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# Kantian Moral Striving

MAVIS BISS
Loyola University Maryland
Email: mlbiss@loyola.edu

**Abstract**

This paper focuses on a single question that highlights some of the most puzzling aspects of Kant's explanation of the duty of moral self-perfection. What kinds of activity count as striving for purity in one's disposition to duty, or strength of will? I argue that a dominant strand of Kant's approach to moral striving does not fit familiar models of striving. I seek to address this problem in a way that avoids the flaws of synchronic and atomistic approaches to moral self-discipline by developing an account of Kantian moral striving as an ongoing contemplative activity complexly engaged with multiple forms of self-knowledge.

**Keywords:** Kant, moral development, self-knowledge, self-perfection

In this paper I shall focus on a single question that highlights some of the most puzzling aspects of Kant's explanation of the duty of self-perfection 'for a moral purpose only' in the Doctrine of Virtue of the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). What kinds of activity count as striving for purity in one's disposition to duty, or strength of will? This question concerns both *what* the duty of self-perfection is, its nature, and *how* it is to be fulfilled in the course of an individual life. I argue that a dominant strand of Kant's approach to moral striving does not fit familiar models of striving: Kant makes it very difficult to conceptualize a fit between the end of moral perfection and the means that could be taken to pursue 'strengthened' maxims. I seek to address this problem in a way that avoids the flaws of synchronic and atomistic approaches to moral self-discipline by developing an account of Kantian moral striving as an ongoing contemplative activity complexly engaged with multiple forms of self-knowledge.

I begin by presenting an interpretation of 'strengthening the will' that situates elements of the Doctrine of Virtue account of moral self-perfection in relation to the conceptions of underlying moral character

and evil in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793) and explains why cultivation of the will does not fit models of moral striving appropriate to other forms of moral self-cultivation. Following discussion of self-scrutiny and moral contemplation as methods of moral striving, I outline a revised account of moral contemplation as a diachronic process plausibly productive of the increased moral confidence and clarified moral consciousness that enable strengthening of will. I explain the details of this process through analysis of a narratively rich illustration of the kind of moral dissemblance that worries Kant, an example that is serially recast to represent the perspective of the striving agent in response to multiple inner 'obstacles' to strong willing. My account corrects notable deficiencies in existing approaches to Kantian moral striving through its two central features: (a) conceptual analysis of striving and (b) the integration of moral striving with ongoing moral practice. Although this investigation of the activities through which the duty of moral self-perfection may be (partially) fulfilled focuses on the private, self-directed efforts of individual agents, it is compatible with a more wide-ranging treatment of that duty which would address the roles of an ethical community and divine assistance in Kant's picture of moral improvement. In closing, I will suggest how my approach to individual moral striving may fit within a broader theory of moral improvement that includes extra-individual influences on moral development.

## 1. Revolution, Reformation and the Problem of Means–End Fit

Kant's most extensive treatments of individual moral progress appear in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and the Doctrine of Virtue (DV), and although these two accounts differ in significant ways, it is possible to arrive at an interpretation of Kantian moral striving that is generally compatible with both texts. I suggest that the process of 'strengthening one's will' is best understood in a way that allows us to think about moral striving in relation to potentially continuous progress, as the DV passages do, and also aligns with the sophisticated approach to principled choice present in the *Religion*. The *Religion* account of moral progress is more complex but also more obscure and problematic than the DV account, which presents a view of the agent engaged in ordinary practices with and in response to others. I outline a Kantian account that captures continuities between the two texts and, most importantly, is insightful 'from the inside', that is, from the perspective of the striving agent. The central features of Kant's approach to moral self-perfection are that (i) it is a process with two stages, (ii) the first of which is the establishment in oneself of a certain moral orientation, and (iii) further



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moral progress may be accomplished through ongoing activity, although (iv) the propensity to evil cannot be eliminated.

In §21 of DV Kant quotes from three New Testament passages in explanation of a human being's imperfect duty to himself to increase his moral perfection. We are instructed: 'be holy', 'be perfect' and 'If there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, strive for it' (*MS*, 6: 446).[1] Kant takes these imperatives to direct us towards the goals of purity in our disposition to duty (that is, to have our incentive to fulfil duty be the representation of moral law and not sensible inclination) and continual moral improvement, with the knowledge that final perfection is not possible. He writes, 'It is a human being's duty to *strive* for this perfection, but not to *reach* it (in this life), and his compliance with this duty can, accordingly, consist only in continual progress' (*MS*, 6: 446).

Although the emphasis of the DV account is on the gradualist view of moral progress as opposed to the revolutionary approach taken in the *Religion*, we have reason to understand the process of moral self-perfection represented in DV in terms of a two-stage process that loosely parallels the *Religion* account wherein an agent must transform his 'mode of thought' (*Denkungsart*) through 'a single and unalterable decision' that reverses 'the supreme ground of his maxims' and thus positions him to gradually reform his vices (*R*, 6: 48). Henry Allison usefully notes that, although Kant does not discuss revolution of the will in DV, the idea 'is not entirely absent' in the sense that moral 'resolution' serves as a counterpart to the idea of moral 'revolution' (Allison 1990: 169–70). Kant writes, 'But the resolution (*Entschliessung*) to practice virtue must be made all at once and in its entirety' (*MS*, 6: 477).[2] The pursuit of virtue as strength of will requires a resolution to prioritize morality over self-love, a resolute change in one's moral disposition, but this resolution does not itself accomplish the progressive strengthening of one's maxims, which does not happen 'all at once'.

