

KANTIAN VIRTUE AS CURE FOR AFFECTS AND PASSIONS

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Abstract: In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant presents virtue not as an arduous task, but as an endeavor, that costs a lot for the agent. In order to explain in what consists moral content, Kant tells a story of an honest man, to whom it is offered great gifts if he joins the calumniators of an innocent person, but he denies it. Then he is threatened by his friends, who deny him friendship, by his relatives, who deny him inheritance, and a prince who threatens him with loss of freedom and even life. If the man, whatever loss or pain he is threaten with, decides to be truthful, then he shows here the value of virtue. Moreover “yet virtue here worth so much because it costs so much, not because it brings any profit” (KpV, 5:156)¹. Virtue shows its worth, even to the youngest listener, because of his pureness and deserves approval and admiration, because moral actions were done without any pretension to happiness or even magnanimity. In this article, I analyze the idea of virtue in Kant and how it is related to the controlling of affects and passions. I begin by showing the relation between virtue and happiness and then I explore virtue as strength.

Keywords: Kant; virtue; passion; happiness.

Virtue is not happiness

In the *Anthropology*, while discussing the faculty of desire and its relation to the feelings of joy and sorrow, Kant recommends of the moderation of feelings. His stoic advice, however, is accompanied by a particular awesome vision: an intemperate joy is worse than an extreme sorrow:

Exuberant joy (untempered by any concern for grief) and absorbing sadness (unmitigated by any hope), or sorrow, are emotions which threaten life. Nevertheless, one can see from the death lists that more persons have their lives suddenly on account of exuberant joy than on account of sorrow. (Anth, 7:255)

Kant is one of the first philosophers not to associate happiness with moral life. In the *Groundwork*, he draws a radical distinction between the realm of happiness and the realm of virtue. Although Kant may be following the stoics in their recommendation for controlling emotions, the stoic philosophy is still a eudemonistic ethics, as all the ancient moral theories.²

¹ I will use the following abbreviations: **G** for *Groundwork*, **KpV** for *Critique of Practical Reason*, **Anth** for *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, **MS** for *The Metaphysics of Moral*, **TL** for *the Doctrine of Virtue*. The volume and pages are quoted according to the Akademie Edition.

² J. Annas maintains in the book *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993) that happiness was a primary notion for all the ancient moral theories: “In them-she says- the notions of the agent’s final end, of happiness and of virtues are primary, as opposed to basic. (...) They are thus primary for understanding; they establish what the theory is a theory of, and define the place to be given to other ethical notions, such as right action.” (p.9) She also points out that stoicism also presents itself as a eudemonistic theory, for which virtue is sufficient for happiness. She cites Arius Didymus: “One’s aims, they say, is being happy, for the sake of which everything is done, while it is not

The intricate relation between happiness and morality is solved by the definition of happiness as a virtuous life. According to the stoic philosophers, only virtue has moral worth and *eudaimonia* can be reached independently of things that are above the control of the agent. By making external goods like wealth, health, friendship and love not necessary for a happy and worthy life, the stoics prevent happiness from being ruined by the contingencies of life.³

Kant gave up answering the old sophist question -why be moral if morality does not bring happiness? - by the redefinition of happiness in terms of virtue. The Kantian definition is the commonsensical one: “Happiness is the state of a rational being in the world in the whole of whose existence everything goes according to his wish and will, and rests, therefore, on the harmony of nature with his whole end as well as with the essential determining ground of his will”(KpV,5:124). The accomplishment of happiness will come from the satisfaction of our desires.

Schneewind points out that the problem of how to attain happiness is the problem of how to satisfy our desires, what is not in our power to do.: “Since happiness for Kant comes from the satisfaction of desires, the range of components out of which we can choose to flesh out our conception of happiness is not up to us”.⁴ He also shows in this article that the conception of happiness as beyond our control accords to the modern lack of confidence in the natural world. In that pessimist “lack of confidence” he would disagree with a major metaphysical stoic position:

The metaphysics of Stoicism is profoundly important for its ethics. Regardless of the extent to which any particular moral principle is derived from the metaphysics, Stoic metaphysics grounds at least the a priori assurance that when we act from reason as far as we can, everything of concern to us will be well. Kant simply takes for granted an anti-Leibnizian, anti-Stoic acceptance of the indifference of the natural world to human concerns.⁵

The accomplishment of the demands of moral law will not give us any happiness, unless for a contingent connection. According to Kant, for a finite being, there is no correspondence between happiness and morality, because such being cannot be a cause of nature:

done for the sake of anything further; and this consist in living according to virtue, in living in agreement and further (it is the same thing) in living according to nature.” (Arius, 77.16-78.6, cit. Annas, p. 163).

