SELF-KNOWLEDGE IN KANT’S PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

JORDAN MACKENZIE: Self-Knowledge in Kant’s Practical Philosophy.
(Under the direction of Thomas E. Hill)

In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant claims that the first command of all self-regarding duties is “know thyself”. This duty seems to be expressly aimed at combatting our strong propensity towards self-deception. Given this, and given the fact that we have a duty to pursue our moral perfection (*MM* 6:444-6), the duty of self-knowledge seems to be an intuitive command. And yet, a broader view of Kant’s ethical corpus exposes a deep skepticism about the possibility of morally-relevant self-knowledge. In this paper, I argue that the duty to know ourselves is consistent with Kant’s skepticism about practical self-knowledge. On my account, the duty to “know thyself is aimed at getting us to understand ourselves as *viz* rational agents to whom the moral law applies categorically. Only when we arrive at the proper conception of our ‘moral selves’ can we understand the deep problem of self-deception and the demandingness of our self-regarding duties.
To my grandmother, Vera Louise Johnston,
the original Kantian in my life.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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1 INTRODUCTION

There is something very odd about Kant’s ethical project. Kant placed a great deal of importance on our intentions. What matters morally is the maxims upon which we act. The best sort of maxim—the only sort that can be considered ‘morally worthy’—is one that is performed “out of duty” rather than “for some self-interested goal” (G 4:397). As rational agents, we have compelling reason to strive towards the performance of morally worthy acts by eradicating motives of excessive self-interest from our practical reasoning. Indeed, in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant insisted that we have a duty to endeavor to increase our moral perfection (MM 6:446-7).

Given this picture, it is no surprise that Kant claims that we have a perfect duty to know ourselves. This duty, he tells us, is the “First Command” of all our self-regarding duties:

This command is “know” (scrutinize, fathom) yourself,” not in terms of your natural perfection (your fitness or unfitness for all sorts of discretionary or even commanded ends) but rather in terms of your moral perfection in relation to your duty. That is, know your heart - whether it is good or evil, whether the source of your actions is pure or impure, and what can be imputed to you as belonging originally to the substance of a human being or as derived (acquired or developed) and belonging to your moral condition. (MM 6:441)

We can only measure the extent to which we are meeting the demands of our self-regarding duties—especially our duty to promote our moral perfection—if we are able to know something about our moral characters.

And yet, Kant appears to deny us the sort of requisite self-knowledge to pursue our project of moral perfection. The depths of our hearts, he tells us, are “unfathomable”. Our maxims are similarly unknowable. We can never “identify by experience, with complete
certainty” a single case in which our maxim was “based exclusively on moral reasons”’. This is because there is always the possibility of “some secret impulse of self-love disguising itself as that Idea of duty” (4:407). These comments pick up on a certain pessimism about our natures. Kant describes human beings as prone to empty self-flattery (G 4:408), and more than willing to take “mere wishes” that “always remain empty of deeds” as proof our good hearts (MM 6:441). If we are as Kant says we are, that is, frail moral agents prone to overestimating the goodness of their moral maxims, then it would seem that any sort of moral progress that it makes would simply be a matter of good luck. Since we cannot ever know the content of our maxims, it seems to follow that we cannot ever know whether we are making moral progress, or just spinning wheels.

This leaves us at an impasse. We seem to need self-knowledge in order to pursue our duty of moral self-perfection. But this self knowledge appears to be fundamentally out of our reach. This paints a very dark picture of the Kantian ethical project. Not only are the demands of morality stringent, but we are incapable of knowing the extent to which we are meeting them.

There are three options available here. We can reject one of Kant’s claims about moral self-knowledge—either his claim that we are opaque to ourselves, or his claim that we have a duty to know ourselves. Alternately, we can attempt to find a way of squaring these two theses.

In this thesis, I will develop an account of the duty to “know thyself” that shows great fidelity with Kant’s text. My objectives are threefold. First, I will develop an interpretation of Kant’s duty to “know thyself” that is consistent with his skeptical thesis about the possibility of practical self-knowledge. Second, I will explain how this duty ought to be considered a ‘natural’ starting point for our self-regarding duties. Finally, I will draw a connection between self-respect and self-knowledge. We cannot, I argue, properly respect ourselves until we recognize certain facts about our moral agenthood.
This project should be of interest to both Kant scholars and moral philosophers more generally. On the scholarship side, my thesis offers a sustained investigation into an under-explored aspect of Kantian ethical theory. This scholarly project, if successful, offers a novel framework within which to understand what is morally at stake in regards to our own knowledge of ourselves. Specifically, Kant’s framework offers both a cogent way to ground self-regarding duties, and an insightful account as to why self-knowledge ought to be among the things that we owe ourselves. This account, I will argue, sheds light on a dimension of self-knowledge that has been largely overlooked, viz., that self-knowledge is inextricably linked with self-respect. On my account, self-knowledge is the “beginnings of” proper self respect. On my account, only when we know what sort of agent we’re supposedly respecting, can we arrive at a self-respect that is based on an appreciation of our actual, rather than idealized or otherwise mistaken, moral character.