The conception of moral revolution as a matter of choice of one's *Gesinnung* (disposition), or supersensible moral character, developed in the *Religion* is theoretically deeper and more metaphysically perplexing than the DV model of 'resolving' to prioritize morality over self-love, yet both refer to the agent's choice of basic moral orientation. Kant explains the *Gesinnung* as 'a rule that the power of choice itself produces for the exercise of its freedom, i.e. in a maxim', a 'supreme' or 'highest' maxim through which an agent establishes her moral character as either good or evil (*R*, 6: 21, 66). Here Kant is much clearer than he is in DV on the point



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that inclination cannot itself be the source of immorality, as evil is always a matter of principled choice, a use of our freedom for which we are responsible.[3] An agent who adopts 'the universal and pure maxim of the agreement of conduct with the law, as the germ from which all good is to be developed' undergoes the revolution at the level of his *Gesinnung* that is a necessary condition for further moral progress (*R*, 6: 66). My discussion of the activities through which an agent may strengthen her will presupposes that this condition is met and thus I do not attempt to explain the nature (or limits) of the moral effort involved in accomplishing a revolution of the will. The striving agent that concerns me is the agent who has established, through some combination of individual effort and 'inscrutable' divine assistance, a good *Gesinnung* (*R*, 6: 45).

Although moral revolution transforms a bad man into 'a subject susceptible of goodness', this new man is still directed by moral law to take moral self-perfection as an end; the not yet virtuous man must strive to become better. Kant explains why the choice of a good *Gesinnung* does not amount to moral perfection: 'a human being, who incorporates this purity into his maxims, though on this account still not holy as such (for between maxim and deed there still is a wide gap), is nonetheless upon the road of endless progress toward holiness' (*R*, 6: 46–7). Even the person who has adopted a good 'supreme maxim' is liable to temptations to act on first-order maxims that violate moral law because of the propensity to evil.[4] So for example a person who has established a good *Gesinnung* might occasionally or even frequently demand unwarranted special treatment when she is in an uncomfortably crowded airplane and hence act on ill-formed maxims despite her good basic moral disposition. Striving to strengthen the will is striving to resist such temptations. To strive for virtue is to endeavour to strengthen one's willing, so what we are after is further explanation of this effortful activity.

The propensity to evil that is an ineliminable feature of even a good *Gesinnung* and the inscrutability of one's own *Gesinnung* create difficulties for a Kantian theory of individual moral progress, but neither of these issues renders such a project impossible. The propensity to evil is at once a challenge to moral progress, in that it is a propensity to act against morality, and what allows moral progress to make sense at all, in that the capacity to choose *not* to act for the sake of moral law (and the openness to temptations to so choose) is necessary to the notion of moral goodness as an achievement for which we are responsible.[5] Kant considers the propensity to evil as 'subjectively necessary in every human being, even the best', for he conceives it as the 'subjective ground of the possibility of



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the deviation of the maxims from the moral law' (*R*, 6: 32; cf. 6: 29). As Pablo Muchnik clarifies, 'the *Gesinnung* indicates the fundamental moral outlook of an *individual agent*; the propensity, the moral character imputable to the *whole human species*' (2010: 117). Hence the propensity to evil 'ranges over' all *Gesinnungen*, both good and evil, of individual agents (Muchnik 2010: 133). I address the puzzle of how the agent with a good *Gesinnung* may possibly strive to counteract the propensity to evil in my discussion of moral contemplation in section 2.

Kant holds that an agent must have some degree of confidence in her moral disposition (*Gesinnung*) in order to 'persevere steadfastly' in moral self-development, yet he also stresses that a person can never be certain that her disposition has changed because immediate consciousness of the ground of our maxims is impossible. An agent may have 'reasonable hope' or a kind of tentative confidence in her *Gesinnung*, but she may not attain self-knowledge at this level (*R*, 6: 68). When I consider self-knowledge as a method of moral striving my focus will be on knowledge of one's moral transgressions and weaknesses, as well as of patterns in one's self-deceiving rationalizations and distorted self-narratives. The pursuit of these forms of self-knowledge is part of the second stage of moral progress, the gradual moral reformation made possible by a change of heart and motivated by reasonable hope in one's change of heart. I leave the task of explaining how one may attain the assurance necessary to support the pursuit of moral self-perfection to others so that I may investigate the actual activity of striving for perfection.[6]

Thus far I have shown that we cannot regard the 'change of heart' or 'revolution of the will' referred to in the *Religion* as itself accomplishing the work of moral self-perfection because it is only the necessary starting point for efforts aimed at the continual strengthening of one's maxims. I further claim that a full answer to the question of how the duty of moral self-perfection is fulfilled will take the form of an account of what strengthening maxims looks like within a life. Many arguments in recent Kant scholarship forward various versions of the thesis that the cultivation of emotions fulfils or partially fulfils the duty to moral self-perfection.[7] Although these arguments enrich our understanding of Kant's conception of moral agency, and may capture the content of our most common practices of moral striving, I do not think that they successfully capture the primary content of the duty to moral self-perfection as conceived by Kant. I would stress the distinction between cultivation of emotional dispositions and cultivation of the will (see *MS*, 6: 387), while acknowledging that natural perfection supports moral perfection.[8] I turn



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next to the interpretative and conceptual difficulties posed by Kant's conception of striving for moral perfection as striving to strengthen one's willing.

Within Kant's thought, holiness refers to complete conformity of will with moral law, an impossibility for embodied beings for whom virtue is self-constraint exercised in adopting the ends necessitated by moral law (Denis 2013: 169). Holiness functions as a regulative ideal, a guide for 'approximating a kind of perfection' as opposed to a goal to be achieved (Herman 2007: 67; Grenberg 2010a: 169). The fact that Kant is not asking us to try to overcome the human and become a different kind of being saves his position from absurdity. Still, Kant's approach to moral striving makes it difficult to identify means appropriate to the end of self-perfection because he requires us to think about the will's relation to its own law, but insists that this relation is largely hidden and offers few hints as to how its revelation would serve a project of moral self-improvement. These difficulties put Kant's account at odds with familiar models of striving for natural perfection and striving to achieve practical goals.

