

Abstract

In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant develops an elaborate virtue ethics grounded in two ends that are also duties: our own perfection and the happiness of others. Kant says apparently inconsistent things about the nature of these duties, however, leaving ambiguous precisely what the demands of Kantian virtue are. In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant says that duties of virtue govern only our freedom to set ends, not our freedom of action; that such duties are not coercively enforceable; and that there are only two of them. Yet in the *Doctrine of Elements*, Kant seems to contradict all these commitments by positing numerous additional duties of virtue, at least some of which (such as duties against suicide or excessive drinking) look to be coercively enforceable constraints on actions. In this paper I develop a cohesive account of Kant's virtue ethics that reconciles these apparent contradictions. We should take Kant at his word, I argue, when he says that there are only two duties of virtue and that those duties exclusively constrain our internal freedom to set ends. Adopting the ends of virtue, however, involves cultivating a continuous and principled commitment to our own perfection and the happiness of others. The duties Kant describes in the *Elements* are intended to illustrate what subsidiary commitments would be entailed by a true commitment to the two required ends of virtue. They are not normatively independent duties, however, nor (contrary to appearances) are they coercively enforceable constraints on action.

On the Doctrine of Elements and the Demands of Kantian Virtue

Guus Duindam

I. Introduction

In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant establishes an elaborate virtue ethics grounded in two “ends that are also duties”—our own perfection and the happiness of others (MS 6:385). But Kant is less than clear about the nature of these duties and the demands they make on us. In the introduction to the *Doctrine of Virtue*, he says that duties of virtue are not coercively enforceable, that they govern only the “inner” action of end-setting (rather than any “outer” actions in the observable world), and that they govern only the “maxims” of our actions, not the actions themselves. But in the *Doctrine of Elements*, which directly follows that introduction, Kant proceeds to provide several purported duties of virtue that seem like straightforwardly enforceable prohibitions on actions such as suicide, excessive drinking, or defamation. Similarly, Kant claims in the introduction that there are only two “ends that are also duties” (MS 6:383, 6:389), but in the *Elements* he says that “there are indeed *many* objects that it is also our duty to have as ends” (MS 6:410).¹ Kant thus appears to follow his own definitional account of duties of virtue only inconsistently.² This leaves unclear precisely what Kantian duties of virtue require or how they differ from their counterparts in the *Doctrine of Right*.

I aim to provide a cohesive account of Kant’s virtue ethics by reconciling the apparently inconsistent approaches Kant takes in his initial discussion of virtue and the subsequent

¹ See Julius Alves, “Vollkommene Tugendpflichten: Zur Systematik Der Pflichten in Kants Metaphysik Der Sitten,” *Zeitschrift für Philosophische Forschung* 4 (2010): 520–45.

² See, e.g., Onora O’Neill, *Acting on Principle*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 50–52; Walter E Schaller, “Kant’s Architectonic of Duties,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 48, no. 2 (1987): 300; Marcia Baron, “Love and Respect in the Doctrine of Virtue,” in *Kant’s Metaphysics of Morals: Interpretative Essays*, ed. Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 404–5; Mary J. Gregor, *Laws of Freedom: A Study of Kant’s Method of Applying the Categorical Imperative in the Metaphysik Der Sitten* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1962), chap. 7.

Elements. I begin by arguing (*contra* Thomas Hill and Onora O’Neill, among others)³ that we should take Kant at his word when he provides his definitional account of duties of virtue in the introduction. We should reject any interpretation according to which duties of virtue differ from duties of right only in degree. Such interpretations, I argue, fail to see that Kant’s two types of duty operate in fundamentally different ways and relate to fundamentally different aspects of moral evaluation. They necessarily miss much of what is most valuable about Kant’s approach to virtue.

I then turn to Kant’s two “ends that are also duties.” I argue that these duties are purely internal; they require only the adoption of an end. That may seem a sparse basis for an ethics of virtue, but for Kant adopting the ends of virtue involves cultivating a continuous and principled commitment to our own perfection and the happiness of others. The resulting view can account for our intuition that virtue requires regularly acting virtuously without reducing duties of virtue to simple constraints on action.

I end by considering the *Doctrine of Elements* and the claim that it is in tension with the interpretive view outlined above. I argue that Kant uses the *Elements* to establish subsidiary duties of virtue, intended to illustrate what would be entailed by a genuine commitment to one’s own perfection and others’ happiness. Thus, Kant does not there derive any new and independent duties of virtue, nor does he say anything that contravenes the account of virtue he provides elsewhere. Rather, Kant’s aim in the *Elements* is to help us understand what a commitment to virtue amounts to in practice.

³ Thomas Hill, “Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation,” *Kant-Studien* 62, no. 1–4 (1971): 55–76; O’Neill, *Acting on Principle*, 52.

II. Duties of Virtue, Duties of Right

The division between right and virtue is the central organizing principle of Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*. Unfortunately, it is also one of Kant's most confusing distinctions. Kant seems to have recognized a predecessor of that distinction in the *Groundwork*'s discussion of perfect and imperfect duty, but it is not obvious to what degree his views had shifted by the time he wrote the *Metaphysics*.⁴ Complicating matters further, Kant throughout his work uses a large variety of terms to mark off distinctions between types of duty—besides right and virtue, he speaks of “wide” vs. “narrow” duty, “strict” vs. “meritorious,” and “perfect” vs. “imperfect.” These categories are sometimes treated as coterminous, and sometimes not. Much therefore remains unclear about Kant's ultimate architectonic of duty.

I will not be able to solve all the interpretive problems raised by Kant's imprecise and shifting terminology on these points here.⁵ My aim in this section is limited: to argue that the distinction between duties of right and duties of virtue⁶—the operative distinction in the *Metaphysics of Morals*—marks off a difference in kind, rather than in degree.

In his seminal paper on imperfect duty, Thomas Hill defends the opposite interpretation. He argues:

⁴ Walter E Schaller, “From the ‘Groundwork’ to the ‘Metaphysics of Morals’: What Happened to Morality in Kant’s Theory of Justice?,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (1995): 12(3) 333-345.

⁵ On this issue see Bernd Ludwig, “Die Einteilungen Der Metaphysik Der Sitten Im Allgemeinen Und Die Der Tugendlehre in Besonderen,” in Kant's “*Tugendlehre*”: A Comprehensive Commentary, ed. Jens Timmermann Andreas Trampota, Oliver Sensen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), 59–84; Schaller, “Kant's Architectonic of Duties”; Schaller, “From the ‘Groundwork’ to the ‘Metaphysics of Morals’: What Happened to Morality in Kant’s Theory of Justice?”; Gregor, *Laws of Freedom: A Study of Kant’s Method of Applying the Categorical Imperative in the Metaphysik Der Sitten*, chap. 7.

⁶ Kant distinguishes between *ethical* duties [*ethischen Pflichten*] and duties of *virtue* [*Tugendpflichten*]. All duties of virtue are ethical duties, but not all ethical duties are duties of virtue (MS 6:383). See Alves, “Vollkommene Tugendpflichten: Zur Systematik Der Pflichten in Kants Metaphysik Der Sitten.” In this paper, I use “duty of virtue” throughout and mean to refer only to Kant's *Tugendpflichten*. I set aside the indirect-ethical duties, which are not duties of virtue.

