

Kantian Ethical Duties

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Perfect ethical duties have usually puzzled commentators on Kant's ethics because they do not fit neatly within his taxonomy of duties. Ethical duties require the adoption of maxims of ends: the happiness of others and one's own perfection are Kant's two main categories. These duties, he claims, are of *wide* obligation because they do not specify what in particular one ought to do, when, and how much. They leave 'a latitude for free choice' as he puts it. Perfect duties, however, such as the duties of respect, to avoid suicide, lying, and servility, do not appear to require the adoption of ends but only the performance or omission of specific types of actions. The puzzle is how these duties can be ethical, and therefore wide. Faced with this difficulty, Mary Gregor denies that perfect ethical duties are wide. She claims that they are an 'anomaly' and that they do not belong to ethics proper but to moral philosophy in general.¹ She argues that these duties are derived from the categorical imperative, instead of, as Kant himself appears to have thought, the first principle of virtue.² Taking a very different approach, Onora O'Neill finds the perfect/imperfect distinction of little importance and suggests doing without it altogether.³ Most other interpreters also assume that 'wide' is opposed to 'perfect' so that a wide perfect duty is a conceptual impossibility.⁴

The most widely shared view on this issue is that Kant's twofold division of duties into strict and wide, on the one hand, and perfect and imperfect, on the other, are equivalent. On this approach, a strict or perfect duty requires the performance or omission of specific types of acts. The duty of keeping one's promises is a clear example. A wide or imperfect duty, by contrast, requires the adoption of a maxim, but does not specify what in particular or how much one should do towards its fulfilment. A good example is the duty of helping those in need where one can. Though the distinction seems clear, I will argue that we should also reject this

'equivalence interpretation', as I will call it, because it closes the possibility of wide perfect duties. My purpose in this article is precisely to offer an interpretation of Kant's twofold division of duties that will allow us to accommodate this kind of duties, namely those that are both perfect and wide. Two main considerations motivate this aim. The first one is quite straightforward: since Kant clearly indicates that ethics contains perfect duties, it should be possible for a duty to be both wide and perfect. The second consideration is that if we endorse the equivalence interpretation and claim that perfect duties are like strict ones in that they require specific types of acts, we will lend support to the view of Kant's ethics as 'act-centred'. An act-centred morality privileges particular acts as the primary object of moral value instead of the agent's character. I will argue that this is an interpretation of Kant's ethics that we should reject.⁵

Some defenders of Kantian ethics have argued in recent years that the primary focus of Kantian ethics is not the performance of morally good acts, but the acquisition of a morally good character.⁶ Shifting the attention from the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* to *Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue*, they have emphasized that the adoption of the ethical maxims of ends is a long-term project to be carried out over a complete life. The resolution to promote the happiness of others and one's own perfection necessarily requires the practice of virtue: we cannot choose to adopt maxims of ends as firm and constant principles throughout a complete life in the same way in which we can, at least in principle, choose to perform a morally good action. We come to adopt ethical maxims of ends through constant practice, especially if we have to struggle against feelings and inclinations that oppose them. If successful, such a practice will result in the acquisition of the firm disposition to act in ethical ways, in which case one's morally good actions will not coexist with a character that is vicious, but will be the actions of a character with a moral disposition.

Kant himself maintains that the constant practice of ethical actions, when successful, changes the attitudes and feelings with which we react to morally relevant situations. In particular, he thinks that the feelings of love and of respect accompany the successful and constant practice of the actions in which we adopt the end of the happiness of others. Though these feelings are

entirely subjective, which means that they do not help us discern what we ought to do, their presence is a sign of progress in carrying out the determination to adopt this moral end. Kant calls such progress 'virtue'. The inward side of virtue is the determination to act on ethical maxims; its outward manifestations are the practice of moral actions and the expression of moral feelings and attitudes, which are a sign of the authenticity of one's resolution to adopt the ethical maxims. The beneficent actions of someone who helps others reluctantly though moved by the motive of duty will be morally worthy, but her character will show lack of virtue.⁷

The important point here is that from the perspective of the agent who is to adopt the ethical maxims of ends, the moral task, so to speak, is primarily to acquire a morally good character. In other words, Kantian ethics is not 'act-centred'. This is why I think that we should reject any interpretation of Kant's categories of duties in which the perfect ethical duties turn out to be strict-like and thus to require the performance or omission of particular types of act regardless of the maxim. After endorsing a version of what I called 'the equivalence interpretation', Thomas Hill claims exactly this about the perfect duties. He maintains that these duties require the performance of particular outward acts but not the adoption of maxims and that, therefore, 'one could fulfill a perfect duty by doing a right sort of act without having adopted any principle relevant to the case but one could not fulfill an imperfect duty in this manner'.⁸ Contrary to this view, I think that perfect ethical duties are duties to adopt maxims of ends, that is, wide, or so I will argue. In what follows, I will examine Kant's main division of duties into juridical and ethical (section 1). In section 2, I will discuss the perfect/imperfect and the strict/wide distinctions and offer my own interpretation. In section 3, I will consider the duty not to commit suicide as a kind of test for my own proposal and maintain that this duty is both perfect and wide.