When one seeks to develop a talent or accomplish a goal one sets an end, and to set this end *just is* to try to act in ways that may bring about progress towards the end. There is no such thing as pure striving; we must have an end and some corresponding means in order to strive, though our end and our effortful activity might be quite open-ended. Even the consolation 'at least you are trying' only applies to a person who is trying to do something and who has a sense of the fit between what she is trying to do and her end. If striving to be holy means trying to make oneself more willing and able to act from duty, to more fully realize one's rational nature,[9] the challenge is to clarify how we may make moral progress in Kant's sense through our own agency and how continuous moral striving may be integrated into a liveable life.

## 2. Self-Knowledge and Contemplation

The pursuit of self-knowledge and contemplation of moral law are the two methods of moral striving proposed in DV that Kant apparently considers capable of directly strengthening one's will. Kant's comments on self-knowledge and contemplation of moral law do not offer fully satisfying explanations of the fit between these activities and the end of moral perfection, but they come closest to identifying something we can do to make moral progress. I draw on and adapt Emer O'Hagan's analysis of moral self-knowledge and Jeanine Grenberg's analysis of moral contemplation to develop a more adequate account of Kantian



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moral striving as a temporally extended reflective practice integrated into our pursuit of the full range of duties of virtue.

The first command of all duties to oneself is '"know (scrutinize, fathom) yourself" … in terms of your moral perfection in relation to your duty' (*MS*, 6: 441). The recognition of flaws directly reveals to the agent that there is room for improvement. However, it would seem that a gap remains between recognition of a deficiency and its correction. In his explanation of the wide nature of the duty of moral self-perfection Kant remarks, 'The law does not prescribe this inner action in the human mind but only the maxim of the action, to strive with all one's might that the thought of duty for its own sake is the sufficient incentive of every action conforming to duty' (*MS*, 6: 393). What puzzles here is the question of how knowledge of one's motives may facilitate the strengthening of one's maxims. Moral self-knowledge seems to combat both false narratives about one's own moral perfection and attendant careless action on bad maxims,[10] but there still seems to be a potential gap between recognition and reform.

My argument will be that as long as self-knowledge is considered apart from an ongoing practice of moral contemplation, itself integrated with pursuit of the full range of duties of virtue, it cannot be understood as a means fully fit to the end of self-reform. Emer O'Hagan's attempt to explicitly theorize the connection between self-knowledge and moral progress, which Kant leaves unclear, is instructive. Because she treats self-knowledge in terms of discrete acts (as opposed to an ongoing practice integrated with other complementary reflective practices) O'Hagan concludes that a convincing connection cannot be made.

O'Hagan suggests that when an agent accurately observes a disconnect between her motives and the demands of moral law, this recognition requires that 'the theoretical ground of obligation be internalized in the moment of self-awareness' (2009: 535). She explains internalization as the result of the constraining effect that focus on moral requirement has on the agent's moral attitudes. The idea seems to be that thinking about the demands of morality aligns our moral attitudes in a manner analogous to the way in which racehorses are kept on track by blinders that restrict their peripheral vision. According to O'Hagan, the agent who focuses on the actual requirements of duty 'will have no cognitive space' for distracting thoughts about frustrations or desires and so 'what he is doing will be structured by and seen in relation to the requirements of duty' (2009: 535). O'Hagan calls this process the 'active internalization of duty in self-assessment'.



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Although she applauds Kant's awareness of the way in which focus on the requirements of duty may prevent self-deception in the form of self-aggrandizing narratives, O'Hagan doubts that this focus can itself accomplish progress towards moral self-perfection in the way Kant suggests. She writes,

> As described, will self-knowledge plausibly have the effects he supposes it to have? How will the shopkeeper be transformed by his awareness that his action doesn't measure up to the moral law? How does a clear-headed awareness of the impurity of one's will lead to moral development? … we might yet puzzle over how awareness of moral law, self-knowledge through the normative frame of duty, unsupported by moral emotions can bring about the changes he predicts. (2009: 535)[11]

Here O'Hagan concludes that her own sympathetic reconstruction of Kant's approach to self-knowledge does not convincingly establish the pursuit of self-knowledge as sufficient for moral self-development. Duty cannot play the role that Kant thinks it can play in moral self-cultivation, and thus it becomes again unclear whether self-perfection is an end towards which we can make progress through our own agency.

I believe that this line of argument correctly identifies the limits of self-knowledge (knowledge of one's motives) as a method of moral striving, but it too quickly dismisses the possibility of developing a Kantian account of moral contemplation as an additional, necessary and complementary aspect of moral self-cultivation.[12] I will argue that when engaged in tandem with self-knowledge, and integrated with ongoing moral practice, moral contemplation can transform the quality of one's awareness of moral law in a way that is plausibly connected to moral improvement. I draw on Jeanine Grenberg's phenomenological account of moral contemplation, but revise it to better capture the developmental, hence temporal, character of moral striving. It is only by moving away from accounts of self-knowledge and moral contemplation as 'stand-alone' mental acts towards a view of these activities as components of a process extended and meaningfully unified over time that we may arrive at a solution to the problem of Kantian moral striving.

Jeanine Grenberg develops her account of moral contemplation in relation to the claim that the real enemy of virtue is not the inclinations, but rather an aspect of reason itself – its tendency to form immoral principles and convince itself that they are justified. She asks a question of central



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importance to my own inquiry: 'Can reason really provide the tools to counteract our propensity to evil if this enemy is itself?' (2010a: 159).[13] Put otherwise, can we *do anything* to make progress towards virtue if the very capacity through which we may strive for improvement creates obstacles to improvement? Elaborating on Kant's spare direction, Grenberg proposes that reason can indeed strengthen itself, in the sense of more honestly recognizing and more reliably respecting moral requirements as categorical, by means of contemplation.[14] The central, primary task of moral self-perfection is to avoid the corruption of reason and this is accomplished by contemplating the dignity of moral law.