³ M. Nussbaum explains the independence of stoic eudemonism from external contingencies: “According to stoicism, then, only virtue is worth choosing for its own sake; and virtue all by itself suffices for a completely good human life, that is, for eudaimonia. Virtue is something unaffected by external contingency-both (apparently) as to its acquisition and as to its maintenance once acquired. Items that are not fully under the control of the agent-such as health, wealth, freedom from pain, the good functioning of the bodily faculties-have no intrinsic worth, nor is their casual relationship to eudaimonia even that of an instrumental necessary condition. “Nussbaum, M. *The therapy of desire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.359.

⁴ “Kant and the Stoic Ethics”, in: Engstrom, S & Whiting, Jennifer, *Aristotle, Kant and the Stoics, Rethinking Happiness and Duty* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996) p.289.

⁵ Ibid, p. 294

Consequently, there is not the least ground in the moral law for a necessary connection between the morality and the proportionate happiness of a being belonging to the world as part of it and hence dependent upon it, who for that reason cannot by his will be a cause of this nature and, as far as his happiness is concerned, cannot by his own powers make it harmonize thoroughly with his practical principles. (5:125)

A finite being that belongs to the world and is dependent on it cannot be a cause of nature, nor can it harmonize its happiness with morality. If pure reason needs the latter connection for the pursuit of the highest good, a being which is the cause of nature and also connected to morality should be postulated. The second postulate of pure practical reason, the existence of god, is advanced as a result of the need of a connection which finite beings would not be able to produce: the attachment of happiness to morality.

In the definition given in the KpV, external goods are certainly essential parts of happiness for Kant. Happiness is attained when events in the world conform to our wish. As a result, happiness cannot be the aim of a moral life, because happiness is dependent on contingent goods, what makes it a fragile and unstable site on which to ground morality. That happiness is contingent, however, is not its sole difficulty. Kant claims that:

1-Happiness cannot be universally defined

2-Even if happiness could be universally defined, it would lead to a disagreement rather than to harmony

1. Happiness cannot have a universal definition

In the *Groundwork*, Kant distinguishes imperatives of skill from imperatives of prudence: the former command an action as necessary to accomplish an end; for the latter, this end is happiness. Although happiness is undoubtedly the end of all rational beings, unfortunately for the eudaemonist philosopher, it is impossible to give a determinate concept of happiness:

But it is a misfortune that the concept of happiness is such an indeterminate concept that, although every human being wishes to attain this, he can still never say determinately and consistently with himself what he really wishes and wills. (G, 4:419)

The claim that one is not able to produce his own happiness seems more acceptable than the claim that we do not know what can count as happiness. It is reasonable to think that even if we do not have the power to produce the ends that we want, we do know what we want and what will count as a good and worthy life. Kant objects to many issues that have, traditionally, in philosophy, been considered a part of happiness, like health, wealth, and knowledge. For example, Kant disagrees with the view that, all things being equal, it is better to be rich than

poor. He writes: “if he wills riches, how much anxiety, envy and intrigue might he not bring upon himself in this way! (G, 4:418). Against the unconditional claim that it is better to have more knowledge of the world than less, he avers that “if he wills a great deal of cognition and insight, that might become only an eye all the more acute to show him, as all the more dreadful” . Even the widely held opinion that the healthier one is, the better, is brought into question: “if he at least wills health, how often has not bodily discomfort kept someone from excess into which unlimited health would have let him fall”.

Another reason why happiness cannot be universally defined is given in the *Critique of Practical Reason*: Kant explains that each person’s happiness depends upon his particular sources of pleasure. Therefore, what counts as an object of pleasure for some person may not be a source of pleasure for someone else. Besides that, what makes the pleasure or displeasure of the same person can change in time.⁶

2. Even if the feelings of pleasure and displeasure could be universal, there would be no harmony

The absence of a consensus on what is desirable is not the only reason why happiness cannot be an object of morality. Suppose that people had the same feelings of pleasure and displeasure and that they desire the same objects. An absence of harmony could still obtain. Kant illustrates this situation with the “unanimity of a married couple bent on going to ruin” and with the pledge of King Francis I to the Emperor Charles V: “What my brother Charles would have (Milan), that I would also have”. (KpV,5:28)

A consensus on what is pleasurable could very well be worse than disagreement: “for whereas elsewhere a universal law of nature makes everything harmonious, here, if one wanted to give the maxim of the universality of a law, the most extreme opposite of harmony would follow, the worst conflict, and the complete annihilation of the maxim itself and its purpose.”

Happiness cannot give us a universal law, whether or not the object of pleasure for multiple parties is the same or different. Happiness proves to be an inadequate basis for the moral life. Its relation to the empirical and particular object of pleasure and joy, the incapacity of finite beings to promote their own desired ends and the conflict that would still result if we overcome these difficulties seem to banish forever the term happiness from the moral domain.

