

Character and Evil in Kant's Moral Anthropology

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IN THE *METAPHYSICS OF MORALS*, Kant explains that moral anthropology studies the “subjective conditions in human nature that help or hinder [people] in fulfilling the laws of a metaphysics of morals” and insists that such anthropology “cannot be dispensed with” (6:217).¹ But it is often difficult to find clear evidence of this sort of anthropology in Kant's own works. In this paper, I discuss Kant's account of character as an example of Kantian moral anthropology.

Kant's account of character is one of the most important parts of his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*.² Kant describes the character of the person, in particular, as the “distinguishing mark of the human being as a rational being endowed with freedom” and says that character “indicates what the human being is prepared to make of himself” (7:285). Recently, Kant commentators have gone even further. G. Felicitas Munzel, for example, claims that character is “the systematic link between the moral, aesthetic, and anthropological elements of Kant's works.”³ This paper will not investigate the full richness of Kant's account of character. Instead, I focus on one particular problem that arises in Kant's discussion of character—an apparent conflict between the moral relevance of character and the possibility of evil character. By showing why there is an apparent conflict and why it is merely apparent, I show some of the ways in which a particular subjective condition in human nature can help, but not force, people to fulfill the laws of a metaphysics of morals.

¹ Throughout the paper, references to Kant's works are given using the Academy Edition pagination (volume: page), and translations are based on the recent *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992–). Translations of the lectures on anthropology are my own.

² I do not intend to suggest here that Kant's *Anthropology* and his “moral anthropology” are identical. For discussions of the relationship between the two, see the introduction to the Academy Edition of Kant's lectures on anthropology (25:xlvi–xlvi); Robert Loudon's *Kant's Impure Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and my *Freedom and Anthropology in Kant's Moral Philosophy* [*Freedom*] (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³ See G. Felicitas Munzel, *Kant's Conception of Moral Character: The “Critical” Link of Morality, Anthropology, and Reflective Judgment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 1999), 4.

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I. THE PROBLEM: MORAL CHARACTER
AND THE CASE OF SULLA

When Kant introduces character in the *Anthropology*, he distinguishes between the character of the person, of the sex, of the nation, of the race, and of the species. Even within the character of the person, he distinguishes between “natural aptitude,” “temperament,” and “character purely and simply,” all of which are different kinds of individual character. But only the last—the “character purely and simply”⁴ of a person—“is moral” and “shows what man is prepared to make of himself” (7:285).⁵ This paper focuses only on that general, moral character.

At first, Kant seems to describe general character as morally good. Twice in his opening discussion of character, Kant describes “character” [*Charakter*] as “moral” [*moralische*] (7:285), and he insists that “character has an inner worth, and is beyond all price” (7:292). Though not decisive, these comments suggest that one with character has a good will. But Kant goes further, adding that the person with character “relies on principles that are valid for everyone” (7:293). This reference to universally valid principles is picked up later in a way that highlights its moral goodness.

For character requires maxims that proceed from reason and morally-practical principles. Therefore one cannot rightly say that the malice of this human being is a quality of his character; for then it would be diabolic. The human being, however, never *sanctions* the evil in himself, and so there is actually no malice from principles; but only from the forsaking of them. (7:293–94)

It seems that Kant could not be more explicit. Character seems to involve acting on the basis of principles that conform to and even flow from “morally-practical principles,” which he seems to distinguish from anything evil. This seems quite close to Kant’s account of the good will as a will “whose principle is the categorical imperative” (4:444). (Although Kant’s precise account of the good will is complicated, for our purposes here it is sufficient to define a good will as a will that consistently acts out of respect for the moral law.⁶) To have character, it would seem, is to have a good will.

But this apparent identification of character with good character does not fit the rest of Kant’s account in which Kant clearly does *not* identify character with the good will. In the midst of the very comments that seem to support the notion that having character just is having a good will, Kant gives a startling example of someone with evil character.