[P]rinciples of imperfect duty can be expressed in the form ‘One ought to do (or avoid) x sometimes, to some extent’ whereas principles of perfect duty must be expressed in the form ‘One ought always (or never) to do x’.⁷

[M]y account suggests that, in distinguishing perfect and imperfect duties, Kant is simply marking off two sorts of principles deriving from the supreme principle of morality, one indefinite (‘Sometimes...’) and one definite (‘Always...’ or ‘Never...’), but both prescribing actions to be done or avoided.⁸

Hill himself recognizes that this is a *gloss* on Kant’s actual view—that it is not entirely accurate. He concedes that in the case of imperfect duties “[w]hat is required, at least directly, is that we take to heart certain principles, not that we act in certain ways,” but argues that this is “not incompatible” with his characterization of the perfect-imperfect distinction. As Hill points out, Kant often treats duties of virtue “as principles prescribing actions of certain sorts,” despite his own apparently contradictory definition of such duties.⁹ Thus, on Hill’s view, duties of right and duties of virtue differ merely in degree—and both govern the permissibility of our actions.

Hill’s account is tempting in its simplifying power, and Kant’s critics often adopt it without Hill’s caveats.¹⁰ But it is fundamentally inconsistent with Kant’s own understanding of duty. For Kant, a duty is a “constraint through a law” (MS 6:394). The law, Kant explains, can constrain in two different ways. Duties of right constrain the exercise of “outer freedom” (*äussere Freiheit*, MS 6:396), meaning our “freedom in external action” (MS 6:214). “External action” is simply action that requires bodily movement.¹¹ To constrain our outer freedom, then, is to constrain what we may *do*, without regard to our motivations or purpose, and without regard

⁷ Hill, “Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation,” 56.

⁸ Hill, 57. Although Hill uses the terms “perfect” and “imperfect” duty throughout his paper, it is clear he uses those terms as synonymous with “duty of virtue” and “duty of right.” *See, e.g.*, p. 56.

⁹ Hill, 57.

¹⁰ For instance, see Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 285. Two decades ago Baron described Hill’s view as the “standard view” of imperfect duty. *See* Marcia Baron, *Kantian Ethics (Almost) Without Apology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 89.

¹¹ Mark Timmons, *Kant’s Doctrine of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 72.

to the goodness or badness of our will (MS 6:396).¹² That is why Kant says such duties deal “only with the *formal* condition of outer freedom,” (MS 6:380); they set “laws for actions” (MS 6:388), and our compliance with them can be forcibly coerced (MS 6:394).¹³

Consider a duty against committing theft. That duty prohibits an *action*; it limits the ways in which we may behave in the world and therefore constrains our outer freedom. It can, moreover, be coercively enforced simply by physically preventing would-be thieves from carrying out their crime. From the perspective of right action, it does not matter if the thief unrepentantly maintains his thieving aims. As Jennifer Uleman has pointed out, “from the point of view of [right], all that matters is that the (juridically) right thing happen, whatever the agent’s actual reasons for doing it.”¹⁴

In the case of duties of virtue, by contrast, duty constrains a different type of freedom. Specifically, duties of virtue limit only the exercise of “inner freedom” (MS 6:380-81; see also 6:396, where Kant explains that duties of virtue concern inner freedom “instead of” freedom that can be “constrain[ed] from without”).¹⁵ As Kant explains, a constraint on inner freedom is a constraint on the ends we may set for ourselves. Such constraints limit our freedom of *internal* action, that is, our freedom to set ends, make decisions, and adopt plans—our “private, mental acts.”¹⁶ Unlike duties constraining outer freedom, then, duties of virtue cannot be coercively enforced. Consider our duty to be beneficent. To be beneficent is to make the happiness of others our end (6:394). We cannot force someone to have this end, though we can force someone to act *as if* they have it (6:381). Someone who acts ‘beneficently’ under threat of coercion still has only

¹² Mary Gregor, “Kant on Obligation, Rights and Virtue,” *Jahrbuch Für Recht Und Ethik* 1 (1993): 72–74; Alves, “Vollkommene Tugendpflichten: Zur Systematik Der Pflichten in Kants Metaphysik Der Sitten.”

¹³ Jennifer K. Uleman, “External Freedom in Kant’s Rechtslehre: Political, Metaphysical,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 68, no. 3 (2004): 582, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2004.tb00367.x>.

¹⁴ Uleman, 582.

¹⁵ On this distinction, see also Timmons, *Kant’s Doctrine of Virtue*, 71–72.

¹⁶ Timmons, 72.

his own happiness as his end; necessarily such actions will fail to be beneficent in Kant's sense. The non-beneficent can be forced to change their ways but not their minds. Conversely, coercing the beneficent is not only unnecessary, it risks corrupting beneficent motivations with selfish incentives.

Duties of virtue and right, then, are not merely different in degree: they involve fundamentally different sorts of constraint. Interpretations like Hill's are mistaken. They treat duties of virtue as weak constraints on outer freedom when in fact they are strong constraints on inner freedom. The difference is significant: the two kinds of duty are used in different types of moral evaluation. Right governs the "legality" of our actions—their "conformity with the law of duty" (MS 6:225, KpV 5:81). That means duties of right concern the permissibility of actions. Duties of virtue, by contrast, concern the moral worth or goodness of our will. Distinct moral rules govern these two moral domains.¹⁷ As Kant explains in the introduction to the *Doctrine of Virtue*, it is often permissible to act in ways that fall short of the demands of virtue: "failure to fulfill [duties of virtue] is not in itself *culpability (demeritum) = -a* but rather mere *deficiency in moral worth = o*" (MS 6:390)." Conversely, someone whose every action outwardly conforms to the moral law could yet be a paradigm of vice: Hence Kant's famous remark that even a "nation of devils" could be made to comply with right (EF 8:366).

Taking in Kant's insistence that duties of virtue are only internal constraints therefore changes not only how we understand the demands of virtue, but also how we should think of those demands when we engage in the moral evaluation of persons. Kant's duties of virtue govern morally worthy willing, so they aim at the formation of a *good will*. And "a good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, because of its fitness to attain some

¹⁷ See also T.M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 99–106.

proposed end, *but only because of its volition*” (G 4:394, my emphasis). It should therefore come as no surprise that Kant’s duties of virtue are purely internal constraints on willing.