⁶ “That is to say, in what each has to put his happiness comes down to the particular feeling of pleasure and displeasure in each and, even within one and the same subject, to needs that differ as this feeling changes.” Kant, KpV, 5:25

Nevertheless, Kant reinstates happiness as an object of duty in the second part of *Metaphysics of Morals*, the *Doctrine of Virtue*. In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant introduces the concept of virtue as an end that is also a duty. There are two ends that are also duties: one's own perfection and the happiness of others.

That happiness of the others should be prescribed as an end that is also a duty is not, at first glance, clear. Wouldn't it be more reasonable to assign some moral end as a duty? Shouldn't we expect something like "promote others' moral life" as a final virtuous aim? Kant remains consistent with his earlier stated view in what he refuses to define happiness in terms of a virtuous life and to reduce natural happiness to moral happiness:

Were we talking about persons whose desires were identical with moral actions, we would have perfect moral beings. We have, however, sensible rational beings for which happiness follows from the correspondence between events and their will, as expressed in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Their will could be anything. When we talk about promoting someone's happiness, it is her task to decide what her happiness would consist of. Of course, I could refuse to satisfy desires that are not permitted or contrary to the moral law.

When it comes to my promoting happiness as an end that is also a duty, this must therefore be the happiness of other human beings, whose permitted end I thus make my own end as well. It is for them to decide what they count as belonging to their happiness, but it's open to me to refuse them many things they think that will make them happy but I do not, as long as they have no right from demand me as what is theirs. (MS, 6:388)

The election of happiness of others as an end for moral life, along with the refusal to identify happiness with virtue leads to a problem for a Kantian moral theory. If happiness is not defined in terms of virtue, (but in terms of pleasure or displeasure), someone's happiness is what gives him pleasure. If my moral aim is to promote the happiness of others, I should promote what gives him pleasure, but this could be opposite to moral demands.

A consequence of the refusal to follow the stoic path and identify happiness with virtue is the need of the following additional theses. In order to promote happiness and the pleasure of the other, his/her pleasure should not contain anything against the law, because the other does not have the right to demand of me to do something wrong. Additionally, I do not have any theoretical tool to decide between two competitive desires.

The effort to solve this problem appears in the latitude ascribed to duties of virtue. However, the attribution of latitude means that we do not have any exact answer to the question: what should I do to accomplish the other's happiness? Kant tries to solve this problem by

establishing that ethics does not give laws for actions, only for maxims for action. A maxim, whereas subjective, should not be in conflict with a universal law. The ends given by virtue (one's own perfection and the happiness of others), only gives maxims, but not actions. They leave a room to be fulfilled with different actions:

For if the law can prescribe only the maxims of actions, not actions themselves, this is a sign that it leaves a playroom (*latitude*) 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. (MS, 6:390)

Let's illustrate Kant's relation between the law and the maxims of action with his own examples. One such maxim is to love one's neighbor; another is to love one's parents. According to Kant, to be a wide duty is not to permit exceptions to these maxims. Rather the agent can limit one maxim by another. If an action done from the maxim "to love of one's neighbor or friend" (house a jobless, homeless and noisy friend in yours parents house) would damage the well being of one's parents, then we are permitted not to do this action, because one maxim (the love of one's parents) would limit the other (the love of one's friends).

If someone fails to fulfill the duties of love, this would not be considered a vice, but only a lack of virtue.

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 human being as such is a vice (*vitium*). For no one is wronged if duties of love are neglected; but failure in the duty of respect infringes upon one's lawful claim (MS, 6:465).

This quote suggests that the priority of right over the good should probably be the correct interpretation of Kant's philosophy, even if some recent authors have claimed to leave deontology behind.⁷ In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant goes further than the mere formal negative view that is sometimes attributed to him. Kant did provide us with a theory of virtue; although his theory does not provide us with an exhaustive list of virtues, as the Aristotelian-type theory does. He certainly recognizes that there is moral merit in doing more than the negative commands of the categorical imperative, that being benevolent and beneficent is certainly better than not being so. Nevertheless, there is a room to decide how our own values will accord with the demands of virtue and to follow these demands. If a person is beneficent in her acts, she is undoubtedly following the demands of virtue. However, if she decides not to be so, she is not doing something wrong because nobody is wronged by her actions.

⁷ I have in mind Barbara Herman and her book *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993)

The duty to promote others' happiness, as a wide duty, is subordinated to the negative demands of the moral law and to the narrow obligations of the duties of right. This entails two things: first, the latter should be satisfied prior to the former. One should not lie to promote the happiness of a friend, for instance, because the duty to promote others' happiness is subordinated to the narrow obligation not to lie. Second, once the narrow obligations are fulfilled, we have a room to choose what to do to fulfill the demands of virtue. If we decide to do nothing, at least in a particular situation, to promote others' happiness, it would mean a lack of moral worth, but not culpability.

