good reasons for accepting that kantian ethics is much closer to virtue ethics than is commonly supposed, it still does not address what may be fatal objections to this position: the examples Kant gives in the *Groundwork* of the three philanthropists.[38] These appear not only to sharply distance kantian ethics from virtue ethics, but seem to make Kant positively opposed to it.

The example Kant discusses first is the sympathetic philanthropist, who acts in conformity with duty, but not from the motive of duty:

> "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 and can take delight in the contentment of others as their own work. Yet I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however right and however amiable it may be, has still no genuinely moral worth."[39]

Kant seems to go against a fundamental principle of virtue ethics in this passage. A person who has acquired virtue finds it less difficult, not more, to act rightly. Yet Kant seems to say the opposite: the more difficult the good act for the person, the more we should esteem him. For Kant, it would seem, the generous act of the virtuous person has "no genuinely moral worth." We should, on this reading, have higher regard for the reluctant donation of the miser than for the kindness of the generous person.

It is easily seen how Kant's regrettable mode of expression has aided such a misreading. What Kant is countering is not virtue ethics, but moral sense theories, such as those of Hutcheson and Hume, that identify motives for acting morally with natural feelings, such as sympathy. For Kant, as for Aristotle, Aquinas and McDowell, virtue is rational and not principally dependent on the emotions. McDowell thinks the virtuous person acts virtuously because he possesses reason. Emotions, for Kant, are unreliable as sources of right action, a position with which a virtue ethicist need not wholly disagree. McDowell, for instance, is clear that virtue requires much cultivation and surveillance of the sources of motivation.

Nothing implies, however, that Kant is against the cultivation of emotions that *accord* with right action. Kant's "moral worth" is a term of art with a specific meaning and purpose: "It [the sympathetic philanthropist's action] stands on the same footing as other inclinations – for example, the inclination for honour, which if

[38] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork*, 397–9.
[39] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork*, 398.

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fortunate enough to hit on something beneficial and right and consequently honourable, deserves praise and encouragement, but not esteem."[40] Kant is not disparaging the desire for honour (it "deserves praise and encouragement"). We have, however, a special regard, referred to by Kant as "esteem," for those who act out of duty. In Kant's usage, the terms "moral" and "moral worth" refer to the special degree of positive estimation that merits esteem. Only acts from the motive of duty rightly elicit this. This is not at odds with virtue ethics. The virtuous act is one carried out because the agent in question has reasons for doing so, reasons whose putting into effect are strengthened by accompanying inclinations. If a person acts rightly solely from the motive of giving himself satisfaction, then his action is neither virtuous nor worthy of esteem.

The second philanthropist is the man "overclouded by sorrows of his own which extinguished all sympathy with the fate of others, but that he still had power to help those in distress, though no longer stirred by the need of others because sufficiently occupied with his own."[41] Yet, only if he tears himself away from his concerns and helps those in distress for the sake of duty alone, does his action have genuine moral worth. His action is not only in conformity with duty, but from the motive of duty. Again, Kant is not saying anything at odds with virtue ethics. Kant is not saying that the extinction of sympathy due to his sorrows is a good thing. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*[42] Kant states that we have a duty to cultivate love, sympathy and other inclinations that make our duties easier to carry out. In *The End of All Things* the highest compliment he pays Christianity is that it cultivates feelings of love in people in a way that promotes the observance of moral duty.[43]

The examples of the first and second philanthropists clarify an important point in virtue ethics. As Philippa Foot puts it: "we both are and are not inclined to think that the harder a man finds it to act virtuously the more virtue he shows if he acts well. For on the one hand great virtue is needed where it is particularly hard to act virtuously; yet on the other it could be argued that difficulty in acting virtuously shows that the agent is imperfect in virtue".[44] The "solution" to this is simple. What makes it hard for the virtuous person to act well is not due to his character, but to the circumstances he finds himself in. In such cases the harder it is for him, the more virtue he shows. Similarly, all other things being equal, the more virtuous he is, the easier it is for him to act well.

[40] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwor*k, 398.
[41] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork*, 398.
[42] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 402, 456–7.
[43] Immanuel Kant, *The End of All Things*, 338–339.
[44] Philippa Foot, 'Virtues and Vices', in *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), p. 10. *C.f.* Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics*, p. 94.

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Correct action is more difficult for the second philanthropist, and so his action shows greater moral worth. It is a caricature to regard his action as performed grudgingly,[45] after all, Kant famously holds that actions done with a "slavish frame of mind" and a temperament that is "fear-ridden and dejected" always involve a "hidden hatred of the law."[46]

The points made regarding the second philanthropist also apply to the third philanthropist, the man "cold in temperament and indifferent to the sufferings of others,"[47] who, Kant claims, shows moral worth most clearly when he acts rightly. The motivations (and hence maxims) for his actions are especially clear and unambiguous. Such clarity, according to Kant, is generally absent from real life. In the second and third examples the presence of inclinations not to act rightly makes it simpler to ascribe right motives, from duty to do what is right because it is right.[48] O'Neill expresses the issue thus:

> "If maxims are underlying principles . . . , it is clear enough why Kant should have thought it difficult to tell on what maxim a given act is performed. For a given outward performance might be ancillary to more than one underlying maxim. The action that seems disinterestedly helpful may be performed for the sake of a good reputation. Kant often proposes that isolation tests – such as asking "Would I have done it if nobody had known? – can help us to know what the maxim of an act is. But such tests are not decisive when they appeal to counterfactual possibilities, given that the consciousness of agents is not transparent."[49]

Conclusion: Differences Regarding Human Nature

Virtue ethics is explicitly agent-centred, entailing the formation and sustaining of virtuous character, or, in McDowell's terms, virtuous second nature. Human nature must be such as to facilitate this. Kant, however, is famously sceptical about the goodness of human nature, not only on epistemological grounds, such as the opacity of human motivation, but from a negative estimation of it. "From such warped wood as that which man is made of," he tells us, "nothing straight can be constructed".[50]

[45] Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, p. 37.

[46] Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 24n. *C.f.* Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, pp. 28–9, 38. Wood argues that the second philanthropist may even have acted from love. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, 399–401, Kant argues the very un-Humean point that philanthropic love is not an inclination, since 'inclination' refers to empirical desire. Instead it is a feeling produced by pure reason acting on our sensibility. The second philanthropist would have shown love of this philanthropic kind.

[47] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork*, 398.

[48] *C.f.* Robert B. Louden, 'Kant's Virtue Ethics', p. 296.

[49] Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, p. 152.

[50] Immanuel Kant, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, proposition 6, trans. H.B. Nisbet in Hans Reiss ed., *Kant's Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

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Kant does not have enough trust in human nature to base his ethics upon it. Indeed, the unsympathetic temperament of the third philanthropist seems to preclude virtue, and yet Kant esteems him. Kantian ethics seems not to require virtuous character.

This negative conclusion, however, is too hasty. It overlooks the fact that kantian ethics requires of the moral agent a sensitivity to ethically relevant contextual variables, a sensitivity that is not reducible to codifiable rules of action. This sensitivity is also required of the follower of kantian ethics, just as of the follower of virtue ethics, for moral decision-making, such as the correct implementation of the principle of impartiality. The sensitivity required of the follower of kantian ethics is therefore comparable to that of the virtuous person. There are then strong grounds for claiming that for Kant there must be a sufficient degree of stability in a person's nature and powers of reason to be able to attain and maintain this sensitivity. This is the formation and sustaining of the agent's character. Since character is needed for the exercise of sensitivity to ethically relevant contextual variables, character must have an important role in moral decision-making in kantian ethics.

Christine Korsgaard argues that the consistency tests of the categorical imperative support the formation and sustaining of ethical character by emphasising consistency in actions, and thereby the unity of the agent. An agent who consistently wills inconsistently is considered to be: "not one person, but a series, a *mere heap*, of unrelated impulses. There is no difference between someone who has a particularistic will and someone who has no will at all. Particularistic willing lacks a subject, a person who is the cause of these actions."[51] If this is so, then the categorical imperative, despite making no reference to human nature or the moulding of the agent, may in fact provide a necessary condition for the formation of moral agents and the sustaining of ethical character. However, since Kant holds, unlike Hume, that reason without passions is able to motivate, we can speak of 'the reasoning part of character' in kantian ethics. This is the agent's character without reference to its emotional aspect. The importance of character in kantian ethics might therefore be only with respect to character in this limited sense. The reasoning part of character enables the agent to be sensitive to ethically relevant contextual variables and to make right decisions where the absence of supporting inclinations is, in effect, part of the circumstances he finds himself in. The third philanthropist is a case in point.

However, this qualified positive conclusion overlooks an important alternative. Classical virtue ethics assumes that human nature can be shaped through habituation into virtuous ways of

[51] Christine Korsgaard, *Self Constitution: Agency, Identity and Integrity*, Lecture II, p. 24.

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behaving, which become stable habits, and where the affective motivational structure of the person is moulded in accordance with virtue. Kantian ethics is in no way committed to saying that this cannot be the case, and in the example of the sympathetic philanthropist Kant accepts that motivational shaping can, and ideally should, take place. Indeed, Kant's definition of virtue as "the moral strength of a human being's will in fulfilling his duty,"[52] whilst a construal of virtue as overcoming inclinations rather than in shaping them, is perfectly compatible with the case where the inclinations have been moulded. Therefore, if a virtue ethics anthropology, an anthropology that allows for the shaping of the inclinations to the extent that they can be considered habits, is accepted, then the qualification that such shaping involves only the reasoning part of character, and not its emotional aspect, does not apply.

In this case kantian ethics promotes and sustains the same sort of character as virtue ethics, as well as giving it a similarly important role in decision-making. However, in not assuming a virtue ethics anthropology, kantian ethics also addresses the situation where the kind or degree of emotional development that virtue ethics assumes is absent. Kant has thus provided an ethical approach that not only dovetails very closely with virtue ethics, but also complements it. Therefore, just as proponents of kantian ethics have become increasingly aware of the many virtues of virtue ethics, so virtue ethicists, for their part, should respond in kind.

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[52] Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 405, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); see also *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 394.

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