⁴ ‘Character purely and simply’ is Louden’s translation of ‘*Charakter schlechthin*.’ Having *Charakter schlechthin* involves simply tying oneself to any practical principles at all, even those that might be “false and incorrect” (7:292). Kant’s inclusion of Sulla as an example of character rather than temperament makes clear that this narrow conception of character is general enough to include both good and evil characters, as I discuss further in the rest of the paper.

⁵ The claim that it “shows what man is prepared to make of himself” suggests that this sort of character is a paradigm case of “pragmatic anthropology,” which Kant describes as an “investigation of what [a human being] makes of himself, or can and should make of himself” (7:119). For further discussion of the significance of this connection, see my *Freedom*.

⁶ For two quite different discussions of what Kant means by a good will, see Karl Ameriks, “Kant on the Good Will,” in *Interpreting Kant’s Critiques* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), and Barbara Herman, “Making Room for Character,” in *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty*, eds. Stephen Engstrom and Jennifer Whiting (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Even a human being of evil character (like Sulla), though he arouses disgust through the violence of his firm maxims, is nevertheless also an object of admiration: because we generally admire *strength of soul*. (7:293)

As if the presence of this example were not striking enough, it is the *only* example of character in Kant's discussion of the character of the person!⁷ And it occurs only two sentences prior to Kant's claim that wickedness cannot be a property of a person's character.

In his lectures on anthropology, Kant offers further references to evil character.⁸ There again Kant mentions Sulla as an example of evil character worthy of esteem, and he explicitly points out that character need not imply moral goodness.

A man of character is a great man but not yet good thereby. ... We esteem character highly. ... (Evil character also excites high esteem as with Sulla in Rome.) (25:1387)⁹

Unfortunately, neither Kant's lecture notes nor his published *Anthropology* explain any more about how Sulla's evil character is to be understood. But in one set of lecture notes, Kant replaces his example of Sulla with another example of a character that is admirable but not morally good:

A character always has something worthy of respect about it, even when it is evil. ... Cromwell certainly had a character; but he had fixed in his head that the government under a monarch would be harmful, and that it would have to stand under a higher being; and he acted fixedly according to this principle. (25:823)

Here one can see more clearly the nature of evil character. Cromwell has a character because he acts fixedly according to a principle. His character is *evil* because he bases his actions on an ultimate principle other than the moral law itself.¹⁰

Aside from particular examples, Kant endorses the general notion that character can be evil. He says that "a human being is truly renowned when he has a determinate character, even would this be an evil one" (25:1169), and he points out that a

human being with a truly evil character is a fearful thing, but he has a firm evil character: so he nevertheless inspires wonder. The essential characteristic of character thus belongs to the firmness of the principles. (25:1175)

⁷ Kant also mentions Charles XII, but only as an example of someone who *lacks* a character.

⁸ The lectures here are compiled from student notes. While there is some question as to the reliability of specific language in these notes, their general reliability is confirmed by their consonance with Kant's published writings. In the context of the present argument, I often use the lecture notes to fill in details of Kant's account, but what is found in these notes is consistent with if not reiterated in the published *Anthropology*.

⁹ In the published *Anthropology* and in the lectures, Kant's discussion of Sulla is associated with a discussion of Charles XII, who is "stiff" or "obstinate" but who does not actually have character. He explains what is wrong with obstinacy like that of Charles XII in his lectures. "Obstinacy is from temperament when it is from a lack of sharing in inclinations, from talent when from a lack of conviction, and from character when one's principles are stronger than the opposite. The last is good" (25:1387). What is wrong with the obstinacy of Charles is that it proceeds not from principles but from temperament and/or lack of conviction.

¹⁰ This passage also gives some indication of *why* Cromwell's evil character nonetheless has something worthy of respect about it. Kant explains: "for we know that if he were to receive better direction, his character would become better" (25:823). As we will see in Section 3, character is an important precondition of a good will.

Kant even distinguishes different sorts of evil character.¹¹ He explains that the “evil character is either deceitful or malicious” (25:651); the former is “base and worthy of disdain” while the latter is “worthy of hatred” (25:635).

