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Herman on Moral Literacy

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Abstract

In her recent book, Barbara Herman explores a range of topics commonly associated with virtue ethics; her focus, however, is not so much on virtue as on normal moral competence and the basic moral capacity underpinning it. To explicate this competence, Herman introduces the idea of moral literacy, arguing that it reveals Kantian ethical thought to be better able than Humean views to account for our readiness to hold persons responsible even for conduct reflecting character flaws that stem from deficiencies in their upbringing. Examination of Herman's account raises a question, however, about how intimately moral literacy is related to the basic moral capacity.

1

In her first published collection, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, Barbara Herman described herself as working on two related fronts, as seeking both to liberate Kant's ethics from the captivity in which his critics have long kept it, and also to approach it in a way that enables us to appreciate its theoretical power and fertility.[1] Rejecting the familiar depiction of Kant as the textbook deontologist, the classical exponent of morality conceived as a rigid system of rules of right conduct, Herman located a value at the centre of his thinking – the value of persons' rational nature as an end in itself – and developed an account of moral reasoning as deliberative rather than deductive, emphasizing the role of moral judgement, through which this supreme value can be respected and promoted in ways that are sensitive to particular moral saliencies of personal, social and historical circumstance, and that draw on motivational sources rooted in these particular conditions.

In offering us this account, Herman has done about as much for anglophone philosophy as anyone else I can think of to rescue Kant's ethics from the grip of two centuries of misconception. In focusing on the questions of judgement and motivation, she squarely addressed the

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familiar difficulties – too familiar to need rehearsing here – that generations of readers encountered in their engagement with Kant. Facing these questions head-on, Herman offered, under the heading of 'middle theory', a detailed treatment of moral judgement and the conditions of its exercise and cultivation. In addition, she outlined ways in which Kant's moral motive of duty can operate as a backstop, leaving scope for the involvement of motives having a more local provenance, in particular projects and attachments.

In her new collection, *Moral Literacy*,[2] Herman deepens and expands her exploration of the themes of her earlier essays, as she continues, with extraordinary originality and insight, to help us gain access to Kant's ethics even as she leads us down from its austere heights and extends her researches into territory well beyond the ambit of Kant's own thinking. As the title indicates, at the centre of this new work is the idea of moral literacy, under which Herman further elaborates her deliberative account of moral reasoning and the treatment of motivational issues she began in the earlier essays. Herman also throws much interpretative light on numerous facets of Kant's ethical thought, including his views on moral education, on pleasure and value, and on the will, and she offers a wide-ranging account of the obligatory ends that flow from the central value of rational agency. Running through much of this recent work, and intimately bound up with Herman's interest in issues relating to judgement and motivation, is a probing examination of moral character, which explores the stresses to which it is subject and the psychological and social factors that may foster its development or contribute to its deformity.

2

From what I have said so far, it might sound as though Herman is in the business of dressing Kant up as a virtue ethicist.[3] Her contention that Kant's ethics is not deontological, but organized around a fundamental value, and her preoccupation with deliberation, with judgement and perception of morally salient particulars, with motivational harmony, and with character – all of this might suggest a programme of putting virtue at the centre of ethical concern. Various things might of course be meant by the label 'virtue ethics'. But it would surely be going too far to assimilate Kant's ethics to classical virtue ethics as standardly understood. The classical approach begins with a conception of the ideal for human practical life, figuring as a sort of pattern or target for practical reflection – the virtuous flourishing human being, living in a well-ordered

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and prosperous society. Kant on the other hand does not begin his *Groundwork* with an account of virtue.[4] He starts with 'common moral rational knowledge', and after the brief exposition of the goodness of the good will, he focuses on the ordinary concept of duty. A noteworthy feature of this starting point that can get lost in the glare of Kant's celebration of the good will is that it represents morality as a shared body of knowledge already alive and at work, binding us together in – indeed constituting us as members of – a common moral social world. It is knowledge we all have together of how we are all to live together. Kant does not describe it in quite those terms, but that is where he starts, and it is the very place where he ends, namely the kingdom of ends, but represented prephilosophically, obscurely and *in concreto*, in the consciousness of duty.

