

Moral Development, Repentance, and Self-Affirmation¹

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Abstract. This article engages closely with David Owen's 'Autonomy, Self-Respect, and Self-Love: Nietzsche on Ethical Agency.' Owen argues that Kant tried, but ultimately failed, to resolve the tension between law and love that is characteristic of European modern philosophy. This is because Kant takes a 'highly critical stance to self-love throughout his moral philosophy' since he conflates self-love with psychological egoism and sees it as 'opposed to morality as a threat, a challenge, a danger...' Owen articulates Nietzsche's main objections to the Kantian opposition between self-love and the moral law and argues that Nietzsche has a rather greater claim than Kant to have resolved this tension. In this article, I explore whether some of the arguments developed in Owen's text represent serious challenges to Kant's position and develop a reading of Kant's ethics which can answer most of the challenges. First, I argue that Kant is committed to a version of the 'agency free will' model. I show that, on the Kantian model, one constitutes oneself as self by becoming what one is through reflecting about one's ability to live up to what one considers one's fundamental commitments. Second, I argue that on this model, there is no universal list of maxims or commitments that can be *fully* specified in advance for all agents in all times. Each person's project of moral transformation is personal and ultimately shaped by features of their own psychology and personal history as well as features of their social circumstances. Third, I argue that the Kantian project of moral transformation, which involves repenting immoral maxims, can also be understood as a form of flourishing and self-affirmation, which includes the pursuit of happiness as one of its components. On this reading, far from endorsing an 'ascetic ideal' of the moral agent, Kant embraces an ideal of the human life in which there is significant space, and even a duty, to pursue pleasurable endeavours. However, although morality and happiness are not intrinsically incompatible, they are likely to conflict under unstable and unjust external conditions. Thus, the extent to which we can live a completely morally good life is not independent of social and political conditions. Ultimately, in the Kantian picture, the task of moral self-improvement also has a social dimension: we must avoid being complicit with the injustices of our time and instead work towards overturning them. It is in fair (or at least fairer) social and political conditions that we can pursue both moral and personal ends and flourish.

Keywords: moral development, repentance, self-affirmation, moral transformation, Kantian forgiveness, happiness, flourishing, guilt, radical evil, Kant, Nietzsche, ethical and moral agency.

I. INTRODUCTION

This article engages closely with David Owen's *Autonomy, Self-Respect, and Self-Love: Nietzsche on Ethical Agency*. Owen argues that Kant tried to resolve the tension between law and love that is characteristic of European modern philosophy by distinguishing morality into a domain of right and a domain of virtue. However,

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Kant did not manage to fully resolve this tension. Although Kant managed to stress the importance of both self-respect and respect for others and make room for the love of others through the wide duty of virtue to promote their happiness, ultimately, he fails to provide a plausible account of true self-love. This is because Kant takes a “highly critical stance to self-love throughout his moral philosophy” since he conflates self-love with psychological egoism and sees it as “opposed to *morality* as a threat, a challenge, a danger...” (2009, 197). Owen articulates Nietzsche’s main objections to the Kantian opposition between self-love and the moral law and demonstrates that Nietzsche “has a rather greater claim than Kant to have resolved the tension between love and law that is characteristic of European modern philosophy” (220). In this article, I identify two main challenges that Nietzsche’s view on ethical agency (at least as it is interpreted by Owen) poses to Kant’s theory of moral agency (at least as it interpreted by me). My aim is to comment on Owen’s interpretation of Nietzsche as I understand it. I don’t have enough knowledge of Nietzsche to evaluate this interpretation or to challenge it. Nor is my aim to argue that Nietzsche’s views of ethical agency are better than Kant’s model of rational agency or vice versa. Instead, my aims are to explore whether some of the ideas developed in Owen’s text represent serious challenges to Kant’s position and to develop a reading of Kant’s ethics which can answer most of the challenges. I will proceed as follows: In section II, I start by offering a brief reconstruction of Kant’s account of rational agency and moral development. In section III, I examine Nietzsche’s model of agency free will, which is expressed in his notion of the ‘sovereign individual’ and argue that it has significant similarities with Kant’s account. In sections IV, V, and VI address the two main challenges that Nietzsche’s position poses to Kant according to Owen and argue that Kant’s moral philosophy has the resources to answer them. Section VII briefly reflects on the place of flourishing in Kant’s philosophy by way of conclusion.

II. KANT’S ACCOUNT OF RATIONAL AGENCY AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT

In previous work, I have developed an account of Kantian forgiveness by appealing to Kant’s theory of rational agency, his theory of imperfect duties, and his theories of radical evil and moral development. Here I offer a reconstruction of Kant’s theories of moral development and rational agency with the aim to then be able to compare them to Nietzsche’s position as reconstructed by Owen. For Kant the will is practical reason, that is, a faculty of acting through the conception of a principle. Kant distinguishes two types of principles. Objective principles hold for all rational beings and instruct us how we ought to act, and for finite beings like ourselves, take the form of imperatives (categorical and hypothetical) (G 4: 413).² Subjective principles are maxims, that is, self-given principles of action that hold

2] Following standard practice, references in the text to the works of Immanuel Kant use the numbering from the Akademie edition, with the following abbreviations of titles: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: G; *Metaphysics of Morals*: MM *Lectures on Ethics*: LE; *Critique of Practical Reason*: CrP; Religion within the Limits of Pure Reason: Rel.

only for the subject (G 4: 422). A central feature of Kant's theory of rational agency is that agents act on maxims. Maxims typically express the reasons that motivate an agent to act and thus they express the agent's rationale and justification to perform that action. More formally, a maxim is a principle that connects some generic description of circumstances (taken broadly to include the inclinations and purposes of the agent) with some generic description of an action type that the agent takes these circumstances to warrant. Kant claims that we are sometimes uncertain of our own motivations (G: 4407; Rel G 6: 20), which means that we are not always explicitly or consciously aware of the maxims that we adopt. Maxims can be adopted tacitly, implicitly and, in many cases, retroactively. However, as maxims are a product of our freedom and principles, for which we are responsible, we can and should become aware of them through reflection (Korsgaard 1996). Moreover, Kant is clear that the *first command of all duties to oneself* is 'know (scrutinize, fathom) yourself ... in terms of your moral perfection in relation to your duty' (MM 6: 441). Thus, a sign of rationality, and an expression of a good character, is a willingness to take responsibility for one's actions by examining and revising one's maxims. Thus, reflection about one's maxims and actions (self-reflection) are a central feature of Kant's theory of agency.