My general strategy will as follows. After explaining the deep problem of self-conceit in Section I, I will reconstruct Kant’s skeptical challenge to the possibility of practical self-knowledge (Section II). This challenge suggests that we can never have knowledge of either the content of our maxims or the content of our ‘hearts’. Next, I will develop a reading of Kant’s duty to know thyself. On my reading, self-knowledge is a sort of practical parallel to the transcendental unity of apperception. Just as a unity of self-consciousness was necessary for conscious experience, so too must we recognize ourselves as rational agents who are constantly subject to the command of the moral law before we can understand the nature of the duties that we owe to ourselves and others. This duty takes aim specifically at our deep predilection to make exceptions for ourselves and to incorrectly identify the grounds of our moral worth. We often ignore our past moral failings, insisting either that these past vices were ‘exceptional cases’ that fell outside the sphere of duty, or that they were willed by a moral agent who simply is no longer ‘us’. This reading, I argue, is consistent with Kant’s skepticism about practical self-knowledge. It also generates a novel reading of
the duties that we owe ourselves as moral agents. On my reading, self-knowledge makes possible the proper performance of duty.
To recognize oneself as the proper object of respect is, according to Kant, to understand oneself as subject to various self-regarding duties. These self-regarding duties, as they appear in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, set standards of behavior that we, as agents worthy of respect, must meet. Kant did not, however, think that we could have a duty of self-respect. This is because he believed that the moral law within an agent, of which the agent is “immediately conscious” (*CPrR* 5:29; 5:161) “unavoidably forces from him respect for his own being” (*G* 6:402). This moral law, or rather, the fact that we are capable of acting in accordance with it, is what makes us worthy of respect.

That the moral law, and the feeling of respect that arises from an appreciation of it, is always ‘on view’ to our reason does not mean that we are incapable of misperceiving it. Consider the problem of self-conceit, or *arrogantia*, which Kant understands as a sort of unwarranted belief in one’s superior moral worth (*MM* 6:465; *CPrR* 5:73).

Self-conceit is not the only sort of failure of ‘moral interpretation’ that Kant considers. Someone who is timorous, for instance, reasons from the fact that he has acted badly in the past to the conclusion that he lacks moral worth. Like the conceited agent, the timorous person gets something right about the moral story—he, at very least, grasps himself as a moral agent. But he fails to understand that his moral worth is not simply a measure of the goodness of his actions, but is rather, something that he inalienably possesses as a rational agent. Timorousness frustrates an agent’s moral practices at every term: paralyzed by the badness of his soul, the timorous agent lands in a state of “inertia” such that he “ventures to do nothing at all” (*C 27*:350). While Kant saw timorousness as a real threat to self-respect,
I will focus my discussion on the phenomenon of self-conceit.

Typically, the self-conceited agent takes one of her ‘natural perfections’—her superior intellect, her good looks, her wealth—as proof of a superior moral worth. In this way, self-conceit involves a failure of self-knowledge. The self-conceited agent rightfully recognizes herself as worthy of respect, but mistakenly identifies what it is about her that gives her this worth.

Because she overvalues her moral worth, the self-conceited ends up performing her duties with a “merely moral enthusiasm” rather than through the sober resolve of duty. While she may acknowledge that other people are constrained by the moral law, she operates under the “delusion that it is not duty...which constitutes the determining ground of [her] actions”, but instead “a spontaneous goodness of heart that needs no spur nor bridle and for which not even a command is necessary” (CPrR 5:85). She believes, in Kant’s terminology, that she is capable of willing the moral law ‘out of love’, rather than ‘out of duty’.

Self-conceit becomes possible for us because of our ability to act from two different motives. We are capable both of acting out of respect for the moral law and from motives of ‘self-love’ (CPrR 5:73). These motives of self-love exist within us prior to the moral law—we set ends for ourselves that promote our happiness and wellbeing long before we are able to consider the question of whether we are morally justified in setting those ends. Once we are capable of willing the moral law, however, self-love typically gets suitably constrained. Self-love becomes a motive to be acted upon only when it is permissible to do so. Sometimes, however, the moral law does not successfully constrain our self-love. In these cases, self-love oversteps its “boundaries” and transforms into self-conceit (CPrR 5:86).

Self-conceit, in this sense, is both prior and subsequent to the moral law. It is prior because the self-love from which it transforms exists within us before we grasp the moral law. But, because it arises only when self-love fails to be restricted by the moral law, it can

1Note, I do not think that Kant is telling a story about development psychology when he discusses the
be said to come after the moral law. Because it is subsequent to the moral law in this way, it ‘inherits’ the moral framework given to us by the moral law. The self-conceited agent, then, does not simply act in motives of self love that violate the commands of the moral law. Rather, she takes herself to be morally justified to act in this way.

We can see how self-conceit frustrates our ability to fulfill duties. The self-conceited agent believes herself to be licensed to treat others “with contempt”. She “demands that others think little of themselves” (MM 6:466-64). When it comes to self-respect, the conceited agent does no better. Because she “builds too much on [her] own powers”, the self-conceited agent envisages herself to be incapable of moral failure. She may not notice, then, when she has failed to live up to her duties of self respect. Of course, the very act of “living up to a duty” or “treating with respect” is difficult for the conceited person, as she sees herself as ‘beyond’ the commands of duty. Given her constant ‘tinkering’ with the moral law, the self-conceited agent may very well excuse herself from duty whenever it does not fit her whim or inclination.