It is, to be sure, not immediately clear what 'contemplation of the dignity of moral law' means or what assumptions one must make to suppose that it improves willing. Grenberg understands moral contemplation as a kind of keen 'attentiveness' to one's experience of moral obligation, as opposed to focus on the fact that one is obligated to will in certain ways and not others. What Grenberg has in mind is a 'felt attentive state' that engages the moral feeling of respect and 'allows one to keep an eye on one's own internal conversation about the meaning of one's experience of constraint' (2010a: 164). Whereas knowing one's moral constitution is a problem of accuracy, the correct relation of reason to its own commands is a matter of honesty.[15] It follows from Grenberg's account that moral striving consists in the maintenance, through 'attentiveness', of a 'faithful yet vigilant attitude' that allows one to appreciate the categorical nature of moral reasons (2010a: 160).[16]

There are several points to note about this model of moral striving before problematizing it. First, sincere striving does not guarantee improvement; rather, *it makes it more likely*. Second, the aim of moral contemplation is not primarily to reduce the frequency of temptations to act against duty by regulating or shaping the agent's inclinations but rather to make one more able to resist temptations (including the temptation to rationalize away the authority of moral law) should they arise. Third, because Grenberg does not indicate how the efficacy of one's contemplative activity may build over time, her account gives the impression that the 'progress' facilitated by moral striving does not amount to incremental improvement, but rather *one becomes better by not becoming worse*.

Although Grenberg does not explicitly state the 'not becoming worse' view, her explanations of the function of moral contemplation align with it more easily than they do with a developmental view of moral progress. For example she writes, 'Those not willing to engage in contemplation … will lose their understanding of themselves as constrained and obligated beings. But the



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contemplative, attentive person understands her experience of constraint as what it in fact is: an affirmation of the untrumpable strength of moral reasons' (2010a: 165). Grenberg notes that contemplation must be done 'regularly' (i.e. we must 'keep an eye' on ourselves) to counteract our tendency to become distracted, but we are left to wonder how she might characterize the progress of the 'becoming-contemplative' person, as the fully contemplative person progresses only in the sense of maintaining her condition, or not backsliding. That said, the conception of moral progress as the maintenance of a balance between confidence and watchfulness is consistent with a certain reading of Kant's intriguing remark that virtue is sinking if it is not rising: 'Virtue is always in progress and yet always starts from the beginning … virtue can never settle down in peace and quiet with its maxims adopted once and for all but, if it is not rising, is unavoidably sinking' (*MS*, 6: 409).

I accept the first and second features of Grenberg's model noted above, but I believe that the practice of 'attentiveness' must be further theorized within a developmental framework that includes a clear alternative to the 'treading water' view of moral progress. In order for moral contemplation to make sense as an activity that supports and extends the pursuit of self-knowledge in a way that is (potentially) morally transformative, it must be recast in a way that explains the possibility of a kind of gradual moral progress. The all-or-nothing avoidance of corruption represented in Grenberg's examples is at odds with the conception of striving as an evolving temporal process.[17] The 'faithful and vigilant attitude' of the virtuous agent may be *maintained* through continued attentiveness, but at some point the striving agent must be able to *develop* such an attitude through a process of gradual improvement.

Grenberg's account aligns with Kant's claim that virtue as strength of will 'always starts from the beginning', but it does not capture the sense in which the not yet virtuous agent who strives to strengthen her will may make moral progress. To see why this is so, consider Grenberg's interpretation of Kant's example of a man who must choose either to 'give false testimony against an honourable man' or face the gallows (*KpV*, 5: 30). According to Grenberg's interpretation, the man resists the temptation to choose love of life over morality *because* he recognizes this temptation, and he recognizes this temptation *because* he recognizes 'a categorical demand as genuinely categorical' (2010a: 160). This explanation fits the following model of strengthening the will:

(1) Moral demands are categorical.

Recognition of (1):

(2) enables you to recognize your temptation to deny this knowledge and



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(3) gives you confidence that you can act as you ought to act.

Together (2) and (3) enable you to:

(4) resist your temptation to deny (1).

We must continue to recognize (1) so that we can go through steps (2)–(4). We either acknowledge what we know or we are susceptible to temptations to choose to deny what we know.

Again, on this model moral progress is the avoidance of corruption and striving constitutes progress because it keeps us honest. However, at this point we may wonder if recognition of (1) really can get us all of (2)–(4), as it seems that in the case of the striving agent who is not yet fully virtuous the process may stall at stage (2). The person who honestly acknowledges the demands of duty yet freely chooses to give into temptation (the Kantian version of weakness of will) seems to be stuck in this way, as does the shopkeeper from Kant's *Groundwork* example as imagined by O'Hagan; he knows moral law requires him to charge everyone a fair price, yet he also knows he will only do so because it is good for business. As previously noted, self-knowledge combats carelessness and multiple forms of self-deception, but it does not itself strengthen one's resolve to act for the right reason.[18]

There are two ways we might alter Grenberg's model to better address the situation of striving agents who are not dishonest about the claims their own reason makes on them. We could hold that the honest recognition of the categorical character of moral demands achieved through attentiveness to one's experience of obligation comes in degrees, meaning that one might neither fully ignore, deny or obscure this knowledge nor recognize it in a fully honest or complete way. We could also, or instead, hold that confidence in one's ability to will correctly is not necessarily a consequence of honest recognition of the categorical character of moral demands, but itself must be developed through a temporally extended process of moral striving.

In response to these suggestions, Grenberg might urge that in every case falling away from virtue amounts to a refusal 'to recognize the quality of one's own experience of obligation' (2010a: 163). The person who strives for virtue strives to accept her experience of the irresistibility (or strictness, validity and purity) of moral demands. They were irresistible all along, but the agent may fail to acknowledge her own experience of their necessity because reason, in a sense, interrupts itself. If falling away from virtue is largely a matter of obscuring 'what's there' in one's own moral



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consciousness or misinterpreting it, then the free choice to give into temptation, rationalizations of temptation and even dependence on non-moral incentives to act in accordance with duty indicate insufficient or incomplete acknowledgement of the quality of one's own moral experience.