Another central aspect of Kant's account is that since the default position of the will is a position of 'radical evil' (Rel 6: 32), it is ethically necessary, and therefore it must be possible, to overcome this evil (Rel 6: 66-67). To overturn evil is to take on the task of becoming virtuous in the sense of acquiring a good *Gesinnung* (meta-maxim): to make one's commitment to the moral law unconditional, which requires a 'revolution of the heart' (Rel 6: 47, 51) or inversion of the incentives, consisting in subordinating the maxim of self-love to the moral law. The revolution of the heart provides the rational framework that allows a person to abandon her immoral maxims. This is because lower-order maxims are rationally justified by higher-order maxims, so a fundamentally good person has no grounds of justification for more particular immoral maxims. For Kant, moral development involves reforming our characters by becoming aware of our maxims and getting rid of those maxims that on reflection we do not fully endorse. Thus, moral development requires self-reform. Moreover, I interpret the reorientation of one's will as requiring a single revolutionary act. However, after (or during³) the revolution there is still more progress to be made (Rel 6: 47-48; 66-67) because although the revolution rules out 'vice,' that is, the principle of deliberately violating a duty (MM 6: 380), it does not rule out

3] Kant says that the choice of evil *Gesinnung* (i.e., the fundamental disposition) is an 'intelligible deed' that does not occur in time (Rel 6: 31) which is sometimes taken to imply that the choice of a good *Gesinnung* is equally timeless. The challenge is then to explain the relation between the timeless revolution and the gradual process of moral self-improvement involved in a project of moral self-transformation. Some authors solve the problem by arguing that the process of overcoming radical evil occurs simultaneously with the process of improving the morality of one's maxims, a process that takes place over the course of a person's life (Sussman 2005, 173; Korsgaard 1996, 181) while others are willing to allow that there is a sense in which we can say that the revolution can be placed at a moment of a person's life (Drogalis 2013, 166). The point I am making here about moral progress and the ongoing struggle to achieve moral perfection aims to be compatible with both readings (see Satne 2016, 1043).

‘impurity’ and ‘frailty’ (MM 6: 408). The striving towards virtue, which I identify with the possession of a good meta-maxim,⁴ requires constant (endless) progress and a continued effort to approximate an (unattainable) ideal of holiness (MM 6: 409 and 390), understood as the aim of acquiring a fully reliable and pure form of moral motivation.

This process of self-reform involves the abandonment of our immoral maxims and thus it necessarily involves repentance for our immoral acts.⁵ I understand the Kantian notion of repentance primarily in intellectual terms as simply the commitment to abandon immoral maxims and become a better person as part of an ethical project of self-reform. Although the intellectual aspect of repentance is the primary aspect of the notion, Kant also states that repentance has a painful, affective aspect: “repentance is a painful sensation which is brought about by a moral attitude” (CrP 5: 98). This is the painful feeling of guilt which usually accompanies the judgment that we are morally guilty in the sense of recognising that we acted wrongly (MM 6: 399). Kant, however, rejects the notion of repentance as a form of self-punishment or chastisement (LE 27: 464) and instead maintains that “inner contrition for our offences and the firm resolve to live a better life” are the only things that are truly helpful to ourselves and others (LE 27: 464). I call this account ‘minimalist’ because although repentance might include pain, it is not the pain that is the motivational aspect of the state.⁶

This characterisation of Kant’s account of rational agency and moral development has been brief⁷ but I will continue to develop these and other aspects of Kant’s position throughout this article as I discuss the challenges presented by the Nietzschean position as interpreted by David Owen.

III. NIETZSCHE’S SOVEREIGN INDIVIDUAL

Owen presents a picture of Nietzsche’s account of ethical autonomy and self-respect by providing an analysis of the figure of the ‘sovereign individual’ as presented in the second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Nietzsche presents:

an image of [ethical] *maturity* articulated in terms of *individuality*, where such individuality is linked to *autonomy*, that is, being able to impose binding norms on oneself (‘the man with his own independent, enduring will, whose *prerogative it is to promise*’). This figure represents, it seems, the concept of the autonomous individual who is not bound by moral rules as customary constraints, but as *the freely endorsed commitments through which he gives expression to his own character* (204).

⁴ I defended the claim that the possession of a good meta-maxim (*Gesinnung*) amounts to the possession of a virtuous character in Satne 2013 and 2016.

⁵ Kant explicitly says that if there is no excuse or reparation for an offence, the wrongdoer should show “contrition” and “regret.” But if “the injured party is not content with that, then it does a man honour if he offers an apology”, noting that “it is not degrading to apologize” (LE 27: 435).

⁶ See Satne 2021 for a discussion of the relation between the notions of guilt and repentance in Kant.

⁷ This interpretation is developed in more detail in Satne, 2016.

Nietzsche equates the sovereign individual with the “liberated man who has the *prerogative* to promise, [the] master of *free* will...” (GM II, 2). Nietzsche’s equation of the sovereign individual with ‘free will’ can represent an obstacle to Owen’s argument that the sovereign individual represents Nietzsche’s account of ethical maturity since Nietzsche rejects the doctrine of free will ‘in the superlative metaphysical sense,’ with its underlying commitment to moral accountability, responsibility, and retribution and its appeal to the idea of the agent as *causa sui*. To overcome this obstacle, Owen appeals to Ken Gomes’s distinction (2009) between the ‘*deserts* free will’ model and the ‘*agency* free will’ model. Owen maintains that Nietzsche rejects the model of *deserts* free will, which is directed to the justification of blame and is represented in the form of debates over free will and determinism, but he accepts an *agency* free will model, which is directed to the question of what distinguishes mere doings (events) from deeds (actions) and relates to debates over the conditions which must be met for one to be an agent, for one’s doings to be deeds. Arguably, Kant is committed to a complex version of the *deserts* free will model. However, I won’t discuss this aspect of Kant’s position here. Instead, I will be arguing that Kant is also committed to a version of the *agency* free will model.