But for Herman and for Herman's Kant too ethics starts, not with an end to be achieved, but with our shared understanding of the rule or principle we are to live by, a principle on which we are to rely even in framing an end for ourselves. Practical reflection begins with a principle and proceeds, in accordance with it, to the articulation of an end – the formal end of rational agency in the first instance, but ultimately the full array of obligatory ends, united together in a social ideal. The categorical imperative, she notes, 'has the form of a social order' (p. 54). Thus, while Herman's claim that moral principle expresses the value of rational agency on which our obligatory ends rest separates her Kantian view from textbook deontology, her insistence on the role that principle and law play in our very framing of ends for ourselves distinguishes it from the textbook teleology commonly associated with eudaimonist virtue ethics.

That Herman's Kantianism is no virtue ethics in the classical sense is also reflected in the distinctive *way* in which she engages the subjects of character, perception, and motivation. It is a striking feature of her recent work on these topics that it approaches them not so much with an eye to the traditional ideal of virtue as from a concern with the underpinnings and the makeup of normal moral character, character that rests on the everyday moral competence that we expect of one another, and of everyone who receives a more or less decent upbringing – a condition requiring moral literacy, but not moral virtuosity. This attention to the ordinary and the normal is another indication that Herman retains the Kantian focus on the common moral subject, situated in a moral community of persons educated into a shared understanding of obligation. And what particularly distinguishes her

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work from that of other leading Kantian ethicists is the level of specificity at which she explores this shared understanding, the territory of what she has called 'middle theory', lying between the high-level abstraction of Kant's investigation of morality's principle and the ground-level application of moral knowledge in the concrete individual case – between our general recognition of the respect due to persons as ends in themselves and the recognition, say, that I need to step to the side now to let this woman pass. Within this region lies a broad range of specific moral knowledge that is rule-like in character and in a presumptive way shapes our moral deliberation – knowledge that you should not lie or deceive, or take what is not yours, or cut in line, or interrupt others when they are speaking; that you should keep your promises, return lost articles to their owners; that if what you are doing is causing someone pain, you should stop, and if you have more than enough, share with those in need. One does not need to be virtuous to understand these things and to know, for a wide range of normal cases, how to apply and to act in accordance with them.

3

The main idea Herman introduces to explicate this understanding is the notion of moral literacy. But before going into that, I would like to return to the point I touched on at the outset by saying a word or two about Herman's move into this mid-level philosophical territory. At first sight, it can look like a defensive move, a mere reaction. Kantian ethics comes under fire from various directions, but perhaps especially from Aristotelian and Humean quarters.[5] Since so much of what comes in for discussion in ethics lies in this middle territory, where Kantian doctrine seems to fall silent, critics from these schools naturally tend to converge in their dissatisfaction, on the one hand expressing scepticism about the high-level theory – the formalism – and on the other deploring the lack of a plausible and realistic account of the moral thought we find exercised in the middle region. In entering this breach, Herman thus appears to be responding to the latter prong of criticism, showing that Kantian theory can do justice to the local, empirically varied terrain and negotiate the forest of thick ethical concepts. And indeed she is. This is part of what she has in mind in presenting herself as rescuing Kant from his critics.

But there is another thing Herman is doing in venturing into middle theory, a thrust to complement her parry. She is in effect saying to the critics: yes, let the phenomena in. But *really* let them in. Phenomena, as we know, are in time, so to appreciate them we need to appreciate their