At the same time, Kant insists that character, even when evil, is better than a lack of character. After pointing out that “a human being is truly renowned when he has a determinate character, even would this be an evil one,” Kant adds:

Here truly is found more excellence than with a human being that has no character, even if he already has a good heart and soul. ... Character has inner moral worth. ... A human being with a right evil character is terrifying, but is nonetheless admired. (25:1169)

Not only does this passage reiterate the point illustrated by admiration of Sulla, it even juxtaposes, in the same discussion, the “inner moral worth” of character with the possibility of *evil* character. And in another set of lecture notes, Kant is reported as saying explicitly, “[I]t is better to have an evil character than none at all. For one who has a character, would he be good or evil, he yet exhibits already strength of soul” (25:631). Not only is character admired, even when evil, but Kant claims that there is in fact something “better” or “more excellent” about a person who has an evil character than about one who has no character at all.

2. KANT'S CONCEPTION OF CHARACTER

In order to clarify the relationship between character and a good will, it is first necessary to explain what character in general is for Kant. Character is action from firm principles. In his lectures, Kant says that “The essential characteristic of character thus belongs to the firmness of the principles” (25:1175; see also 25:630, 651–52, 1384). In the published *Anthropology*, Kant explains:

Simply to have a character signifies that property of the will by which the subject binds himself to definite practical principles that he has prescribed to himself irrevocably by his own reason. Although these principles may sometimes indeed be false and incorrect, nevertheless the formal element of the will in general, to act according to firm principles (not to fly off hither and yon, like a swarm of gnats), has something precious and admirable in it; for it is also something rare. (7:292; see also 6:651–52)

And in another set of lectures, Kant insists that “the most important part of character” is “that a human being has a constant will and acts according to it” (25:1386).

However, if character is fundamentally a matter of “firmness and persistence in principles [*Grundsätzen*]” (7:294), it is important to clarify what sort of “principles” these are. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant distinguishes two different sorts of practical principles:

Practical *principles* are propositions that contain a general determination of the will, having under it several practical rules. They are subjective, or *maxims*, when the condition is regarded by the subject as holding only for his will; but they are objective, or practical *laws*, when the condition is cognized as objective, that is, as holding for the will of every rational being. (5:19)

¹¹ He also discusses bad (*schlechte*) as opposed to evil (*böse*) character, where bad character is really an incurable *lack* of character.

In these terms, to be morally upright is to act only on practical laws. If the practical principles on the basis of which one with character acts are practical laws, character would be identical with a good will. If, on the other hand, character is a matter of stable maxims, one can make sense of how one could have an evil character.

There are some comments in the published *Anthropology* which make it seem as though practical laws are the only principles that can ground character. Kant explains that one is bound to practical principles “prescribed irrevocably by his own reason” (7:292). For Kant, “if it is assumed that pure reason can contain within itself a practical ground, that is, one sufficient to determine the will, then there are practical laws” (5:19). One might ignore the difference between “*pure* reason” and mere “reason” and think that the principles that ground character must be practical laws. This suspicion seems confirmed when Kant remarks that “a rational human being [i.e., one with character] ... relies on principles that are valid for everyone” (7:293).¹²

Kant’s accounts of character in his lectures, however, make clear that stable *maxims*—rather than practical *laws*—are the principles upon which one with character acts. In one lecture, immediately after distinguishing laws from maxims, Kant explains that a lack of character is a failure to act on *maxims*.

Principles (*Grundsätze*) are either objective or subjective, the objective are principles [*principia*], and the subjective maxims (*Maximen*); the objective everyone realizes, but not everyone lets them become maxims for himself. He who has no character, also has no maxims; but rather he is always moved through incentives. (25:822)

In a later lecture, Kant again points out that it is stable *maxims*, not laws, with which the principles of character should be identified.