Self-conceit should not be considered some sort of moral nihilism. Rather, self-conceited agents still comprehend themselves as moral agents. In this way, they are still invested in the ‘moral project’. They care about the needs of people around them, and they have an interest in meeting those needs (C 27:350). They make their mistake, however, when it comes to grasping what it is that makes them part of this ‘moral progress’—they mistakenly tie their moral agency to a contingent fact about their particular characters, rather than the rationality that they necessarily possess as human agents. And this frustrates, if not completely stops, their ability to fulfill the duties that they bear to themselves and others. But it is not entirely clear how self-conceit and timorousness, the “two rocks” that we run into if we depart “in one direction or the other, from the moral law” (C 27:351) are meant to be transition from animality, to humanity, to personality (Rel 6:26). Rather, I follow Sussman in taking Kant to be providing a story about the “development of increasingly reflexive forms of self-consciousness” (2001: 163).
combatted. The very tools that are meant to guide us through turbulent moral waters—our
natural feelings of respect, our awareness of the moral law—have already failed in cases of
self-conceit and timorousness.
3 SKEPTICAL CHALLENGES TO THE DUTY OF SELF KNOWLEDGE

Self-conceit, as I have presented it, involves a failure of self-knowledge. To be self-conceited is to locate one’s moral worth in something other than one’s rational capacity. This requires that I overvalue the worth of some other feature of myself—I fail, in other words, to properly comprehend that I am only worthy of respect insofar as I am a rational agent, and that none of my ‘natural perfections’ warrant me to any more respect than my peers.

This propensity to make exceptions for oneself, or to unduly privilege one’s self interest above the moral law is a common one. We all, at one point or another, act conceitedly. Given the threat that self-conceit, and other failures to appreciate the nature of one’s moral worth pose to our moral agency, it is no surprise that Kant saw self-knowledge as a perfect duty that we owe ourselves. The presence of this duty, further, seems to ‘jive’ well with Kant’s ethical project. Kantian ethics, broadly construed, locates the moral worth of actions in the intentions that brought them about rather than in the consequences that result from them. For the Kantian, the question of why we do what we do is more central to the ethical project than the question of what consequences arise out of what we do.¹

And yet, the duty of self-knowledge that appears in the Doctrine of Virtue is a clear anomaly within Kant’s ethical canon. While questions of self-knowledge drive his theoretical project² Kant is largely quiet on the question of moral self-knowledge. This reflects the sort of ethical project that Kant begins in the first Critique. There, Kant tells us that ethical

¹Of course, the two are interrelated. Acting on maxims that accord with the Categorical Imperative will most likely also bring good results.

²In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant declared his critical philosophy to be:
philosophy strives to answer the question “What ought I to do?” To answer this question, we must discern what commands practical reason is capable of issuing. Specifically, we need to know how (and whether) practical reason can issue moral imperatives that we are categorically required to follow. Note that the ‘we’ in this picture is rather obscure. It matters to Kant that we be the sorts of agents that are capable of responding to the moral law, that is, that we are agents that possess positive freedom, but the particularities of our agent-hood seem importantly beyond the scope of Kant’s project.

Imbedded in the question that motivates Kant’s practical philosophy is an assumption that we can settle the question with only minimal self-knowledge. We can turn to Kant’s first two formations of the Categorical Imperative to support this claim. The first, the ‘Formula of Universal Law’ gives a rather mechanical procedure for settling the question of what we ought to do. When we act, we act from a particular maxim. We can test the moral permissibility of our potential actions by determining whether a maxim prescribing that action could be willed as a universal law.\((G:4:421)\). We can offer a similar interpretation of the Humanity Formula (FH)—“Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in any other person, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” \((G:4:429)\).\(^3\) We meet the FH test so long as we act in a way that is respectful of the inner dignity of both ourselves and other rational agents.

Neither of these formulas requires that I know what maxims I actually act upon.

\(^{3}\)This formula, taken to be ‘equivalent’ to FUL in the sense that both prohibit maxims that could not be endorsed as a ‘law’ for all rational agents, might seem at first to require some knowledge of the sort of being that I am, such that I am worthy of being treated as an end. But this sort of knowledge is only self knowledge in a derivative sense; I can come to recognize that I have an inner ‘dignity’ that commands that I be treated as an end, by recognizing both that humanity in general has this dignity and that I am a member of this ‘humanity’.
they require is that I act in a way that is consistent with a maxim that could meet their respective tests of universalizability. Indeed, as Kant says, I can never even be completely certain whether I have acted on a maxim that meets the FUL test, or simply a maxim that leads to an action that could be permissible under FUL:

It is in fact absolutely impossible to identify by experience, with complete certainty, a single case in which the maxim of an action—an action that accords with duty—was based exclusively on moral reasons (moralischen Gründen) and the thought of one’s duty. There are cases where the most searching self-examination comes up with nothing but duty as the moral reason that could have been strong enough to move us to this or that good action or some great sacrifice. But we cannot conclude from this with certainty that the real determining cause of our will was not some secret impulse of self-love, disguising itself as that Idea of duty. So we like to flatter ourselves with the false claim to a nobler motive (Bewegungsgrunde) but in fact we can never, even with the most rigorous self-examination, completely uncover our hidden motivations (Triebfeder) (G4:407).

These ‘secret impulses of self-love’ can affect our practical reasoning in two different ways.

First, they might cause us to be deceived about which maxims we have actually acted upon. I may, for instance, believe that I helped an old lady across the street out of a sense of duty, when in reality, I was motivated to do so because I wanted to feel like a good person.  