The sovereign individual possesses self-mastery in the sense that he has full competence to represent himself to the rest of the world as someone who can maintain a commitment or a promise. At the opposite pole, is the liar, a mere *wanton*, who is incapable of keeping his word. However, since arguably the majority of socialized individuals are not wantons, Owen attempts to explain what is *distinctive* about Nietzsche’s account of agency. One distinctive aspect of the sovereign individual is that in this model, one’s deeds are seen as criterial for one’s intentions. This means that the sovereign individual is not only committed to fulfilling his promises, but he does indeed fulfil them. The only impediments to the realisation of his commitments, which are compatible with self-mastery, are physical or normative impossibilities. Since it is impossible to have mastery over faith in general, a degree of prudence in one’s commitment-making activity is also recommended. Owen stresses the importance of upholding one’s word “even against fate,” which involves taking a stance which “acknowledges and affirms the fatality of one’s agency” in the sense of accepting “the damage incurred when one’s commitment cannot or must not be kept” (207). This aspect of Nietzsche’s position can be aligned with Bernard Williams’s analysis of the claim ‘I did it.’ Contrary to the ‘morality system’, which does not pay attention to the significance of the ‘I did it’, “the sovereign individual is one for whom the thought *I did it* has ethical purchase and salience” (208). The ethical significance of the ‘I did it’ is highlighted in Williams’ example of Ajax’s suicide. After a deranged act, Ajax commits suicide out of shame, acknowledging the significance of what he did: “being what he is, he could not live as a man who had done these things...” (Williams 1993, 73). I will analyse the significance of ‘I did it’ for Kant’s position in section VI.

The second distinctive aspect of Nietzsche's position is that the sovereign individual is able to master the norms constitutive of social practices. While the success conditions of promising can sometimes be specified externally, promises often also have internal conditions that cannot be fully specified in advance. In this case, the nature of my intention is revealed in the way that I keep the promise. For example, the nature of my intention when I promise to 'love and honour you until death do us part' is only revealed in the way I treat you throughout our lives together and requires an understanding of the social practices through which we act (i.e., in this case the social practice of marriage). Promising is thus an essential part of *becoming what one is* and of *constituting oneself as self*:

It is only through commitments characterized by internal success conditions that one discovers what one's intentions are or...acquires self-knowledge concerning what one is, what is necessary to oneself and what is not...the process of *becoming what one is* requires self-knowledge...[about] one's commitments and the issues that arise in the practical lived working out of what one has committed oneself to in making these commitments... (210).

We can see how some of the features of the model of agency here sketched are also implicit in Kant's conception of rational agency as sketched in section II. Recall that Kant claims that we act on maxims and that these maxims are always opaque to us, but that we nevertheless have a duty to reflect about our true motives. Arguably, given our tendency to deceive ourselves about our true motives and the inherent opacity of our maxims, any possible knowledge about one's commitments can only be acquired through reflecting about the success conditions internal to our intentions (maxims in Kantian parlance). This, of course, will involve knowledge of the practical issues that arise when one tries to live up to one's maxims. Thus, on the Kantian model of agency, one also constitutes oneself as self by becoming what one is through reflecting about one's ability to live up to what one considers one's fundamental commitments. The commitment to a project of moral self-improvement is also a form of constituting oneself as self and it also requires self-reflection, although complete self-knowledge is, for Kant, beyond human reach.

There are some important similarities between Nietzsche's account of ethical autonomy and Kant's model of moral agency as the following passage clearly shows. For Nietzsche, freedom demands:

[t]he ability to take one's virtues and oneself as objects of reflection, assessment and possible transformation, so that one can determine who one is [...] to take ourselves as potentially free requires that we are not merely bearers of good qualities but *self-determining beings capable of distanced reflection* (Guay 2002, 315, cited at 211, *my emphasis*).

The Kantian moral agent is conceived precisely as an agent who is capable of taking distanced reflection and self-determination. Owen acknowledges that Nietzsche's position shares with Kant a view of autonomy as the ground of self-respect. He draws

from Nietzsche's discussion of freedom in *Twilight of the Idols* and argues that there Nietzsche also identifies freedom with standing surety for oneself but he adds the claim that, given our exposure to luck, self-mastery is a condition that can never be fully and finally achieved:

the condition of self-mastery must be construed as an *ongoing achievement* or, to put it in another way, a *continual process of struggle engaged with both the material of oneself and the circumstances of one's agency*. [...] [T]he sovereign individual, the ethically autonomous person [i]s one who is engaged in a process of struggle which continues through the course of one's life (212, *my emphasis*).

As we have seen, Kant also emphasizes the ability to reflect on one's maxims and assess one's actions as a central aspect of autonomous agency and he takes the possibility of radical transformation of the self as a central aspect of our freedom. Moreover, for Kant this process of transformation involves a struggle which continues through the course of one's life. The struggle of the Kantian moral agent can arguably also be seen as a struggle with the material of oneself understood as both one's maxims (commitments) and our ability to shape our inclinations and emotions in line with those commitments. Moreover, although this is not often recognised, in section IV below I will argue that the Kantian moral agent must also struggle with the circumstances of their agency and the injustices of their time. Having shown the similarities between Kant's and Nietzsche's accounts of free agency, in the next two sections I consider the two central challenges that Nietzsche's position poses to Kant's account, the second challenge being Owen's central preoccupation.

IV. NIETZSCHE'S FIRST CHALLENGE

So far, I have been able to show that both Kant and Nietzsche endorse versions of the agency free will model and although there may be differences between the two, there are also some significant similarities. However, Owen's reconstruction of the Nietzschean position poses two important challenges to the Kantian model.⁸ The first challenge arises because, according to Owen, Nietzsche provides an *ethical* model of agency, while Kant endorses a *moral* model of free agency. According to Owen, Nietzsche is articulating a view of *ethical* autonomy that contrasts sharply with the ideal of *moral* autonomy expressed in Kant and which Nietzsche takes to be representative of 'morality' (2009, 210). The problem for Kant is the central role that the categorical imperative plays in his moral philosophy since this implies that if:

I find that the maxim of my action cannot be universalized without contradiction, I have identified an absolute prohibition, an unconditional 'I will not'. I have, in other words, stopped short at a formulable instruction that might be fully obeyed by anyone... The spirit... has gone missing without trace (Ridley 2009, quoted in 210).

[8] Owen's texts also raise other (minor) criticisms to Kant's position, which I address as I proceed.

On this reading, the Kantian moral agent is obliged to comply with a list of 'I will not's' that can be specified in advance and independently of the way in which commitment to them is executed. The characteristic error of 'morality' which is enshrined in Kant's moral philosophy is a failure to acknowledge the expressive character of human agency and thus Kant is unable to account for the nature of "human freedom as an unformulable process of self-legislation" (210).

Kant argues that moral requirements impose constraints on our maxims of action and thus give rise to moral obligations. Thus, Kant certainly can be read as imposing a list of 'I will not's' on agents. However, I argue that this is somehow a simplistic reading of Kant's ethics. In fact, I do not believe that a list of maxims or commitments for each Kantian agent can be fully specified in advance. It is true that moral demands are universal. But morality is not simply an issue of endorsing a list of 'I will not's'. Often (usually) we need to think much more carefully about what is morally required from us. Each person's project of moral development has both individual and collective (historically situated) aspects. Moral development has an individual dimension because the inclinations that represent temptations to immorality vary for each person since they depend on features of our psychology and individual histories. Moral development involves reforming one's character by revising one's maxims and this is going to involve something different for each one of us. The key task for each agent is to figure out how can their maxims, which are subjective principles of action and thus relate to all aspects of an agent's life (including their work, personal projects, aims and aspirations, personal relationships, and community life, among many other areas aspects), embody universal values, i.e., respect for the dignity of persons.