Character is the will of human beings according to principles [*Grundsätzen*]. ... The character of a human being relates to the sovereignty of *maxims*. Character could thus also be defined by the determination of the choice of human beings through hard and fast *maxims*. (25:1384–85, my emphasis)

Kant never refers to these principles as practical laws, and he often identifies them with maxims. Moreover, considering them maxims is the only way to make sense of the possibility of evil character. One with character is one who is ruled by her own fixed *maxims*. Since these maxims can be evil, an evil character is possible.

3. CHARACTER AS A PRECONDITION OF GOOD CHARACTER

With this understanding of the nature of character, it becomes clear why character, even if not identified with a good will, is so morally important. Character is necessary but not sufficient for having a good will. Kant points out that “before a good or evil character is built for a human being, a character altogether must be built, with which he first has a character in general, i.e., he first must get into the habit of acting from principles” (25:630–31). One problem with lacking character is

¹²In the context, the “rational person” is contrasted with “the imitator” who is “without character.” Given that the section is titled “On the Qualities that Follow Merely from the Human Being’s Having or not Having Character” (7:293), it is clear that Kant uses ‘rational person’ here to describe one with character.

that “such human beings ... have no principles because they often are deceived through their good heart and cannot rely on it at all” (25:631). People without character tend to employ misguided and shifting rules of thumb in their deliberations. Kant describes, for instance, how one without character but with a good heart will frequently be taken advantage of because she lacks the principles to stick to policies that can be maintained. Thus she will give to a persistent beggar even if she thereby leaves her child hungry. Then, being frustrated by past abuses of her generosity, she will be excessively stingy with the next beggar, whom she perhaps can and should help (see also 25:631). A father with a good heart might give in to his son’s whining and buy him a toy. Then, upset at the money he spent, he may refuse to let his son read an enriching book. The inconsistency of the inclinations of the heart prevents those without character from being morally good.

Even if one with a good heart *in fact* acts consistently for the good of others, the fact that a good heart is not *necessarily* consistent prevents it from being an effective vehicle of good.¹³ Hence Kant says, “such people [without character] are like soft wax,¹⁴ every instant they take up another rule. Towards evil they are quite steerable but not to good, for to become good already requires principles” (25:631). People without character are steerable to evil but not to good because good action is *necessarily* action according to principle. To be good, for Kant, just is to act according to maxims that conform to the categorical imperative *because* they conform to the categorical imperative. But this implies an overall commitment to a principle as a guide to action. One might be good-hearted and for that reason¹⁵ frequently do nice things for others. But then one does not do nice things for others out of a commitment to following the categorical imperative precisely because one does not act from any commitment at all, but only from feeling.¹⁶

The importance of character is further highlighted when, in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant specifies that a good will is not merely one that acts according the imperative *at some time*, but one whose commitment is *stable*. Kant insists that one thing that makes it difficult to judge one’s moral status from isolated actions is that “a human being’s inner experience of himself does not allow him so to fathom the depths of his heart as to be able to attain . . . an entirely reliable cognition of the basis of the maxims which he professes, and of their purity *and*

¹³ This topic has been discussed at length in recent Kant literature. See, for example, Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), and Marcia Baron, *Kantian Ethics (Almost) without Apology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995). Interestingly, none have pointed out the tendency that Kant points out here. Good hearts are deeply susceptible to bad principles precisely because good-heartedness is not possible to sustain since too many people have too many needs. People who are good-hearted early in life are often the very people who become the most cold- and hard-hearted over time.

¹⁴ This is a variant reading (see 25:631 n.4) that makes more sense in the context. The Friedlander lectures actually read ‘hard wax’ here.

¹⁵ It is important that this person do good merely because of their good heart. One who is good-hearted may act out of a firm resolve to follow good maxims, in which case she would have not only a good heart but a good character as well. Such a person rightly deserves moral esteem.