The duty of love, understood as practical love, shows that the blame of a mere formal theory is wrong, since Kant shows the directions of the virtuous life. However, it does not lead to the abandon of deontology, because the good (the wide duty) will always be subordinated to the right (the strict duties).

Virtue and pleasure

In the Introduction of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant explains that metaphysics is a system of a priori cognition and, if the doctrine of morals were the doctrine of happiness, it would be impossible to obtain those a priori principles. The reason is given in the *Groundwork*; happiness is empirical joy that means nothing more than the fulfillment of each one's desires:

Only experience can teach what brings us joy. Only the natural drives for food, sex, rest, and movement, and (as our natural predisposition develop) for honor, for enlarging our cognition and so forth, can tell each of us, and each only in his particular way, in what he will find those joys. (MS, 6:215)

In the Introduction of the text of 1797, Kant remains faithful to his idea of happiness expressed 12 years before. Happiness is related to joy, and each one has his particular way of getting it. Moreover, he does not differentiate between superior and inferior pleasures; the drives for sex and food are put in the same category as the drives for honor and enlarging our cognition, against a tradition that separates the bodily pleasure from the virtuous one. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant stresses this point, showing that there are not superior and inferior pleasures:

It is surprising that men, otherwise acute, believe they can find a distinction between the lower and the higher faculty of desire according to whether the representations that are connected with the feeling of pleasure have their origin in the senses or in the understanding. (KpV, 5:23)

One can, of course, call some pleasures more refined than others, but it doesn't imply that they come from a different source or are virtuous because of that. A man that likes refined and

cultivated pleasures could reject a poor man who begs for money, because he just has money to pay his admission for the theater. This act would not be morally different from someone who leaves an intellectual conversation to enjoy a meal. In matters of pleasure, what is most important is the “how intense, how long, how easily acquired and how often repeated” (KpV, 5:23) the gratification is. With these remarks, he aims at showing that all eudemonistic ethics would have to agree with the Epicurus’ conclusion that gratification of virtue is the same of the gratification of the senses:

If, with Epicurus, we have virtue determine the will only by means of the gratification it promises, we cannot afterward find fault with him for holding that this is of exactly the same kind as those of the coarsest senses. (KpV, 5:24)

The idea of a shared ideal of happiness, implied in all eudemonistic ethics, is abandoned. Reason cannot teach us what happiness is, because there could not be an a priori definition that is independent from experience. Moreover, even a general synthetic a posteriori judgment will be unsatisfactory, because happiness in the modern world is the radical realm of singularity. One could be happy with a healthy, wealthy life, or in a life without any external goods, it depends on how one feels joy and pleasure. Kant recognizes that each individual has its own rational plan of life, based on his own values. However, Kant does not think that we can define a collection of primary goods, goods that anyone will want in order to advance his own rational plan of life, whatever it is.

If Kant sustains the same thesis in the *Groundwork* and in the Preface of *Metaphysical of Morals*, why happiness is one of the ends of virtue?

We should consider that benevolence (as the promotion of others happiness) is obtained as a generalization of the maxim of being helped in case of need:

The reason that it is a duty to be beneficent is this: since our self-love cannot be separated from our need to be loved (helped in case of need) by others as well, we therefore make ourselves an end for others; and the only way this maxim can be binding is through its qualification as a universal law, hence through our will to make others our ends as well. The happiness of others is therefore an end that is also a duty. (MS, 6:393)

The need to be helped, in order to be a universal obligation, should be transformed in a general rule of beneficence. Moreover, to choose the happiness of others as an end is a way to indicate that we should do more we are morally bound to do, in order to be fully virtuous:

If someone does more in the way of duty than he can be constrained by law to do, what he does is meritorious (*meritum*); if what he does is just exactly what the law requires, he does what is owed; finally, if he does is less than the law requires, it is morally culpable (*demeritum*). (MS, 6:227)

However, if the duties of virtue specify that we should do more⁸ than what the moral law commands, it fails to specify how much we should do and how far we should go in order to renounce our own well-being to promote the happiness of other people. It means that we have a basis not to do it, if we consider that the sacrifice will be too great.

The center of the Kantian theory will be composed of the moral law and the narrow duties. This is nothing but morality in a narrow sense of right and wrong. In this central nucleus, the end of promoting others' happiness plays no role. The happiness of others operates in a wider realm of morality.⁹ But the wide duties of virtue are subordinated to the duties of right, showing that we cannot forget the essential deontological character of the Kantian ethics. If the *Doctrine of Virtue* shows how to go beyond the formalism of the moral law, it does not go so far as to transgress the limits of deontology.