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4Kant’s skepticism about the knowability of our maxims makes an appearance in the first Critique. He notes that “the real morality of actions (their merit and guilt), even that of our own conduct, therefore remains entirely hidden from us”. How much of our the motivation behind our actions “is to be ascribed to mere nature and innocent defects of temperament” cannot be discovered because “no one can judge it with complete justice” (A551/B579). His thought here is rather different than his Groundwork discussion on the unknowability of maxims. In the Groundwork, Kant was concerned with the problem of self-deception. There is always, he warns, a “dear self” that frustrates our “searching self-examination” (G 4:407). In contrast, his comments in the Critique suggest that we simply do not have a sufficiently ‘impartial’ standpoint available to us from which to assess the morality of our actions.

5There might be more than ‘secret impulses’ of self-love clouding our view of our maxims. Insofar as we are not simply trying to clarify empirical patterns of behavior, but are instead attempting to uncover the nature of a maxim that we have willed, we have moved beyond what can be empirically shown and into the ‘transcendental realm’. We cannot, on Kant’s charge, possess theoretical knowledge of entities that are beyond the realm of empirical experience. At most, we are licensed to certain practical “assumptions” about these entities, insofar as these assumptions are necessary for the fulfillment of our practical aims. We are, he tells us, licensed to ‘believe’ three practical postulates—that our souls are immortal, that we are free, and that God exists—insofar as we require these postulates to accomplish practical aims of “skill or of morality” (CPR A823/B851). Kant’s thought here is this. The moral law is an “absolutely necessary” practical law.
The other way that ‘secret impulses of self-love’ can enter into our practical reasoning is more problematic. Kant often talks of maxims as discrete first-order principles meant to govern specific actions. But he also, at times, speaks of maxims as overarching principles that guide our lives (Rel 6:22; 6:89; CPrR 5:27). These ‘second-order’ principles needn’t have been adopted with a specific action in mind, but will no doubt frame how I understand my options when it comes to future actions. Some of these principles might then effectively serve as ‘blinders’, making us unaware that we had the option of doing more than we did. A bystander who has, long ago, decided never to intervene in a problem that isn’t his, may deliberate between watching a crime and walking away, without even noticing that he also had a choice to try to help the victim of the crime.

Especially in the latter sort of case, the fact that our self-love may blind us to the motivations that lie behind our actions seems worrying. And yet, Kant is unfazed by this worry. His project in the *Groundwork*, he tells us, is not an anthropological inquiry into whether we have acted purely from duty:

...the question at issue here is not whether this or that [action springing from a motive of pure duty] actually occurs. The question is rather whether reason, by itself and independently of all appearances, commands what ought to be done. *(G4:408)*

Here, Kant is endeavoring to establish the metaphysical possibility of a good will; he wants to know whether our reason *can* command us to act in accordance with the moral law, and not whether our actions ever do spring “from such pure sources” *(G 4:407; R 25, 27; CPR* (CPRA633-4/B611-2; CPrR 5:122). The postulates are propositions that are “attached inseparably” to the moral law *(CPrR 5:122)—we’re licensed to believe in them insofar as they are presupposed by the moral law. We are warranted in taking ourselves to be positively free, for instance, insofar as this freedom is a necessary condition for the binding force of the moral law. God and the immortal soul, similarly, are necessary conditions for the achievement of the highest moral good.

Note how tight the restrictions are on what gets to count as a postulate. We’re only licensed to believe in the existence of an entity unprovable on theoretical grounds if said entity bears a necessary connection to the moral law. Freedom meets this test. So too (more controversially) do God and the immortality of the soul. Knowledge of our maxims or hearts will not meet this test. We simply do not need to know the content of our maxims or the intricacies of our moral character in order to act in accordance with the moral law. This is because the moral law only requires that we presuppose a capacity to will it; we needn’t be able to know whether or not we ever actually realize this capacity.
A551/B579, V 27:624). Whether we actually do act purely out of duty is beyond the scope of the project.

There is, however, a subtle shift in Kant’s ethical project between the *Groundwork* (1785) and his later ethical writings. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, notably, Kant concerns himself not so much with the possibility of duty, but rather with its substance. Whereas Kant is only indirectly interested with establishing the duties that we are actually bound to obey in the *Groundwork*, generating a list of such duties is of paramount concern to him in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. This is not to say that we should read this latter ethical work as carrying on the tradition of Stoic self-help treatises. We should, however, appreciate it as a work that offers, among other things, a rich conception of what an ethical character looks like, and how we might go about cultivating it within ourselves.

Still, Kant’s skepticism about self-knowledge perseveres into his later writings. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant offers a variation on his *Groundwork* contention that:

> The depths of the human heart are unfathomable. Who knows himself well enough to say, when he feels the incentive to fulfill his duty, whether it proceeds entirely from the representation of the law or whether there are not many other sensible impulses contributing to it that look to one’s advantage (or to avoiding what is detrimental) and that, in other circumstances could just as well serve as vice? (*MM* 6:447)

What reason does Kant have for thinking that we cannot ever know our maxims or our hearts? For starters, Kant sees self-deception as both a pervasive and incredibly obstinate phenomenon. In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant condemns ‘inner lies’—of which “man is actually guilty of many”— as that which makes a man “contemptible in his own eyes” (*MM* 6:429-30). These inner lies, by their very design, are difficult to eradicate. As Allen Wood aptly remarks, “If anyone were seriously to deny that self-deception actually occurs, the only correct response would be to accuse that person of it” (2008: 256).

This more extreme form of self-knowledge skepticism is picked up in the *Religion*.  