Moreover, for Kant, wrongdoing is in broad terms a tendency to either act on subjectively valid motives while recognising that they do not provide justification for one's actions (weakness) or, more seriously, a tendency to take subjective valid motives as having more objective force than they really have in the sense of being justified from the standpoint of others (depravity). The theory of the *Gesinnung* goes some way to explain how this happens, since the agent adopts self-love as her fundamental maxim, subjective valid motives are seen as having objective justification. However, given that the moral law commands unconditionally and that we are always aware of moral obligation since consciousness of the moral law is a basic 'fact of reason' (CrP 5:31), what is more difficult to understand is why we have this predisposition to adopt self-love as our fundamental maxim.⁹ One way of understanding Kant's position is to see self-love as sustained by ideology or rationalizations. Andrews Reath expresses the point as follows:

9] In fact, Kant's theory of radical evil is notoriously complex and is considered by many as one of the most controversial and difficult aspects of Kant's moral psychology. Here I am glossing over some of these complexities in the interest of clarity of exposition and because the points I want to make here do require that we engage with these complexities. For an overview of some of the main difficulties associated with Kant's radical evil thesis, see Morgan 2005, 63-65.

The different tendencies that this description [of taking merely subjectively valid motives to have objective justification] fits might share the feature of being sustained by some set of false or impoverished beliefs. These could range from beliefs about one's motives or the relevant features of one's situation, to beliefs about practical reason or the moral capacities of the self [...]. [Thus,] the influence of self-love on the will is sustained by an ideology of sorts, which enables individuals to view their maxims as objectively acceptable reasons (2006, 21).

The ideologies that sustain self-love are often developed collectively (although sometimes can also be formed by a sole individual) and thus they can vary both historically and geographically. This means that temptations to immorality (this time in the form of false beliefs) and the challenges that each person must overcome in their struggle against radical evil often vary from person to person. Myisha Cherry (2021) provides the example of Christian Picciolini. Christian Picciolini was a member of a violent neo-Nazi organization, which he eventually rejected. He became the author of *Breaking Hate* and created a non-profit organization to help other disengage from hate groups.¹⁰ On a Kantian reading of Picciolini's transformation, we can see him as engaging in a personal project of moral development, which includes his own personal set of maxims, dealing with the particular obstacles that he had to overcome given his personality and social circumstances. Ultimately, there is no universal list of maxims or commitments that can be fully specified in advance for all agents in all times. Each person faces their own challenges and has to attempt a transformation of different maxims.

It is also important to note that some of our obligations are context dependent in the sense that each society has its own structural injustices, which give rise to different moral challenges and, in some cases, collective obligations. Each époque must interpret what morality demands of them at that time and place. Here I have in mind cases in which we have no way to act rightly because we live in a structurally unjust state such that, despite our best efforts, we cannot but be implicated in wrongdoing. This type of case has recently been discussed by Lucy Allais (2015) and Garrath Williams (2018). Williams focuses on our complicity with climate change especially in developed societies. Allais focuses on the moral dilemma of whether or not to give money to a beggar. Starting from the thought that just public institutions must uphold subsistence rights in order to prevent relations of dependence and domination, Allais shows that societies that fail to provide poverty relief are structurally unjust and often leave their citizens with no way of acting rightly. However, on closer analysis, even though we appear to be left without options, we are often complicit with that structural injustice because we cooperate with and benefit from it and thus we bear *some*¹¹ responsibility for it. As Allais eloquently puts it:

¹⁰] Cherry 2021, 172, fn. 12.

¹¹] There are degrees of power, responsibility, and complicity and of course some are much more implicated than others.

On Kant's analysis, our daily confrontations with beggars confront us with *structural injustice in which we are implicated*. In this situation, there may be nothing you can do to relate to the beggar perfectly rightfully...[T]his analysis ...suggests that, although *you do not do wrong if you do the best act available to you, the extent to which you can live a completely morally good life is not independent of the conditions of the society you live in*. Living in an unjust state means you can find yourself in situations in which there is no morally unproblematic alternative [...] If there are genuine beggars, then *there is structural injustice of a sort which makes it impossible for you to relate rightfully to these individuals in individual encounters*. (2015, 770-71, my emphasis).

Allais says that living a completely morally good life is not independent of social conditions. This is somehow surprising because it is usually thought that Kant's ethics is an ethics of autonomy and that the extent to which you can live a completely morally good life depends on your maxims or principles of actions and ultimately your individual character. However, Williams' and Allais' analyses show that there is a social dimension to our attempts to live a moral life and thus the continuous struggle to live a moral life also requires engagement with the circumstances of one's agency. Thus, we are (partially) responsible for the injustices of our time and attempting to address these injustices often requires acknowledging our complicity and embarking on collective action. Here again the task ahead of us is one of moral and social transformation by committing to an individual and collective project of reflection and reform. As noted by Allen Wood, moral progress and the struggle against radical evil "can be effective only if it is carried out through an ethical community" (Wood 1999, 332).

Thus, the Kantian moral agent is not simply committed to a list of 'I will not's'. On the contrary, each person's project of moral development is personal and shaped by features of their own psychology and personal history as well as features of their social circumstances. However, it is true that the Kantian process of self-legislation is unlikely to be completely unformulable. To the extent that our maxims must express respect for the dignity of persons, and given that dignity expresses an absolute worth, I see no advantage in a process of self-legislation that is completely unformulable.

V. NIETZSCHE'S SECOND CHALLENGE

The starting point of Owen's article is Aristotle's distinction between 'true' self-love and 'pseudo' self-love in Book IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. True self-love is "an acquired relation to self that consists in appropriating to oneself (committing oneself to the service of) what is noblest by submitting to the rule of reason and, hence *identifying one's well-being with living a virtuous life*" (199, *my emphasis*). In contrast, pseudo self-love simply involves the self-interested pursuit of pleasure and the identification of happiness with the satisfaction of one's irrational appetites. Owen claims that despite the plausibility of such distinction Kant denies it any place in his moral philosophy, attributing this denial to Kant's view that inclinations are always both the product

of luck and are exposed to luck and that, therefore, they cannot be conceived as the objective basis for the ascription of moral worth. For Kant, respect for the moral law is the “basis of the disposition of self-respect (as well as that of respect of others) that characterizes the morally autonomous agent” (202). By denying the Aristotelian claim that the moral agent is characterised by a disposition of true self-love, Kant fails to fully resolve the tension between love and law that informs the modern philosophical tradition. Owen’s conclusion is that Nietzsche’s ethics has a “rather greater claim than Kant to have resolved [this] tension” (220).