III. The Demands of Virtue

Few authors would deny the basic point that Kant’s central duties of virtue constrain inner rather than outer freedom.¹⁸ Yet it is tempting to resist taking that position to its natural conclusion: that duties of virtue are *exclusively* internal constraints. After all, virtue seems—rather obviously—to require virtuous action as well as virtuous willing. Thus, Timmons argues that “some duties of virtue concern obligations to perform external actions, such as acts of beneficence where one acts to help others,”¹⁹ and Marcia Baron suggests that duties have an “internal” and an “external” aspect because they require both the adoption of a virtuous maxim and (sometimes) doing virtuous actions.²⁰

Of course, there is something right about these views. It cannot be enough, from the standpoint of virtue, piously to wish everyone the best and to do nothing when faced with an easy opportunity to provide concrete assistance.²¹ But there is something problematic, too, about positing external aspects to duties of virtue, given Kant’s insistence that the good will is good *only* because of its volition and his clear definition of duties of virtue as constraints on inner freedom. As I’ll now argue, Kant’s account does not need to be supplemented with external elements of virtue. Indeed, his account of virtue is attractive precisely because it lacks such elements.

¹⁸ Although, as we will see below, the same is not true for the duties Kant poses in the *Doctrine of Elements*, which several authors have characterized as posing constraints on external freedom. See, e.g., O’Neill, *Acting on Principle*, 52.

¹⁹ Timmons, *Kant’s Doctrine of Virtue*, 74.

²⁰ Baron, “Love and Respect in the Doctrine of Virtue,” 401–2; Baron, *Kantian Ethics (Almost) Without Apology*, 30, 88–90.

²¹ Marcia Baron makes this point effectively in “A Kantian Take on the Supererogatory,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33, no. 4 (2016): 352, <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12139>.

As we have seen, Kant says that duties of virtue require that we set ourselves two ends—our own perfection and the happiness of others. Kant explains that setting an end for oneself is not merely a mental action without consequences. To the contrary, “[a]n end is an object of the choice (of a rational being), through the representation of which *choice is determined to bring this object about.*” (MS 6:381) (emphasis added). That is why the good will aims at the good not through “a mere wish [*Wunsch*]...but [by] the summoning of all means that are within our control” (G 4:394). Put another way, setting an end involves what Kant calls a “practical desire:” a determination of our faculty of choice [*Willkür*]. Such a choice is necessarily accompanied by a commitment to *bring about the object of our choice* (see, e.g., VE 29:1013).²² Accordingly, the inner action of setting others’ happiness as our end involves a choice to bring about happiness for others—and likewise for the end of one’s own perfection.

Kantian virtue, moreover, requires that we maintain these ends over time. Thus, it requires a continuous commitment rather than a momentary choice. As Kant says, virtue arises from “considered, firm, and continually purified principles” (MS 6:384). That means the virtuous person must consistently choose to bring about the ends of virtue. She must do so, F because Kant’s duties of virtue separately require sometimes acting virtuously, but because having virtuous ends *consists in* a reliable commitment to bring about the ends of virtue. Someone with such a commitment will, of course, act virtuously. But duties of virtue require only the commitment, not the action.

To adopt the ends of virtue, then, we must cultivate a lasting commitment—a stable disposition to make choices consistent with the required ends. That is true even though Kant insists that virtue is not mere aptitude or habit (MS 6:383-384). Because Kant characterizes

²² On the distinction between choice and wish in Kant, see also Richard McCarty, *Kant’s Theory of Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 15–17.

duties of virtue as duties to set ends, *mere* habituation could never be enough. We could, after all, acquire a habit to ϕ without setting ϕ as our end—and without understanding *why* we ought to ϕ . But this is not to say that virtue does not involve the cultivation of dispositions at all, for dispositions can be *principled* tendencies—tendencies to (freely and deliberately) make the right choices for the right reasons.

As Allen Wood has also argued, this type of principled disposition is more similar to the Aristotelian virtuous habits than Kant realized.²³ Aristotle calls the virtues “deliberately choosing state[s]” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, II 6:1107a).²⁴ Moreover, like Plato, Aristotle distinguished skill [*techne*]—which requires that we be able to articulate *why* we do what we do—from mere knack [*empeira*], which does not.²⁵ As Julia Annas notes, Aristotelian virtues are like skills rather than knacks: they require that “the learner...understand what she is doing, to achieve the ability to do it for herself, and to do it in a way that improves as she meets challenges, rather than coming out with predictable repetition.”²⁶ Kant expresses a similar sentiment: “unless this aptitude [*Fertigkeit*] [of virtue] results from considered, firm, and continually purified principles, then, like any other mechanism of technically practical reason, it is neither armed for all situations nor adequately secured against the changes that new temptations could bring about” (MS 6:383-384). In other words: only a disposition grounded in a principled commitment of the will is virtuous; reflexive habits do not prepare us for unexpected challenges, nor are they expressive of the right kind of commitment (*see also* MS 6:407). Indeed, Kant distinguishes between a *free habit*

²³ Allen Wood, *Kantian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 145.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2014).

²⁵ Plato effectively draws out this distinction in the *Gorgias*’ discussion of oratory, by distinguishing pastry baking (a knack) from medicine (a craft or skill). Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), ll. 464b-466a. *See also* Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI 1140a.

²⁶ Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 20. *See also* Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, at 1105_b (setting forth the articulacy requirement, explaining that virtuous actions must be done “knowingly,” “deliberately,” and “from a stable and unchangeable state.”).

[*habitus libertatis*]—resulting from repeated, deliberate, and informed exercises of our faculty of choice—and a mechanical habit based on mere repetition [*Angewohnheit* or *assuetudo*] (*Ibid.*).²⁷

Both Kant and Aristotle reject an account of virtue as mere mechanical habit.

Both Kant's *Doctrine of Virtue* and Aristotle's virtue ethics, then, involve duties to develop *principled dispositions*. But they adopt rather different approaches when it comes to how such dispositions ought to be developed. Kantian duties of virtue begin with the exclusively internal requirement that an end is adopted, *i.e.*, that a principled choice is made. Having adopted the commitment of virtue, we then develop the virtuous dispositions. This order of explanation is also reflected in Kant's pedagogical views: even children, he believes, ought not be simply habituated into doing the right thing; instead, they should be taught to act on considered principles (e.g., P 9:475). Aristotle adopts the opposite order of explanation, with the practice of virtuous action giving rise to the informed disposition.²⁸ Thus, Aristotelian duties of virtue arguably begin as external constraints to *act in virtuous ways so as to develop a virtuous disposition*.²⁹ In contrast, Kantian duties of virtue are internal constraints to *adopt a commitment to virtue and thereby develop a disposition to act virtuously*. For Kant, virtuous actions are the end-result of compliance with the demands of virtue.

We are now in a position to see why Kant's account of virtue has no need for external components. Duties of virtue constrain only inner freedom, just as Kant says. They require only that we adopt the two ends of virtue. But adopting and maintaining an end is a more demanding requirement than we might have supposed; it requires, among other things, that we develop a

²⁷ Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Press, Cambridge University, 1999), 331.

²⁸ See, *e.g.*, Margaret Hampson, "Imitating Virtue," *Phronesis* 64, no. 3 (2019): 292–320 (explaining the importance of imitation in the development of the Aristotelian virtues).

²⁹ See, *e.g.*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 1103_b (arguing that we can build a virtuous character through habit); Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 109, explaining that for Aristotle "at a basic stage we also learn, *by doing*, that the things which we are encouraged to do are indeed what *are to be done*; and by doing we also learn to do them 'for the sake of the noble'").

disposition to make choices consistent with that end. Thus, someone who has indeed adopted the ends of virtue will necessarily act virtuously—she will necessarily perfect herself and help others, at least sometimes. Barring some extraordinary moral ignorance or physical incapacity; someone who never acts to promote their own perfection or others' happiness thereby proves that she has failed to adopt the ends of virtue.

