



Kantian Duty and Reluctance

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I. Introduction

The relation between duty and reluctance in Kantian ethics has long been a point of interest for many scholars. A well-known satire put forward by one of Kant's contemporaries, Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller, makes light of this issue:

The Scruple of Conscience

Gladly I serve my friends, but alas I do it with pleasure.

Hence I am plagued with doubt that I am not virtuous.

The Verdict

For that there is no other advice: you must try to despise them,

And then do with aversion what your duty commands.¹

This little piece points to the idea that Kant's idea of duty necessarily involves reluctance. Indeed, the common charge against Kantian ethics appears to be that of his 'asceticism' in that his ideas of moral action run contrary to inclinations and feelings (Beiser 2005, 169). In this respect, Kantian ethics seem to differ from other well-known moral theories. Aristotle, for instance, thinks that virtue as a disposition must be cultivated through habituating oneself to virtuous actions and accompanying states of pleasure in response to these actions (*Nichomachean Ethics*, II.3). The role of pleasure, for Aristotle, not only does not oppose the cultivation of virtue, but rather, can even serve to aid in its

¹ Translated by Frederick C. Beiser, from "Dispute with Kant", in *Schiller as Philosopher: a Re-examination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 170.

cultivation. Kant, on the other hand, appears to hold the view that what counts as a duty must necessarily be something that one is reluctant towards, provided that it is in conformity with the moral law. This can be most explicitly seen in his denial of the duty to promote one's own happiness. Kant argues that since everyone is naturally inclined (and not reluctant) towards promoting their own happiness, it cannot be a duty to do so, even if it does not directly violate the moral law.

In talking about duty within this paper, I am primarily dealing the concept of objective duties, that is, specific implications of the moral law. I term this sense of duty as the "objective sense of duty". There is another sense of duty which often appears within Kant's writings as well, which I will refer to as the "subjective sense of duty". This second sense of duty primarily centers upon the subjective motivations of the agent. These two senses of duty are nevertheless closely related, and discussion of one would have to involve discussion of the other to some extent. Since reluctance is a concept that has to do with one's subjective motivations, touching upon the subjective sense of duty would be unavoidable, in examining the relation between reluctance and the objective sense of duty. However, discussion of the subjective sense of duty will be limited to its role in contributing to the overall discussion on the objective sense of duty.

When Kant says that the promotion of one's own happiness cannot hold as a duty (in the objective sense) as it is one that everyone is not reluctant towards, the subjective sense of duty has to serve as a bridge here. The subjective sense of duty, which is the motive of duty, entails reluctance on the part of the agent. For an act or end (which is

lawful) to count as a duty (in the objective sense), the subjective sense of duty must be presupposed, that is, it must be possible to act from the motive of duty in fulfilling this act or end. If reluctance must be involved within the motive of duty, then the promotion of one's own happiness cannot possibly involve the motive of duty in any way. It is for this reason that Kant thinks that the promotion of one's own happiness cannot hold as an objective duty. Hence, from this example it may be inferred that for an act or end to count as an objective duty, reluctance towards this act or end must be involved. I will term this condition of duty as the "reluctance criterion".

However, the degree of reluctance that must be involved for something to count as a duty is not explicitly stipulated by Kant. In Section IV, I will attempt to articulate the reluctance criterion for something to count as a duty in conditions entailing varying degrees of reluctance, and show the problems associated with these different cases. I argue that for Kant to preserve the categorical command of duty for all finite rational beings, he cannot accept that reluctance towards a certain act or end can vary across different individuals at different times for this act or end to be considered a duty. Yet, if he were to frame the reluctance criterion in a manner that states that everyone must be reluctant towards a certain act or end at all times for this act or end to be considered a duty, he also runs into insurmountable difficulties. It seems as though he could recast the reluctance criterion in stating that the possibility of reluctance towards a certain act or end is a necessary condition for this act or end to count as a duty. However, this option also leads us to several questionable points.

In general, the main difficulty that Kant would face in holding on to the reluctance criterion would largely be that this criterion appears to be at odds with the overall ratiocentric line of thought that underlines Kantian ethics. In Section V, I attempt to present an exposition of this conflict. Given that the reluctance criterion as a necessary condition for something to count as a duty runs into all these difficulties, it seems as if it should be given up altogether.

II. Kantian Duty

When Kant uses the term “duty” in his writings, there appears to be at least two distinct senses in which this term is used. Usually, whenever an article is used before the term, or whenever the term is used in the plural (i.e. “a duty”, “the duty”, “duties), he appears to referring to the objective sense of duty, that is, to a specific end or act that can stand objectively independent of the agent. When Kant refers to “duty” without the use of an article (i.e. “from duty”, “the concept of duty”, “the motive of duty”), he appears to be referring to the subjective sense of duty, that is, a ground of action that issues from the agent.² Although I cut the conceptual distinction across the linguistic distinction, there are some cases whereby it is not clear which sense of duty Kant might be referring to. Nevertheless, the objective and subjective senses of the term “duty” remain distinct.

² I am grateful to Dr. Siegfried Van Duffel and Ms. Yap Zi Wei for prompting me to think further about this distinction and its implications.