According to Owen, for Nietzsche: “true self-love is the [acquired] disposition to value what is noble” (213). Nietzsche’s conception of nobility in *The Gay Science* has two main elements: (i) *amor fati*, which involves “learning to love the piece of fate that one is by coming to see what is necessary in and to oneself as a new ‘indescribable beauty’” (213) and (ii) the doctrine of eternal recurrence as “the lover of one’s life ‘who no longer want anything better from the world than it and it again’ (GS 334)” (213). For Owen, it is the disposition to *amor fati* that is the silent disposition of *true* self-love’ (213). Nietzschean self-love is a form of artistic interpretation through which one comes to see oneself as a ‘new and indescribable beauty’ (GS 334). Nietzsche exhorts us to embark on the ethical work needed to ‘*become what we are*—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves!’ (GS 335) and “to ‘give style’ to one’s character- a great and rare art!” (GS 290).

In Owen’s interpretation, to submit to one’s taste or, in the case of ethics, to submit to one’s own law involves a process of self-creation and self-formation, which involves being bound by constraints related to “the intentions of the artist which, in the case of self-artistry, are comprised of one’s evaluative commitments” (215). Submitting to the demands of one’s own law does not mean that the relevant constraints are not objective in the sense of being independent of the relevant subject. To commit to the value of scientific activity, for example, may be an expression of one’s taste but “the value of scientific activity entails that the constraints to which one is subject are those norms and necessities that govern the practice of scientific activity. Hence it follows that one can only give style to one’s character by submitting to the norms and necessities that govern the relationships, practices, ideals, etc. to which one is committed” (215, fn. 28).

Owen reads Nietzsche as offering an aesthetic re-description of the sovereign individual and claims that:

A preliminary view concerning the relationship between self-love and self-respect would thus be that valuing the disposition of *amor fati* broadly equates to valuing the will to self-responsibility (i.e., ethical autonomy) and, hence, that *self-love consists in valuing self-respect* (216, *my emphasis*).

In the case of self-artistry, the medium is the human material comprising oneself. Giving style to one’s character involves surveying all the strengths and weaknesses that our nature has to offer (GS 290), removing non-necessary weaknesses and ugliness and

concealing and reinterpreting necessary weaknesses “so that one learns how to see it as beautiful, as a strength” (Ridley 2005, xiii, quoted in 217). Owen links this discussion of self-artistry to the discussion of intellectual conscience in GS 335:

A necessary condition of the self-mastery exemplified by the sovereign individual is the exercise of intellectual conscience and, hence, truthfulness [...] with respect to what one is, what one is committed to and the requirements of these commitments. At its limit, this is an unflinchingly honest and realistic appraisal of oneself and the circumstances of one’s agency... (217).

To maintain such a stance is difficult and requires strength. In fact, we need art as a counterforce to guard off nausea and suicide and to maintain our overall commitment to truthfulness (GS 107). Artistry, and the “local falsifications, projections, rationalizations, and illusions” that come with it accompany our search for truthfulness and are also part of valuing the disposition to *amor fati*, which constitutes true self-love (218). For Owen, Nietzsche’s ethics seeks to dissolve the tension between self-love and self-respect by presenting *self-love as the disposition to value self-respect*.

Nietzsche’s second challenge to Kant then is simply that:

Kant’s framing of this distinction [the modern distinction between morality and egoism] rules out self-love as the general orientation to *eudaemonia* (whether conceived in Aristotelian or Nietzschean terms) and, hence, fails to acknowledge the centrality of self-love to the achievement and maintenance of the disposition of *amor fati* (Nietzsche’s version of *eudaemonia*) (219).

The objection is not that Kant fails to give a place in his moral system to self-love or happiness understood as the overall sum of one’s inclinations. Owen claims that Nietzsche joins both “Aristotle and Kant in rejecting the life of pleasurable inclinations, of pseudo self-love” (219). The way I read the objection is that ultimately Kant does not have an account of flourishing.

Owen notes that Kant’s rejection of self-love is bound up with his effort to immunize morality from luck (219). However, given Nietzsche’s naturalism in ethics, he cannot possibly endorse this project. Thus:

Nietzsche’s strategy is exactly the opposite of Kant’s; it is to build an acknowledgment and affirmation of our exposure to luck into our understanding of ethics and ethical autonomy. This strategy embraces self-love as necessary to the task of developing and maintaining an orientation to, and engagement with, the world that consists in *leading* our lives and not simply existing through the course of their duration (219).

I find the claim that self-love consists in valuing self-respect somehow difficult to (fully) understand (i.e., in what sense is this a form of ‘love’?). But, in any case, the key point seems to be that on Nietzsche’s conception of autonomous and self-respecting agency, the agent achieves a form of flourishing or *eudaemonia* through loving their fate (*amor fati*), a form of becoming and affirming oneself which involves self-creation, but which also requires commitment to truthfulness and self-artistry. The objection, as

I understand it, is that Kant's ideal of moral agency fails to constitute a form of genuine flourishing or *eudaimonia*. The question that arises specifically for my interpretation of Kant is this: to what extent can it be said that the ongoing project of self-reflection and self-reform, which represents a fundamental commitment of the human agent, but which is also, to a certain extent, painful (because it necessarily involves the painful aspect of repentance) and a struggle, leads to a life of flourishing?

Considering the interpretation of Kant sketched in the previous section, we can say that Kant is committed to a version of the claim that submitting to one's own law involves a process of self-creation and self-formation which involves 'giving style' to one's character. Although, it would be stretching too far to say that we can find a reference to self-artistry in the Kantian process of self-creation (at least in Kant's ethical writings), there is a sense in which it can also be said that Kant is committed to a version of the claim that human beings are new, unique, incomparable, give laws to themselves and create themselves. Moreover, Kant also thinks that an unflinchingly honest and realistic appraisal of oneself and the circumstances of one's agency is morally required, although he thinks that we can never be sure that we have achieved total self-awareness. So, there is a sense in which we can say that the Kantian ideal also involves self-creation and self-reflection. Although Nietzsche's account seems to put more emphasis than Kant's on reinterpreting and ultimately accepting our weaknesses as beautiful, Kant, Aristotle and Nietzsche all stress the importance of self-reformation and critical appraisal of oneself (Owen, 2009, 200). So, the crucial questions really are: can the Kantian project of moral transformation also be seen as a form of self-affirmation? Can it be seen as a form of flourishing?