Kant has been criticized¹⁰ for being incapable of providing an ethics with moral content. The *Doctrine of Virtue* is an effort to provide this content, however, it is nothing more than general outlines that will guide us to promote others happiness or our moral perfection. Virtues like courage, prudence, justice and wisdom give place to virtues related to these two ends. We have mostly a list of vices than a list of virtues. Lewdness, excessive use of food or drinking, lying, avarice and servility are vices opposed to our virtuous purposes to search our natural and moral perfection. Arrogance, defamation and ridicule are vices opposed to the respect of others. In any case, the Kantian theory of virtue is composed mostly of interdictions than prescriptions.

The indetermination of what is a good live to do is related to the changing of the definition of happiness. Happiness is not defined by virtue, but in terms of pleasure and joy, which makes it variable according to personal preferences.

⁸ The actions that aims to accomplish the duties of virtue can be called supererogatory, according to the definition of Heyd: "they fulfill more than is required, over and above what the agent is required or expected to do" (*Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p1) Kant has been criticized by many for presenting a minimal morality, without concerns about friendship, emotions and care about the others. Recently, M. Baron took his defense, in order to show that the doctrine of Virtue give us much more than a narrow moral theory. However, she does not consider the virtuous actions, according to Kant, are supererogatory actions. See Marcia Baron, *Kantian Ethics (almost) without apology* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 21-107.

⁹ The idea of a narrow realm of morality, composed by the right and wrong and a wider one, composed by broader values also appears in some neo-Kantian contemporary theories. See Scanlon, *What we owe to each other* (Cambridge, Harvard university Press, 1998), pp. 342ss.

¹⁰ In *After Virtue*, McIntyre diognosticated Kantian morality what he called the failure of the enlightenment project of foundation of morality.: "The project of providing a rational vindication of morality has decisively failed- he says- and from henceforward the morality of our predecessor culture lacked any public, shared rationale or justification" (McIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd Edition, Notre Dame University, 1984, p.50). ¹⁰The Kantian moral theory is considered part of this failure of providing a full set of virtues. If McIntyre still persists in the searching of Virtue in his neo-Aristotelian theory, Kant seems to take this impossibility of a shared public values as an undeniable truth of his time. He no longer has a conception of what is a worthy life and this is expressed in the absence of a defined conception of happiness.

Virtue as fortitude against the inclinations

Kantian virtue does not aim at any *telos* as the achievement of happiness, even if it is only the happiness of the stoic *tranquilitas*. If virtue does not lead necessarily to happiness or pleasure, what is then virtue? What is the aim of Kantian virtue? The Kantian answer will be: virtue is self-constraint in order to attain full rationality. For holy beings there will be no doctrine of virtue, because they are never tempted to violate duty. Virtue is autocracy of practical reason, and entails “consciousness of the capacity to master one’s inclinations when they rebel against the law” (DV: 6: 383).

Virtue is perfection in choice, where man can freely determine oneself. For inner freedom two things are required: “being one’s own master in a given case (*animus sui compos*), and ruling oneself (*imperium in semetipsum*), that is, subduing one’s affect and governing one’s passions.” (DV, 6: 407). The first task is easier than the second. Since affects are precipitate or rash, they can be taken as something childish or weak. Affects do not lead to real vice, but only to weakness of the will, when man cannot control himself in order to accomplish what his will has been determined to do. As we have seen in chapter two, weakness is to act contrarily to what has been determined by the will. If it is a sign of rational agency to act accordingly to the motives which determined the will, weakness can lead to irrational action, actions to which the agent has decided not to perform.

In the Doctrine of Virtue, Kant propose a cure to heal weakness of the will - this momentary incapacity to act accordingly to reason - and this therapy is attained through the duty of apathy:

Since virtue is based on inner freedom it contains a positive command to a human being namely to bring all his capacities and inclinations under his reason’s control and so to rule over himself, which goes beyond forbidding him to let himself be governed by his feelings and inclinations (the duty of apathy); for unless reason holds the reins of government in its own hands, his feelings and inclinations play the master over him. (DV, 6: 409)

Kantian apathy should not be taken as indifference to the objects of choice. That is the reason why Kant calls it moral apathy:

This misunderstanding can be prevented by giving the name “moral apathy” to that absence of affects which is to be distinguished from indifference because in the case of moral apathy feelings arise from sensible impressions lose their influence on moral feeling only because respect for the law is more powerful than all such feelings together. (DV, 6: 409)

Virtue as a process, but not an Aristotelian habit

However, Kant points out that virtue is a process, in which man reaches the highest stage in human morality, which can be poetically, call the sage. But this is a process in time:

Virtue is always in progress and yet always starts from the beginning. It is always in progress because, considered objectively, it is an ideal and unattainable, while in constant approximation to it is a duty. That it always starts from the beginning has a subjective basis in human nature, which is affected by inclinations because of which 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. (DV, 6: 409)