I. Kant's Distinction between Ethics and Right

The tendency to think that Kantian morality focuses on particular acts as the locus of moral value at the expense of the agent's character is partly due to a conflation of the kinds of demands that ethics and Right make upon us in Kant's theory. Thus, I will begin

by briefly reviewing the distinction between ethics and Right in Kantian morality.⁹ Kant divides all moral duties into duties of virtue (or ethical duties) and of Right. Ethical duties comprise the domain of what we might call ‘personal morality’, whereas duties of Right are those enforced by the political authority and comprise the domain of what we might call ‘political morality’. Kant distinguishes ethical and juridical duties according to the kind of legislation. He claims that all legislation has two elements, namely, a law ‘which represents an action that is to be done as *objectively* necessary’ and an incentive ‘which connects a ground for determining choice to this action *subjectively* with the representation of the law’ (MPDV 6: 218/46).¹⁰ He then claims that all legislation can therefore be distinguished according to the incentive: the legislation ‘which makes an action a duty and also makes this duty the incentive is *ethical*’, whereas the legislation ‘which does not include the incentive of duty in the law and so admits an incentive other than the Idea of duty itself is *juridical*’ (MPDV 6: 219/46). At first glance, then, the difference between ethical and juridical duties is that the former require us to perform certain actions from moral incentives, whereas the latter duties do not require that the incentives be moral, but admit of incentives coming from our inclinations and aversions.

This way of putting the distinction between ethical and juridical duties reinforces the view that ethics as much as Right requires the performance or omission of particular outward acts, and that they only differ in that ethics further requires moral incentives whereas Right does not. However, the actions that ethics requires are what Kant calls ‘internal’ because they consist in the adoption of certain maxims; Right, on the other hand, requires ‘external’ or outward acts. This is obviously related to Kant’s claim that ethical legislation is internal, whereas juridical legislation is external. Ethical legislation is internal partly because it requires these internal acts (that is, the adoption of maxims) but also because, according to Kant, only the agent herself has both the capacity and the authority to impose these requirements upon herself. The claim about having such a ‘capacity’ is straightforward. As I have already mentioned, ethics requires that we adopt the ends of the happiness of others and one’s own perfection. Kant claims that ‘to have any end of action is an act of *freedom* on the part of the acting subject’ (MPDV 6: 385/190), which means that only agents themselves

have the capacity to impose maxims of ends upon themselves. By contrast, juridical legislation is external both because it requires the performance or omission of specific outward acts and because we may be coerced externally (by other people) to such performance or omission. Specifically, the political authority coerces us to obey the law through the threat of sanctions.

The claim about who has the authority to coerce us to the adoption of maxims of ends or to the performance or omission of outward acts follows from Kant's views on autonomy. Because of his conception of autonomy, he believes that nobody but the agent herself has the authority to impose ethical maxims upon herself. Although other people cannot, strictly speaking, make us adopt them, they may try. If they do so through reasons, that is fine; but if they resort to coercion, they would fail to respect our autonomy. In the case of juridical legislation, by contrast, Kant clearly thinks that coercion may be legitimately used to make people act in certain ways or to omit certain types of outward acts. Coercion is consistent with autonomy when it is used to oppose a 'hindrance or resistance to freedom'. He says: 'if a certain use of freedom is itself a hindrance to freedom in accordance with universal laws (i.e., wrong), coercion that is opposed to this (as a *hindering of a hindrance to freedom*) is consistent with freedom in accordance with universal laws, that is, it is right' (MPDR 6: 231/57). The reason why there should be laws for our outward acts is that through our actions we may interfere with the freedom of action of other people, and the point of juridical laws is precisely to make possible the coexistence of the freedom of action of everyone.¹¹

Kant's distinction between ethical duties and duties of Right makes clear that the business of ethics is not to govern our outward conduct regardless of our maxims. Only juridical legislation requires the performance or omission of specific outward acts independently of the maxim. Right demands that we live under public laws of justice that specify our rights as citizens of the same society. In this sphere, persons are regarded from the point of view of their external freedom to act in the world in pursuit of their various ends; public justice ensures that this pursuit be consistent with the exercise of the freedom of action of all others by requiring us to limit our outward conduct. Thus, one may fulfill the duties of Right by performing or omitting the outward acts that they require or forbid. Though the constant practice of this sort of conduct may be

quite likely to have an effect on our characters, Right does not require such a change. When we think of a good citizen, we think of someone who acts on certain moral maxims and displays certain attitudes, such as fairness and civility, but the law does not coerce us to be good in this way. On Kant's account, the law enforces only outward acts. Ethics, by contrast, makes demands upon our characters. By requiring us to adopt maxims of ends, it necessarily demands a change of character. Kant claims that this change requires a 'revolution of the cast of mind', but because we have feelings and inclinations that are recalcitrant to morality, such a revolution only puts us on the path of 'continual *progress* from bad to better', which he calls 'virtue'.¹² This means that the adoption of ethical maxims cannot be accomplished overnight but requires constant effort and practice. We cannot adopt maxims of ends by merely deciding to do so: we need to work on our characters so that we acquire the firm disposition to act ethically and learn to react with the appropriate moral feelings to each morally relevant situation.

For example, adopting the end of the happiness of others involves determining oneself both to help others realize their permissible ends and to respect them. Now, determining oneself to help others realize their permissible ends will not automatically turn you into a beneficent person: the authenticity of your resolution will depend on what in fact you do. We come to adopt maxims of moral ends by actually acting on them. If you do not do beneficent actions, your resolution to do good to others will not have been genuine. Although adopting a maxim is what Kant calls an 'internal action' (*MPDV* 6: 218/45) there is no fact of the matter as to whether one has performed such an act except for what would be its manifestations, that is, outward performances. Such performances are certainly not a sure indication of a morally good maxim, but they are a necessary condition. Perhaps a more reliable sign is the presence of moral feelings. Kant maintains that the successful practice of beneficent actions produces in us an increased receptivity to the needs of others and teaches us to enjoy such a practice. In an often quoted passage in *MPDV* he claims about beneficence that 'if someone practices it often and succeeds in realizing his beneficent intention, he eventually comes to love the person he has helped' (*MPDV* 6: 402/203). His point is not that we can set ourselves to produce in us any feeling by practising certain

sorts of actions. We know that we do not have this sort of control over our feelings. His claim, rather, is that the moral feeling of love of mankind can be produced in us through the practice of beneficence, and when this happens, it is a sign of the genuine adoption of the ethical maxim of helping others where we can. When the constant practice of beneficent actions does not produce in us the moral feeling of love of mankind, we must take this as a sign of lack of virtue, that is, of little progress in the adoption of the ethical maxim of beneficence. The point that I hope to illustrate is that fulfilment of ethical duties necessarily requires a change of character.