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6See the *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) and the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797).
Mirroring his language in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant tells us that we can never be assured that we have transformed our evil disposition into a good disposition. This is because such an assurance is not available to an agent “naturally, neither via immediate consciousness nor via the evidence of the life he has hitherto led, for the depths of his heart...are to him inscrutable” (*R* 6:50). Unlike in the *Groundwork*, the Kant of the *Religion* takes self-opacity to be a very serious problem. Speaking of the difference between a man “of good morals” and a “morally good man”, Kant tell us that the former, who acts on good maxims without an appreciation of the ‘spirit’ of the moral law, is “nevertheless evil” (*R* 26).

From this discussion, two different sorts of skepticism emerge. The first concerns skepticism about particular practical maxims. I cannot, on Kant’s charge, ever be empirically certain of the content of any maxim upon which I act. The second sort of skepticism concerns our second-order maxims. When Kant says that we cannot know our ‘hearts’, he implies that we cannot know what ‘fundamental’ principles of reason we have adopted. These principles inform what options we view as salient. To be ignorant of the content of these principles, then, is to be ignorant of what choices are on the table for me in my practical deliberation.
4 WHAT WE SHOULD AND CAN KNOW ABOUT OURSELVES

4.1 Content of the Duty to ‘Know Thyself’

Stated in full, the duty to ‘know thyself’ reads as follows:

This command is “know” (scrutinize, fathom) yourself,” not in terms of your natural perfection (your fitness or unfitness for all sorts of discretionary or even commanded ends) but rather in terms of your moral perfection in relation to your duty. That is, know your heart - whether it is good or evil, whether the source of your actions is pure or impure, and what can be imputed to you as belonging originally to the substance of a human being or as derived (acquired or developed) and belonging to your moral condition.

Moral self knowledge, which seeks to penetrate into the depths (the abyss) of one’s heart that are quite difficult to fathom, is the beginning of all human wisdom. For in the case of man, the ultimate wisdom, which consists in the harmony of a being’s will with its final end, requires him first to remove the obstacle within (an evil will already present in him) and then to develop the original predisposition to a good will within him, which can never be lost (Only the descent into the hell of self-knowledge can pave the way to godliness). (6:441)

That the sort of knowledge required by this duty is ‘Erkenntnis’ rather than ‘Wissen’ suggests that Kant is not demanding that we obtain a sort of self-knowledge that meets the standard of knowledge set out in the first Critique. Kant is not in fact clear about what standard of Erkenntnis—or cognition—is demanded by the duty, but I take it be a rather loose and unspecified one. This reading is supported by Kant’s equivocation between ‘knowing’, ‘scrutinizing’ and ‘fathoming’.

To know our moral perfection in relation to our duty, that is, to know the extent to which we are living up to the demands of our moral duties, we must know ‘our hearts’, or moral
4.2 Knowledge of the Substance of a Human Being

We do not have a duty to obtain just any sort of available self-knowledge. Kant makes clear that the duty to ‘know thyself’ in no way requires that we unearth facts about our natural perfections. This takes off the table certain facts about the ‘substance’ of our humanity. The duty, presumably, does not require me to rehash portions of the first Critique. Nor does it require that I undergo some sort of physiological or genetic analysis of myself.

What, then, are we supposed to know about ourselves? One tempting answer, which should avoided, is: the maxims upon which we act. This, I think, is absolutely not what Kant had in mind. As we have already seen, Kant is highly skeptical about the possibility of knowing the content of the maxims upon which we have acted. This skepticism concerns not only first-order maxims, that is, those maxims that govern particular maxims, but also the second-order maxims that establish the overarching moral principles with which we govern our lives.

Even if we could bracket this concern, there is still good reason to resist a ‘maxim-centric’ interpretation of the duty. Consider what we would need to do in order to endeavor to know our maxims. We are, fundamentally, agents who act upon maxims. To scrutinize all of our maxims, even if we restricted this scrutiny to moral maxims, would be an exhausting endeavor. Onora O’Neill likens this process of maxim-uncovering to paralysis. If we were...

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1 We are not obligated by this duty to know our natural perfections, because they are “always only conditionally good, that is, good only on condition that their use does not conflict with the moral law” (Rel 6:4). The duty to know our natural perfections, while not mandated by the duty of self-knowledge, does nevertheless follow from another self-regarding duty viz. to increase our natural perfections. That it follows from this auxiliary duty, and not from the ‘first command’ of all duties to the self is telling.
under a duty to know our maxims, she warns, we would simply become ineffective practical agents (1996: 94).

To have a duty to know our maxims, it seems, would require the sort of ‘morose self-scrutiny’ that Kant condemned in the *Anthropology* (A 133).² He saw the sort of self-observation undertaken by religious fanatics like Albrecht Haller, wherein every action was examined for hidden motives, as a sort of “disease of the mind” (A 132). When we examine ourselves with this level of rigor, Kant thought, we become ineffective practical agents. So consumed are we with the content of our souls that we are simply unable to act on the maxims that we are struggling to uncover.

We need, then, to locate some sort of moral self-knowledge that doesn’t require Haller-style self-scrutiny. Let us start with trying to uncover the ‘substance of our humanity’. Knowing what can be imputed to us as part of that substance³—that is, knowing what belongs to our moral character by virtue of the fact that we are human beings—can be taken as a sort of starting point to the duty. We have, I will argue, a duty to know that we are subjects under the law. This requires both that we grasp the moral law within us, and that we recognize our imperfections in relation to this law.