Here it seems that the Kantian virtue is nothing more than an Aristotelian habit, a second nature attained by habituation and practice. However, Kant denies that virtue is habituation in the Aristotelian sense. Were virtue a habit, man would lose the power to freely decide maxims to his conduct:

For moral maxims, unlike technical ones, cannot be based on habit (since it belongs to the natural constitution of the will's determination), on the contrary, if the practice of virtue were to become a habit the subject would suffer loss to that freedom in adopting his maxims which distinguishes an action one from duty. (DV, 6: 409)

Virtue is a process in time, in which the agent fortifies his will in order to do what he has decided to accomplish. Since weakness is a momentary lack of control, it is not difficult to see how virtue can be a cure for them. Virtue increases the force of the will and help to prevent affects to lead the agent to irrational actions.

But how can virtue, as fortitude, be a cure for inclinations?

Evil and passions

Kant defines feeling as belonging “to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure”, while passions belong “to the faculty of desire.”¹¹ The assignment of affects to feelings and passions to the faculty of desire is a constant in Kant's work. We find it in the early Mrongovius transcriptions of the *Lectures on Anthropology* (1784/85) as well as in the later *Doctrine of Virtue* (1797)¹². Now, although an affect is a feeling and passion belongs to the faculty of desire, the converse does not hold. It is not the case that all feelings are affects, nor is it the case that everything that belongs to the faculty of desire is a passion. In the *Lectures of Metaphysics* taught in the 1770's Kant explains that feeling is related to the way we are affected by an object, rather than to properties of object: “If I speak of an object insofar it is beautiful or ugly,

¹¹ *Lectures on Anthropology*, Mrongovius (1784/85), (25,2: 1340)

¹² In the *Doctrine of Virtue* Kant writes: “Affects belong to feeling (...) A passion is a sensible desire that has become a lasting inclination.” (TL, 6:408).

agreeable or disagreeable, then I am acquainted not with the object in itself, as it is, but rather as it affects me." (M, *Metaphysik* L1, 28:245)

The difference between the feelings related to affects and the feelings related to the beautiful can be discerned in the *Anthropology* (Ant. & 60), where sensuous pleasure is divided into pleasure derived from sensation and pleasure derived from the imagination. While the feeling for the beautiful is partly sensuous, partly intellectual, depending upon the harmony between the cognitive faculties of understanding and imagination, the feeling of pain (*Schmerz*) and gratification (*Vergnügen*) is related to the pleasure and displeasure of sensation alone. According to the Mrongovius transcriptions, the sensuous feeling of pleasure and displeasure admit two different divisions: sensitivity (*Empfindsamkeit*) and affect (*Affekt*). The difference between them is that the first admits a choice,¹³ that is, we can decide to have it or not, while we are passive regarding pure affects.

Passion is also related to sensation, however it is not linked to the way we are affected by an object, but to the way we desire it. The faculty of desire admits four levels of intensity: the first is propensity (*Hang, propensio*), when one have a desire that precedes the representation of the object. In the Mrongovius transcriptions (AntM, 25,II,1340), Kant cites the north people's tendency to drink strong drinks as an example of propensity. The second is instinct (*Instinkt*), which consists in a desire without previously knowing the object by which it is satisfied, e.g., a child's instincts desire for milk or the instinct of an animal to protect his offspring (Ant, 7: 265). The third level is inclination (*Neigung, inclinatio*)¹⁴, which is defined as a habitual desire, and exemplified with the desire to play games or drink. If an inclination is too strong, it becomes a passion (*Leidenschaft, passio animi*), which is the last degree of the faculty of desire. Inclination, Kant argues, is "a habitual sensuous desire", and passion is the "inclination which can hardly, or not at all, be controlled by reason" (7:251).

If we disregard, for the moment, the difference in how they are related to objects, we find that both affects and passions are considered illnesses of the mind, because both affect and passion hinder the sovereignty of reason. However, the former is less harmful than the later. This can be shown if one compares anger (affect) with hate (passion). Anger intensifies quickly and

¹³ "Sensitivity is not opposed to equanimity, because it is a faculty and a power which either permits the states of pleasure or displeasure, or even keeps them from being felt. Sensitivity is accompanied by a choice. Sentimentality, on the other hand, is a weakness because of its interest in the condition of the others who could play the sentimentalist at will, and even affects that person against his will". (Ant, 7: 236).

¹⁴ Although inclination is sometimes used to refer to all sensible incentives of human nature that is opposed to reason, in its specific definition, it refers to only one of the divisions of the faculty of desire.

subsides in an equally instantaneous manner. Hatred, because it is a passion, does not allow of such control.