With this distinction between ethics and justice in mind, let us turn now to the twofold division of all duties into strict and wide, and perfect and imperfect.

2. Kant's Categories of Duties

As I mentioned in the introduction, it has become common in the literature to line up the strict/wide and perfect/imperfect distinctions and to treat them as equivalent. It is often assumed that 'wide' means roughly the same as 'imperfect' so that wide and imperfect duties allow for a certain latitude in their fulfilment because they require the adoption of maxims of ends as opposed to particular actions; since no particular actions are required their fulfilment is meritorious. A duty that requires the adoption of an end leaves room for you to determine what in particular to do towards the realization of the required end (such as the happiness of others). Take the end of promoting the happiness of others. Someone who determines herself to its adoption has a lot of room to determine whose happiness to promote, in which manner, and to what extent. On the other hand, one might also think that duties which require particular actions to be either performed or omitted are perfect or strict; since they require specific actions their fulfilment is not meritorious.¹³ The difficulty with this view, as I also mentioned, is that Kant claims both that ethical duties are of wide obligation and that we have *perfect ethical* duties, such as the duty not to commit suicide (MPDV 6: 422–3/218–9). This suggests that the two sets of categories of duties cannot be equivalent but cut across each other.¹⁴ However, perfect ethical duties puzzle

commentators because they appear to be duties to perform or omit specific types of actions; thus, it is quite unclear how they could also be wide. My purpose in this section is to argue for an interpretation of the two sets of categories of duties that will allow us to accommodate duties that are perfect and ethical (and therefore wide).

The most important source of the equivalence interpretation is Kant's own division of duties in the *Groundwork*.¹⁵ Here he treats as equivalent the strict/wide and perfect/imperfect distinctions, although he also remarks that he will 'reserve the division of duties entirely for a future *Metaphysics of Morals*' (G 4: 421/31n. and 4: 424/33). In the *Groundwork* he tells us that by a perfect duty he understands one 'that admits no exception in favor of inclination' (G 4: 421n./31), which seems to imply that an imperfect duty admits such exceptions. He also claims that the contradiction in conception test of the categorical imperative gives us strict or narrower duties, whereas the contradiction in the will test yields wide duties; he refers to the former as 'unremitting' and to the latter as 'meritorious' (G 4: 424/34). According to this way of making the division of duties, the duties not to commit suicide and not to promise falsely are strict or perfect, whereas the duties of beneficence and of developing one's talents are wide or imperfect. This means that we must never commit suicide or promise falsely, but we may not help other people or not develop our talents on occasions in order to favour our own inclination; for example, I may not help my friend to do his homework because I prefer to go for a walk, or I may quit my language lessons because I do not like getting up early. If, after all, I decide to help my friend or continue my language lessons out of a moral motive, my conduct will have merit. But refraining from suicide or from making false promises out of a moral motive can never be meritorious.

There are at least two reasons, however, for dismissing Kant's earlier division of duties. First, in the Introduction to *MPDV* he seems to take it back when he tells us that 'a wide duty is not to be taken as permission to make exceptions to the maxim of actions, but only as permission to limit one maxim of duty by another (e.g. love of one's neighbor in general for love of one's parents), by which in fact the field for the practice of virtue is widened' (*MPDV* 6: 390/194). This means that, keeping to the previous examples, I may not help my friend or quit my language classes only when

there is something else of moral import that I would rather do, such as resting because I am too tired (which falls under the duty of taking care of oneself) or spending more time with my family (which falls under the duty of promoting the happiness of others). In both cases I would be limiting one maxim of duty by other moral considerations. The second reason is that even if we want to retain the earlier division for perfect and imperfect duties only, it is incompatible with Kant's later characterization of the perfect/imperfect division in *MPDV*. In this work, he now tells us that *imperfect* duties are only duties of virtue and that their fulfilment is *merit*, whereas 'failure to fulfill them is not in itself culpability [. . .] but rather mere deficiency in moral worth' (*MPDV* 6: 390/194). Accordingly, it seems that fulfilment of perfect duties is not meritorious and that failure to do so is culpability. Although Kant treats merit and moral worth as equivalent here, they are not.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the contrast he means to establish holds: failure to fulfill imperfect duties is morally deficient but does not imply culpability, while failure to fulfill perfect duties does imply culpability. In agreement with this, Kant also claims that

failure to fulfill mere duties of love is *lack of virtue (peccatum)*. But failure to fulfill the duty arising from the *respect* owed to every man as such is a *vice (vitium)*. For no one is wronged if the duties of love are neglected; but a failure in the duty of respect infringes upon a man's lawful claim. (*MPDV* 6: 464/ 256)

I take this to mean that duties of love are imperfect, whereas duties of respect are perfect. Although moral worth and virtue are not the same thing either, I think that the parallelism I am making is correct.¹⁷ We show lack of virtue or deficiency in moral worth when we fail to act morally but do not wrong anyone; and we are vicious or culpable when we wrong someone.

This later characterization of the difference between perfect and imperfect duties is quite different from the one that appears in the *Groundwork*. To see this, consider the duty of beneficence, which according to Kant is imperfect: its neglect on certain occasions would not be culpability, but this does not mean that, therefore, the duty allows exceptions in order to favour our inclinations. The duty does not allow for exceptions because its neglect would show lack of virtue. We may not be culpable when we fail to help others where we can, but certainly show lack of merit; we may not wrong

anyone, but still fail to be virtuous. If the duty allowed for exceptions in favour of inclinations, its neglect on certain occasions would be morally all right and would not show lack of merit or virtue. We may not act on an imperfect duty, according to Kant, but only on account of other morally relevant considerations. This is how I interpret his remark that we may limit one maxim of duty by another.