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temporal dimension, their dynamic aspect. And to comprehend this temporality in its full range, we need to consider it both in the individual and also at the level of society and its institutions. In the individual, we must attend to the dynamic of moral education and character development. At the societal level, we need to consider changes in moral practice that arise through the emergence of what Herman calls 'new moral facts', developments such as claims on behalf of the environment, and injuries in the areas of gender, race and cultural relations. When we do this, Herman argues, we discover a surprising theoretical power latent in Kantian ethical thought, a potential that in significant ways outstrips that of the rival approaches favoured by the very critics who attack Kantian ethics for its rationalism and formalism. Herman observes that the Humean insistence that reasons must be internal, or traceable to the motivational resources afforded by a person's 'subjective set', rests on motivational considerations that confine their attention to the 'however-formed' adult. This restriction betrays a blindness to the possibility that, at least in the case of individuals with the normal moral literacy that a more or less decent upbringing provides, we are entitled to expect them to have a moral motive and sufficient moral competence to address, or at least to cope with, character deficiencies that trace to flaws and vagaries of their moral education (for instance by at least trying to avoid situations that might trigger action they know would be wrong). The friends of Aristotle tend to be more attentive than Humeans are to the moral importance of upbringing, but their approach appears to face challenges too when we consider the forces exerted on moral practice by changes in material conditions – economic, technological, demographic and the like. The emergence of new moral facts puts pressure on Aristotelian accounts, which have offered little in the way of an internally accessible critical standpoint from which local practices and traditions can be evaluated. At both levels – individual and societal – the Kantian approach has an advantage to the extent that, by drawing on the idea of moral literacy, it can throw light on the relation that our empirically contingent practices bear to the basic idea and value of rational agency. Such elucidation makes it possible for us, as moral philosophers, to see how it can be possible for us, as moral agents, to provide for ourselves a reference point enabling us, together, not only to negotiate the more or less familiar local terrain of everyday moral knowledge, but also to find our way both in circumstances where, as individuals, we come to see that our own character fails us, and in situations where, as a society, we find that our institutions and practices contain no explicit and adequate guidance in the face of the new moral facts that challenge them.

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But aside from this aim of showing that when the phenomena are let in the theoretical power of the Kantian approach can be displayed to good advantage in comparison with the systems of its critics, Herman has a keen interest in middle theory in its own right. In what follows I will concentrate on the idea of moral literacy, which lies at the centre of her work in this area.[6] Herman advances this idea as a 'moral-theoretic resource' that can help us manage the gap we face between what we expect of one another as ordinary moral agents and the various deformities of normal character that we are familiar with from everyday practical life. These deformities may trace to the particular conditions in which a given individual was raised or to the broader social environment. But as defects in normal character, they are not deficiencies of the sort that would place an agent beyond the pale of accountability. We hold persons responsible for the actions reflecting such flaws, even while acknowledging that, in a sense, they could not help but do them.

So what is moral literacy and how does it help us in our thinking here? Herman introduces the idea of literacy partly to change the terms in which we think about conditions of responsibility, drawing us away from talk of motives (desires and the other elements in the agent's subjective set) and towards consideration of competence and capacity. It can certainly be appropriate to consider motives when we try (as in a court of law) to determine who was responsible for some deed, who did it; but when we have settled that question and are deciding whether to hold the agent responsible, questions of competence come to the fore. The competence of interest here – moral competence, the competence of moral agency – is an acquired capacity, one of the fruits of culture, not something we are born with, and in this regard it resembles linguistic competence. Language is a very early development, of course; already in early childhood we gain a mastery of speech. Herman focuses on literacy rather than speech, it seems, because it better fits with her interest in *adult* moral competency and its connection with responsibility.

I will start here, where Herman does, with literacy in the 'literal' sense, the 'reading and writing' sense. It is significant that this capacity embraces these two related skills – reading and writing. Literacy is a two-sided competency distinctive not only on account of having, loosely speaking, both a 'theoretical' and a 'practical' aspect, in that it includes formal (i.e. symbol-involving) functions of intake and output, but also because these functions are interdependent, indeed interdependent

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in a specific way, in that, as particular types of the forms of giving and receiving essential to communication, they stand in an inverse yet complementary relation to one another. Every reading is of something that has been written, and every writing is of something that might be read.[7] Now it is perhaps not entirely clear that Herman intends this two-sided structure of interdependence, since she is drawing on our tendency to use the term 'literacy' in an extended, metaphorical way, which yields a somewhat diffuse and irregular array of literacies, including musical literacy, scientific literacy and a good many others. But she offers a general characterization of these as 'learned capabilities or skills, having to do with the acquisition and use of knowledge' (p. 79), and she says that in the idea of literacy 'epistemic access and symbolic production (knowledge and action) are joined' (p. 80). These points highlight the cognitive and communicative dimension of literacy. So I believe we can safely take it that she is thinking of a competency involving the double and interdependent functionality I just noted. And in fact the familiar extended uses do seem pretty consistently to implicate this two-sided capacity. 'Media literacy', for instance, and E. D. Hirsch's 'cultural literacy' seem each to signify a specific capacity to acquire knowledge, usually from others rather than on one's own, and to communicate it. Some of our extended uses, however, point to something more, beyond a two-sided communicative capacity, namely a certain skill in action, often technical or productive in nature. Think, for instance, of computer literacy, financial literacy and health literacy. And some literacies seem to involve, more specifically, a two-sided interactive capacity. Financial literacy, for instance, involves the financially informed capacity to buy and to sell. Herman's own example – musical literacy – is a complicated case and seems to have distinguishable forms. In one sense (call it the 'music appreciation' sense), it is not required for musical literacy that a person be able to hold a tune or to play a musical instrument, much less be able to read a score or have any training in composition; an informed capacity to appreciate music in a well-listened music-lover is enough, along with some ability to understand and to contribute to informed discourse about music. But there is another, more literal sense (call it the 'music-making' sense), in which musical literacy involves not only the ability to appreciate but also the ability to understand and to work with a score (at least to read music if not also to write or compose it[8]) and perhaps some performance skill as well.