On Kant's view, a duty (in the objective sense) is a particular implication of the moral law. The moral law, for Kant, is a supreme norm for moral action (G 4:390).³ All duties are derived from the moral law. This can be seen in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* where Kant derives "a few of the many actual duties" from the universal imperative of duty (G 4:422-423), which is one of the many ways of representing the moral law.⁴ Since duties are derived from the moral law, they are necessarily lawful. Dutiful actions or ends (those which are in conformity with duty) are thus also lawful acts or ends. Hence, the conformity to the moral law of an act or end (i.e. its lawfulness) is a necessary condition for it to count as a duty.

Duties can either take the form of the "commission or omission of an action" (MM 6:223), or the adoption of ends (MM 6:380). Duties that can be stipulated by strict boundaries are narrow duties, such as duties that consist in absolute prohibitions, like the duty to refrain from murdering oneself (G 4:424). Duties that cannot be clearly stipulated in such a manner, that "[determine] nothing about the kind and extent of actions themselves but [allow] a latitude for free choice" are wide duties (MM 6:446). This latitude of free choice available is due to the fact that wide duties involve the setting of

³ All references to Kant's writings in this paper will be based upon the following abbreviations: G (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*); CPR (*Critique of Practical Reason*); MM (*The Metaphysics of Morals*). These abbreviated references will be followed by the standard academic paginations for Kant's texts. All quotations of Kant's writings used within this paper are based upon Mary Gregor's translations. *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁴ This is explicitly stated by Kant in the *Groundwork*. According to Kant, "the above three ways [namely the universal imperative of duty, the Formula of Humanity and the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends] of representing the principle of morality are at bottom only so many formulae of the very same law, and any one of them of itself unites the other two in it" (G 4:436). This means that all these formulae serve as complete representations of the moral law, as the implications and list of duties derived from the different formulae should all be the same.

ends, which necessarily presupposes the capacity for free choice. As can be seen, there is a clear sense throughout Kant's writings that duties are objective actions or ends.

However, a second sense of duty appears to surface in some of Kant's writings, as in the following passage:

The concept of duty, therefore, requires of the action *objective* accord with the law but requires of the maxim of the action *subjective* respect for the law, as the sole way of determining the will by the law. And on this rests the distinction between consciousness of having acted *in conformity with duty* and *from duty*, that is, respect for the law... (CPR 5:81)

When Kant speaks of acting "in conformity with duty", he appears to be referring to duty here as an objective list of specific duties in terms of actions and ends. These duties hold objectively, independent of the agent. In this way, it can be understood how certain actions or ends can be "in conformity" with this objective list as a standard.

However, when he speaks of acting "from duty", he appears to be referring to the subjective sense of the motive of duty, in relation to the agent. This sense of duty here clearly does not refer to an objective list of duties, as it makes no sense to speak of acting from an objective standard. Rather, it seems to refer more to acting from the motive of being in conformity with the objective duties, and this motive is the subjective sense of duty. Kant uses the term "duty" in this sense rather often throughout his writings, such as

when he claims that “*duty is the necessity of an action from respect for law*” (G 4:400). The respect for law is a subjective motivation of a (lawful) action for the agent. This lawful action would be a duty in the objective sense, but the motivations for performing it would be the subjective sense of duty. In this quote from the *Groundwork*, the referent of the term “duty” is the subjective motivation of an action.

Even if Kant has really placed two separate concepts under the same term “duty”, these two concepts are nevertheless closely interrelated. According to Kant, an act that is done from the subjective motive of duty is necessarily in conformity with the objective duties which are derived from the moral law:

I [in the explication of the concept of duty] pass over all actions that are already recognized as contrary to duty/for in their case the question whether they might have been done *from duty* never arises, since they even conflict with it. (G 4:397)

If there can be no act contrary to duty (as an objective standard) that issues from the subjective motive of duty, then it follows that all actions arising from the motive of duty must necessarily be in conformity with the objective moral duties. This means that as long as one acts from duty (subjective), he will necessarily be in accord with the moral duties (objective).

It is important to make the distinction between both senses of duty as each can have different implications. For example, while Kant thinks that two subjective grounds

of acting from duty can conflict with each other, it is impossible for two separate duties to conflict with each other. Kant deems the “collision of duties and obligations” as “inconceivable”, as “duty and obligation are concepts that express the objective practical *necessity* of certain actions and two rules opposed to each other cannot be necessary at the same time” (MM 6:224). The subjective grounds of acting from duty, however, lies “in a rule [the subject] prescribes himself” (ibid), and is thus contingent upon the subjective conditions of each individual. Hence, in discussing the issue of whether reluctance is a necessary condition for duty, a distinction between the objective and subjective senses of duty must be kept clear, as dealing with each sense might yield different results.

This distinction is also important as there are further implications. While the acting from the subjective motive of duty necessarily results in conformity with the list of objective duties for Kant, it is not necessary condition. It is possible for one to act in conformity with a duty, though from incentives other than the motive of duty. The objective duty would still stand regardless of the agent’s subjective motivations. Hence, determination of objective duties need not hinge upon factors concerning subjective motivations. However, for something to be a duty, it must necessarily involve the possibility of acting from the subjective motive of duty in order to fulfill this objective duty.