Strict and wide duties

In order to articulate an alternative interpretation, the first thing to take into account is Kant's claim in the Introduction to *MPDV* that duties of right are of *strict* or *narrow* obligation whereas duties of virtue are of *wide* obligation (*MPDV* 390:5/194). Regarding wide duties, he writes:

If the law can prescribe only the maxim of actions, not the actions themselves, this is a sign that it leaves a latitude (*latitudo*) for free choice in following (complying with) the law, that is, that the law cannot specify precisely in what way one is to act and how much one is to do by the action for an end that is also a duty. (*MPDV* 6:390/194).

Wide duties require the adoption of maxims of ends and do not specify what in particular we ought to do towards their fulfilment. Duties are strict or narrow, by contrast, when the law prescribes actions but not maxims. This becomes clear when Kant remarks regarding ethical duties that 'since a law must yet lie at the basis of every duty, this law in ethics can be a law of duty given, not for *actions*, but only for the maxims of actions [. . .] that (as follows in turn from this) ethical duty must be thought as *wide*, not as narrow duty' (*MPDV* 6: 410/210).¹⁸ For example, the duty of beneficence is ethical because it requires that we adopt the end of helping others where we can, while the duty to keep one's contracts is strict because it requires that we perform the outward act of keeping one's contracts out of any incentive whatever (moral or not moral). There is not much room to decide what in particular to do in order to keep a promise, not to steal a beautiful and expensive fountain pen, or not to cheat in an exam, all of which are strict duties. But if you are determined to make the happiness of others your own end, there is a lot of leeway to determine what in particular to do. There are a lot of people in the world, and you may choose to do more for those who are near and with whom you have ties of affection.

This is not contrary to morality as long as you do not think that these near and dear people deserve your good will *only* because you happen to care about them. Beneficence is an ethical duty, which means that you must regard all other people as deserving your good will, except that time and resources are finite and you must make some choices. You will have to determine what in particular to do, how much, on which occasions and how to balance your good acts with the due care of your own needs.

The claim that ethical duties are wide because they require us to adopt maxims of ends and that duties of right are strict because they require outward acts but not maxims has a good deal of textual support since Kant keeps repeating this point throughout the Introduction to *MPDV*.¹⁹ Despite Kant's explicit indication that ethical duties are of wide obligation and juridical ones are of strict obligation, Onora O'Neill has argued that the two distinctions (juridical/ethical and strict/wide) do not coincide.²⁰ She agrees that all juridical duties are strict because only outward acts can be exacted from us. But she claims that some duties of virtue are strict, namely, the ethical duties of omission, such as the prohibitions against lying and self-deception, which are also perfect duties. Since my purpose is to show that perfect ethical duties require the adoption of maxims of ends, I cannot agree with O'Neill on this point.

My own view is that the two distinctions coincide, though they are not identical. The juridical/ethical distinction refers to the *source* of the duty, that is to say, to the kind of legislation from which it arises: all juridical duties arise from external legislation, while ethical ones arise from internal or self-legislation. The strict/wide distinction concerns the *content* of the duty: whether the duty requires the performance or omission of an outward act or the adoption of a maxim of an end. Contrary to O'Neill, I believe that there is a close connection between the kind of legislation from which a duty arises and its content. Duties that arise from external legislation can only require external acts, as she points out, and those that proceed from internal legislation are always duties to adopt maxims, which she denies. It is an important question, which I cannot answer here, why Kant thought that ethical or internal laws must be laws for maxims of ends.²¹ Already in the *Groundwork* it is clear that self-legislation governs our maxims, not merely outward acts. In *MPDV* Kant adds that laws that

proceed from internal legislation must have as their content maxims of ends. Why he thought so depends on his reasons for formulating the first principle of virtue as a principle that requires us to act according to maxims of ends.

The difference in the content of these two kinds of duties (wide and strict) gives rise to further asymmetries. Because strict duties demand the performance or omission of specific outward acts regardless of the maxim, they can be discharged in one or a few acts. By contrast, the fulfilment of wide duties can never be completed because the adoption of a maxim of an ethical end requires a change of character over a complete life. This is why Kant claims that virtue lies in that progress. The point here is not only that such an adoption is hard and requires effort, but also that part of what it is to adopt a maxim of an end is to act on it and to show the appropriate moral feelings. There is no end point at which you may say that you are done with the adoption of a maxim of an ethical end. If you stop acting on it and stop expressing the appropriate feelings, you will not have undergone the change of character that adopting such a maxim necessarily requires. Someone who has made good progress in adopting the end of promoting the happiness of others will have become the sort of person who cares about the needs of others and likes helping. It would be odd for such a person to entertain the thought that she has done enough for a lifetime and consider her ethical duty fulfilled. If she were to do this, she would not have become a genuinely virtuous person: she would have been trying to be virtuous without ever committing herself truly to the ethical end. Being virtuous is not the sort of thing that may be conceived of as a task to be completed, just as fulfilling strict duties certainly is. Wide duties are, thus, open-ended, whereas strict ones can be discharged.