Let us turn now to the idea of moral literacy. As Herman presents it, moral literacy is somewhat like musical literacy in the 'music-making'

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sense, in that it involves more than just the cognitive and communicative dimension belonging to literal literacy. It has a distinctive practical character: in addition to the two-sided capacity to communicate (exercised in giving and acknowledging reasons, in joint deliberation, in moral criticism, and so forth), it includes a two-sided capacity exercised in choice and action, a capacity with material functions of intake and output, recognition and response. It includes, that is to say, a capacity embracing both the ability to read or interpret one's situation in a way that is sensitive to its morally salient factors and the capacity to act appropriately in the light of that interpretation (pp. 80, 97–8).

Now as I have just described it, Herman's idea of moral literacy may seem, in respect of the second of the two two-sided capacities I just distinguished, to bear only a rather imperfect analogy to the notion of literacy. Moral literacy involves a capacity to act, but at first glance there does not seem to be anything that stands over against acting in the way that reading stands over against writing. Moral literacy does include the capacity to read one's situation, and that capacity will involve the ability to read actions and their effects, but for obvious reasons Herman is thinking of this capacity as enabling us to read much else besides – for instance, certain facts about our biological makeup and our natural environment, enabling us to see, say, that this person is sick and needs help. But I think Herman's analogy is tighter than it may at first appear to be. If we think of the 'object' of moral literacy as our shared social world (just as we might take the 'object' of musical literacy in the 'music-making' sense to be music), then we can think of the capacity as the two-sided competency of understanding and forming that world. All the literate members of this world share the capacity to understand and appreciate it, and all of them likewise contribute to sustaining and shaping it through their conduct. And indeed Herman does suggest that moral literacy includes 'agents' articulated grasp of their social world' as well as 'norms of correctness for choice and action' (p. ix).[9] On this understanding, the inverse complementarity of the material functions is recovered: were there no moral agents, there would be no social world to understand; and had these agents no capacity to understand, to read, neither could they have the capacity to bring about an intelligible social world.

To bring this abstract representation down a bit closer to earth, we might describe moral literacy as a practical understanding of one's socially constituted moral environment. It enables deliberative navigation through one's moral-social setting. Transacting the business of

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everyday morality will have its moments of awkwardness, confusion and difficulty, even for the best of us. But persons with a reasonably well-developed capacity of moral literacy will in general be able to make ethical sense of their moral environment. This need not be a philosophically articulate appreciation, but it will be a sort of communicable practical understanding, not just of how things work, but of the moral point and intelligibility of the practices of one's moral community, an understanding of their rationale that first enables one to discern superficially not-so-obvious respects in which those practices may be oppressive or otherwise deficient. This capacity for understanding rests in the ability to appreciate the practices as imperfect expressions of moral principle and the value of rational agency it encodes.

I have described this literacy as a 'practical understanding' with an eye to Herman's thought that it finds its basis in the original moral capacity, a primitive practically efficacious understanding of persons (as distinct from mere things) and the status they have as beings to whom moral claims can be attached. But Herman is thinking of moral literacy as a capacity that, in the first instance, is wholly practical, an ability to find one's way about in, and to be morally at home in, one's moral-social environment. As a form of literacy, it is not itself a body of knowledge or fund of acquired information. It is rather a competency or skill, the know-how by which one can acquire and use the body of moral knowledge available to and shared by the literate members of one's moral culture.[10] Later I will return to this idea of literacy as skill.