The logic here is somewhat unusual in that we tend to think that anything that one fails to recognize in the field of experience has not actually entered conscious awareness. We understand what it means to fail to experience moral demands as necessary. But it is harder to grasp the notion of failing to experience a quality of one's own experience; it seems in this case that we simply did not experience the quality in question (irresistibleness). I do not intend these remarks as criticisms of Grenberg's acceptance of the Kantian premise that all agents have awareness of moral law at some level or her focus on the first-person perspective of common moral consciousness; rather, I wish to highlight the conceptual difficulty of explaining reason's relation to its own prescriptions. Grenberg allows that some people properly attend to their experience of categorical obligation and others do not. But this all-or-nothing model of 'attentiveness' does not easily translate into a description of an effortful activity through which we strive to develop greater willingness and ability to honestly recognize the quality of our own moral experience, the experience of constraint by moral law.

I believe that Grenberg's account may be revised to serve a more convincing explanation of moral striving, one that explicitly allows for progressive clarification of moral consciousness and development of confidence in one's moral capacities. I propose to reframe moral contemplation as 'attentiveness' in less abstract terms and in relation to examples less dramatic than that of a man at the gallows. The idea here is to shift focus from the state of being that manifests the achievements of recognition (of the moral law) and confidence (in one's moral capacities) in a discrete instance, to the work-in-progress development of these achievements.

My argument in this section began with the claim that self-knowledge is limited as a method of moral striving because knowledge of one's motives does not itself transform them. I suggested that the work of self-scrutiny may be extended by a complementary practice of moral contemplation, which together with self-knowledge makes possible the gradual strengthening of one's maxims. However, in order for moral contemplation to make sense as a mode of striving that is in this way fit to the



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end of moral perfection, it must be understood as an activity integrated over time with ordinary moral practice and involving continuous, but not constant, effort. In the next section I enter further into the first-person perspective of the striving agent to advance this alternative account of moral contemplation as a central method of moral striving.[19]

## 3. Setting Ends, Striving and the Fulfilment of Duties of Virtue

I will develop my revised account of moral contemplation as a method of moral striving in relation to an ordinary example of the kind of corruption of reason through self-deception that the agent who takes moral perfection as an end would strive to avoid. The example, taken from an early passage in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, is narrated in the third person, but we may imagine variations of the episode renarrated from the first-person perspective. In this excerpt Pierre is on his way home and remembers that an evening of gambling, followed by drinking, will be taking place at Anatole Kuragin's.

> 'It would be nice to go to Kuragin's,' he thought. But at once he remembered the word of honor he had given Prince Andrei not to visit Kuragin.
>
> But at once, as happens with so-called characterless people, he desired so passionately to experience again that dissolute life so familiar to him, that he decided to go. And at once the thought occurred to him that the word he had given meant nothing, because before giving his word to Prince Andrei, he had also given Prince Anatole his word that he would be there; finally he thought that all these words of honor were mere conventions, with no definite meaning, especially if you considered that you might die the next day, or something so extraordinary might happen to you that there would no longer be either honor or dishonor. That sort of reasoning often came to Pierre, destroying all his decisions and suppositions. He went to Kuragin's.[20] (Tolstoy 2007: 30–1)

Tolstoy illustrates the process by which reason betrays itself with almost uncanny precision.[21] The many-headed rationalization that 'destroys' Pierre's resolve to keep his promise occurs 'at once', quick on the heels of reason's 'unrelenting'[22] prescription. The passage shrewdly and comically represents the momentum with which a rationalization may build such that it seems here that reason has no opportunity to interrupt the interruption once it is under way. Purely synchronic strengthening of will of the kind described by Grenberg does not seem possible for Pierre



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because the temptation is not recognizable to him *as* a temptation. However, if he had been engaged in a diachronic process of moral striving (involving both self-knowledge and attentiveness) he may have been in the position to properly interpret himself as tempted to break his promise because of his desire for a night of irresponsible entertainment. Attentiveness to the experience of obligation, initiated by awareness gained through previous self-scrutiny of how one's own rationalizations tend to 'sound', might allow reason to reassert the validity of moral commands and discredit the seeming reasonableness of corrupting rationalizations.

As mentioned, we may also imagine variations of this episode renarrated from Pierre's own perspective. Two possible variations will serve to illustrate the situations that I claimed problematize Grenberg's view of contemplation as attentiveness. In these variations I imagine a counterpart of Pierre who has developed awareness of his own patterns of rationalization and vulnerabilities to temptation through reflective self-observation. The work of self-knowledge allows this hypothetical protagonist to confront temptation as temptation, and thus to struggle against it.

(1) It would be nice to go to Kuragin's. I really wish I had not promised to refrain from visiting Kuragin's. I know it is wrong to break my promise, but I don't think I can stop myself.

(2) It would be nice to go to Kuragin's. I really wish I had not promised to refrain from visiting Kuragin's. I know it is wrong to break my promise, but mostly I am afraid that if I break it Prince Andrei will find out. Why can't I keep my promise because it is right?

In both cases (1) and (2), the protagonist lacks confidence in his ability to will as he knows he ought or does not fully believe in his moral capacities.[23] What does striving through attentiveness mean here? I approach this question by revisiting the conditions for meaningful striving in general and then applying them to these cases to argue for a conception of moral contemplation as attentiveness that allows for gradual moral improvement, understood as strengthening of will.

If one's exertions are to count as striving in relation to a particular end, one must have set that end for oneself – it is not sufficient to value, long for or admire the end. Wishing does not amount to willing: setting an end requires activity guided by a conception of the end. Further, one must settle 'in a relatively enduring way' upon an end in relation to which to strive because this allows one's pursuit of the end to be 'sufficiently



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unified over time to count as striving' (Goodin 2012: 65). The point here is that some subset of one's efforts across time must be meaningfully related to each other by ongoing connection to a common end for one to properly be understood as striving for something. Finally, one cannot set an end without at least tentatively believing oneself capable of progress in relation to it, because willing an end is not separable from willing some action that is understood as constituting or potentially accomplishing progress in relation to the end. This is just an elaboration of the idea that to will an end is to will the necessary means to the end. These general premises have implications for how we think about the activity of striving for moral perfection.