How exactly do we get this duty out of the substance of our humanity? To answer this question, we first need to know something about this ‘humanity’. Kant does not have a consistent account of ‘humanity’. Sometimes, he treats ‘humanity’ as that within us that is opposed to our ‘animality’—whereas an agent’s ‘animality’ has as its end self-preservation, her ‘humanity’ aims to act in accordance with the moral law (*MM* 4:20). Elsewhere, in the *Religion*, Kant takes humanity to be a predisposition to self-love. The humanity within us drives us to seek our worth in the opinion that others have of us. On this reading, humanity is a sort of moral-drive that takes self-love as its law—it cares about doing the right thing,


³I do not take Kant to mean ‘substance’ in the first *Critique* sense. Rather, I take him to mean to refer to anything that is an essential feature of our humanity.
so to speak, but only insofar as that right thing brings an agent higher esteem in the eyes of others (Rel 6:26). This sort of ‘humanity’ is contrasted both with our ‘animality’ and with our ‘personality’, which is the part of us capable of grasping and appreciating the moral law.

With the caveat about inconsistency in mind, here are the traits that he frequently associates with ‘humanity’. Our ‘humanity’ concerns our capacity to set and act on principles (G 4:423). It also allows us to follow these principles, whether they be moral principles or prudential principles (G 4:412; 414-15). This means that humanity has a tight connection with positive freedom, that is, our ability to act in a way that is free from causal determination. We can only meaningfully set ends for ourselves and follow those ends, on Kant’s account, if we are positively free. Our positive freedom, in turn, establishes our status as self-legislators. That is, to possess the positive freedom that Kant associates with ‘humanity’ is to be able to set the Moral Law as the fundamental law of one’s reason, and then follow that law (G 416; G 440). Humanity is also, in this way, associated with failures to follow the moral law—we can only have meaningful freedom if there is a possibility of us failing to abide by the law that we set for ourselves. This potential for moral failure is anticipated in Kant’s Religion account of ‘humanity’. We fail to abide by the moral law, Kant says, when we privilege our ‘self-love’ over the demands of morality (Rel 6:36). We also, Kant warns, have the potential to mistake our motives of self-love for moral motives. That is, we sometimes fall into the trap of believing that it is our self-love, and not our rational capacities, that make us worthy of the ‘dignity’ that Kant associates with the moral law (CPrR 5:84-5).

Humanity is an ‘objective end’ (G 427-28), according to Kant. To recognize this is to acknowledge that “in its place one could put no other end” to which it would be a mean (G

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4In the Religion, Kant does not have a consistent account of ‘humanity’. Sometimes he treats ‘humanity’ as a predisposition of self-love. Other times, he talks associates humanity with “moral perfect”, calling it at one point “rational being in general as pertaining to the world” (Rel 6:60-61).
4:428). This, in turn, will make certain other ends morally salient. When I recognize that I am an ‘objective end’ with an alienable dignity, I come to recognize that I am obligated to treat myself with the utmost respect. I also come to the realization that the humanity within me ought to be cultivated. That is, the capacities that define my humanity—most notably, my ability to will the moral law—ought to be refined and improved (MM 6:446).

When I grasp the humanity in myself, Kant thinks, I will also grant that nothing else about myself has this status as an objective end. This means that I am not licensed to privilege my self-love—that is, those inclinations and desires that I have for my own well-being—over my rational agency.5

With this account in place, two natural questions arise: (1) How can I fail to know my humanity? and (2) Why do I have a duty to know my humanity?

Let us start by answering these questions as they relate to the first conjunct of the duty outlined above: to recognize the moral law within us. At first glance, it is not clear how I could possibly have a duty to know the moral law within me.6 Kant denied that we could be under a duty to acquire something that we have within us as a “predisposition”. This is why we cannot have a duty to have a conscience, to seek our own happiness, to love other human beings and so forth (MM 6:399-403).

Kant thought that the hallmark of our humanity—that is, the fact that we are capable of willing the moral law—is a “Fact of Reason” that is always available to us in consciousness (CPrR 5:29; 5:31; 5:116; 5:162). Whether we acknowledge it or not, we feel “self-contempt and inner abhorrence” when we fail to live up to it (MM 6:429).

Kant’s idea, which might sound rather extreme, seems actually to factor into a lot of common views about morality. My grandmother speaks about morality in very plain terms: “There’s right and there’s wrong,” she once told me, “and whether we admit it or not, we

5For an extended discussion of Kant’s conception of humanity, see Thomas E. Hill, 1992: 38-57.

6Kant speaks of our knowledge of the moral law, and more specifically, our relation to it, as a sort of cognition (Erkenntnis) CPrR 5:105).
all know the difference”. Her thought, which is very Kantian, is that: no matter how much we might like to deny it, we have an innate capacity judge right from wrong and to feel guilt (Rel 6:38), and a conscience from which we cannot escape (M 6:400).

Given the moral law’s status as a Fact of Reason, how can we be under a duty to recognize it within ourselves? Kant’s thought here, as I take it, is that even if we are incapable of completely losing sight of the moral law, there are nevertheless various ways that we can fail to correctly perceive it within us. As the previous section demonstrated, Kant thought that we had a strong propensity to misunderstand the grounds of our moral worth by privileging our self-love over the moral law. In other words, we often fall into the trap of believing that our moral worth stems from some contingent trait about us—our sharp wit, our past moral actions, the respect that other people have of us. This often makes us believe that we are justified in making exceptions for ourselves. Kant thinks that when we understand our relationship to the moral law in this misguided way, we denigrate the humanity with us.