5

As I noted earlier, Herman argues that by drawing on the idea of moral literacy, a Kantian approach can do a better job than standard Humean views can of accounting for our practice of holding persons responsible for conduct reflecting deficiencies in character that spring from a flawed yet still more or less decent upbringing. How does moral literacy help?

To fix ideas, Herman asks us to imagine a person who, as a child, is caused by his 'neurotic and psychologically abusive parents' to have 'a disposition to casual cruelty toward intimates' in the form of 'a demand for trust followed by covert betrayal'; as an adult, this person 'seeks and betrays intimacy', repeating the pattern of childhood abuse, and though he 'is forever at a loss about how things can go so wrong', he 'also gets unacknowledged pleasure in the distress he orchestrates' (p. 92). This 'manipulative abuser' is 'morally deformed', but in a 'limited or selective'

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way; he is 'normal enough': 'We can imagine saying to him: "Don't be cruel!"' and 'we feel no compunction in holding him responsible for actions that he in some sense cannot help' (pp. 92, 98).

Herman makes several points in discussing this case. One of them is a negative claim directed against a 'passive moral theory' such as a latter-day Humean might offer. She observes that a passive theory, with its attention confined to the 'however-formed' adult, will tempt us to regard the abuser's failure as exhibiting no more than weakness in his attachment to morality, the sort of weakness that could also be reflected in a moral lapse stemming from the compulsive force of some more or less benign obsession, whereas in fact we hold the abuser responsible for more, specifically for the cruelty revealed by the pleasure he takes in his action.

What I want to focus on, however, is Herman's positive explanation of how moral literacy helps us understand our attitude towards this individual and his abusive behaviour. She structures her explanation around two points (p. 94). The first draws on the limited or selective nature of the cruelty. Across the greater part of his dealings with others, the casual abuser is 'routinely moral': 'He is not aggressive; he probably keeps promises and tells the truth most of the time; he may even be impersonally beneficent.' This routine moral conduct evinces his moral literacy (p. 98). Her second point is that the pleasure the abuser takes in his cruel actions enables us to see them as 'flowing from his conception of the good' and hence as 'fully his'. The abuser cannot be seen as acting under the influence of a desire that originates outside his evaluative capacity, merely giving in to it out of weakness, as he might succumb to a compulsive obsession; it is rather the successful exercise of his own agency in which he delights. What pleases him is his achievement of his own aim.

Now taken by themselves, these two points do not give us all we need. The first concerns the routine cases, which evince general moral literacy; the second focuses on the special cases of abuse, where the abuser's delight in his cruelty shows the abusive actions to be his own. In order to make sense of our readiness to hold the abuser morally responsible, we need to bring the two points together, by supposing that the moral literacy evinced in the routine cases reveals that moral competency belongs to the man himself, as something essential. Now I think that Herman is in fact supposing that moral literacy does this; some of what she says elsewhere strongly suggests as much. In particular, she maintains (i) that we need to understand moral literacy as

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expressive of a *single* basic moral capacity,[11] and further (ii) that this capacity is 'not merely something that enters into the balance of reasons, but is instead part of the structure of the agent's reasons in general' (p. 23). Insofar as this single capacity belongs to the very structure of an agent's reasons in general, it cannot be separated from the rationality that belongs to this agent's constitution as a person. Thus, the abuser's routine moral conduct reveals his standing as a person, a subject who acts for reasons, being constituted by a capacity for evaluative judgements that includes in its very structure the basic moral capacity. Since this capacity belongs to his constitution as a person, actions that follow from its exercise spring from him himself, and conversely we must likewise regard the actions that are properly his as under his deliberative control and, so to speak, within his sphere of responsibility, his moral competence.

6

When Herman's two points are connected in the way I have just described, they afford what strikes me as a compelling explanation of our judgement about this case, clearly exhibiting the contribution made by the idea of moral literacy. But I now want to consider a different sort of case, which seems not to allow an explanation along such lines. Not because it is more complicated; it is simpler in a sense and more familiar. Nor do I regard it as one that Herman's approach is unable to handle. But it will need to be treated differently and so may help bring her idea of moral literacy into clearer view by furnishing a different perspective on it.