It is important to notice that the difference in the content here is between *outward acts* and *maxims of ends*. Commentators are not always quite clear on this point. They draw the contrast between actions and maxims, but this is doubly ambiguous. By 'action' they usually mean 'outward act', though some of them may mean the action as it is expressed in a maxim, that is to say, the outward act along with the reasons or motives for it. 'Action' is ambiguous between these two meanings. In the remainder of this article I will follow Christine Korsgaard's suggestion and use 'act' to mean

'outward act'.²² A strict duty commands the performance or omission of acts in this sense, and has nothing at all to say about the maxims that we should adopt. On the other hand, 'maxim' is ambiguous between 'maxim of an action' and 'maxim of an end'. For example, 'I will exercise in order to stay healthy' is a maxim of an action; it expresses the kind of actions that I will perform and the reasons for them. 'I will promote the happiness of other people for its own sake' is, according to Kant, a maxim of an end. Although the distinction is not clear and sharp, it should be kept in mind because commentators sometimes use 'action' as a shorthand for 'maxim of an action'. In Kant's contrast between juridical and ethical duties, strict duties require *acts* to be either performed or omitted, while wide ones command the adoption of *maxims of ends*.

Perfect and imperfect duties

The perfect/imperfect distinction is harder to spell out. As I mentioned, most commentators line it up with the strict/wide division. Onora O'Neill does so as well but in a subtler way. She claims that a duty may be strict or wide in obligation or in requirement.²³ The kind of obligation refers to 'the type of derivation that can be given to justify the duty': it may be derived from either external or internal legislation. The kind of requirement refers to how the duty is to be fulfilled: either by specific acts and omissions, or by adopting and implementing certain policies. This analysis is similar to the one I offered in the previous section, except that O'Neill also maintains that these two senses of the strict/wide distinction cut across each other. She argues that a duty that is wide in obligation may be narrow in requirement. She mentions specifically perfect ethical duties which, on her view, arise from internal legislation but are to be fulfilled through specific acts or omissions. Thus, she thinks that the perfect/imperfect distinction coincides with the second sense of the strict/wide division. However, this is exactly the kind of conclusion that I wish to deny for it maintains that an ethical duty may be fulfilled through outward acts or omissions regardless of the maxim.

It is possible to find an alternative interpretation of the perfect/imperfect distinction in what Kant says about it. In his explanation of why the failure to fulfill duties of love is lack of virtue, whereas the failure to fulfill duties of respect is a vice, he

tells us, as we saw, that 'no one is wronged if the duties of love are neglected; but a failure in the duty of respect infringes upon a man's lawful claim'. I take this to mean that the perfect/imperfect distinction concerns the *recipient* of the duty, that is, whether the duty is owed to someone or not. Kant claims that fulfilment of an imperfect duty is merit, while failure to fulfill it is not culpability but mere deficiency in moral worth. Failure to fulfill imperfect duties cannot be culpability because they are not owed. For example, the duty of beneficence is imperfect because its fulfilment is not owed to anyone in particular: whom to help and when is left up to us to decide. The beggar on the street cannot demand help from me as if I owed it to him in particular. By contrast, failure to fulfill a perfect duty, such as the duties of respect, is culpability because we owe respect to all other persons. This is in agreement with Kant's claim that fulfilment of imperfect duties is merit: since we do not owe help to any person in particular our conduct is meritorious when we help someone, but are not culpable when we fail to help. Since we owe respect to all other persons, an attitude of respect cannot be meritorious because we owe it to others and are culpable when we fail to respect them.

Such a sharp distinction between what is owed and what is not is notoriously suspicious, and I do not mean to deny this. The clearest counter-example is the duty of beneficence itself, which may appear to be either imperfect or perfect depending on the circumstances. The starving children in central America have no complaint against me in particular for not having done something to relieve their misery, but a drowning person seems to have a stronger claim against those who are near and could help. What makes the difference are the circumstances: the urgency of the help needed, the proximity and availability of resources. Kant never considered this sort of contrast, but it seems that the right thing to say is that the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties marks the two extremes of a continuum with a grey area in the middle. The strict/wide opposition, on the other hand, is sharper because there is a clear difference between demanding owed outward acts and a change in one's character. The former has to do with what we may legitimately be coerced to do or to omit, while the latter belongs to the domain of personal virtue. This does not mean, though, that only duties of right are other-regarding whereas ethics is entirely self-regarding. This is another reason why

I think that it is important to allow for the possibility of perfect wide duties: duties of virtue that we owe to specific persons, and neglect of which would wrong someone.

This way of understanding the perfect/imperfect distinction seems to make more sense for duties to others than for duties to ourselves, since how can there be duties to ourselves that we do not owe to ourselves? On this interpretation, the duty not to commit suicide is perfect because we owe it to ourselves to preserve ourselves, while the duty to develop one's talents is imperfect because we do not owe it to ourselves. This last implication sounds odd, for the fact that developing one's talents is an ethical duty suggests that we owe such development to ourselves. However, Kant appears to believe that developing one's talents or cultivating one's moral perfection is doing more than what strictly speaking we owe to ourselves; this is why fulfilment of these duties is meritorious. What lies behind the apparently odd implication is Kant's view that humanity is a negative end, that is, an end which we must never act against (*G* 4: 437/45). Strictly speaking, what we owe to ourselves and to others is not to treat ourselves and others in ways that are incompatible with the unconditional value of humanity. As Kant puts it in the *Groundwork*, we must never treat humanity as a mere means. Expressing in a positive way in our actions the value that we accord to humanity goes beyond what is owed and is, therefore, meritorious. Although imperfect duties are not owed, there are such duties because part of what it is to value humanity always as an end goes beyond merely abstaining from certain acts; it also comprises positive actions which express our valuing humanity as the only end with unconditional value, such as promoting the welfare of others.²⁴ Perfect duties, by contrast, are owed because their neglect would wrong someone. They include both outward acts and attitudes. Strict duties are all perfect because failure to fulfill them is to treat humanity as a mere means. And I have claimed that there are also perfect wide duties, such as the duties of respect and the duty not to commit suicide. Because they are wide, they are duties to adopt maxims of ends, which do not determine what in particular one ought to do; since they are perfect they must be owed to someone in particular, which may suggest that they must be clearly specified, otherwise, how could a not well-specified duty be owed to anyone? In the following section, I will offer an answer to this question.