Given that the moral law is a *fact of reason* and that we experience it with reverence (respect), it is (relatively) easy to explain why we can be motivated to act from duty when moral demands conflict with inclination. However, the interpretation here defended implies a stronger claim: to be a moral agent is to be an agent who is fundamentally committed to the moral law as this involves commitment to an ongoing, long-term, ethical project of self-reflection and self-reform. In short, why should we adopt the moral law as our fundamental maxim? In a recent article, Anastasia Berg eloquently explains it thus:

because moral law commands universally, properly recognizing its authority means recognizing its authority universally, or, over all of one's actions. In particular it means that an agent cannot be thought of as only occasionally acting from genuine recognition of the moral law. To allow oneself to occasionally deviate from the commands of the moral law is simply to refuse its authority as universally binding, which is to refuse its authority *tout court*. An agent is thus either committed to the supremacy of moral considerations in all matters, or, in effect, in none (2022, 178).

This explains why we must commit to the moral law unconditionally, and why there is no space for moral luck in Kant's system. However, although adopting the moral

law as our fundamental maxim is morally necessary, this still does not show how or whether such moral life amounts to a life of flourishing.

However, at this point, it is important to make some important clarifications about Kant's position and in particular the role that happiness plays in Kant's ethics and his theory of moral development. In order to make this argument, I will now complement my reconstruction of Kant's position by drawing from Alice Pinheiro Walla's recent book *Happiness in Kant's Practical Philosophy: Morality, Indirect Duties, and Welfare Rights*. Pinheiro Walla shows that the pursuit of happiness plays a much greater role in the personal and collective life of the Kantian moral agent than is commonly thought. Kant rejects the principle of happiness as the basis of human morality because he thinks that an adequate moral theory must be one that takes seriously the common understanding of morality as unconditional binding. For Kant, this means that "autonomy of the will is the sole principle of all moral laws" (CrP 5: 33). Kant rejects ethical theories which are based on the principle of happiness as heteronomous since they presuppose a prior object of the will to be authoritative and thus, they can only generate hypothetical, and hence, conditional imperatives. However, Pinheiro Walla shows that Kant's rejection of happiness as the foundation of morality should not be confused with a hostile attitude toward human happiness in general and an attempt to eradicate happiness from the moral life.¹²

Pinheiro Walla interprets Kant's claim that human beings have the end of happiness by natural necessity (G 4: 415-6) as following from Kant's conception of the finite *rational* will. Maxims make references to acts which are pursued for the sake of some end. To act in the world, we also need to adopt *ends*, which constitute the necessary material aspect of willing. Kant claims that adopting an end analytically implies the commitment to take the means for its realization (G 4: 417). The matter of the will is provided by our inclinations understood in broadly hedonist terms as desires to obtain pleasure. The inclinations provide the matter for the adoption of our non-moral ends. However, since having an end necessarily involves one's commitment to its realization, in order to realize our non-moral ends and satisfy some of our inclinations, we must attempt to form a determinate material and realistic conception of our happiness. As Pinheiro Walla puts it "because we have a plurality of ends which are incompatible with each other or must be realized in different times, agents are confronted with the task of forming a conception of the ends that constitute their happiness, in a more or less coherent hierarchy" (2022, 10). While each agent's material conception of happiness would differ and agents would also differ in their ability to form a coherent model of happiness and live up to it, the "necessity" of forming a determinate and realistic conception of one's own happiness understood as well-defined sum of compatible ends arises from the structure of finite willing itself and it is not imposed externally from our non-rational animal nature.

[12] This argument is made in Chapter 2 of the book.

Kant also claims that happiness cannot be the *natural* end of finite beings with the capacity of practical reason (G 4: 395). Adopting the perspective of the teleological principle of natural efficiency, Kant argues that we cannot assume that happiness is the highest end of nature for humanity since instinct seems to be a more efficient capacity for the attainment of our happiness than reason (G 4: 395). However, the fact that our reason is not merely contemplative but also has a practical use provides ultimate evidence for the claim that happiness cannot be the highest end of humanity. The only end that reason is best to promote “by itself” is the good will, which must be seen as the natural end for human beings. Pinheiro Walla shows that it is precisely because happiness is not our natural or whole end that incompatibilities between happiness and morality are merely contingent and not intrinsic to morality. If we took happiness to be the fundamental principle of the will, then the possibility of morality would be excluded as a maxim of subordinating morality to happiness is evil (Rel 6:31) whereas subordinating happiness to morality does not exclude the possibility of happiness. Having morality as our natural end allows us to see the natural and social evils that plague humanity, not as something that we have no hope to improve, but as presenting us with a moral task, that is, as something we have a duty to address. Paradoxically, Pinheiro Walla notes, the recognition that morality is humanity’s supreme good can “bring us closer to contentment than making happiness our ‘whole end’” (2022, 22).

Kant claims that we have an indirect duty to promote our own happiness (G 4: 399). Kant’s explicit rationale for the duty is to make us less susceptible to temptations to immorality arising from an unhappy life. The underlying idea seems to be that a life of continuous and unbearable discontentment would make the pursuit of morality more difficult and perhaps even impossible (Pinheiro Walla 2022, 80). Kant argues that we have a duty to promote our long-term happiness and to make sacrifices for the sake of our long-term well-being. Pinheiro Walla explains Kant’s position by arguing convincingly that Kant makes an implicit distinction between subjective and objective happiness. Objective happiness refers to “basic ends of our animal nature which have an impact on our moral integrity and thus can be commanded in case of neglect,” while subjective happiness simply refers to what we happen to desire (2022, 82). Pinheiro Walla argues that securing one’s objective happiness can become the object of a direct duty “presumably when the agent feels no inclination to pursue her own happiness and the neglect of her wellbeing has moral relevance” because it either has an impact on her capacity for moral agency or her moral integrity (2022, 81). Thus, the indirect duty to promote one’s happiness can qualify as a direct duty under specific circumstances.

Pinheiro Walla’s insightful analysis has important implications for my interpretation of Kant’s theory of moral development as requiring an agent’s commitment to a project of self-reflection and self-reform. Given human cognitive limitations, happiness would always involve an element of indeterminacy (G 4:418). However, it is rationally necessary for finite beings like us to attempt to form a determinate (as much as we can) and realistic conception of our own happiness understood as well-defined sum of our

compatible ends. Moreover, we have an indirect (and sometimes even a direct) duty to promote our own happiness. As we have seen, actual perfection is an unachievable task for finite beings. Pinheiro Walla reminds us of Kant's warning against the moral fanaticism involved in striving to achieve perfection in our finite lives at all costs, often attempting to do so by searching for spurious opportunities to act morally and ultimately "turn[ing] the government of virtue into tyranny" (MM 6: 409).¹³ Here we can conclude that the pursuit of happiness, which nevertheless cannot be reduced to the contentment that follows from complying with morality, constitutes an important aspect of each agent's personal project of moral self-improvement.