Herman's example presents us with a character defect that is, in a rough sense, the reverse of what we commonsensically think of as the typical flaw. What people commonly 'expect' is that people will treat their intimates with a relatively high level of moral regard and concern, and that this attitude will tend to erode as their dealings extend to persons more remotely related to them. They trust their friends, but are suspicious of strangers. Herman's abuser, in contrast, is at his best when dealing with strangers and mere acquaintances; it is those close to him whom he is most prone to mistreat.[12]

This comparison returns us to the sort of character flaw that has received by far the greater bulk of attention throughout the history of ethics as well as within Kant's own thinking. It is not a limited or selective deformity, but rather a global distortion stemming from the

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gravitational effect self-love has on practical deliberation, a pull that becomes stronger the more closely one's own interests are touched, and that provides correspondingly less supplemental motivational support to the moral motive where those who one sees would be affected by one's contemplated action are more distantly or weakly related to oneself. Nor is this force to be conceived merely as arising from a source outside character and deliberation (a massive natural obsession, as it were). The defect does not boil down to mere weakness in attachment to morality. The distortion is in the evaluative judging itself and is incorporated into one's conception of the good.

Now since our social world is, as we all know, organized through a system of laws and norms supported by a variety of sanctions that speak to the interests of self-love, a character defective in the way I just described will, even in a person of moderate intelligence, express itself in a wide range of normal cases through actions that, when viewed from the outside, resemble the actions of a person of good character, which directly or indirectly express the moral motive. Social sanctions accordingly introduce, across the range of normal cases, the possibility of a redundancy of motivational support for actions that, viewed from the outside, are of the sort that a person of good character would do anyway. A space thus opens up, and in this space we confront the classical figure of vice: a person – Hume's sensible knave, perhaps, or one of the scoundrels Kant occasionally mentions – whose character is formed on a maxim of personal advantage, possibly but not necessarily intensified and organized by a passion for power or renown, but deployed with enough intelligent sensitivity to social sanctions to render this person's conduct sufficiently indistinguishable, from the outside, from that of a person of good, or at least normal sound character.

These sanctions, however, seem to depend for their efficacy not only on self-interest, but also on moral literacy. For they work to enforce the body of moral knowledge generally shared by the literate members of the moral community, and this enforcement, which is carried out through the actions of those same members, is just a certain use of that moral knowledge and hence an exercise of moral literacy, the capacity to use such knowledge. The intelligent sensitivity to those sanctions that figures in the deployment of the vicious maxim thus evidently depends on that same moral knowledge and literacy, and so involves the literacy's use – or rather its abuse, insofar as it is being exercised in the service of personal advantage. Herman herself notes that the possession and exercise of moral literacy 'does not make one a good or even

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minimally decent person' (p. 98). We can say of Herman's casual abuser too, in the 'limited or selective' range of instances where he treats his intimates cruelly, that he seems to abuse his moral literacy. But in the case of the clever scoundrel, the abuse is global, even though for a wide range of normal cases it will not be noticed by others, at least not by those who do not know this person well. From the outside, he will appear 'routinely moral' and 'normal enough'. But in truth, as may be known or surmised by such intimates as he may have, his life is suffused with vice.[13] Yet this classical scoundrel is not amoral, not someone we refrain from holding accountable; he may have an intense, if distorted, sense of justice and may have had a more or less normal upbringing, even if his parents were vicious in a similar way, and he possesses, as it appears, moral literacy, though a literacy systematically turned to the service of his vicious end.

We have before us, then, a character deficiency that differs notably from the one Herman discusses. Neither of the two figures is beyond the pale of accountability, and both possess moral literacy, or at least appear to. But though there will be a wide range of cases where the scoundrel's conduct appears to be 'routinely moral', even there the actions are not genuine expressions of the moral motive, or the basic moral capacity. As Kant might say, they are certainly not done from duty, even if they are in accordance with it. These features of the case naturally incline us to say that such an individual, in taking care to appear 'routinely moral', is twisting morality to serve his own ultimate purpose. But what is it, exactly, that is being twisted? It does not seem that the moral motive itself could be abused. As the fundamental moral capacity, the moral motive is not something that could be intelligibly put to use in the service of the vicious maxim. As I noted earlier, this capacity, according to Herman, is 'not merely something that enters into a balance of reasons, but is instead part of the structure of the agent's reasons in general' (p. 23), and it therefore cannot be separated from the rationality that belongs to the agent's constitution as a person. This makes it impossible to regard it as available for use, or in Kant's terms as one of the 'gifts', like the talents of understanding and judgement, which are given to and hence separate from the will rather than integral to it. In contrast to all such gifts, this basic moral capacity cannot be put to any bad use. Is it then the moral literacy that is being twisted? Herman says that literacy is based on the moral motive (p. 106). If that means that it is nothing but that motive itself in a developed condition, then it can no more be abused than the moral motive can. On the other hand, to the extent that we conceive of moral literacy as a *skill*, as the metaphor of