3. Wide Perfect Duties

On the view I am defending, a wide perfect duty is always a duty of virtue that is owed to someone in particular and which requires the adoption of a maxim of an end. Duties of this kind are the following: the duties of respect, which we owe to all other persons; the prohibitions against killing or mutilating oneself as well as against various ways of abusing one's own body through the excessive consumption of food or alcohol, all of which are duties that we owe to ourselves; and not lying, which is also a duty to ourselves. Most commentators deny that these duties can be wide because they are negative and are thus clearly specified, while a wide duty leaves it up to us to determine how in particular to act. Because they are clearly specified, they are said to be strict, which means that they require only the performance or omission of outward acts. There are at least two reasons why this standard view cannot be correct. First, some of these duties require not so much the omission of outward acts but of *attitudes*, such as arrogance, defamation, and ridicule, which are contrary to the respect owed to other people. Second, Kant mentions duties of omission that are not perfect: the prohibitions against envy, malice, and ingratitude fall under the duties of love. It follows from my characterization of the perfect/imperfect distinction that the duties which forbid these attitudes are not perfect because they are *not owed* to other people. We don't wrong anyone if we are envious, malicious, or ungrateful. However, such attitudes are vices because they are directly opposed to the practice of virtue. It is therefore a mistake to believe that a clearly specified duty is for this reason perfect. A duty is perfect when it is owed to someone in particular, so that its neglect would wrong someone.

Wide duties certainly forbid those outward *acts* that are inconsistent with them. For example, promoting the happiness of others is inconsistent with deliberately and gratuitously obstructing the realization of the ends of other people. Kant's attention, however, is directed not so much at this sort of outward acts, but at those attitudes that are incompatible with the change of character required by the adoption of an ethical end. Envy, ingratitude, and malice are vices that are contrary to the adoption of a loving attitude towards others. Arrogance, defamation, and ridicule are directly opposed to treating others with respect. Although the

duties that forbid such attitudes are all negative, they are also wide because the cultivation of these attitudes is a long-term project that necessarily requires a change of character. Freeing oneself from envy and regarding all others as moral equals, for example, are attitudes that require emotional maturity and moral development. Contrary to what some commentators assume, I also think that these duties don't specify what in particular one ought to do, and are wide for this reason as well. Admittedly, they are less wide than the positive maxim of beneficence for they leave less margin to determine what in particular to do. However, since they concern the attitudes that we ought to take towards other people, they don't determine any specific outward act. It is true that some strict duties may also be underdetermined. It is not always clear what counts as keeping a promise, and whoever made it may have to deliberate about what precisely she ought to do. The difference, however, is that in the case of a strict duty it is crucial to fix the facts in order to determine the duty, whereas in wide duties, because they concern the adoption of maxims, there is more flexibility as to how in particular to act on them. In the domain of Right where, according to Kant, all duties are of strict obligation, it is absolutely necessary to specify the duties precisely since we may be legitimately coerced to fulfill them. Right is the proper home of this kind of duties. It makes sense to determine which outward acts we are morally obliged to perform or to omit only when we would otherwise wrong other people in ways in which would infringe the lawful exercise of their freedom of action. In the domain of ethics, by contrast, although we certainly care about outward performances, we *also* care about attitudes and emotions, and, as Kant says, sometimes mind the former *only* as signs of the latter.

Someone could object to my account that in the domain of ethical duties to others perfect duties forbid only attitudes because the prohibitions against outward acts, such as killing for example, belong to the domain of Right. Perfect duties to ourselves, the objection continues, do forbid outward acts, such as taking one's own life, and it is unclear how such duties could be wide. In order to respond to this objection, let us consider the duty not to commit suicide. This prohibition may be taken in either of two ways: either as the mere prohibition of performing the outward act of killing oneself, or as the prohibition to perform such an act for moral considerations. Either way finds support in Kant's text, for he

claims both that the duty not to commit suicide is ethical (and therefore wide) and *strict* (MPDV 6:422/218–9), which suggests that despite being ethical the duty does not require the adoption of any maxim but only the omission of the specific outward act of killing oneself. Choosing between these two ways of taking the duty in question depends on which option one thinks agrees with the best interpretation of MPDV. I will argue that the prohibition against killing oneself, because it is ethical, is a wide duty. In the remainder of the article, I will consider two interpretations of this prohibition as a *strict* duty and argue that neither of them is convincing. I will conclude that this duty is wide.

One may argue that Kant's thesis about the wide nature of ethical duties holds only for the imperfect duties of promoting one's own perfection and the happiness of others, but not for the perfect duties. One's own perfection (both natural and moral) is an ethical end, and the duty that requires its adoption does not specify what in particular we ought to do towards the fulfilment of such an end: it does not tell us which talents to develop, when, and how much, nor does it tell us which specific acts we ought to perform in order to promote our own moral perfection. This duty is clearly wide. One may argue that perfect duties cannot be wide on the grounds that they are owed, and no duty can be owed unless it can be clearly specified. Thus, one may claim that perfect duties are duties to perform specific outward acts, so that their fulfillment does not involve, as Hill claims, adopting the relevant maxim. So we get a version of the equivalence interpretation. As I mentioned above, however, the problem with this view is that the duties of respect to others are perfect, and though respect must be shown in outward acts, the duty is primarily not to take certain *attitudes* toward other people which would be incompatible with treating them as persons. This means that these duties require us to act on *maxims* of respect and not merely to perform or to omit specific outward acts. Thus, I think that we must reject this argument for regarding perfect ethical duties as strict.