Compare the decision to adopt an end to the decision to follow a diet. To plausibly count as following a diet, it is not enough simply to aim or choose to follow it; instead, we must make repeated choices in favor of the diet-approved foods and against the tempting alternatives. Mistakes and moments of weakness are natural, of course, but if you make the wrong choice too often you no longer count as following the diet. So too with virtue: having virtuous ends involves making virtuous choices. If we never make those choices, we do not plausibly count as having the ends. Still, (unlike dietary requirements) Kant's duties of virtue require the ends, not the actions. One who is incapacitated may be virtuous even though he cannot act virtuously.

All this may begin to look like a distinction without a difference. But an account of virtue that requires only the adoption of ends is far more adaptable than one that directly imposes external requirements on action. Consider again the duty of beneficence. A virtue ethics that imposed external constraints on action might require that we donate a certain percentage of our disposable income to an appropriate charitable cause every year; spend a reasonable percentage of time and effort helping others; or impose some similar action-guiding rules. Kant recognized, I think rightly, that such external requirements are neither necessary nor sufficient for genuine beneficence. A billionaire who donates large portions of his income to charity every month, spends time helping those in need, and otherwise meets whatever external constraints we might want to impose, but does so only for PR-purposes is not beneficent. So long as the billionaire

does not care about the wellbeing of those involved—for their sake, rather than his—his “beneficent” actions evince neither moral worth nor goodness of will. Thus, they make no difference whatsoever from the perspective of virtue. Conduct consistent with virtue is not sufficient for virtue.

Nor could external requirements plausibly capture a necessary component of virtue. Consider, for instance, how greatly the demands of beneficence vary depending on our circumstances. A single parent working a minimum-wage job may be beneficent without ever donating a single dollar to charity. His commitment to the wellbeing of others could be sufficiently expressed in other ways, such as in his care for his children, his kind gestures to strangers, and so forth. But the billionaire we considered above could not credibly express *his* commitment to beneficence in that way. As Kant explicitly recognized, the well-off have a much more serious duty to help others: “someone who is rich...should hardly even regard beneficence as a meritorious duty on his part” (MS 6:453). That is because the rich have the ability to help millions at very little cost to themselves. Failing to make use of that ability would be wholly irreconcilable with a genuine commitment to the happiness of others.³⁰ Thus, no one set of external constraints on action could adequately capture what the beneficent person ought to do. What a commitment to the ends of virtue *means*, in practice, depends on one’s station and circumstances. The important thing, from the perspective of virtue, is that we develop and maintain the commitment. Defining virtue in terms of external constraints is a fool’s errand that Kant—like Aristotle—wisely rejected.

³⁰ That is a Kantian way to put the idea Peter Singer persuasively defended in “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972). I take many of Singer’s conclusions there to be at least compatible with Kant’s account of beneficence.

It might seem that there are risks to foregoing all external duties of virtue, lest we become too permissive. Consider cases of “easy rescue,” where we are presented with an opportunity to save the victim of an ongoing emergency at little cost to ourselves.³¹ It seems that those cases leave only one virtuous possibility: to rescue the victim. We might therefore be tempted to posit a virtuous duty according to which “easy rescues” are mandatory. That would be putting matters too simply, of course, since people will vary in their capacity to accomplish even “easy” rescues. In any event, Kant can accommodate the intuition underlying these rescue cases by appealing to an *obligation*, rather than a duty, to rescue. If a duty is a general moral requirement—a universally applicable constraint on inner or outer freedom—an obligation is an application of that duty to a particular set of facts: an individual instance or token of the duty.³² For example, a duty not to steal could yield an obligation not to steal a particular object from a particular person at a particular time. So too a duty to be committed to beneficence could yield an obligation to be committed to the end of beneficence with respect to a particular person at a particular time.

When we apply our duty to adopt others’ happiness to the particular set of facts presented by an “easy rescue” case, that duty can generate the needed obligation to rescue. As Alice Pinheiro Walla has persuasively argued, the latitude involved in Kantian duties of virtue “shrinks away when refusing to help would amount to *giving up* one’s commitment to beneficence *altogether*.³³ Barring relevant physical incapacity, easy rescue cases present a choice between helping or giving up, at least temporarily, our commitment to beneficence. After all, it is simply

³¹ For discussion of these cases see Martin Sticker, “A Funeral March for Those Drowning in Shallow Ponds?: Imperfect Duties and Emergencies,” *Kant-Studien* 110, no. 2 (2019): 236–55, <https://doi.org/10.1515/kant-2019-0001>.

³² Jens Timmermann, “Kantian Dilemmas? Moral Conflict in Kant’s Ethical Theory,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 95, no. 1 (2013): 42–43.

³³ Alice Pinheiro Walla, “Kant’s Moral Theory and Demandingness,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 18, no. 4 (2015): 734, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s> (emphasis in original).

not possible to hold a commitment to others' happiness, and, at the same time, choose not to provide life-saving aid to a person in need if such aid can be provided at little cost to oneself.

As Walla aptly puts it, such cases "put the sincerity of one's commitment to the moral end *under proof*."³⁴ The duty of beneficence prohibits us from choosing to give up our commitment to beneficence, so only one possible choice consistent with virtue remains: the choice to aid. Thus, the duty of beneficence yields an obligation to act in easy-rescue cases.

In sum: Kant has no need to posit any external constraints of virtue. Indeed, an account of virtue is better off without them. Kantian duties of virtue capture what is important about virtue—that we are committed to the right ends. And they can accommodate the Kantian (and surely correct) intuition that the obligations of virtue vary greatly depending on our station and circumstances. They can do all of this, as I hope to have shown, while still accommodating cases in which virtue seems to require a particular action.

IV. The Elements of Virtue

This account of virtue invites an obvious objection, since I have thus far ignored the duties of virtue Kant presents in his *Doctrine of Elements* [*Elementarlehre*]. As I noted in the introduction, several among those duties *do* appear to prohibit actions, for example, by purporting to prohibit lying, suicide, or defamation. And Kant's discussion of those duties was an important impetus for the views I have criticized so far. After all, O'Neill and others argue that the duties in the *Elements* leave us with no other option than to conclude that some of Kant's duties of virtue "require acts or omissions, not the adoption of policies...[and] could be fulfilled without internal legislation."³⁵ And if that is true, then Kant either mistakenly classified (some

³⁴ Walla, 734 (emphasis in original).

³⁵ O'Neill, *Acting on Principle*, 52; Gregor, *Laws of Freedom: A Study of Kant's Method of Applying the Categorical Imperative in the Metaphysik Der Sitten*, chap. 7; Alves, "Vollkommene Tugendpflichten: Zur

of) the duties in the *Elements* as duties of virtue—as Baron suggests when she argues that duties of respect “are perhaps best thought of as only marginally duties of virtue”³⁶—or Kant’s definitions of virtue must be taken less literally than I have so far suggested. Neither solution is attractive, for both involve rejecting important parts of Kant’s account of virtue.