With this analysis in place, we can see that although Kant rejects the principle of happiness as the basis of morality, it is inaccurate to say that Kant adopts a 'highly critical stance towards happiness throughout his moral philosophy.' Although it is true that Kant saw the tendency of the human heart to make happiness our supreme principle as the source of the radicality of evil in the human condition, it is nevertheless inaccurate to say that Kant saw happiness *per se* 'as a threat, a challenge, a danger' to morality. On the contrary, it is precisely because morality is the natural end of human beings that morality and happiness are not necessarily incompatible and that there can be space for the pursuit of happiness in human life, albeit a pursuit which is subordinated to the primacy of morality. Perhaps more surprisingly, although prioritising our own long-term well-being requires short-term sacrifices, Kant's conception of happiness should be understood in broadly hedonist terms. This means that, far from endorsing an 'ascetic ideal' of the moral agent, Kant can embrace an ideal of the human life in which there is significant space, and even a duty, to pursue pleasurable endeavours. It turns out that Kant's ethics is much more welcoming to the pursuit of pleasure than either Aristotle's or Nietzsche's accounts.

The pursuit of happiness has value and plays a central role in the life of a Kantian moral agent but, as we have also seen, morality has priority over happiness and, when the two conflict, Kant's position entails that we must sacrifice happiness for the sake of morality. Thus, there is a seemingly tragic aspect of Kant's moral theory, as in some difficult cases, it may even demand the complete sacrifice of our happiness for the sake of complying with our (perfect) duties:

Ask a [man] whether, if his prince demanded, on pain of the same immediate execution, that he give false testimony against an honourable man whom the prince would like to destroy under a plausible pretext, he would consider it possible to overcome his love of life, however great it may be. He would perhaps not venture to assert whether he would do it or not, but he must admit without hesitation that it would be possible for him. He judges, therefore, that he can do something because he was aware that he ought to do it and cognizes freedom within him (CrP 5: 30).

¹³] Pinheiro Walla 2022, 113.

Although the conflict between morality and happiness can certainly be tragic, we should not see this tragic conflict as an inherent aspect of the human condition. As we have just seen, since morality is the end of human beings, this means that morality and happiness are not intrinsically incompatible. Here again Pinheiro Walla makes an important observation: often whether morality becomes very demanding is not an intrinsic feature of moral demands themselves but an extrinsic feature regarding the agent's social and political circumstances, (in Kant's example, an unfair and threatening prince). Morality and happiness are more likely to come into conflict under very dire circumstances, such as political turmoil, instability, war and/ or oppression, when complying with everyday ordinary duties can become an almost impossible task (Pinheiro Walla 2022, 134). This means that our task is to create stable political and social conditions where human beings can fulfil their duties while pursuing their conception of happiness, a point that aligns well with my previous argument about the need to address the injustices in the social circumstances in our moral lives.

It turns out that on the reading of Kant that I have been developing in this article, Kantian ethics is much more palatable than is commonly thought, and this has allowed me to show that the Kantian position has some similarities to the Nietzschean position and answer some criticisms implicit in Owen's article. However, I have not been able to answer the two main problems associated with Nietzsche's second challenge. That is, I have not yet been able to fully explain why the pursuit of morality plus the pursuit of our overall pleasure should amount to a life of *self-affirmation* and ultimately *flourishing*, a task that I undertake in the next two sections.

VI. MORAL TRANSFORMATION AND SELF-AFFIRMATION IN KANT

In a recent article, Lucy Allais claims that in order to make sense of ourselves as agents, we have to interpret ourselves as basically good, well-ordered, unified selves acting under the principle of the moral law: "this is because Kant thinks that acting for reasons commits you to seeing what counts as a reason for action as governed by the constraint of respecting the humanity of others" (2021, 275). Moral transgressions, when they occur, constitute a serious threat to our self-understanding as unified, basically good, well-ordered agents. In order to avoid this threat, we are often lead to self-deception (we interpret ourselves as being better than our failures suggest) or despair (we realise that we are deeply flawed). Allais argues that since moral perfection is beyond our reach and since morality always represents a struggle for us, we will inevitably continue to transgress. These transgressions ultimately reveal that we do not have "a properly or fully ordered self" after all:

The condition of virtue that is possible for us in the actual human condition involves not having a properly or fully ordered self. Human agents are not fixed, determinate characters, but rather messy, only partially unified works in progress...at best constantly engaged in a struggle to be better, including a struggle to be honest with themselves (2021, 276).

Given this lack of ordered character, Allais claims that forgiveness,¹⁴ understood as a form of secularised grace, is needed as a response to each other's wrongdoing. Grace involves an overall view of the agent's character as "a possible (God's eye) perspective on our overall willing (our life seen as a whole) from which our flawed strivings can be seen as oriented toward good willing" (2021, 275) whereas forgiveness simply involves a view of an agent in relation to some specific wrongful action. Forgiveness involves evaluating agents "as oriented to better willing than their transgressions indicate" (2021, 277). Allais argues that we need to embark on this charitable interpretation of each other's wrongful actions to help us avoid despair and self-deception.

Allais's analysis is correct in pointing out that in order to make sense of ourselves as agents, we have to interpret ourselves as basically good, well-ordered, unified agents acting under the principle of the moral law. I also agree that moral development constitutes a struggle and that, therefore, transgressions are inevitable. However, I disagree with her claim that, in Kant, the actual human condition always involves not having a properly or fully ordered self and that it is therefore always possible to interpret a wrongdoer graciously or charitably as someone who is struggling towards the good. This interpretation of the human condition fails to account for the different forms of character and agency that, according to Kant's theory of radical evil, are implicit in different attitudes that we can adopt towards our own transgressions. To see this, we must appeal to Kant's theory of the three stages of radical evil: frailty, impurity, and depravity (Rel 6: 29-30). There are important differences between transgressions that occur 'after' the revolution of the heart (frailty and impurity) and the transgressions of those who are fundamentally committed to a maxim of self-love (depravity). In the case of depravity, as self-love is adopted as one's fundamental maxim, and thus as providing the ultimate justification for one's action, the agent will see her transgressions as fully justified and will be unlikely to condemn and repent them (or even recognise them as transgressions). In such cases, evaluating agents "as oriented to better willing than their transgressions indicate" may not only be mistaken but actually counterproductive, since in the absence of genuine repentance, interpreting them as being oriented to better willing than their wrongdoing supports is not likely to help them to avoid despair and self-deception, and become better persons. In contrast, in cases of frailty and impurity, as Anastasia Berg has recently argued (2022), the subject adopts a fundamentally good maxim and thus their willing is oriented towards the good. However, although in these cases one's way of thinking is not corrupted, the problem is that in both cases the moral incentive is not sufficient determination to action. Frailty involves a form of weakness: we have the right maxim