That we are so prone to make an exception for ourselves establishes why the “first command” of all self-regarding duties is a duty of self-knowledge and not just knowledge of humanity in general. It is possible, on Kant’s view, for an agent to know that humanity in general is bound by duty to obey the moral law, but to nevertheless think that he has some special peculiarity that allows him to ‘unbind’ himself at duty from will.7

7This phenomenon is not restricted to our moral lives. Consider, for instance, the passage in from Tolstoy’s Death of Ivan Ilych wherein Ivan contemplates his impending death:

The syllogism he had learned from Kieswetter’s Logic: “Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal,” had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself. That Caius—man in the abstract—was mortal, was perfectly correct, but he was not Caius, not an abstract man, but a creature quite, quite separate from all others...“Caius really was mortal, and it was right for him to die; but for me, little Vanya, Ivan Ilych, with all my thoughts and emotions, it’s altogether a different matter. It cannot be that I ought to die. That would be too terrible.” (33)

Ivan tries to locate his immortality in the specific details of his life—details that nobody else’s life has or will possess. Similarly, when we grant ourselves exceptions to moral rules, we often justify these exceptions with appeal to the particularities of our circumstances.
To fully grasp our humanity, then, is to understand that the moral law is the fundamental rule of our reason. It is, in other words, to understand that we are “subjects” under the moral law. When we understand this about ourselves, we are lead to recognize the second conjunct, *viz.* that we not capable of “willing it out of love”, but rather, are constrained by it. We arrive at this recognition, Kant thinks, by comparing ourselves to the moral law that we grasp within us.

This recognition is supposed to humble us:

> [The] discipline of duty before [our eyes]...sets limits of humility (i.e., self-knowledge) to self-conceit as well as to self-love, both of which are ready to mistake their boundaries... (*CPrR* 5:86).

That Kant equates humility with self-knowledge is striking. To know the substance of one’s humanity, in the reading I have given, is to gain the proper appreciation of the relationship that one bears with the moral law. This relationship is meant to humble us—while it enables us to recognize that we are agents with an inalienable moral worth, it also makes us realize just how far we are from moral perfection.⁸

Note that we can arrive at this self-knowledge either by appreciating the moral law within us, or by recognizing our moral vices:

> In order to represent someone vicious as tormented with mental unease by consciousness of his offenses [sic] they must first represent him as morally good, at least to some degree, in what is most basic to his character, just as they must represent someone who is delighted by consciousness of his dutiful actions as already virtuous. Now, one must first value the importance of what we call duty, the authority of the moral law, and the immediate worth that compliance with it gives a person in his own eyes, in order to feel that satisfaction in consciousness of one’s conformity with it and bitter remorse if one can reproach oneself with having transgressed it...Someone must be at least half way toward being an honest man even to frame for himself a representation of those feelings. (*CPV* 5:38)

Knowledge of our humanity, in this sense, is not actually hard to come by. We need only

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⁸For an extended discussion on Kant’s conception of humility, see Grenberg (2005).
to recognize ourselves as a moral agent—whether a good one or a bad one—and then endeavor to recognize that within us that gives us this moral agency.

Now to the second question: why do we have a duty to have this conception of our humanity in place? To answer this, consider the conflict between prudential and moral reasons. Without understanding ourselves as first-and-foremost moral agents, we can only understand ourselves as having prudential reasons of varying strengths. When we understand the humanity within us, we are able to see moral reasons as belonging to a fundamentally ‘different’ category of reason than practical reasons, a category which is always to be privileged above prudential considerations:

He who has lost at play can indeed be chagrined with himself and his imprudence; but if he is conscious of having cheated at play (although he has gained by it), he must despise himself as soon as he compares himself with the moral law. This must, therefore, be something other than the principle of one’s own happiness. For, to have to say to himself “I am a worthless man although I have filled my purse,” he must have a different criterion of judgment from that by which he commends himself and says “I am a prudent man, for I have enriched my cash box.” (CPrR 5:37)

Once we grasp the humanity within us, Kant thinks, we simultaneously grasp that this agency is to be exalted above all other parts of ourselves (CPrR 5:162). We are lead to the recognition that moral reasons are not to be weighed against prudential reasons, but rather, are to be privileged above prudential reasons. In this way, a recognition of the moral law within us, “strikes down self-conceit altogether” (5:73).

This reading makes good sense of the Vigilantius comments about self-knowledge. According to Vigilantius, Kant held that “just as in the metaphysical sense, self-knowledge is presupposed in apperception of the determinations present in us...so it is also presupposed in the moral sense”9 (V27:608). With my reading in place, we are in a position to construct a sort of ‘practical parallel’ to the transcendental deduction that established the unity

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9The full quotation reads “For, just as in the metaphysical sense, self-knowledge is presupposed in apperception of the determinations present in us, and consciousness of everything that goes on in us, so it is also presupposed in the moral sense, and consists in examination of our past state, or comparrison of our actions...”
of self-consciousness. Consciousness of the moral law implies consciousness of ourselves being subjects under the moral law. When we fully grasp this relationship that we bear to the moral law, we come to see ourselves as agents who are capable of being bound by duty to ourselves and others. When we understand the sorts of beings that we are, viz. beings who possess an inalienable humanity, and for whom the moral law always applies, we come to realize that it is not within our power to ‘excuse’ ourselves from the demands of the moral law. Only with this recognition in place, are we able to truly deliberate about what we ought to do, for such deliberation assumes that there is a subject that is positively free and capable of acting from duty, and not simply from motives of self-love.