The aim of this thesis is to ascertain whether reluctance towards a certain act or end is necessary for it to be considered a specific duty. Hence, for this purpose, it is

sufficient for us to focus primarily on the objective sense of duty, since the concern is mainly with the criterion for the determination of specific duties. Though I will be touching on the subjective sense of duty insofar as it contributes to the discussion on objective duties, the focus of this paper would not be on the subjective sense of duty per se. Discussion of the motive of duty in great detail would be irrelevant for our purposes, since it would be more fitting to the discussion of whether reluctance to perform or adopt a certain act or end (which is already established as an objective duty) is necessary for this act or end to have any moral worth. This paper is primarily concerned with the establishment of these objective duties. Throughout this thesis, I will be talking about the concept of duty in terms of specific duties that hold on objective grounds. The central question here will be that of whether reluctance should be a necessary condition for something to count as a duty (objective), and not whether reluctance should be a necessary condition in acting from the motive of duty (subjective).

III. What Counts as a Duty: The Criterion of Reluctance

It seems that Kant's concept of what counts as a duty must involve reluctance. This can be seen in Kant's rejection of the duty to promote one's own happiness:

For *his own happiness* is an end that every human being has (by virtue of the impulses of his nature), but this end can never without self-contradiction be regarded as a duty. What everyone already wants unavoidably, of his own accord,

does not come under the concept of *duty*, which is *constraint* to an end adopted reluctantly. Hence it is self-contradictory to say that he is *under obligation* to promote his own happiness with all his powers. (MM 6:385-6.)

Prior to discussing this claim by Kant, we must first understand what happiness is for Kant. According to Kant, happiness is the satisfaction of the sum of one's needs and inclinations, which are habitual desires (G 4:405, MM 6:212). Since inclinations are also termed "sensible impulses" (MM 6:213), happiness is wholly a concept of sensibility. In fact, it is a central pursuit of sensible nature, since one's sensible impulses primarily work to serve the purpose of promoting one's own happiness. According to Kant, all human beings are finite rational beings in that they are not fully rational and are governed by their sensible natures. Kant describes all finite rational beings as belonging partly to the world of sense as well as to the world of understanding (G 4:451). Given that happiness is a central pursuit of sensible nature, and that all human beings are essentially beings of sensibility, Kant concludes that all human beings unavoidably aims at their own happiness, by virtue of their sensible natures.

When Kant says here that "duty" is "*constraint* to an end adopted reluctantly", he appears to be referring to the subjective sense of duty. A duty, in the objective sense, would be the end or the act itself. The constraint to adopt ends would have to do with the act of one's own willing. The subjective motive for adopting this end comes in the form of this constraint. Hence, "duty" here should be read in the subjective sense.

However, Kant's claim that the subjective sense of duty must involve constraint of this sort has implications for what counts as a duty (in the objective sense). For Kant, all subjective ground of acting from duty must involve constraint to an end adopted reluctantly. According to Kant, all human beings aim at pursuing their own happiness, and this is determined by nature. It is impossible to promote one's own happiness from the motive of duty (subjectively) as it is what "everyone already wants unavoidably". It is only because one might naturally be reluctant to abide by the moral law that one can be constrained to act in conformity with the moral law by duty (in the subjective sense). There is a further implicit premise that for an act or end to count as a duty in the objective sense, it should entail that it is possible for the subjective sense of duty to apply to this act or end, and this is mentioned in Section II. If reluctance is a necessary condition for acting from the motive of duty, and whatever that makes an objective duty should include the possibility of acting from the motive of duty in its fulfillment, then it seems as if reluctance towards a certain act or end is necessary for this act or end to be considered a duty (provided it is lawful). Since it is impossible for one to act from duty in promoting one's own happiness given that there is no reluctance to do so, the promotion of one's own happiness cannot count as a duty in the objective sense.⁵ From this a necessary condition of what constitutes a duty may be thus constructed: for an act or an end to count as a duty, it must be possible for this act or end to be performed or adopted from the motive of duty, which entails reluctance on the part of the agent.

⁵ Even though Kant rejects the duty to promote one's own happiness, a qualification must be made here. Kant does in fact think that one has an *indirect* duty to promote one's own happiness, to ensure that one is not sufficiently unhappy to the extent that this unhappiness ("adversity, pain, and want") would pose as a great temptation to transgress the moral law (G 4:399, MM 6:388). This means that it is not a moral duty to promote one's happiness for its own sake i.e. not a direct duty, but rather, it is only a duty insofar as it serves another moral duty, that is, the duty to one's own moral perfection.

Objective duties hold only for finite rational beings and never for beings with a holy will. Beings with a holy will are wholly rational and free (autonomous) on Kant's view (G 4:439), unlike finite rational beings who are determined by both reason and sensibility, as mentioned earlier on in this section. Thus, the wills of finite rational beings are determined by their own reason as well as their sensible natures, which consist in their inclinations. The main distinction between a holy will and the will of a finite rational being is thus a matter of the possession of a sensible nature.