Setting oneself the end of moral self-perfection entails attempting to reorient one's own willing, not just one's evaluative judgements.[24] A person who regularly reads history books and contemplates what various actors ought to have done to comply with moral law, for example, has not thereby set himself the end of moral perfection. This is so because reflections on others' obligations and evaluations of others' willing do not engage the agent's own experience of constraint in deliberative contexts.[25] Because gradual progress can be made towards perfection, but perfection cannot be fully realized, setting this end also entails attempting to engage in some kind of ongoing practice, the connected elements of which are fit to the end as understood by the striving agent. It follows from this analysis that the 'attentiveness' to moral experience engaged in by an agent who has set himself the end of moral perfection, conceived minimally as firm resolve to act for the right reason, is different from the moral consciousness of an agent who has not set himself this end. The agent who has not taken on the end of moral self-perfection is still capable of acting as he ought and may at any point choose to take on the end of moral self-perfection. But the agent who does not understand himself as trying to strengthen his moral resolve will not experience a present struggle with temptation in meaningful relation to past struggles, and therefore lacks a toehold for progressive clarification of moral consciousness.

This argument applies to our reimagined versions of Pierre's encounter with temptation or inner obstacle. Just as striving to undo a rationalization that undermines the authority of moral law makes sense in terms of a diachronic process, so too striving through attentiveness in cases of (1) weakness and (2) impurity makes sense only if we conceive of the agent as having already consciously committed himself to the project of moral self-development in the sense of having set himself this end. The version of Pierre who has committed to improvement is positioned to struggle



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against his rationalization and bare temptation in a way that the original Pierre is not. The experience of constraint undergone by the protagonist in case (1) is not his very first experience of constraint; it is not the first occasion on which he has had the opportunity to contemplate the meaning of the felt conflict between self-love and morality. Presumably, the agent who takes moral self-perfection as an end has in some way (almost certainly without any theoretical terminology such as 'categorical'!) explicitly formulated the meaning of this experience to himself, perhaps simply in terms of it being important above all to be a good person.

Hence if the protagonist in case (1) is imagined as a striving agent, then he is positioned to recognize his thought 'I don't think I can stop myself' as itself a temptation to be combated through effortful moral contemplation.[26] His effortful activity of attentiveness to *this* experience of obligation *now* may resonate with previous experience of the 'irresistibleness' of moral demands gained through attentiveness *before*, allowing the striving agent to recognize that both experiences mean the same thing. The transformation of moral consciousness to be achieved through attentiveness to the meaning of one's experience of obligation may be represented discursively by the replacement of the thought 'I don't think I can stop myself' with 'I am tempted to not stop myself, but I can choose to stop myself.' In this way, moral contemplation as attentiveness is a method of combating the temptation to believe oneself incapable of doing what one ought. Confidence in one's moral capacities may be developed through striving in the sense that attentiveness re-engages past experiences of agency that may 'brighten' a presently dim acknowledgement of one's nature.

In case (2) the protagonist is confident that he can outwardly comply with the requirements of duty but believes that he cannot act for the right reason. The intelligibility of attentiveness as a method of striving in this case depends, as in case (1), on an interpretation of the protagonist as already engaged in an ongoing process of 'trying out' his moral capacities. Endorsing the Stoic view that virtue must be taught, Kant explains that virtue must be '*exercised* and cultivated by efforts to combat the inner enemy within the human being', and then adds, 'for one cannot straightaway do all that one wants to do, without having first tried out and exercised one's powers'. Virtue, Kant tells us, is 'produced by' pure practical reason as it gains 'consciousness of its supremacy' (*MS*, 6: 477). The agent who asks himself 'Why can't I keep my promise because it is right?' cannot 'do all that he wants to do' in that he cannot silence the



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claims of self-love. Yet through attentiveness to his experience of this conflict the agent strengthens to some extent his consciousness of the supremacy of the claims of reason to those of self-love. Moral contemplation brings the striving agent into a state of anxious aspiration, wherein he exercises his moral powers even in questioning their adequacy.

Setting the end of moral self-perfection makes moral transformation possible for the striving agent because it necessarily involves the agent in an ongoing practice of attentiveness to the experience of obligation. I have argued that engagement in such a practice of moral contemplation allows for development of confidence in one's moral capacities and progressive clarification of moral consciousness on account of the resonances between stages of striving over time and across deliberative contexts. We should not expect to be able to explain the possibility of strengthening one's maxims through one's own agency in relation to examples of agents who have not engaged in striving for this end or whose separate so-called 'strivings' are completely disconnected from each other.

The agent who has taken moral self-perfection as an end does not strive to strengthen her will by occasionally or frequently setting aside time to contemplate the dignity of moral law or by seeking opportunities to face the categorical nature of moral demands in the face of dramatic temptations. Rather, in the course of an agent's ordinary efforts to live and work with others she will meet situations in which she experiences aversion or resistance to moral obligations to keep promises, act fairly, speak truth, offer help, avoid competitive self-estimation and so on. The experience of mild aversion or resistance is not full-fledged temptation to vice, and so it creates an opportunity for an agent to pay attention to her experience of resistance to moral demands while recognizing the force of moral reasons. In this way, the agent may 'work up' her ability to relate honestly to the experience of constraint in a process of contemplative self-coaching, which may manifest discursively in phrases such as 'I don't want to, but I must'; 'This is going to cause me problems, but that doesn't matter.' Attentiveness to one's own experience of confidence with respect to resisting temptations integrated into the lower-stakes fulfilment of a range of duties of virtue may prepare one to resist the temptation to deny the validity, or strictness and purity, of reason's prescriptions or the temptation to dismiss one's own moral capacities when the stakes are higher or the resistance is simply greater. Developing moral resolve or commitment is a process in which earlier efforts and partial achievements support further strengthening at later stages.[27]