A second interpretation could state that although the duty not to commit suicide is strict because it requires the omission of specific outward acts, it is nevertheless an ethical duty because it falls under a wide duty; on this view, such acts are forbidden because they are inconsistent with the adoption of an ethical maxim, in particular, the maxim of preserving oneself, which in turn falls under the

broader maxim of perfecting oneself.²⁵ Adopting ethical maxims necessarily involves not doing certain things that would be directly inconsistent with having the maxim. Not killing and mutilating ourselves are specific outward acts that we ought to omit insofar as we are committed to the maxim of perfecting ourselves. Strict duties are those the omission of which would be incompatible with the fulfillment of an imperfect duty. Not to obstruct the realization of the lawful ends of others deliberately may be considered a duty of this sort because it is inconsistent with a maxim of promoting the happiness of others. Not taking one's own life may also be considered in this light. The problem here, though, is that on this view, ethics contains a subset of duties that are juridical-like, a consequence that runs directly against Kant's claim that ethics includes both ethical and juridical duties. On his view, the virtuous person makes the rights of others his own end so that she fulfills her juridical duties out of moral maxims (*MPDV* 6:390–1/194). If the domain of virtue extends so as to encompass duties that originate in juridical legislation, it would be quite odd to suppose that among those duties that proceed from ethical legislation, there is a subset in which we are exempt from adopting ethical maxims. Kant's own view is exactly the opposite: from the ethical perspective, we must fulfill all our duties in a virtuous manner. There is no ethical duty whatsoever that limits itself to demanding an outward conduct. This is why I think that the 'act-centred' interpretation, which I mentioned at the beginning of the article, is completely misguided.

If this argument is correct, we reach the result that there cannot be strict duties that proceed from ethical legislation. Thus, I think that there is no good interpretation of Kant's text that will accommodate his claim that the duty not to commit suicide is strict. My proposal is to take him at his word when he claims that all ethical duties are of wide obligation for they are duties to adopt maxims of ends. To the extent that the duty not to commit suicide is ethical, it cannot be strict. I believe that we should welcome this result because it agrees better than the equivalence interpretation with the view of Kant's ethics as centred on the development of a moral character. On this proposal, the duty not to commit suicide is perfect and wide. It is perfect because whoever commits suicide wrongs herself. And it is wide because the duty requires us not to commit suicide out of a moral commitment to a valuing attitude

towards oneself, and not from any motives whatever, say, from fear of death. Regarding oneself as a being with a supreme kind of value, against whom one must never act, is the sort of attitude that one may come to acquire through the practice of virtue. If the duty were strict, the prohibition against the performance of those outward acts that count as taking one's own life would be absolute and would not leave any room for deliberation. Since it is a wide duty, however, one must act out of a moral attitude towards oneself as a being with a supreme kind of value, but precisely because it is an attitude, it leaves room to determine what in particular to do. As we saw, Kant claims that a wide duty allows permissions 'to limit one maxim of duty by another', which open the door for assessing reasons in favour of or against taking one's own life. In one of his own examples, Kant asks whether a man who has been bitten by a mad dog did wrong when he killed himself in order not to harm others when he felt the disease coming on (*MPDV* 6: 423–4/220). Although he does not answer, the example suggests that killing oneself may not be ethically wrong. The point that I want to emphasize is that this is possible only if the duty is wide. Only duties to adopt maxims allow room for reflecting on how to limit one maxim of duty by another, to use Kant's own words. Strict duties, by contrast, do not leave such a room for assessing reasons: they demand specific outward acts regardless of the good ethical reasons that there may be against them. This is why only juridical duties are strict.

To conclude, let me summarize my argument. If we believe that the best reading of Kant's ethics regards it as an ethics of character, we must have an interpretation of his two categories of duties so that we can claim that all ethical duties are wide, though some of them are perfect and others imperfect. Only wide duties require the adoption of maxims of ends, which adoption necessarily requires a change of character over time. Most commentators have thought that perfect ethical duties require the performance or omission of outward acts only and are therefore strict. I have argued against this view on the grounds that it is inconsistent with Kant's own text at some points, and also because it runs against the spirit of his ethics. I have also argued that the perfect/imperfect distinction concerns the recipient of the duty and is thus different from the strict/wide division. On my view, duties are perfect when owed to someone in particular, and imperfect when not so owed. With these

two sets of distinctions in hand, I have claimed that perfect ethical duties are wide.

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Notes

- ¹ Mary Gregor, *Laws of Freedom* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), p. 126.
- ² She claims that perfect ethical duties are derived ‘from the first principle of all duty prior to its differentiation into the special first principle of juridical duty and that of ethical duty’. They therefore belong ‘neither to jurisprudence nor to ethics, but to “moral philosophy in general”’. Gregor, *Laws of Freedom*, p. 116.
- ³ Onora Nell (O’Neill), *Acting on Principle: An Essay on Kantian Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), pp. 48–9.
- ⁴ Gregor, *Laws of Freedom*, Thomas Hill, ‘Kant on imperfect duty and supererogation’ in his *Dignity and Practical Reason* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992). Marcia Baron and Nancy Sherman basically follow Hill’s interpretation of perfect duties. Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 27–36. Sherman, *Making a Necessity of Virtue: Aristotle and Kant on Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 332–50.
- ⁵ The view of Kant’s ethics as act-centred is quite common. Roger Crisp, for instance, claims that ‘two of the most influential modern proponents of virtue ethics [Elizabeth Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre] advise us to jettison act-centred moralities of obligation such as Utilitarianism and Kantianism’. Crisp (ed.), *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 5.
- ⁶ See Sherman, *Making a Necessity of Virtue*. I have argued for this view in Faviola Rivera, ‘Moral principles and agreement’, *Critica*, vol. XXXII, no. 94, 2000.
- ⁷ Towards the end of the *Metaphysical first Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue* Kant remarks that ‘what is not done with pleasure but merely as compulsory service has no inner worth for one who attends