Owing to the possession of a sensible nature, the human will (the will of a finite rational being) must be necessitated by the subjective motive of duty, or it would otherwise be governed by inclinations. The subjective concept of duty, for Kant, involves the idea of necessitation (MM 6:379). Necessitation is the "determination of [a will not in itself completely in conformity with reason] in conformity with objective laws" (G 4:413). Since human beings do not always act from respect for law under the competing influence of their inclinations, they have to be necessitated by the command of duty in order to do so. The subjective motive of duty can never apply to a holy will, a will that is necessarily and completely good. This is because such a will would necessarily always act from respect for the law. Thus, it cannot be necessitated by the motive of duty to do so (G 4:414). The motive of duty constrains one to act from reason in accordance with the moral law, as human beings, who possess the natural end of their own happiness, are likely to act under guidance of their impulses and inclinations without such constraints. Given that holy wills are perfectly rational, they have no sensible

natures, and would not deviate from the moral law under the influence of sensible impulses. Since it is impossible for holy wills to act from the motive of duty for this very reason, no (objective) duties hold for these wills. For something to count as a duty (with the exception of indirect duties⁶), it thus appears to have to include the criterion of reluctance by virtue of the very fact that it applies to human beings, finite rational beings who are also governed by their sensible natures. Since they do not necessarily accord with the moral law under the influence of their inclinations, they have to be constrained by the motive of duty to do so. Hence, objective duties hold for all finite rational beings.

For Kant, necessitation is also a “constraint of free choice through the law”, a constraint which may be external or self-imposed (MM 6:379). Kant includes the idea of reluctance under this idea of constraint:

Such constraint, therefore, does not apply to rational beings as such (there could also be *holy* ones) but rather to *human beings*, rational *natural* beings, who are unholy enough that pleasure can induce them to break the moral law, even though they recognize its authority; and even when they do obey the law, they do it *reluctantly* (in the face of opposition from their inclinations), and it is in this that such *constraint* properly consists. (ibid)

⁶ Kant certainly does not think that for something to count as an indirect duty, it must necessarily involve reluctance. This is because he explicitly states that the promotion of one’s own happiness is an indirect duty (see Footnote 5). Yet he does say that everyone is not (at least not always) reluctant to promote their own happiness (MM 6:385-386).

Hence, necessitation for Kant involves two ideas: firstly, it is the alignment of an unholy will with the moral law, and secondly, this alignment implies a constraint that necessarily involves reluctance on the part of the agent. Kant thinks that reluctance is a necessary component in this process of alignment.

In the quote above, we also see that Kant takes reluctance to imply “opposition from [one’s] inclinations”. From this, we may infer that Kant takes reluctance to lie on the same plane as inclinations, that is, on the sensible plane. The inclinations provide an opposing motivational force to respect for the moral law in governing lawful conduct. Reluctance in according with the moral law is a product of this opposition from the inclinations. Since reluctance is generated by the inclinations, it is an object of sensibility.

There are scholars who think that Kant himself did not endorse the reluctance criterion. In Chapter 6 of his book *Human welfare and moral worth: Kantian perspectives*,⁷ Hill denies that the criterion of reluctance is the main reason for Kant’s denial of the duty to promote one’s own happiness. Hill acknowledges Kant’s reason for denying the duty of promoting one’s own happiness owing to the fact that everyone is already naturally inclined towards the end of their own happiness. However, Hill states:

[Kant] did not mean, I take it, that we can never have a duty to do something that we have a natural inclination to do. The idea of duty includes the idea of being ‘necessitated’ or constrained by reason, but we can be constrained to act in a way

⁷ All page references to this book are based on the Oxford University Press edition (2002).

that we are already inclined to act if, despite that inclination, we may still fail to act as we should. (pp. 186-187)

According to Hill, Kantian ethics allows for the possibility that one can be necessitated by reason to act in a way that one is already inclined to act. Hill states that if Kant did seriously adopt the view that there can never be any duty to do something one is naturally inclined to, then this would lead him to the absurd conclusion that there can be no duty to promote the happiness of others in the event that one has the inclination to do so.

A question to ask at this point would be whether Hill has represented Kant accurately. The justification offered by Kant for the denial of the duty to promote one's own happiness rests solely on the grounds that the concept of duty only applies to "an end adopted reluctantly", and happiness is not such an end. Kant does indeed endorse the reluctance criterion as a necessary condition for something to count as a duty. However, it might be fair to say that Hill has represented Kant's view partly correctly, in saying that Kant does admit of cases in which an action which one is naturally inclined to may still be a duty. In the next section, I will raise the examples of two such duties that render the reluctance criterion problematic, namely, the duty to preserve one's own life and the duty of beneficence towards others.

IV. Problems with the Reluctance Criterion as a Necessary Condition of Duty

If Kant wants to insist that a lawful action can only be a duty if it is one that all human beings would naturally be reluctant to perform, two of the duties proposed by him would become problematic, namely, the duty to preserve one's own life and the duty of beneficence towards others. I will also show that any attempt to defend the reluctance criterion would only create more problems for Kant.

Consider the following example of what Kant deems as a duty: the duty to preserve one's own life. Within the Doctrine of Virtue, Kant does show that the preservation of one's own life is a direct duty (MM 6:422). In the *Groundwork*, Kant states that "to preserve one's life is a duty, and besides everyone has an immediate inclination to do so" (G 4:397). This statement by Kant in the *Groundwork* contradicts the reluctance criterion outright. Given that everyone has an immediate inclination to preserving their own life, why can it still count as a duty? If Kant wants to insist that the preservation of one's own life is a duty despite it being an object of one's immediate inclinations, then it seems as if he cannot consistently also accept the reluctance criterion for something to count as a duty. This is because he rejects the duty to promote one's own happiness on the grounds that one's own happiness is an object of one's immediate inclination. What can then justify the establishment of the duty to preserve one's own life on one hand and the denial of the duty to promote one's own happiness on the other, since both are what everyone is inclined to do?