¹⁶ Kant draws particular attention to the “evil” that necessarily comes with a lack of character in his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. One without character is at best characterized by the first “grade of the natural propensity to evil,” which Kant calls “the *frailty* of human nature” (6:29). This frailty is characterized by the “general weakness of the human heart in complying with the adopted maxims,” especially when these maxims are good (6:29).

stability" (6:63, my emphasis). One might think that one could act out of principle on one occasion and not on another, but Kant objects to this as a form of moral "latitudinarianism." Against this view, he argues:

Nor can a human being be morally good in some parts, and at the same time evil in others. For if he is good in one part, he has incorporated the moral law into his maxim. And were he, therefore, to be evil in some other part, since the moral law of compliance with duty in general is a single one and universal, the maxim relating to it would be universal yet particular at the same time: which is contradictory. (6:24–25)

In other words, one who truly acts in accordance with the categorical imperative commits oneself to principled action, such that any transgression shows that one was never truly acting in accordance with the moral law. This contradiction is evident because the moral law—which is supposed to be universal—is applied in some cases but not in others. In this context especially, one must have *character*—and so a stable disposition to act on a fixed principle—in order to have a *good* character, the stable disposition to act on the categorical imperative.

This account shows how Kant can say that "character rises to the level of morality insofar as it is determined as either good or evil" (25:652), such that "good character would be the good will" (25:648) and "evil character refers to the condition of the evil will" (25:652). If a character is a stable set of maxims on the basis of which one acts, then if those maxims are endorsed because they conform to the categorical imperative, one has a good character, and thus a good will. If those stable maxims are endorsed for any other reason, then one has an evil character. Not only is being principled a necessary part of being morally good, but Kant also suggests that being principled is the *most difficult* part of being morally good. And this is an important part of why having a character, even if that character is evil, is worthy of so much esteem.

It is better to have an evil character than none at all. For one who has a character, would he be good or evil, he yet exhibits already a strength of soul, that one is capable of acting according to principles, and *even if the character is evil, he can yet through principles be improved*. But he who has absolutely no character is totally not in union with himself. Today he gives everything, he is very generous, but tomorrow he will be very mean and frugal, for he sees that he comes too far short when he acts that way every day. Hence he quickly takes up another rule and thus nothing is reliable with him. (25:631, my emphasis)

One who lacks any character cannot be improved through principles, since principles carry no weight for such a person. In this respect, one with evil principles is more capable of improvement than one without principles at all. As Kant explains,

[w]hen one fails ... to stick to his word, then nothing comes of it, e.g., when he has promised to regularly get up early and he regularly postpones this resolution when it comes to execution, nothing comes of it. The person that ought not trust himself with respect to his resolutions is in a state of hopelessness of all good, [with no hope] that he can get hold of himself. (25:1387–88)¹⁷

¹⁷ See also 25:1169–70: "The first feature of character consists in this, that the person stick to what he promises to himself. Whoever does not do this cannot trust himself." And see 25:825: "A person without character also cannot trust himself much; he has little calculation to make his decisions."

Neither one who is evil nor one without character is good. And when one is not good, the process of becoming good involves making and sustaining a commitment to improve. But one without any character at all is incapable of sticking to any programs of improvement. Thus one with an evil character is actually closer to goodness than one with no character at all.

Insofar as Kant's account of character is an example of moral anthropology, the account here shows a general way in which "subjective conditions" can "help or hinder fulfilling the laws of a metaphysics of morals" (6:217). Lacking character is an important hindrance to fulfilling such laws, since morality requires *consistent* action. And having character is an important help for the same reason. But character or the lack thereof is only a subjective help or hindrance. It does not *determine* whether or not one will be morally good.

4. CULTIVATING CHARACTER PROMOTES GOOD CHARACTER

Not only is character an important precondition of good character, but the cultivation of character also seems to *promote* good character. Even one with an evil character must—purely to preserve her character—promote features of oneself that are conducive to becoming good.

To see the connection between the cultivation of character and good character, it is crucial to recognize that for Kant character is not something with which one is born.

Character comes not from nature, but rather must be acquired. One has in fact the propensity thereto, but this seed of nature must be cultivated, through understanding and reason, with which come forth principles. (25:1172)

As it will turn out, however, the means for cultivating character also cultivate good character. The most extensive list of rules for the cultivation of character is in the published *Anthropology*.