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This model of moral striving as a progressive practice of attentiveness integrated with both efforts at self-knowledge and the pursuit of a range of moral ends aligns with Kant's remark that virtue is 'always in progress' and yet always 'starts from the beginning'. The pursuit of virtue as strength of will always starts from attentiveness to one's experience of obligation; however, for the agent who has taken self-perfection as an end, these beginnings re-engage and advance previously achieved recognition of the nature of moral demands and one's own moral capacities. Striving through attentiveness is then a practice that is deepened and reinforced through continuous re-engagement. My amendments to Grenberg's model lead to a mode of Kantian moral striving that may accomplish progress beyond not getting worse. The striving agent who has not yet fully developed virtue avoids descent into weak willing through progressive improvement. The virtuous Kantian agent strives to maintain her firm resoluteness in the face of temptation, but the agent striving for virtue must develop this strength before it can be maintained. Thus the version of Kantian moral striving we have arrived at is consistent with Kant's claim that virtue 'if it is not rising, is unavoidably sinking', but requires separate interpretations of 'rising' for the agent striving for virtue and the agent striving to maintain virtue.

## 4. Conclusion: The Fulfilment of the Duty to Moral Self-Perfection

Reading sections 21 and 22 in the context of the forty-eight sections that make up the Doctrine of the Elements of Ethics in DV, I believe that we should understand moral striving as a contemplative approach to our pursuit of moral ends. Moral striving is not a discrete activity, but a way of approaching moral life that is sustained by the fulfilment of a range of duties of virtue. Kant's explanations of the duties against servility and the duties of gratitude and friendship, for example, specify what we might think of as companion ends to the end of moral self-perfection.[28] We are instructed not to compare ourselves to other people, but rather to make 'sincere and exact comparison of ourselves with the moral law'; we are to honour our benefactors and we should seek to nurture relationships of mutual respect in which we can reveal our thoughts (*MS*, 6: 436, 471 and 473).

These duties are all relevant to the content of the duty of moral self-perfection, not only because they are part of the complete attainment of 'one's moral end with regard to oneself', but because they *occasion* and *sustain* contemplation of our experience of obligation across multiple contexts of deliberation. These practices of judging, listening, sharing and socializing discussed by Kant are all activities that realize the pursuit of moral self-perfection when they are engaged in contemplatively.



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Understanding moral contemplation as occasioned and sustained in relation to the fulfilment of duties of virtue situates the single virtuous disposition in relation to the various virtuous qualities and helps clarify how this method of moral striving fits into a life.

In taking self-perfection as an end, we adopt an approach to fulfilling our other duties of virtue and this grounds our contemplative practice. Just as one cannot take others' happiness as an end without taking the happiness of some specific persons as an end, one cannot meaningfully strive for moral improvement without striving to form trusting relationships, to express respect for others, to judge oneself against moral law, and the like. We contemplate our experience of obligation and cultivate self-consciousness of our freedom[29] while doing other things in pursuit of moral ends and permissible non-moral ends. In this way the duties of virtue fulfilled through properly motivated outward expression support the more 'private' or 'pure thought' duties of virtue by orienting our contemplation in relation to our ongoing practices, that is, to things that we do in the world. We do not 'crowd out' distractions just by focusing on the fact of moral requirement in isolated moments, but by orienting our attention to our experience of constraint in relation to the projects and relationships through which we fulfil duties of virtue.

My account of moral striving as ongoing engagement in a process of contemplative activity, complexly related to self-knowledge and rooted in ordinary moral life, clarifies what an agent can do directly in meaningful pursuit of virtue as strength of will. As noted at the outset, Kant does not approach moral cultivation as a wholly individual enterprise, which is evident, for example, in the vision of the highest good presented in his later works and his concern for the ways in which social disorder threatens rational agency.[30] However, individual striving is clearly essential to moral progress and questions regarding the interplay between practices of self-discipline and participation in social and political institutions in moral development cannot be answered without an interpretation of individual striving. The interpretation that I have offered is well suited to serve as starting point for further work on the relation between self-perfection and sociality, as it leaves open the possibility that one's ability to clarify the meaning of one's own experience of agency may be shaped by relationships with others. Although several factors relevant to moral cultivation cannot be directly controlled through individual action, I would hold that if the end of moral perfection is taken on completely, such that it truly structures one's life, one will make some progress – however modest – towards holiness.



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## Notes

1 English translations of passages from the *Metaphysics of Morals* are from *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J. Gregor, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). English translations of passages from the *Religion* are from *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, trans. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Because these translations cite the volume and page numbers of the Akademie edition of Kant's collected works, I include only the latter in my citations. I will use the following abbreviations: *MS* = *Metaphysics of Morals*; *R* = *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*; *G* = *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*; *KpV* = *Critique of Practical Reason*.

2 Mary Gregor translates *Entschliessung* as 'decision'.

3 Jeanine Grenberg (2010a) seeks to reconcile the differing accounts of immorality in DV and the *Religion* based on an interpretation of Kant's view of virtue as the 'strong' use of inner freedom in DV. I find this argument convincing.

4 For this reason, the good *Gesinnung* is best understood as a 'disposition to progress' established by the choice of 'the maxims of "incessant counteraction" against man's propensity to evil' (Wood 1970: 230).

5 For variations on this point see Grenberg (2010b: 179), Moran (2012: 93) and Wood (1970: 243).

6 For detailed analysis of the problem of gaining confidence in the authenticity and stability of one's change of heart and a well-developed solution, see Ware (2009: esp. 695–6).

7 Paul Guyer's interpretation of acting based on cultivated emotions as acting from duty (1993: ch. 10) and Nancy Sherman's analysis of the 'underlying project of natural perfection that supports our moral perfection' in Kant's moral philosophy (1997: 143) are influential examples.