Another example of a duty proposed by Kant would also run into problems: the duty of beneficence towards others. Kant affirms beneficent acts towards others as a duty:

To be beneficent where one can is a duty, and besides there are many souls so sympathetically attuned that, without any other motive of vanity or self-interest they find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy around them and can take delight in the satisfaction of others so far as it is their own work. (G 4:398)

Kant himself does admit of the possibility of there being “many souls so sympathetically attuned”, who are naturally inclined and not reluctant to act beneficently to others, yet, beneficence towards others is still a duty. If the reluctance criterion is a necessary condition for something to count as a duty, then beneficence towards others as a duty should not hold for these people who are naturally “sympathetically attuned”.

In face of such inconsistency, the following solutions may be proposed for Kant to hold on to the criterion of reluctance: 1) claim that duty only applies wherever one is reluctant to perform or adopt a lawful act or end, 2) claim that duty only applies to an individual where he is always reluctant to perform or adopt a lawful act or end, 3) claim that only lawful acts or ends that everyone is always reluctant to perform or adopt can be duties, or 4) claim that only lawful acts or ends that everyone would possibly be reluctant to perform or adopt can be duties.⁸

⁸ I am grateful to Dr. Neil Sinhababu for suggesting Option 4 as an alternative to the other three options.

Option 1 implies that something counts as a duty only when it is a lawful act or end that one is reluctant to do or adopt. This implies that the very same act or end can be and not be a duty for different individuals at different times. Beneficence towards others would not hold as a duty while one is motivated by the inclination of sympathy, and would only become a duty when this motivation disappears.

Kant cannot accept such a conclusion, since he does think that a duty must be an apodictically practical principle that commands with universally valid necessity, that is, it must hold as a categorical imperative (G 4:415 – 416). He explicitly states that “if duty is a concept that is to contain significance and real lawgiving for our actions it can be expressed only in categorical imperatives” (G 4:425). Hence, a duty must always command categorically for Kant, which means that it must hold for all finite rational beings with absolute necessity. Whether a certain act or end is a duty or not cannot vary from individual to individual simply because of the differing inclinations of each. It cannot also vary from time to time.

This requirement that duty must command categorically is important for duty to hold as a useful practical concept in governing action in conformity with the moral law. The moral law itself must hold with absolute necessity:

The moral law, however, is thought as objectively necessary only because it is to hold for everyone having reason and will. / But the moral law commands compliance from everyone, and indeed the most exact compliance. (CPR 5:26)

Also:

...we cannot dispute that [moral] law is so extensive in its import that it must hold not only for human beings but for all *rational beings as such*, not merely under contingent conditions and with exceptions but with *absolute necessity*... (G 4:408)

Since the moral law holds with absolute necessity for all rational beings, then the specific duties derived from it must also hold with absolute necessity insofar as this is possible.

A note must be made here, on the claim that all duties must command categorically. When we say that Kant thinks duty must command categorically, implying that it applies to all beings, and yet does not apply to holy wills, there appears to be an inconsistency. From the previous paragraph, we see that the moral law is valid for all rational beings, holy or unholy. Duties, however, can only hold for unholy rational beings. The moral law commands categorically, that is, for all possible rational beings. Duties, however, command categorically only where imperatives apply, that is, for all possible finite rational beings. This is because Kant seems to imply that all (direct) duties are categorical imperatives, from his claim that “[duty] can be expressed only in categorical imperatives” (G 4:425). Hence, a specific duty (as a specific representation of the concept of duty as a whole) is also a categorical imperative. A duty thus holds categorically, that is, for all rational beings, insofar as it may command as an imperative.

Since holy wills cannot be commanded by imperatives, duties hold only for all possible finite rational beings, but nevertheless command categorically (insofar as they command).

Hence, if Kant wants to hold on to the criterion of reluctance as a necessary condition for duty, he has to include the additional qualification that this reluctance towards the duty in question must hold for all possible finite rational beings at all times, such that duties that can command categorically may be established. This means that Option 2 is also not viable, as it fails this universal reluctance requirement. If Kant allows for the possibility that something's being a duty is contingent upon particular instances of reluctance, then the idea of duty would be useless in his ethical theory, as it would not be able to serve as a grounds for categorical command. Hence, another way of retaining the reluctance requirement is by turning to Option 3, that is, to assert that for something to count as a duty, it must be a lawful act or end that all possible (finite) rational beings must be reluctant to do or adopt at all times. On this line of thought, Kant will have to reject the duty to preserve one's own life as well as the duty of beneficence towards others, since there are cases whereby there are at least some individuals who are not reluctant towards these two things.

Even if we accept the rejection of these two duties, option 3 also presents further problems. Firstly, there is no way of absolutely determining whether all finite rational beings do feel reluctance towards something at all times. Such a determination would have to be done through empirical means and not logical means, and the factual universality of this feeling of reluctance amongst all human beings would be empirically

unverifiable. If so, then it appears as if we have no available means of conclusively determining what may be counted as a duty or not.