They are:

- a. Not intentionally to say what is false. ...
- b. Not to dissemble. ...
- c. Not to break one's (legitimate) promise. ...
- d. Not to enter into an association of taste with evil-minded human beings. ...
- e. Not to pay attention to gossip. ... (7:294; see also 25:1387–88, 1392)

These are all practical principles that support and constitute the development of character. In the context of Kant's ambiguity in the *Anthropology* about the relationship between good character and character as such, it is not entirely clear whether these practical principles are intended as means for developing character as such or for promoting good character in particular.

However, the justifications that Kant gives for his rules suggest that they are important for the development of character as such. For example, "not to speak an untruth intentionally"—which would seem to be an element of *good* character—is connected with the need "to speak with caution so that one does not bring upon oneself the disgrace of retraction" (7:294). The prohibition against dissembling is explained in that one should not "appear well-disposed in public, but hostile behind people's backs" (*ibid.*). Even the restriction on listening to slander is

justified “because paying attention to it already indicates a weakness” (ibid.). The suggestion in these justifications is that certain activities undermine the unity of one’s person. To say one thing now and another thing later is closely akin to being one thing now and another thing later.¹⁸ In that sense, habitual deceit undermines even an evil character. And to listen to the malicious judgments of others reveals a weakness of soul that cannot or will not judge for itself, even when one knows the judgments of others to be shallow and malicious.¹⁹

Nonetheless, while these rules are primarily designed to cultivate character in general, they also promote the development of a good character. By cultivating a habit of truthfulness, one with character avoids “the greatest violation of a human being’s duty to himself regarded merely as a moral being, ... lying” (6:429). Likewise dissembling and breaking promises are both forms of dishonesty which violate one’s duties both to oneself and to others. The importance of limiting one’s contacts with “evil-minded people” is emphasized in the *Religion*, where Kant insists that “the dominion of the good is not otherwise attainable” than through union with others into an “ethical community” (6:94). By avoiding the company of the wicked, even if only to maintain a firm and consistent character, one moves closer to this ideal of ethical community and thus towards genuine virtue. Of course, none of these techniques for cultivating character lead *necessarily* towards good character. It is possible to be a Sulla: wicked but still true to one’s principles. But all of them are consonant with morality, and this consonance may even actively *promote* morality.

Again, this further account of character helps to flesh out the way in which moral anthropology can study subjective conditions which help or hinder moral development without being identical to that development. Cultivating the subjective conditions studied by moral anthropology may promote morality, as in the case of character. But such cultivation is not identical to moral development, nor will it *necessarily* give rise to fulfilling the moral law.

¹⁸ Of course, these are not identical. Kant is well aware that there is a kind of evil character that is fundamentally deceitful. But he also insists that deceit more properly belongs to a bad than an evil character (see 25:652 and footnote 11 above). The point seems to be that there is a difference between principled deceit and habitual deceit. A truly deceitful character is a possibility, but even such a person will need to be honest at least to himself, true at least to his principles, faithful at least in his commitment to deceit. In his lectures, Kant occasionally seems to interpret honesty in this restricted sense. Thus in one lecture he explains that “one must stick to his own word,” but his example is of one who “had promised to himself to always get up early and in the execution always postpones this intention” (25:1387–88). Here the failure to stick to one’s word—associated (as in the *Anthropology*) with a failure to keep one’s promise—clearly relates to the case of an individual’s honesty to himself. It is true that the list in the *Anthropology* seems more conducive to intersubjective honesty, and in that sense may relate better to the development of good character than character as such. Still, the general importance of honesty for the development of any character at all is important throughout Kant’s work.

¹⁹ The pursuit of these methods for developing character depends on already having at least some level of character. Unless one can act on the basis of principles, one will be unable even to follow the principles for developing character. Of course, keeping these principles even sporadically can have some beneficial effect. The more one avoids duplicity, bad company, and slander, the easier it will be for one to stick to principles in the future. Insofar as one has some minimal level of constancy, these principles can reinforce one’s character. They are important aids to self-improvement, even if they are not sufficient.