Since the passions can be coupled with the calmest reflection, one can easily see that they must neither be rash like the emotions, nor stormy and transitory; instead, they must take roots gradually and even be able to coexist with reason. (Ant. & 80)

Passions are more closely related to the will; nevertheless, this does not imply that they can be brought under greater control by reason. The converse is suggested, namely, that they “take roots” into reason and coexist with rational decision. Curiously the irrational aspects of affects make it preferable to passions. And Kant uses many medical metaphors to stress just this distinction: affect is an intoxicant that causes a headache while passion is a poison that causes a permanent illness (Ant, 7:252), affect is a delirium (7:266) or a “stroke of apoplexy” (7:252), while passion “works like consumption or atrophy”(7:252) or an illness that abhors all medication (7:266), passions are “cancerous stores for pure practical reason “ (7:266) to which the physician of the soul could only prescribe palliative medicines (7:252). The metaphorical bundle of infirmity of emotions speaks to their degree of evil. Affect, the least dangerous of the “illnesses of mind”, is related to weakness which can still coexist with a good will:

Affects belong to feeling insofar as, preceding the reflection; it makes this impossible or more difficult. Hence an affect is called precipitate or rash (*animus praeceps*), and reason says, through the concept of virtue, that one should get hold of oneself. Yet this weakness is the use of one’s understanding coupled with the strength of one’s affects is only a lack of virtue and, as it were, something childish and weak, which can indeed coexist with the best will. (TL, 6:408)

Affects makes the work of the understanding more difficult. If one has a weak understanding united to a strong affect, he momentarily loses control. But such a lack of control is not, properly speaking, a vice, but a lack of virtue. In the *Religion*, this loss of control is called frailty (*fragilitas*) of human nature, and consists in taking the moral law as the objective ground of action. However, it lacks sufficient subjective force when compared to inclinations (Rel, 6: 30). Passions, on the other hand, are beyond the weak adjectives of ‘childish’, because they are not just signs of weakness, but the true evil:

A passion is a sensible desire that has become a lasting inclination (e.g., hatred, as opposed to anger). The calm with which one gives oneself up to it permits reflection and allows the mind to form principles upon it and so, if inclination lights upon something contrary to the law, to brood upon it, to get it rooted deeply, and so take up what is evil (as something premeditated) into its maxim. And the evil is then properly evil, that is, true vice. (TL, 6:408)

Unlike affects which are temporary emotions, passion is characterized as a lasting inclination. Evil is connected to reflection and to the will's formulation of maxims based on emotions. While an affect constitute a subjective incentive that opposes a maxim, passion may form principles for action. If one is overtaken by anger, he may be unable to act on maxims which he reflectively acknowledges to be the right ones. But if the passion of hatred is present, the agent may choose maxims against the moral law, choice that is classified as a third degree of evil, i.e., perversity of the human heart, , in the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. (*Rel*, 6: 30). The passion of hatred, for instance, can lead someone to premeditate a murder. One could also murder someone based on a momentary uncontrolled affect. Even if the wrong action is the same, the latter is based on a discrepancy between the force of emotion and the will; the former is based on a will that has chosen to act according to a non moral maxim. That is the reason why Kant says that passions are worse to freedom than affects:

One can also easily see that passions do the greatest harm to freedom; and if emotion is a delirium, then passion is an illness which abhors all medication. Therefore, passion is by far worse than all the transitory emotions which stir themselves at least to the good intention of improvement; instead, passion is an enchantment which also rejects improvement. (*Anth*, 7: 266)

The evil character of passions comes from two features. First, passion presupposes a maxim of the subject and is associated to the purposes of reason. It implies that maxims are a kind of distortion and perversion of reason. Second, passions are never completely satisfied, for that reason they are labeled by the word mania (*Sucht*), meaning that they become an obsession about their never totally conquered object. That's the reason why Kant supports that no physical love can count as passion¹⁵. Only the refusal of the object of the love can turn the affect of love into a passion of love.

There are also other feelings that can be either an affect or become a passion. Besides love, Kant gives the example of ambition. An ambitious person, besides its own ends, usually wants to be loved by others; however, if he is passionately ambitious, he can be hated by others and even run the risk of becoming poor, because his passion makes him blind. If ambition, however, remains as an inclination, it will be compared to other inclinations and will not ruin the ambitious man. That is the reason why Kant declares that "inclination, which hinders the use of

¹⁵ Man benennt die Leidenschaft mit dem Worte *Sucht* (*Ehrsucht*, *Rachsucht*, *Herrschaftsucht* u.d.g.), außer die der Liebe nicht in dem Verliebtsein. Die Ursache ist, weil, wenn die letztere Begierde (durch den Genuß) befriedigt worden, die Begierde, wenigstens in Ansehung eben derselben Person, zugleich aufhört, mithin man wohl ein leidenschaftliches Verliebtsein (so lange der andere Theil in der Weigerung beharrt), aber keine physische Liebe als Leidenschaft aufführen kann: weil sie in Ansehung des Objects nicht ein beharrliches Princip enthält.