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literacy may invite us to do, it becomes easy to think of it in the way we think of skills generally. As Kant observes, echoing Aristotle and many others, the medical art – 'health literacy', so to speak – can be used to destroy life as well as to save it. Such uses, however deplorable, are perfectly consistent with the art, considered narrowly, just as skill. Hence a temptation may arise to suppose that in the vicious scoundrel the skill of moral literacy is intelligibly put to use in the service of the vicious maxim.

Vice is no easy topic, of course, and some – though I doubt that Herman is among them – would favour letting go of it. But if we wish, at least for analytical purposes, to retain a hold on its traditional image, we seem to face a choice: Either give up the idea that moral literacy has its seat in the moral motive, the basic moral capacity, or explain how, though a skill, it is different from other skills on account of having a special dependence on that basic capacity, a dependence entailing that what may look like moral literacy in a morally accountable but globally vicious individual is not the genuine article. Or will we perhaps need to distinguish senses when we ask whether moral literacy is a competency in which the knave can share?[14]

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Notes

1 Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. vii.
2 Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. Subsequent page references are to this volume.
3 In the words of one reviewer, 'Herman develops a Kantian virtue theory' (Adrienne Martin, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (http://ndpr.nd.edu), 5 Sept. 2007).
4 Virtue is not even mentioned until the end of the first section, after the argument has been completed.
5 There are also the supporters of Hegel, of course, but since Herman does not engage that party directly in her discussion of moral literacy, I will not bring them in here.
6 To keep the discussion manageable, I will restrict attention to Herman's use of this notion in connection with motivation and responsibility, leaving to the side its relevance to the problem of new moral facts.
7 Of course, these two sides can come apart to an extent; a job applicant may profess to have merely a 'reading knowledge' of Greek or German, and it seems possible to have a mere reading knowledge of one's native tongue, though this would already put one well on the road toward having the ability to write, given that these skills build on the underlying abilities to speak and to understand the speech of others. (It is noteworthy that a deficiency of the opposite sort is wholly unintelligible: no one could have the ability to write but not the ability to read.) But if we consider these capacities in a general way, abstracting from the particular individual, the two sides clearly stand or fall together: there can be readers only where there are writers, and writers only where there are readers.
8 The case of musical literacy is particularly complicated, in that music can be written and read in a quite literal sense.

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9 See also Herman's references to Kant's idea of the 'ectypal world' (pp. 201–2) and to 'the value of giving, as much as we are able, rational and moral form to the world' (p. 268).

10 Herman does not put it this way, perhaps in part because she wants to present the notion of moral literacy as a freestanding idea, independent of the trappings of Kantian doctrine, but if we wanted to press into application here the broad legal metaphor that informs Kant's representation of reason, we could think of moral literacy as comprising the experientially developed judicial and executive functions that complement the legislative function that rests originally in the moral law (the constitution).

11 Herman does not explicitly mention this point in the argument, but presumably it would figure in the 'much more complex story about moral motivation' that she acknowledges would need to be offered to cover 'the full range of normal agents'. It is a main contention of hers that understanding normal moral agency requires a moral motive that 'supports some unity for the agent acting' (p. 104).

12 Herman's description seems not, however, to close off the possibility that she is conceiving of the abuser's deformity as, so to speak, layered on top of the more typical deficiency, modifying it.

13 There could, of course, be a 'limited or selective' range of instances where, say, he displays kindness, perhaps to intimates (possibly owing to a sympathetic strand in his temperament, strengthened by the influence of a doting parent), in which case he would be a kind of thoroughgoing opposite to Herman's abuser.

14 This article is a slightly revised version of a paper presented at a session on Barbara Herman's *Moral Literacy* at the meeting of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association in April 2009. I thank Andrews Reath, Sally Sedgwick and especially Barbara Herman for help with the issues discussed here.

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