I offer an interpretation of the *Elements* that avoids both conclusions. Kant’s aim in the *Elements*, I argue, is not to establish new and normatively independent requirements of virtue, but rather to elaborate on the implications of a genuine commitment to the two ends that are also duties. Kant’s virtue ethics is thus organized hierarchically: although there are only two ends that are themselves also duties, a genuine commitment to those ends necessarily involves compliance with several subsidiary duties as well. Kant uses the *Elements* to illustrate what it would take to adopt a genuine commitment to the required ends by deriving examples of those subsidiary duties. Ultimately, then, *all* duties of virtue are best understood as components of either of the two primary duties of virtue.³⁷

As I have just argued, Kantian virtue requires significant commitments—commitments that ought to give rise to dispositions to act. Those commitments are meaningful, but without further clarification they are also quite vague. We understand intuitively that a commitment to others’ happiness is inconsistent with failing to save someone’s life when we can easily do so—but more detail is needed to understand the commitment’s implications in complex situations.

Systematik Der Pflichten in Kants Metaphysik Der Sitten”; Philipp-Alexander Hirsch, “Von Rechtfestigungen Zu Vollkommenen Tugendpflichten? Kants Ungelöstes Problem Der Pflichtensystematik,” in *The Court of Reason: Proceedings of the 13th Kant Congress* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 1461, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110701357-143>.

³⁶ Baron, “Love and Respect in the Doctrine of Virtue,” 404–5.

³⁷ Some interpreters have defended a hierarchical picture of duties of virtue along different lines. For instance, Walter Schaller argues that all duties of virtue ultimately include or involve a requirement to set the two required ends, *see* Schaller, “Kant’s Architectonic of Duties,” 301. While I think Schaller gets much right, I argue the order of explanation runs in the opposite direction: it is the two required ends that ultimately involve compliance with all of the subsidiary duties of virtue.

Kant explicitly recognizes that problem when he explains the need for “a division of ethics into a *Doctrine of Elements* and a *Doctrine of Method*, when no such division was needed in the doctrine of right” (MS 6:411):

[T]he doctrine of right, which by its nature must determine duties strictly (precisely), has no more need of general directions (a method) as to how to proceed in judging than does pure mathematics; instead, it certifies its method by what it does. —But ethics, because of the latitude it allows in its imperfect duties, unavoidably leads to questions that call upon judgment to decide how a maxim is to be applied in particular cases, and indeed *in such a way that judgment provides another (subordinate) maxim* (and one can always ask for yet another principle for applying this maxim to cases that may arise). (MS 6:411, my emphasis).

In other words: duties of right are easily applied, but to determine the application of a duty of virtue we require the guidance of subordinate principles. Kant uses the *Doctrine of Elements* to derive the subordinate principles we need to clarify what the two ends that are also duties require of us. The duties in the *Elements*, then, ultimately are nothing more than applications of the two overarching duties of virtue.

The *Elements*’ organization provides powerful support for this view, for it precisely mirrors Kant’s earlier descriptions of the two ends that are also duties. Kant divides the *Elements* into two main parts—duties to the self and duties to others—and that division matches the two primary ends of virtue. Each section is in turn divided so as to match Kant’s earlier descriptions of the required end. The section on duties to the self contains headings on duties to the self as an animal being, which involve our natural perfection, and duties to the self as a moral being, which involve our moral perfection (6:420); Kant includes those same elements in his earlier explanation of the required end of self-perfection (6:392-393). Similarly, duties to others are divided into duties of love, involving the natural welfare of others, and duties of respect, involving the moral welfare of others (6:448-449). Again, that division matches Kant’s earlier

explanation of the duty of beneficence as including both natural and moral wellbeing (6:393-394).

Understanding the duties of the *Elements* as subsidiary also resolves the apparent inconsistency in Kant's remarks about the number of duties of virtue. It can be true both that there are only two true duties of virtue (MS 6:383-385) *and* that "there are indeed *many* objects that it is also our duty to have as ends" (MS 6:410), if those "many objects" are subsidiary to the two required ends. Notably, Kant never says that the ends discussed in the *Elements* are ends *that are also duties* [*Zwecke die zugleich Pflichten sind*]. Rather, they are merely "objects it is also our duty to have as ends." The only ends that are *themselves also duties* are "one's own perfection and the happiness of others" (6:385). Thus, Kant is perfectly consistent. A duty of virtue is an end that is itself also a duty. There are only two such ends. Yet those ends in turn entail many subsidiary objects that we must set as ends, and those are the objects discussed in the *Elements*. Importantly, these subsidiary objects properly belong to Kant's virtue ethics because (contrary to appearances) they constrain only our internal freedom and not our outer freedom.

The specific duties Kant discusses in the *Elements* bear out this view. Kant begins by introducing several "limiting (negative) duties" to the self (6:419) which prohibit vices inconsistent with self-preservation (6:421). It is easy to see how the general requirement to set one's own perfection as an end yields a duty of self-preservation. We cannot perfect ourselves without first preserving ourselves: Self-preservation is the first and most basic precondition to the fulfillment of any duty to ourselves. That is what Kant means when he says that self-preservation is "the *first*, though not the *principal*, duty of a human being to himself as an animal being" (MS 6:421, Kant's emphasis).³⁸ And as a general matter, a duty to will an end necessarily

³⁸ This point is also made in Yvonne Unna, "Kant's Answers to the Casuistical Questions Concerning Self-Disembodiment," *Kant-Studien* 94, no. 4 (2003): 455, <https://doi.org/10.1515/kant.2003.026>.

entails a duty to will any means necessary to that end; this follows from Kant's hypothetical imperative.³⁹ The duty to adopt the end of self-perfection thus necessarily entails a duty of self-preservation because the latter is a necessary means to the former.

If a positive duty of self-preservation can be derived from the general duty to perfect oneself, that duty can also be used to rule out conduct inconsistent with self-preservation. That is to say: it can be used to mark such conduct as inconsistent with virtue, and, when done deliberately, as vicious. That is what Kant attempts to do in the sections on suicide, masturbation, and gluttony and drunkenness—all vices he believes to be directly related to our physical self-preservation. Suicide—construed here as the willful ending of one's life—is clearly irreconcilable with the end of self-preservation. Again, that is also how Kant argues the point: he says that “the contrary of [self-preservation] is willful *physical death* or killing oneself” (6:421). We cannot consistently will both our own preservation and our own death. Since virtue requires that we will the former, it necessarily precludes us from willing the latter.

The duty of virtue against suicide is not a constraint on external freedom, then, because it does not prohibit the act of killing oneself as such. Rather, it prohibits setting one's own death as an end, or willfully aiming at one's own death. Someone who unthinkingly jumps into shark-infested waters in a doomed attempt to rescue a friend does not violate the duty; but someone who takes an entire bottle of harmless medication believing it to be deadly *does* violate it. That Kant includes this duty in the *Elements* is no argument against his conception of duties of virtue as internal constraints.