5. GOOD CHARACTER AS THE MOST
AUTHENTIC FORM OF CHARACTER

If character is a precondition of virtue, and if the cultivation of character promotes virtue, then it is easy to understand why Kant includes some strong language in support of its moral importance. But sometimes Kant seems to go beyond these claims. As we saw in Section 1, Kant sometimes seems to think that (in some sense) character really is good character. And nothing we have seen so far explains how he could make *that* claim.

In order to make sense of the apparent identity of character with good character, it is useful to make a comparison between Kant's occasional slide from character to good character and another conflation to which attention is often drawn in discussions of Kant's moral philosophy—that between a free will and a good will. In the *Groundwork*, for instance, Kant says that “a free will and a will subject to moral laws are one and the same” (4:447). Even more, he claims that autonomy is “freedom of the will” (4:447), but also that the “categorical imperative . . . commands neither more nor less than . . . autonomy” (4:440). Thus freedom seems to be identical to moral goodness. Of course, Kant also thinks that one must be free if one is to be considered evil. Thus he writes: “the propensity [to evil] is itself morally evil, since it must ultimately be sought in a free power of choice” (6:37).

Kant solves the problem of the apparent identity of freedom and moral goodness by distinguishing, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, between “positive freedom,” according to which one acts according to the moral law (and independent of sensuous inclination), and “negative freedom,” according to which one *can* act independent of sensuous inclination.²⁰ As Kant puts it:

Independence from being *determined* by sensible impulses . . . is the negative concept of freedom. The positive concept of freedom is that of the ability of pure reason to be of itself practical. But this is not possible except by the subjection of the maxim of every action to the condition of its qualifying as universal law. (6:213–14; see also 4:446–47)

All human beings have negative freedom and ought to exercise positive freedom. That is, all human beings are *in fact* free from determination by sensuous influences, and all *ought* to determine themselves in accordance with pure practical principles.²¹ Moreover, there is a connection between negative and positive freedom, in so far as it is only in positive freedom that one's negative freedom is actually exercised. Negative freedom is nothing more than the potential for positive freedom, so there is a sense in which the only fully actual freedom is the positive freedom of obedience to the moral law.

²⁰ Numerous commentators have discussed this issue. See, for example, Christine Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* [*Kingdom*] (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. ch. 6; Henry Allison, *Kant's Theory of Freedom* [*Theory of Freedom*] (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), esp. chs. 5 and 7; and Karl Ameriks, “Kant on the Good Will.”

²¹ This relationship between positive and negative freedom is echoed in Kant's distinction (in the *Religion* and elsewhere) between the *Wille* and the *Willkühr*. For further discussion of this distinction, see John Silber, “The Ethical Significance of Kant's *Religion*,” in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1960); see also Henry Allison, *Theory of Freedom*, esp. ch. 6.

Christine Korsgaard has expanded on this relationship by pointing out that what it means to be (negatively) free just is to be free *from* determination by contingent inclinations. Freedom, as she explains it, is the condition under which one can “choose a principle or law for itself.”²² But the only way to remain free is to make one’s only law the law of freedom, which is the categorical imperative. As Korsgaard says, “by making the [categorical imperative] its principle, the free will retains the position of spontaneity. . . . The categorical imperative is thus shown to be the law of spontaneity.”²³ By contrast, “the free will that puts inclination above morality sacrifices its freedom for nothing.”²⁴ Not only does (negative) freedom make morality possible, but morality also is identical with the internal constitutive standards of freedom itself. Because the moral law specifies nothing other than the condition of freedom, any choice that is based on a principle other than the moral law is a limitation, rather than a reaffirmation, of one’s own freedom.