- to his duty in this way and such service is not loved by him' (MPDV 6: 484/273).
- ⁸ Hill, 'Kant on imperfect duty', p. 156.
- ⁹ Some interpreters have raised the issue whether the duties of Right belong to the moral domain. I believe that they do, though I cannot argue for it here. See Allen Wood, 'The final form of Kant's practical philosophy', in Nelson Potter et al. (eds), *Kant's Metaphysics of Morals: The Southern Journal of Philosophy XXXVI*, Supplement (1997), pp.1–20; Paul Guyer, 'Comments: Right and morality', in Potter et al., *Kant's Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 21–8; and Thomas Pogge, 'Is Kant's *Rechtslehre* Comprehensive?', in Potter et al., *Kant's Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 161–88. Also see Otfried Höffe, 'Recht und Moral: ein kantischer Problemaufriß,' in *Neue Hefte für Philosophie* 17 (1979), 1–36; and 'Kant's Principle of Right as a categorical imperative of law', in Yirmiyahu Yovel, (ed.), *Kant's Practical Philosophy Reconsidered* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1989).
- ¹⁰ Kant, I., *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 6: 422/218. Following standard usage, I indicate the volume and page number of *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (published by the *Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Berlin) followed by the page number of the English translation. The *Metaphysics of Morals* (hereafter referred to in the main text as *MM*) has two parts: *Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Right* (referred to in the main text as *MPDR*) and *Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue* (referred to in the main text as *MPDV*).
- ¹¹ On Kant's justification of coercion see Christine Korsgaard's 'Taking the law into our own hands: Kant on the right to revolution', in Andrews Reath, *Reclaiming the History of Ethics: Essays for John Rawls* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- ¹² Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. by Theodore M. Green and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row), 6: 33/43.
- ¹³ On this point see Onora O'Neill, *Towards Right and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 184–7; Hill, 'Kant on imperfect duty', p. 148; Sherman, *Making a Necessity of Virtue*, pp. 332 and 335; Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 324–5.
- ¹⁴ Christine Korsgaard appeals to this same point to support the view that the strict/wide and the perfect/imperfect distinctions are not equivalent in 'Morality as Freedom,' in her *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 186, n. 25.

- ¹⁵ Kant, I., *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. by Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). In what follows I will refer to this work in the main text as ‘G’ followed by the volume and page number of *Kants gesammelte Schriften* and by the page number of the English translation.
- ¹⁶ ‘Moral worth’ is a kind of value that the will and its actions have when it acts from duty. Kant’s clearest example appears in the second section of the *Groundwork* when he claims that beneficent actions have moral worth only when done from duty. ‘Merit’, on the other hand, is a kind of value that actions have when, in addition to being morally worthy, are not owed to anyone in particular. Beneficent actions are also meritorious because helping others where we can is not strictly owed to anyone, according to Kant. Fulfilling a promise, by contrast, is not meritorious because it is owed to someone. See the discussion by Robert N. Johnson in ‘Kant’s conception of merit’, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 77 (1996), 310–34. He argues that some actions may be meritorious although not performed from duty.
- ¹⁷ Moral worth is a kind of value that our actions have whenever we act on a morally good maxim. Virtue, as I explained, is progress in the acquisition of an ethical maxim as a firm principle of one’s own character. Similarly, deficiency in moral worth and lack of virtue are not the same thing either. We show deficiency in moral worth when we fail to act on a morally good maxim on any occasion but do not wrong anyone. Our conduct is lacking in virtue when our actions can be taken as failures to progress in the adoption of an ethical maxim over time, but do not wrong anyone either. Culpability and vice, by contrast, are the same thing.
- ¹⁸ The first emphasis is mine. A similar remark appears in 6: 393/197 where Kant claims that that the adoption of the end of the happiness of others is a wide duty because ‘[it] has in it a latitude for doing more or less, and no specific limits can be assigned to what should be done. The law holds only for maxims, not for *specific actions*’ (my emphasis).
- ¹⁹ The heading of section VI of the Introduction to The Doctrine of Virtue says: ‘Ethics does not give laws for *Actions* (*Ius* does that) but only for *Maxims* of actions.’ The heading of the following section (VII) says: ‘Ethical duties are of wide obligation, whereas duties of Right are of narrow [strict] obligation.’ Kant begins this latter section by pointing out that ‘This proposition follows from the preceding one’. I take this to mean that the proposition which is the heading of the VII section follows from the proposition which is the heading of the previous section (VI).

In addition to the title of section VII, the claim appears in 6: 392/195–6: ‘this duty is merely an ethical one, that is, a duty of wide

obligation'; in 6: 393/197: 'Hence this duty is only a *wide* one [...] The law holds only for maxims, not for specific actions'; in 6: 395/198: 'ethical obligation to ends [...] is only *wide* obligation – because it involves a law only for the maxims of actions'; and in 6: 410: 'this law in ethics can be a law of duty given, not for actions, but only for the maxims of actions [...] that, (as follows from this) ethical duty must be thought as *wide*, not as narrow duty'.

²⁰ O'Neill, *Acting on Principle*, p. 46.

²¹ I develop an answer to this question in Rivera, 'Moral principles and agreement'.

²² Christine Korsgaard, 'Motivation, metaphysics and the value of the self: a reply to Ginsborg, Guyer and Schneewind', *Ethics* 109 (1998), 49–66, p. 55.

²³ O'Neill, *Acting on Principle*, p. 47.

²⁴ Not all perfect duties require that we do not perform certain acts. Some perfect duties require the performance of specific acts, such as keeping one's promises. They are perfect because not keeping a promise amounts to treating the humanity of the promisee as a mere means for one's own personal purposes; therefore, the promiser owes the promisee the fulfillment of the promise. This kind of perfect duty is an acquired obligation because we come to have it through our own actions.

²⁵ This is O'Neill's view in O'Neill, *Acting on Principle*, p. 54.