14] The topic of Kantian forgiveness is a fascinating one and one that has often occupied me. My interpretation of Kantian forgiveness differs significantly from Allais' reading (see Satne 2016, 2018, 2020), but here I do not have space to enter into this debate.

but nevertheless perform a different (immoral) action. In the case of impurity, the agent performs the good action but only with the help of an incentive of inclination.

Frailty and impurity are, according to Berg's interpretation, *states of moral immaturity* when the agent has yet to achieve a stable moral character.¹⁵ Here it is important to note that those frail agents who are still morally immature but who have undergone (or are undergoing) a revolution of the heart are likely to repent their transgressions and abandon their immoral maxims because of the perceived discrepancy between their actions and their principles. Although our motives are obscure so we cannot know in advance whether our repentance is sincere, the frail person has the right maxim so she is likely to feel remorse – the affective aspect of repentance – and attempt to reform her character, at least in the sense that she would attempt to strengthen her resolve to act on her morally good maxims. We can say that the nature of her commitment (to change) is revealed in the way that she keeps it and ultimately through her deeds. So, here we can say that her deeds are the criteria for her maxims. If she changes and starts to act differently because she has repented, then that is (defeasible) evidence of her moral transformation. Repentance must be reflected in a changed life and thus it provides (defeasible) evidence of a will oriented towards the good. Somehow paradoxically, repentance can have an affirming role. It is part of one's moral transformation which amounts to constituting oneself by affirming one's values.

Thus, contrary to Allais, acknowledging our moral transgressions, which for Kant would always involve guilt (CrP 5:98), is not always necessarily a burden because it can play an important role in our moral development. Guilt can also be analysed as having an intellectual and affective aspect. Although the affective aspect of guilt is painful (and, to that extent, a burden), the intellectual aspect of guilt, that is, the recognition of our transgressions, is bound up with the recognition of our freedom as the necessary condition of the very possibility of this recognition. As Alenka Zupančič stresses, in the *Critical Elucidation of the Analytic of Pure Practical Reason*, Kant shows “that which proves the reality of freedom — Or, more precisely, that which posits freedom ‘as a kind of fact,’ is presented...in the guise of guilt” (2000, 25). The key point for us is that recognising our transgressions as transgressions (the intellectual aspect of guilt) although painful (the affective side of guilt) leads us to recognise that we are free. As I put it in previous work:

Guilt, in the intellectual sense, consists in passing a guilty verdict regarding our violation of the moral law. That is, when we reflect lucidly about our (objective) past wrongful acts, we cannot avoid reaching a guilty verdict. The mere fact that we judge ourselves as guilty shows that we take personal responsibility for our actions, and that, on the ultimate analysis, we think we could have acted otherwise in those same circumstances. This is evidence that there is an alternative description of actions, namely one appealing to a causality of freedom, which transcends the determinism of empirical causes (Satne 2021, 1515)

¹⁵] Berg 2022.

Thus, recognizing our guilt does not *necessarily* lead us to despair. It is through our guilt that we become aware of our fundamental freedom and this awareness represents an opportunity for change and improvement. This can also be seen as a (more optimistic)¹⁶ way of acknowledging the significance of *I did it*. Perhaps through this process of acknowledging and repenting our immoral deeds, we can be hopeful (if not fully confident) about our prospects of becoming better people. This process of self-transformation is a process of self-affirmation and self-creation in which one constitutes oneself as self. In this process we affirm our values (our maxims as our commitments) and ultimately this involves *valuing oneself as the bearer of those values and commitments*.

In his Rousseau Lecture “On Vindication in Ethical Life”, Owen distinguishes the ethical concepts of justification and vindication. Justification involves acknowledging the claims of what we owe to each other while vindication refers to the process of struggle to realize outcomes of value to the flourishing of the agent’s life such that the agent has reason to affirm (or at least not regret) what they have done. We can say that there is an element of vindication in Kant’s position. Living a moral and happy life is the agent’s goal (with all the subgoals and challenges that this involves) and one is accountable to oneself for attaining this life. However, the priority of justification (over vindication) is not (rationally) optional for Kant. The Kantian agent has a responsibility to herself to live her life in a way that is accountable to others.¹⁷ A life in which we accomplish our goals at the cost of disrespecting others cannot ultimately be vindicated (or affirmed).

VII. BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: FLOURISHING IN KANT

To the extent that this process of moral transformation is also a process of self-affirmation which involves valuing oneself as the bearer of values, we can say that a life committed to a project of moral transformation is a life of flourishing. However, this statement does not fully capture all aspects of Kant’s position. As we have seen in section V, Kant argues that happiness cannot be identified with the contentment that follows from complying with morality. Although morality is the highest (in the sense of supreme) good, it is not the whole good. The highest (in the sense of complete) good for a human being “must be understood...as [the] synthetic connection between [the] two heterogeneous, irreducible components”¹⁸ of virtue and happiness. As we saw, the moral agent is also committed to the pursuit of their own happiness (albeit not unconditionally). Although morality and happiness are not intrinsically incompatible, they are likely to conflict under unstable and unjust external conditions. Thus, the

16] Arguably Kant’s more optimistic stance derives from his rejection of naturalism, which constitutes an important disagreement with the Nietzschean position.

17] Incidentally, Pinheiro Walla also demonstrates, against Williams, that Kant’s ethics does not require strict impartiality. See her excellent chapter 4 (2022).

18] Pinheiro Walla 2022, 55.

extent to which we can live a completely morally good life is not independent of social and political conditions. Paradoxically, having morality as our supreme end allows us to see the natural and social evils that plague humanity, not as something that we have no hope to improve, but as presenting us with a moral task, that is, as something we have a duty to, and indeed can, address. Ultimately, in the Kantian picture, the task of moral self-improvement also has a social dimension: we must avoid being complicit with the injustices of our time and instead work towards overturning them. It is in fair (or at least fairer) social and political conditions that we can pursue both moral and personal ends and flourish.

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