Moreover, there appears to be the more serious worry that Kant might not be able to admit any wide duties at all. If it can be the case that someone, on some occasion, is not reluctant to adopt a certain end, then Kant cannot count this end as a wide duty. This may well be the case for all lawful ends, which cannot then be considered duties. This would render the idea of having duties practically useless in Kantian ethics.

Also, reluctance is not a stable condition. Since the concept of happiness is indeterminate and thus changeable, one may be reluctant towards something at one time and not reluctant towards the same thing at another time. Reluctance does not appear to be a stable disposition within an individual. The inherent volatility of the condition of reluctance would then mean that reluctance cannot serve as a ground of obligation that can command with absolute necessity. This inherent volatility stems from the fact that reluctance is a product of sensibility, as mentioned in Section III. Since one's sensible nature is a product of nature, determining what it is consists in is an empirical matter, that is, it has to be known from experience. The volatility of the condition of reluctance is due to the fact that what sensibility consists in is subject to empirical conditions, and is thus changeable accordingly. If a duty is to command with objective practical necessity, it must be unchangeable and hence cannot admit of any empirical part⁹, which includes

⁹ In the preface of the *Groundwork*, Kant himself does explicitly state that his aim is in establishing a “pure moral philosophy” that is “completely cleansed of everything that may be only empirical and that belongs to anthropology” (G 4:389). This is because he seeks the “supreme principle of morality”, (G 4:392) and this supreme norm must remain pure and unshakeable, regardless of empirical circumstances. Elsewhere in

any element of sensibility. Given that the condition of reluctance is an object of sensibility, the reluctance criterion should not be a necessary condition for something to be considered a duty. Hence, option 3 is untenable.

Even if factual reluctance seems untenable as a criterion for something to count as a duty, can the mere possibility of reluctance serve as a criterion? This would bring us to option 4: a certain lawful act or end can be a duty as long as it is possible for all finite rational beings to be reluctant in performing or adopting this act or end. After all, duties only apply to finite rational beings and not holy beings, and this may be seen as being due to the fact that it is possible for finite rational beings to be reluctant towards a lawful act or end. Holy wills, on the other hand, are never reluctant towards any lawful act or end.

Option 4 appears to be a very attractive alternative in framing the reluctance criterion. It averts the problems that the assuming of universal reluctance runs into. The mere possibility of reluctance is in no way an empirical matter and can be determined a priori, independent of all knowledge from experience. That it is possible for all finite rational beings to be reluctant towards something may be established on the premise that these finite rational beings are also partially determined by their sensible natures, which can produce feelings of reluctance. Hence, the possibility of reluctance for all finite rational beings does not require any empirical grounds of determination.

the *Groundwork*, Kant states that “all moral concepts have their seat and origin completely a priori in reason” and that “they cannot be abstracted from empirical and therefore merely contingent cognitions; that just in this purity of their origin lies their dignity, so that they can serve us as supreme practical principles”. (G 4:411) All moral concepts, for Kant, cannot be derived from empirical grounds. Hence, it is reasonable to infer that what makes a duty also cannot be determined by any empirical conditions.

Kant appears to assume that a being that is not fully determined by reason (i.e. a finite rational being) necessarily means that this being is finite by virtue of being partially determined by sensibility. This assumption all finite rational beings have sensible natures can then fully back the claim that the possibility of reluctance definitely holds for all finite rational beings, given that reluctance is an object of sensibility. However, it must be noted that being finite in one's rational capacities need not presuppose that this finiteness is due to the will being governed by the competing force of sensibility. Rather, this finiteness can be due to many other factors. One may conceive of a possible finite rational being that has no sensible nature, but is finite in lacking the empirical understanding or empirical power in order to fully express his rational capacities in action.¹⁰ In such a case, the possibility of reluctance might not apply to this being; yet, this being is nevertheless a finite rational being. The dividing line between holy wills and the wills of finite rational beings would then not be the possession of a sensible nature, but rather, the ability to fully manifest rational nature. If so, then the dividing line between holy wills and the wills of finite rational beings would not be the possibility of reluctance.

Even if we accept that the possibility of reluctance applies to all possible finite rational beings, this manner of framing the reluctance criterion still might not explain why the promotion of one's own happiness should not be a duty whereas the preservation of one's life should be for Kant. If we take Kant's claim that "everyone has an immediate inclination to [preserve one's own life]" seriously, it might mean that it is impossible for anyone to feel reluctant to do so at any time. If we reject this strong

¹⁰ I am grateful to Dr. Christopher Brown for having brought up this point.

reading of reluctance, then the claim that happiness is what “everyone already wants unavoidably” also need not translate to the strong claim that reluctance towards one’s own happiness is never possible. In this case, the ‘possibly of reluctance’ criterion would not be able to sufficiently explain why the preservation of one’s own life is a duty whereas the promotion of one’s own happiness is not.

On top of that, the strong claim that reluctance towards one’s own happiness is never possible appears to be untenable too, and it seems as if Kant would have to agree with that as well.¹¹ Kant thinks that happiness as a whole does not simply refer to immediate gratification of the inclinations, but rather to the “maximum of well-being in [one’s] present condition and in every future condition” (G 4:418). If seen in this manner, the ensuring of one’s long-term happiness as an absolute whole would have to include specific instances of reluctance. One could be inclined to pursue one’s own (long-term) happiness, and at the same time experience reluctance in sacrificing certain present pleasures such as smoking or eating a certain type of food in order to attain the goal of long-term happiness. Surely then, it would not be correct to say that the possibility of reluctance would never apply to the goal of promoting one’s own happiness. Hence, if Kant wants to insist that the promotion of one’s own happiness can never be a (direct) duty, he cannot accept the ‘possibility of reluctance’ criterion as well.