Kant next argues against drunkenness and gluttony. He points out, plausibly, that both are essentially forms of temporary self-incapacitation (6:427, “when stuffed with food he is in a

³⁹ See Thomas E. Hill, “The Hypothetical Imperative,” *The Philosophical Review* 10, no. 1 (1973): 429–50.

condition in which he is incapacitated, for a time, for actions that would require him to use his powers with skill and deliberation”). Kant does not argue separately for the wrongness of self-incapacitation, as we might have expected if the *Elements* contained derivations of independent duties of virtue. Instead he claims only that “it is obvious that putting oneself in such a state violates a duty to oneself” (6:427). That claim makes sense in context, for self-incapacitation of this form is evidently inconsistent with self-perfection. Because Kant takes himself already to have established the duty to self-perfection, he can say here that the wrongness of self-incapacitation is “obvious.”

Kant’s inclusion of “defiling oneself by lust” in his list of vices might seem to pose difficulties for this view, since it seems difficult to derive that vice from a general duty of self-preservation. As an interpretive matter, however, it is fairly clear Kant thought masturbation is inconsistent with the end of self-preservation (see 6:425), and that explains its inclusion in the *Elements*. We need not adopt Kant’s reasoning there to adopt the present account of the *Elements* and its role in Kant’s virtue ethics. Indeed, even Kant himself seems to have recognized that a derivation of this duty from the required end of self-perfection posed substantial difficulties—he remarks: “that such an unnatural use (and so misuse) of one’s sexual attribute is a violation of duty to oneself...occurs to everyone immediately, with the thought of it,” even though “it is not so easy to produce a rational proof” for it (6:425). Kant’s argument here fails because it rests on false premises about human sexuality that bear no connection to Kant’s ethics generally.⁴⁰ For purposes of this discussion, we can therefore safely set it aside.

Kant next turns to vices inconsistent with *moral* self-preservation. The notion of moral self-preservation is an underdeveloped one in Kant’s work, but its basic contours are clear.

⁴⁰ Timmons, *Kant’s Doctrine of Virtue*, 163–64; Wood, *Kantian Ethics*, 237.

Where natural self-preservation aims at the preservation of our physical (“animal”) selves; moral self-preservation aims at the preservation of our *human* or *rational* selves. For Kant, this involves preserving the dignity and worth inherent in our humanity (e.g., MS 6:435). The negative duties contrary to moral self-preservation are vices because they are inconsistent with the preservation of that dignity or worth. This is what makes them inconsistent with our duty to perfect ourselves morally, which in turn is one of the elements of the general duty to self-perfection (MS 6:393).

According to Kant, lying, avarice, and servility are vices contrary to our moral self-preservation. Of these three, it is easy to see how avarice and servility could conflict with moral self-preservation. Kant defines “miserly avarice” (as distinct from greed) as “restricting *one’s own* enjoyment of the means to good living so narrowly as to leave *one’s own* true needs unsatisfied” (6:432, Kant’s emphases). He claims that this is “directly contrary to duty to oneself” (6:433), because it involves “depriving oneself of the comforts necessary to enjoy life” (6:433). As such, it is inconsistent with self-perfection.⁴¹ Moreover, this type of avarice is plausibly inconsistent with the self-respect that features in all of Kant’s discussions of moral self-preservation: it involves casting ourselves as unworthy to enjoy the fruits of our labor. Similarly, the vice of servility consists in a failure sufficiently to value our own worth—we exhibit this vice when we engage in behavior that is inconsistent with appropriate self-esteem (6:435). And a failure to value oneself is the moral analogue of failing to take care of your basic physical needs. It is plainly inconsistent with moral self-preservation, and, therefore, also with self-perfection.

⁴¹ Note Kant’s specification that avarice renders us unable to satisfy *true* needs, or *necessary* comforts. Needless to say, self-perfection is consistent with (and sometimes requires) refraining from satisfying *unnecessary* comforts. See Martin Sticker, “True Need in Kant,” *Kant-Studien* 113, no. 3 (2022): 447–49, <https://doi.org/10.1515/kant-2021-0030>.

Kant's views on lies are complicated, and there is insufficient room here for a full discussion of them.⁴² Two points are important for our purposes. First, Kant explicitly recognizes both a duty of right and a duty of virtue against lying.⁴³ Thus, the conditions under which lies are impermissible—i.e., violative of a duty of right—are different from those under which lies are vicious—i.e., inconsistent with a good will. Kant's account of lies accordingly supports the view, defended above, that duties of virtue are distinct from the rules governing permissibility. Second, it is beyond dispute that, in the *Elements*, Kant explicitly characterizes lying as a failure to maintain one's own dignity, i.e., as a vice contrary to moral self-preservation. He says that lying “annihilates [our] dignity as a human being,” and reduces our worth so that it is less “than if [we] were a mere thing” (6:429). Thus, like avarice and servility, the vice of lying derives from the duty to perfect oneself.

Each of Kant's negative duties to the self therefore turns out to be subsidiary to the primary duty of self-perfection. That subordination renders any apparent similarity to duties of right significantly less puzzling. We need no longer be forced to conclude, with O'Neill, that Kant inconsistently posited new duties of virtue that could be coercively enforced and fulfilled without the adoption of an end.⁴⁴ Instead, Kant simply sought to explain the practical consequences of the general duties of virtue by deriving subsidiary principles from them. Because those principles spell out in more concrete terms what it *means* to have the end of self-perfection, they sometimes come close to prohibiting actions, such as suicide or lying. *Contra*

⁴² For fuller discussion, see Allen Wood, “Kant and the Right to Lie,” *Eidos* 15 (2011): 96–117; Stefano Bacin, “The Perfect Duty to Oneself Merely as a Moral Being,” in Kant's “*Tugendlehre*”: A Comprehensive Commentary, ed. Jens Timmermann Andreas Trampota, Oliver Sensen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), 247–55.

⁴³ Bacin, “The Perfect Duty to Oneself Merely as a Moral Being.”

⁴⁴ O'Neill, *Acting on Principle*, 52.

O'Neill, however, they are not independent moral requirements with which we could comply simply by refraining from committing the acts.

Kant's positive duties to the self and duties of love to others need little discussion here; their appearance in the *Elements* simply elaborates what Kant has already said earlier in the *Metaphysics of Morals* about the basic obligations of virtue. Nor are these duties even arguably in tension with Kant's remarks in the introduction to the *Doctrine of Virtue* or the account of duties of virtue I defend. We may therefore set them aside, and turn to the negative duties of respect to others, which are the primary source of interpretive concerns about the *Elements*.⁴⁵

Kant establishes duties against the vices of arrogance, defamation, and ridicule as contrary to our duty of respect for other human beings (6:465). Our duty of respect for others follows directly from the general duty to set the happiness of others as our end (6:394, 6:449). That is because, on Kant's view, the happiness of others includes their moral well-being (6:394), just as self-perfection includes moral self-preservation.⁴⁶ Although we need not actively promote others' moral development—because it is impossible to perfect someone else (6:386)—we do have what Kant terms a “negative [duty] to promote this” (*Ibid.*). As Kant explains later, that negative duty is “to be understood as the maxim of limiting our self-esteem by the dignity of humanity in another person” (6:449).