8 Nancy Sherman makes the first part of my point in her critique of Paul Guyer's (1993) reinterpretation of acting from duty. Here she claims that striving for purity in the motive of duty and the cultivation of 'human material' are 'two pulls' in Kant's account that never fully come together (1995: 375). I note here that the moral feeling of respect for moral law has a special status in Kant's thought, though I do not have space here to elaborate on this issue.

9 For a discussion of this construal of the duty to moral self-perfection see Denis (2001: 115).

10 Self-scrutiny may improve an agent's willing in the sense that the agent is more able to consciously choose to exclude incentives contrary to duty from her maxims when she is aware of their presence. In the case of the person who has resolved to pursue virtue, awareness of temptation to choose against one's fundamental moral commitments may facilitate moral development because it allows the person to hold herself responsible in the moment of decision.

11 O'Hagan goes on to suggest that moral emotions such as sympathy can help explain the possibility of moral transformation. As several commentators have noted, this kind of suggestion is problematic because the development of a non-rational (sensible) emotion cannot help strengthen our ability to act from duty. For further discussion of this point see Seymour (2007: 120, n. 130).

12 Because it is true that common experience tells against the claim that being aware of the requirements of duty guarantees that one will act for the right reason, I will return to O'Hagan's sceptical questions.

13 Grenberg rejects (2010a: 159, n. 7) John Hare's (1996) defence of God's grace as a solution to this problem, claiming that one must make oneself worthy of God's help by exerting effort.



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14 Kant writes, 'the way to acquire [virtue] is to enhance the moral incentive (the thought of the law), both by contemplating the dignity of the pure rational law in us (*contemplatione*) and by practicing virtue (*exercitio*)' (*MS*, 6: 397).
15 I thank Krista Thomason for suggesting this distinction.
16 Paul Guyer also notes that attention and vigilance are central to the pursuit of self-mastery, but his focus is on the disciplining of imagination, judgement and feeling (Guyer 2005: 138–44).
17 It is possible that Grenberg's examples suggest a view of attentiveness as a kind of episode-specific all-or-nothing act because she wishes to highlight the contrast between attentive moral consciousness and non-attentive moral-consciousness, which is most easily done through analysis of isolated episodes. Grenberg does not address the role of attentiveness in moral transformation and so it is unclear whether she would allow for the more dynamic modes of attentiveness that interest me.
18 I understand impurity as an obstacle to good willing to be strived against by an agent who in her basic disposition prioritizes morality over self-love. For discussion of the compatibility of impurity with a general commitment to morality, see Allison (1990: 160).
19 Grenberg very thoroughly develops the methodology of approaching moral theory from the first-person perspective in (2013). She does not specifically consider the perspective of the *striving* agent – the experience of agency specific to striving to improve one's willing.
20 I thank Drew Leder for directing me to this passage.
21 In the *Groundwork* Kant describes this as a 'natural dialectic' (*G*, 4: 405).
22 Kant uses this word to describe reason's prescriptions in the *Groundwork* passage on the 'natural dialectic' of reason cited above.
23 Andrews Reath (2006: 21) takes this mindset to be a kind of 'ideology' organized around the belief that 'our practical and motivational capacities are limited to empirical practical reason', which allows us to take self-love 'as a principle with justifying force'. I believe that Reath's conception of how self-love operates through an ideology of false beliefs is correct, but I disagree with the claim that false beliefs about one's moral capacities and the nature of practical reason are immediately corrected by awareness of the requirements of duty.
24 I understand the resolution to prioritize morality over self-love as constitutive of setting the end of moral perfection. The resolution initiates effortful activity aimed at strengthening the resolution.
25 Reflecting on what you yourself should have done might be relevant, if it is part of a process that also includes attentiveness to experience of conflict of moral law and self-love in deliberative contexts. The process must be organized around this, because moral perfection is not a matter of having the right evaluative attitudes, but rather of willing.
26 Marcia Baron and Melissa Seymour Fahmy (2009: 216) note that it is against the duty of moral self-perfection to regard one's moral character as incapable of change. I add the point that one must be positioned to recognize the temptation to so regard one's character in order to strive to combat it and thus to fulfil this requirement of the duty of moral self-perfection.
27 The striving agent who has not yet attained virtue will sometimes fail to will in a way that makes 'the thought of duty for its own sake' sufficient incentive to action. Kant understands one's response to one's own failures as part of meaningful striving for virtue. For example, he recommends 'morally repenting sins (with a view to improving)' and condemns attempts at self-punishment (*MS*, 6: 485).
28 In her discussion of the fulfilment of obligatory ends, Maria Baron (1995: 94) argues that we must adopt subsidiary ends, 'ends that instantiate the OE [obligatory end]'.



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A 'companion end' is distinct from a 'subsidiary end' in that pursuit of a companion end opens possibilities for striving in relation to the obligatory end. Use of the term 'companion' instead of 'subsidiary' also avoids the suggestions that contemplative fulfilment of duties of virtue supplement some other more primary method of moral perfection.

29 Stephen Engstrom (2002: 312) uses this phrase to describe the aim of moral contemplation. Engstrom and Grenberg agree that contemplation of the purity of moral law may facilitate moral improvement, though Grenberg (2010a: 166) questions Engstrom's comparison of the person with Kantian virtue to the magnanimous person because the propensity to evil is never eliminated.

30 See Moran (2012: ch. 2) for an argument connecting aspects of the duty to moral self-perfection to the duty to promote the highest good. Andrews Reath (1988: 617) has also argued for a connection between the duty of moral self-perfection and a duty to promote the highest good through reformation of social organizations. He remarks, 'Certainly one's disposition to act from the Moral Law is strengthened when it is given public support, and when one can count on others to do so as well.' For discussion of the roles played by a just political order and external peace in removing obstacles to moral cultivation see Munzel (1999: 175–86, 321–7). For discussion of the ways in which socially acquired passions such as ambition and avarice may threaten even the possibility of moral contemplation see Morrisson (2008: 45–7).

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