Perhaps it is worth asking whether the reluctance criterion when framed in this manner (in the ‘possibility of reluctance’ criterion) is worth retaining with the implication

¹¹ I am grateful to Dr. Loy Hui Chieh for having prompted me to think further about the possibility of reluctance towards one’s own happiness.

that Kant would have to give up his rejection of the duty to promote one's own happiness. Since it is possible that the promotion of one's own happiness can include instances of reluctance, then Kant cannot reject this as a duty on the grounds that a duty necessarily requires at least the possibility of reluctance.

In the next section, I will show why that dropping the reluctance criterion would not affect the essence of certain key concepts within Kantian ethics. In fact, I argue that it would probably be better for Kant to give up the criterion of reluctance altogether, given the ratiocentrism that underlies his theory of ethics.

V. Theoretical Implications of Dispensing with the Reluctance Criterion

Thus far, we have seen that the inclusion of the reluctance criterion as a necessary condition of duty would present many problems for Kant. In this section, I will show that the concepts of necessitation and command, which are key concepts related to duty, will not be affected by the dropping of the reluctance criterion. More importantly, I argue that the dropping of the reluctance criterion would be better for Kantian ethics as a whole, if we take the view that Kant advocates a certain ratiocentrism within his theory.

The concept of necessitation would not suffer from the dropping of the reluctance criterion. As mentioned in Section IV, the concept of necessitation involves two ideas, the alignment of an unholy will with the moral law, and the idea that this alignment

necessarily involves reluctance. However, it seems possible for a finite will to be aligned with the moral law without any presupposition of reluctance. If the concept of necessitation is mainly that of alignment with the moral law, then reluctance need not be built into this concept. Necessitation essentially refers to the “determination of [a will not completely in conformity with reason] in conformity with objective laws” (G 4:413). The claim that necessitation involves reluctance then seems to be a synthetic one, and not an analytic one. There appears to be nothing within the definition of necessitation that necessarily implies reluctance. The determination of a will in conformity with the moral law need not involve reluctance, since it can be done by one’s own reason to the exclusion of all sensible states, or even by the will’s being governed by certain inclinations. In Section IV, we have noted Kant’s example of some “sympathetically attuned” souls who act in conformity with the moral law from the inclination of sympathy. Similar inclinations can determine the will in according with the moral law, and in these cases, reluctance is obviously not involved.

The concept of command also need not involve reluctance. The idea that command applies only to finite rational beings and not to beings with holy wills need not be due to the fact that the possibility of reluctance towards performing or adopting lawful acts or ends hold only for the former group and not the latter. Finite rational beings need to be commanded by duties (as categorical imperatives) only because they are not necessarily in accord with the moral law. This possibility of lack of accord with the moral law need not presuppose reluctance. As mentioned in the previous section, finite rational beings can be finite in the sense that they lack the empirical capacities to fully

manifest their rational natures in according with the moral law. Hence, the claim that the concept of command involves reluctance is also a synthetic one and not an analytic one, for it is possible for command to apply even in cases where there is no reluctance. This possibility can be seen in the case of finite rational beings who do not possess sensible natures (and hence cannot feel reluctance), but are still finite by virtue of their lack in empirical capacities.

It is not only the case that the dropping of the reluctance criterion does not alter the main essence of the concepts of necessitation and command as a whole. In fact, the inclusion of the reluctance criterion in determining duties is at odds with the ratiocentrism that Kant advocates in his moral theory. By ratiocentrism, I am referring to the emphasis that Kant places on rational nature within his theory of ethics. According to Kant, rational nature “exists as an end in itself”, that is, it has absolute worth in itself (G 4:428-429). This claim forms the ground of the Formula of Humanity (FH), one of the formulae representing the moral law, which states, “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.” (G 4:429). Given that Kant takes the FH to be one of the complete representations of the moral law,¹² it can be seen that he deems rational nature to be the only end in itself that have absolute worth. In this section, I argue that the inclusion of the reluctance criterion for something to count as a duty does not cohere with this ratiocentric line of thought that runs throughout Kantian ethics. This is because, as shown earlier within Section III, reluctance is essentially an object of sensibility.

¹² See Footnote 4.

Another way in which Kant's ratiocentrism can be seen is in his idea that the subjective motive of duty must issue from reason. The subjective motive of duty is the representation of the moral law by one's own reason.¹³ In Section II, I have explained that for a certain (lawful) act or end to qualify as an objective duty, it must at least be possible for the subjective motive of duty to apply in the fulfillment of this objective duty. Kant thinks that the subjective motive of duty must be independent from the determination of one's sensible nature. All that is required is its determination by reason. If independence from sensibility is a necessary condition for the subjective motive of duty, and the establishment of an objective duty entails the possibility of the subjective motive of duty in the fulfilling of this objective duty, then the conditions for determining objective duties should also be independent from any element of sensibility. This would mean that reluctance, being an object of sensibility, should not form any part in determining what counts as a duty.