reason to compare, at a particular moment of choice, a specific inclination against the sum of all inclinations, is passion”¹⁶. (Anth, 7: 265)

Passions does not act like affects, making the subject momentarily incapable of acting according to what he has decided to do. An agent taken by an incontrollable affect may act against the maxim she has decided to follow, what may lead to irrational actions, that goes beyond what one call rational agency. On the contrary, passions may form maxims of action, which speaks of their evil disposition. Actions from passions belong to the realm of rational agency; however, they do not follow prudential reasons. This is the case of the ambitious man. If ambition is only an inclination, one can have ambition as grounding maxims of action, which will lead to the conquest of which is desired by the ambitious man. When ambitious as passion grounds maxims of action, since passion is a mania (sucht), it can lead to the opposite of what is desired. A blind ambition, such as Lady Macbeth’s lust for power, can lead to the opposite of what is ambitioned. She madly wanted her husband to be king, but she ended up causing his death.

Natural and social passions

Kant divides passion into natural and social ones, natural passions are called “burning passions”, e.g., the inclinations for freedom and sex; the second ones are called cold passions and are ambition (ehrsucht), lust of power (herrschaft) and greed (habsucht) (Ant, 7:272-275). The passion of freedom should not be understood as a rational desire to determine the will in an autonomous way; rather it is a desire not to depend on other people: “whoever is able to be happy only at the option of another person, feels that he is unhappy” (Anth, 7:268). It is a natural desire, a desire to keep others far away, and to live “as a wanderer in the wilderness”. It is a natural desire, not a rational one and comes from the desire not to depend on anyone, which belong to the natural man before “public law protects him”, i.e., in the state of nature.

But the most dangerous passions are not the innate, but the acquired ones, which arise from culture. In the *Religion*, Kant states that the evil principle of human nature resides in passions, “which wreak such great devastation in [human being’s] originally good disposition” (Rel, 6:93), referring mostly to the social passions of envy, addiction to power and avarice. Their danger consists in their having characteristics of reason: “passion appears to imitate the idea of a faculty which is closely linked with freedom, by which alone those purposes can be attained”.

¹⁶ Die Neigung, durch welche die Vernunft verhindert wird, sie in Ansehung einer gewissen Wahl mit der Summe aller Neigungen zu vergleichen, ist die Leidenschaft (*passio animi*).

(Ant, 7:270). Passions imitates rationality in the sense that they can calculate means to desired ends. We can observe this in the analysis of greed. Kant explains this passion as the desire to have all that is good: “money is a password, and all doors, which are closed to the man of lesser means, fly open to those whom Plutus favors”. (Ant, 7:274). Although avarice is a passion and is not related to the moral self-determination of an agent, it is related to a calculus of the means to have everything materially worthy and to open all doors forbidden to the poor.

After all these negative features imputed to passions, we should ask: can virtue be a cure to passions? That the evil of passions are worse than the evil of affects can be attested by many passages in the *Religion*. Kant also cites the bible in his own words: “we have to wrestle not against flesh and blood (the natural inclinations) but against principalities and powers, against evil spirits” (Rel, 6:60) in order to asseverate that evil does not reside in sensible incentives.

In the *Religion*, Kant maintains that inclinations are good and that evil should be searched in a rational principle, this position seems to contradict the *Anthropology*, where both affects and passions are considered illnesses of mind. We should try to solve the apparent contradiction between the *Religion* and the *Anthropology*. If we correctly distinguish the purpose of the texts, we see that, while in the *Religion* Kant is concerned with the source of evil, which cannot be placed in the natural realm; in the *Anthropology* he is merely trying to *explain* emotions. In the latter, it is correctly shown that both affects and passions may impede the will, either as a stormy feeling that hinders the accomplishment of the action based on a moral maxim, or by entering in the choice of the maxim. However, both the *Religion* and *Anthropology* the worst evil resides in a rational principle, not in a natural one. And that is the reason why even in the *Anthropology*, passion is thought to be more dangerous than affects. Affects can be the cause of weakness, but passions are the cause of true evil.

The extirpation of affects is not Kant’s inflexible purpose, since in the *Religion* he states that extirpation of inclinations would “not only be futile but harmful and blameworthy as well” (Rel, 6: 58), it is a invariable position that we should extirpate passions, since they are not natural feelings or inclinations. The non-natural character of passions is recognized in both texts. The evil principle should not be searched in man’s raw nature, but in its rational perversion.

We have seen that virtue, as strength, could work as a cure for affects. Could it also be considered a cure for passions? Since the evil of passions is connected to society, only an ethical community based on a rational religion can overcome these cancers of pure practical reason.

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