Keeping this background in mind, it is not difficult to see how the vices contrary to our duty of respect could be derived from the required end of others' happiness. Arrogance is incompatible with respect for others because it consists in the “demand that others think little of themselves in comparison to us” (6:465). Arrogance thus involves an attitude of “contempt” for others (*Ibid.*), which is plainly inconsistent with the end of others' happiness, as well as with the

⁴⁵ See e.g. Baron, “Love and Respect in the Doctrine of Virtue.”

⁴⁶ Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, 327.

subsidiary duty to respect others' dignity. The same is true for defamation and ridicule. We have duties to avoid these vices because engaging in them would be inconsistent with the end of others' happiness.⁴⁷ That primary obligation again provides the ground for the secondary duties; we cannot comply with the secondary duties without setting others' happiness as our end. Accordingly, the negative duties of respect are not "marginal" in their status as duties of virtue; nor could they be coercively enforced.

Melissa Fahmy has recently argued against this understanding of duties of respect on the ground that "all human beings are *entitled* to respect from others as their due," while they are not entitled to have their happiness promoted.⁴⁸ Thus, Fahmy objects, "the duty of respect is narrow, whereas duties of love are wide"⁴⁹—and, she says, it would be "extremely odd, if not inconsistent" to think that the one could be derived from the other.⁵⁰

As an initial matter, this objection conflates wide and meritorious duty. Admittedly, Kant at times blurs the lines of that distinction himself, as when he argues that the duty to respect the moral law is wide "for [the] very reason" that it is meritorious (MS 6:391). Yet there is an important distinction here. A duty is *wide* when "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). The wide-narrow distinction is one that makes sense only within the confines of virtue. Duties of right command or prohibit actions directly, so they *do* "specify precisely in what way one is to act" (*Ibid.*). Duties of right can—by definition—never be wide.

⁴⁷ Wood, 327.

⁴⁸ Melissa Seymour Fahmy, "Understanding Kant's Duty of Respect as a Duty of Virtue," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 10, no. 6 (2013): 726–27, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455243-4681006>.

⁴⁹ Fahmy, 727.

⁵⁰ Fahmy, 727.

Within the realm of virtue, a duty can be more or less wide depending on how much “playroom (*latitudo*) for free choice” it leaves—that is, depending on how many ways of “following (complying with) the law” there are (*Ibid.*). Thus, Kant says, “the wider the duty...the more imperfect is a man’s obligation to action” (*Ibid.*). There is nothing puzzling or inconsistent about deriving a narrow duty, in this sense of the term, from a wider one. To the contrary, subsidiary duties of virtue will *always* be narrower—leaving less room for discretionary judgment—than the two overarching duties from which they are derived. That is because they are *applications of* those overarching duties to narrower sets of circumstances. For instance, Kant reasons from the wide(r) duty of self-perfection to the narrower duty of self-preservation, and from there to the even narrower duty against suicide. It is entirely unsurprising that Kant should derive narrower duties of respect from the wider duty of beneficence.

As Fahmy points out, Kant also says that duties of respect are *owed*, while other duties of virtue are not (MS 6:449). But a duty that is not owed to anyone is a *meritorious* duty, not a wide one (MS 6:227).⁵¹ And the distinction between wide and narrow duties is conceptually distinct from that between meritorious and owed duties. For instance, one might argue that we *owe assistance* to those who have been victimized by an unjust political system, even though there is some latitude as to how that assistance is provided.⁵² It should thus be clear that there is conceptual space for wide-and-owed duties, regardless of whether Kant recognized any such duties. The same is true for narrow-and-meritorious duties.

⁵¹ “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* (*debitum*).”

⁵² Barbara Herman defends a category of “juridical imperfect” duties of this type, see Barbara Herman, *The Moral Habitat*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), sec. 8.2.

Having said all this, the objection remains that duties of respect are unique among duties of virtue because they are “owed,” suggesting either that they ought not be duties of virtue, or at least that they cannot be derived from the end of others’ happiness. That is also the ground for Baron’s concerns about Kant’s account of respect as a virtue.⁵³ But duties of respect meet each of Kant’s definitional criteria for duties of virtue: they cannot be coercively enforced, they involve a virtuous end (whether others’ happiness or, as Fahmy argues, some other virtuous end), and they prescribe the maxim of our action rather than the actions themselves. That Kant says we owe it to others to respect them does not change this.

In fact, it is not at all obvious that Kant would consider every other duty of virtue meritorious. Kant explains that the human being considered “as a *natural being*” can be “put under obligation . . . to the humanity in his own person” (6:418). That language suggests there is at least one sense in which we “owe” it to *ourselves* not to engage in the vices contrary to self-preservation, e.g., suicide or lying. (Indeed, that is not an unusual way to talk about obligations to ourselves.) And a failure to respect others is vicious precisely because it involves a lack of respect for the dignity of “humanity itself” (6:462). Kant’s discussion of respect is therefore remarkably parallel to his discussion of the narrow(er) duties to oneself.

This view of duties of respect admittedly raises a new complication: if what I have said so far is true, then Kant’s ethics contains some obligations that are owed, but with which noncompliance is nonetheless permissible. After all, I have argued that duties of virtue are not related to permissibility, yet Kant says some duties of virtue are “owed.” But I think that is not implausible. Indeed, we often use “owed” in this way, such as when we say that you “owe” it to a friend to visit them in the hospital, even though we do not think it strictly impermissible not to

⁵³ Baron, “Love and Respect in the Doctrine of Virtue,” 404–5.

do so. Besides, to the extent disrespectful conduct is strictly impermissible (as some of it surely is) Kant can account for that with corresponding duties of right, as he does in the case of lying.

Kant's discussion of respect does not show him to be inconsistent, then, but it does show that his categories of duty and moral evaluation are significantly more complex and nuanced than we generally give him credit for.

Kant's remarks about respect thus do not provide sufficiently convincing reasons to depart either from his definitional account of virtue, or from his insistence that there are only two ends that are also duties. Because Kant derives each of his duties of virtue from the two central duties of virtue, Kant's *Doctrine of Elements* concerns, in a very literal sense, the *elements of virtue*. That point is of more than merely interpretive significance. Subsidiary duties are normatively distinct from the central principles that ground them, for subsidiary duties are not normatively independent. That means these duties are limited in ways the central duties of virtue are not. Consider, for example, the duty of physical self-preservation. Physical self-preservation, as a subsidiary duty, is not an end-in-itself. Rather, it derives its normative force from the overarching duty of self-perfection. When self-preservation ceases to serve *that* end, virtue no longer requires that we engage in it. Kant affirms as much in his lectures, where says that “the preservation of life is not the highest duty; one often has to give up life, merely in order to have lived in an honorable way” (VE 27:377-378). Kant's ethics is therefore fully compatible with nuanced views on issues like self-sacrifice and suicide, even if Kant himself did not always endorse those views.⁵⁴ Ultimately, all duties of virtue are normatively grounded in the two ends that are also duties (which are themselves, in turn, grounded in the Categorical Imperative).⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Thomas E. Hill, *Autonomy and Self-Respect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), chap. 7; Wood, *Kantian Ethics*.