Hence, it seems as if Kant need not go the full mile to insist that there can only be a duty where there is reluctance. All that is required is that whatever makes a duty a duty is not determined by any considerations of any inclinations and happiness, as they are objects of sensibility. This may be supported by the following passage:

“But this *distinction* of the principle of happiness from that of morality is not, for this reason, at once an *opposition* between them, and pure practical reason does

¹³ It can be seen that the representation of the law is necessarily a product of reason, since Kant states that such representation can “occur only in a rational being”, as the “determining ground of the will” (G 4:401)

not require that one should *renounce* claims to happiness but only that as soon as duty is in question one should *take no account* of them.” (CPR 5:93)

If what constitutes a duty is to take no account of any claims to happiness, then it ought to be free from all such considerations, on grounds that happiness is an object of sensibility. It seems that Kant only requires that the grounds determining moral action do not stem from the incentives of inclinations for his concept of duty to be pure and free from all empirical determinations (G 4:389). If taken to be absolute, the grounds determining moral action ought to hold despite any motivations of inclinations or feeling of reluctance. This means that reluctance, being empirical in nature due to its being an object of sensibility, should not play any part in determining duties.

For Kant, duty “would often require self-denial”, which refers to the denying of self-love as a purpose for one’s actions (G 4:407). Self-denial, an element of duty for Kant, should be seen in terms of transcendence from one’s sensible nature, and need not necessarily imply self-sacrifice. Self-love entails having one’s own happiness as an end, and so manifests in being governed by one’s sensible nature and acting under the influences of one’s inclinations. The denying of inclinations and of self-love as a motivation for action is encouraged by Kant, owing to the ratiocentrism that he advocates:

All objects of the inclinations have only a conditional worth; for, if there were not inclinations and the needs based on them, their object would be without worth. But the inclinations themselves, as sources of needs, are so far from having an

absolute worth, so as to make one wish to have them, that it must instead be the universal wish of every rational being to be altogether free from them. (G 4:428)

This passage was written by Kant to explain that humanity (which consists in rational nature) is the only end in itself and thus has absolute worth, whereas objects of inclinations only have a conditional worth. From this passage, however, it may also be seen that Kant would encourage the view that one should transcend beyond one's inclinations, and more generally, beyond the sensible plane, since objects of sensibility only have a conditional worth. Since reluctance is an object of sensibility, self-denial should not involve reluctance, if it implies transcendence from sensibility. The focus here should be on transcendence from one's sensible nature, rather than opposition towards it.

The relation between duty and transcendence has also been made explicit by Kant in the following passage:

In the doctrine of duties a human being can and should be represented in terms of his capacity for freedom, which is wholly supersensible, and so too merely in terms of his *humanity*, his personality independent of physical attributes (*homo noumenon*), as distinguished from the same subject represented as affected by physical attributes, *a human being* (*homo phaenomenon*). (MM 6:239)

According to Kant, the entire list of objective duties should represent a human being merely in his capacity for freedom, which is the state of transcendence from sensibility (“wholly supersensible”). Reluctance appears to be what Kant refers to here as a physical attribute, as it is a product of sensibility. Hence, in deriving the list of duties, one’s rational nature, which is the capacity for freedom, should be the only consideration, to the exclusion of all objects of sensibility, including reluctance.

This view of transcendence that I have proposed is also supported by Kant’s advocacy of moral apathy, which is a necessary condition of virtue for Kant (MM 6:408-409). Moral apathy is the state in which “feelings arising from sensible impressions lose their influence on moral feeling only because respect for the law is more powerful than all such feelings together” (MM 6:409). It is the state of being apathetic towards one’s inclinations and impulses. This is not to say that one ought to not have any sensible feelings, but rather, that the will should not be determined by these feelings. Hence it is the state of independence from all sensible feelings, including reluctance. Only sentiments arising from rational grounds such as the respect for the law may be admitted into this state of apathy, to the exclusion of all objects of sensibility. If all determinations of the subjective motive of duty and subsequently what counts as a duty should be grounded upon this apathy, then it seems as if Kant should also not accept the reluctance criterion in determining what constitutes a duty.

VI. Conclusion

Through everyday experience, we realize that the fulfilling of duties often involve a certain degree of reluctance. However, though this is so, it does not mean that reluctance should be considered a necessary condition for something to count as a duty. The empirical reality of these instances of reluctance cannot be taken as grounds for the inclusion of the reluctance criterion in the determinations of duties. Even if it is the case that the fulfilling of duties *does* always involve reluctance as an empirical fact, it does not follow that reluctance *should* be an integral component of the concept of a duty.

In fact, the ratiocentric line of thought that runs throughout Kantian ethics appears to imply that reluctance should in fact be left out from the conditions in determining duties. This is due to the implication that the concept of duty, whether subjective or objective, cannot admit of any element of sensibility as determining grounds.

If we are to take this ratiocentric line of thought seriously, then the taking of rational nature as an end in itself ought to be a condition of duty instead, rather than the reluctance criterion. On this line of thought, the preservation of one's own life may be justified as a duty even if we are all never reluctant towards it. It can still be a duty on grounds that killing oneself equates to annihilating the rational agent within oneself. The conditions determining duties ought to be consistent with Kant's ratiocentrism, in which case the reluctance criterion becomes problematic.

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