There is a similar relationship between character and good character. We have already seen that to have a character is to act from fixed principles. But for one’s principles to be fixed, one’s adherence to them can depend neither upon particular inclinations, nor upon contingent circumstances.²⁵ If one only follows a principle when one is inclined to follow it, or only in certain cases, then one does not truly have character. Whenever adherence to the principle depends on something contingent, one’s character is compromised. And the principle that best preserves this essential nature of character is the principle that one act only on principles which do not depend upon anything contingent. In other words, the principle that preserves the consistency and stability intrinsic to character should be a *categorical* principle—a moral law. To have character in the fullest sense is to have a good character.

Of course, in the same way that one can use one’s freedom to abdicate freedom, one can commit oneself to principles that are not consistent and stable in principle. People can and often do commit themselves to principles that are based in some way upon inclinations, or social norms, or contingent details of one’s condition. And Kant insists that, insofar as they act consistently in conformity with the principles they adopt, such people have a character. In this sense, evil character is possible. But such an evil character is always more fragile—and in that sense less authentically character—than a character that in principle can be maintained in any conditions: a good character.

This account of the relationship between character and good character is strengthened because of a feature of Kant’s account of character upon which I have not yet focused. In many of his discussions of character, Kant points out that

²² See Korsgaard, *Kingdom*, 166.

²³ Korsgaard, *Kingdom*, 166.

²⁴ Korsgaard, *Kingdom*, 167.

²⁵ Of course, whether or not one has a character may depend in part on contingent circumstances, and even upon one’s inclinations. Kant points out, for instance, that certain temperaments can be conducive to character (see also 7:290, 25:1388) and that education can aid in cultivating character (see also 8:375). Thus in one sense “adherence” to principles depends upon contingent factors because character itself does. But even if inclinations and circumstances contribute to the formation of character, having a character means adhering to principles independent of contingent factors. That is, once one has a character, one adheres to principles without regard to inclination or circumstance.

acting on the basis of firm principles—while necessary for and “the most important part” of character—is not itself sufficient for character. For instance, while he says that “to character belongs ... that the human being has a constant will and acts according to it,” Kant adds that it is also necessary “that the human being has *his own will*” (25:1386, my emphasis). And when he says that one with character “binds himself to definite practical principles,” he adds that these must be principles “that he has prescribed to himself ... by his own reason” (7:292).

Character involves acting consistently on maxims *that are one's own*. But, as Kant argues throughout his moral philosophy, the only maxims that are *fully* one's own are maxims of reason—maxims adopted because of their conformity with the moral law. While any maxim can be one's own in the sense that it is the maxim on which one chooses to act, maxims adopted from inclination are ultimately given by nature. Only the categorical imperative is not only adopted by, but also given by, oneself. Hence only good character is character in the fullest sense. However, this does not reduce the importance of all character, just as free will has dignity even when evil, though only the good will is properly a source of moral worth.

6. CONCLUSION: CHARACTER IN KANT'S MORAL ANTHROPOLOGY

This paper has shown three ways in which character is a subjective condition of moral goodness. In every case, to have a character is to act from fixed principles in one's actions, whether these principles are themselves good or evil. But Kant also claims that character elicits admiration, and this can be explained by the ways in which character promotes virtue. First, character is a requirement for virtue because morality requires acting fixedly according to the requirements of the moral law. Since one must be able to act fixedly according to a principle in order to act as morality requires, having a character is required for having a good will. Second, the rules by which one cultivates character also promote the development of a good will. Third, since the moral law is the only principle that comes entirely from oneself and can provide an entirely fixed principle of action, the good will is the most authentic form of character.²⁶ Thus character rightly fits under Kant's description of moral anthropology as the study of the “subjective conditions in human nature that ... help [people] in fulfilling the laws of a metaphysics of morals” (6:217). And this study of character shows at least three of the ways that such influences can function.²⁷

²⁶ Admittedly, the third relationship between character and the good will is significantly different from the first two. The first two are genuine aids to fulfilling the demands of morality, while the third suggests that true character just *is* good character.

²⁷ I thank Aaron James, Karl Ameriks, and my anonymous reviewers for extensive and very helpful comments on this paper.