⁵⁵ Manfred Baum, “Probleme Der Begründung Kantischer Tugendpflichten,” *Jahrbuch für Recht und Ethik* 6, no. 41 (1998): 48.

V. Conclusion

Let us take stock. Kant recognizes only two ends that are themselves duties: one's own perfection and the happiness of others. These duties involve *only* the setting of an end and constrain *only* inner freedom. But true commitment to ends we may never abandon is no easy matter: it involves the kind of significant cultivation and character-building that is often associated only with more traditional forms of virtue ethics. Thus, a duty to set ends can account for our obligations to act virtuously without any further external additions to Kant's account of virtue. In order to help us see the far-reaching implications of the two central duties of virtues, Kant derives subsidiary rules of virtue in the *Elements*. Those rules of virtue do not stand alone as independent normative requirements; rather, they make explicit what the two required ends already implied.

What follows from all this? For one: though Kant was not a “virtue ethicist” in the contemporary understanding of that term, his account of virtue is sophisticated and attractive—and it does not suffer from internal inconsistency or tension. His account of virtue, moreover, is separate from his much more rule-bound account of permissibility. A full understanding of Kant's moral thought requires taking account of *both* aspects of his work. The enormous differences in the ways in which Kant approaches questions of virtue and questions of permissibility are often insufficiently appreciated. For Kant, these two areas of moral philosophy really do represent distinct domains of moral evaluation. To reduce Kant's duties of virtue to external rules about permissible action does significant injustice to the sophistication and complexity of Kant's views on these issues.

For another: nothing about the *Elements* suggests that Kant meant it to represent an exhaustive account of the obligations that arise from the two primary duties of virtue. Thus, the present interpretation opens up other interesting avenues of argument. Given the developments in normative ethics since Kant, what could we say today about the requirements entailed by a genuine commitment to others' happiness and our own perfection? Our answer may be different from Kant's without thereby being un-Kantian.

Works Cited

Alves, Julius. “Vollkommene Tugendpflichten: Zur Systematik Der Pflichten in Kants Metaphysik Der Sitten.” *Zeitschrift Für Philosophische Forschung* 4 (2010): 520–45.

Annas, Julia. *Intelligent Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by C.D.C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2014.

Bacin, Stefano. “The Perfect Duty to Oneself Merely as a Moral Being.” In *Kant’s “Tugendlehre”: A Comprehensive Commentary*, edited by Jens Timmermann Andreas Trampota, Oliver Senzen, 245–68. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013.

Baron, Marcia. “A Kantian Take on the Supererogatory.” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 33, no. 4 (2016): 347–62. <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12139>.

———. *Kantian Ethics (Almost) Without Apology*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995.

———. “Love and Respect in the Doctrine of Virtue.” In *Kant’s Metaphysics of Morals: Interpretative Essays*, edited by Mark Timmons, 391–407. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Baum, Manfred. “Probleme Der Begründung Kantischer Tugendpflichten.” *Jahrbuch für Recht und Ethik* 6, no. 41 (1998): 41–56.

Broadie, Sarah. *Ethics with Aristotle*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Fahmy, Melissa Seymour. “Understanding Kant’s Duty of Respect as a Duty of Virtue.” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 10, no. 6 (2013): 723–40. <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455243-4681006>.

Gregor, Mary. “Kant on Obligation , Rights and Virtue.” *Jahrbuch für Recht und Ethik* 1 (1993):

69–102.

Gregor, Mary J. *Laws of Freedom: A Study of Kant's Method of Applying the Categorical Imperative in the Metaphysik Der Sitten*. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1962.

Hampson, Margaret. “Imitating Virtue.” *Phronesis* 64, no. 3 (2019): 292–320.

<https://doi.org/10.1163/15685284-12341984>.

Herman, Barbara. *The Moral Habitat*. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Hill, Thomas. “Kant on Imperfect Duty and Supererogation.” *Kant-Studien* 62, no. 1–4 (1971): 55–76.

Hill, Thomas E. *Autonomy and Self-Respect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

———. “The Hypothetical Imperative.” *The Philosophical Review* 10, no. 1 (1973): 429–50.

Hirsch, Philipp-Alexander. “Von Rechtspflichten Zu Vollkommenen Tugendpflichten? Kants Ungelöstes Problem Der Pflichtensystematik.” In *The Court of Reason: Proceedings of the 13th Kant Congress*, 1457–66. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110701357-143>.

Ludwig, Bernd. “Die Einteilungen Der Metaphysik Der Sitten Im Allgemeinen Und Die Der Tugendlehre in Besonderen.” In *Kant's “Tugendlehre”: A Comprehensive Commentary*, edited by Jens Timmermann Andreas Trampota, Oliver Sensen, 59–84. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013.

McCarty, Richard. *Kant's Theory of Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

O'Neill, Onora. *Acting on Principle*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Parfit, Derek. *On What Matters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Plato. *Gorgias*. Translated by Donald J. Zeyl. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987.

Scanlon, T.M. *Moral Dimensions*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.

Schaller, Walter E. “From the ‘Groundwork’ to the ‘Metaphysics of Morals’: What Happened to Morality in Kant’s Theory of Justice?” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (1995): 12(3) 333–345.

———. “Kant’s Architectonic of Duties.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 48, no. 2 (1987): 299–314.

Singer, Peter. “Famine, Affluence, and Morality.” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1972).

Sticker, Martin. “A Funeral March for Those Drowning in Shallow Ponds?: Imperfect Duties and Emergencies.” *Kant-Studien* 110, no. 2 (2019): 236–55. <https://doi.org/10.1515/kant-2019-0001>.

———. “True Need in Kant.” *Kant-Studien* 113, no. 3 (2022): 432–58.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/kant-2021-0030>.

Timmermann, Jens. “Kantian Dilemmas? Moral Conflict in Kant’s Ethical Theory.” *Archiv für Geschichte Der Philosophie* 95, no. 1 (2013): 36–64.

Timmons, Mark. *Kant’s Doctrine of Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Uleman, Jennifer K. “External Freedom in Kant’s Rechtslehre: Political, Metaphysical.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 68, no. 3 (2004): 578–601.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2004.tb00367.x>.

Unna, Yvonne. “Kant’s Answers to the Casuistical Questions Concerning Self-Disembodiment.” *Kant-Studien* 94, no. 4 (2003): 454–73. <https://doi.org/10.1515/kant.2003.026>.

Walla, Alice Pinheiro. “Kant’s Moral Theory and Demandingness.” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 18, no. 4 (2015): 731–43. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s>.

Wood, Allen. *Kant’s Ethical Thought*. Cambridge: Press, Cambridge University, 1999.

———. “Kant and the Right to Lie.” *Eidos* 15 (2011): 96–117.

Preprint draft. Forthcoming in *Kant-Studien* (2025).

———. *Kantian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.