We might worry that there is a certain circularity to this part of the duty to ‘know thyself’. How can we have a duty to know ourselves, when we need self-knowledge in order to see ourselves as under duty? We can answer this question by recalling how exactly it is that we can fail to know the moral law within us. Kant is not particularly concerned with the possibility of losing sight of the moral law altogether—he thinks, after all, that it is present to us immediately in consciousness. Rather, he is concerned with the possibility of us misinterpreting what exactly it is that we see. On Kant’s view, we may understand the notion of ‘obligation’ or ‘morally required action’ without understanding what it is that ultimately explains both of these concepts. We might, in other words, start to fulfill the duty to ‘know thyself’ with a faulty sense of what it is to fulfill a duty, only to have that sense corrected by the very fulfillment of that duty.

4.3 Knowledge of our Particular Moral Condition

The duty does not let us stop here. Rather, Kant also tells us that we must know something about our particular moral condition (MM 6:441). Note, however, that we must have a certain self-conception in place before we can even make sense of having an obligation to

with their dutifulness, insofar as we fulfil or transgress the same.” (V 27:608). The second part of this quotation sets out a method for obtaining knowledge of one’s particular moral character. But this method only ‘works’ if one has already come to understand oneself as an agent unified in practical reason by the moral law.
know our particular moral condition. Without an essentially ‘moralized’ conception of ourselves, we simply cannot make sense of the possibility of ‘duties’. And without an understanding of ourselves as morally imperfect beings prone to various forms of self-deception, we cannot understand how our moral condition is something that we must ‘uncover’, rather than something that is simply given to us in experience.

With this second component of the duty, two questions naturally arise. First, why is it necessary to know something about my particular moral condition, when knowledge of myself as both morally good and morally fallible seem sufficient to bring about the “humility” that is “self-knowledge” (CPrR 5:86)? Second, given first- and second-order maxim skepticism, what reason do we have to think that we can ever have this knowledge of our particular moral condition?

Let us consider the case of the agent who, by virtue of her “egotistical self-esteem”, takes mere wishes to be proof of a good will. There is a sense in which she is failing to know something about her humanity—that is, there is a sense in which she is failing to understand how she relates to the moral law. But there is another sense in which she is failing to properly comprehend her actions. She fails to appreciate, perhaps, that her “wishes” were motivated by apathy, laziness, ignorance, or self-conceit, rather than by a “good will”.

The moral law, to Kant, is motivational—properly grasping that we are governed by it requires that we see ourselves as obligated to pursue various rational ends. Amongst these ends are various negative-self regarding duties (avoid servility, avoid deception, avoid avarice), and a positive self-regarding duty to increase our moral perfection. Thus, when we are able to know ourselves in the particular way outlined above, we are moved to perfect our moral characters. And this goal of moral perfection requires an appreciation of how we are ‘falling short’. We cannot meaningfully try to improve our moral character until we grasp the ways in which this character falls short.
Of course, this task is a difficult one. Putting aside our inability to know the content of our maxims, there is still the fact that we are prone to various other forms of self-opacity. The egotistical agent might genuinely believe that her “wishes” reflect a good will, rather than a disinterest in the plight of others or an unwillingness to sacrifice her own pleasure to fulfill her duties.

Note that this sort of opacity often takes the form of self-deception. This “inner lie” stems from a “rotten spot” that we all, as imperfect moral agents, possess. But, contra Kant, there seem to be more benign ways in which we can fail to understand ourselves. I may simply fail to pay attention to my motives, acting out of instinct rather than careful deliberation. In these cases, I may be generally perplexed about why I did what I did—did I retrieve the lady’s purse from the mugger because it was the right thing to do, or because I wanted to look like a hero? Whether intentional or not, however, both self-deceit and carelessness constitute violations of the duty to know oneself.

How exactly are we meant to correct these failures? The Doctrine of Virtue provides only a cursory procedure. Near the end of his discussion of the duty, Kant tells us that “impartiality in appraising oneself in comparison with the law, and sincerity in acknowledging to oneself one’s inner moral worth or lack of worth are duties to oneself that follow directly from this first command to cognize oneself” (MM 6:441). But these ancillary duties raise a puzzle: exactly what am I meant to be appraising about myself when I compare myself to the moral law?

Vigilantius provides a tentative answer to this question:

We would have to direct our method here to investigating our moral condition over a period of time, and not just as it is now. In doing so we would need to have laws in view, and judge our actions honestly in accordance with them, and be actively endeavoring to amend our faults. If we merely take our present condition as the standard, we fail to discover which resolutions have been left uncompleted; we make new decisions to behave well, and fail to execute them, because there is still a lack of persistence in the fixed determination to mend our ways, which the conviction of often having made the resolution in vain
With the usual caveats about the reliability of the Lectures in mind, there is a lot to glean from this comment. First, Vigilantius makes clear that the duty to “know thyself” is not a duty to scrutinize particular maxims in isolation from each other. In this way, it is not a duty that is primarily concerned with answering the question “What ought I to do?”. Rather, its concern is expressly backward-looking. It asks “What did I do?” This is not to say that the duty has no practical worth. Rather, it is clear that we need to know something about the cases wherein we have failed to follow through with resolutions, in order to make sure that our future resolutions are successfully completed.

Collins adds to this picture when he tells us that our self examination of our moral dispositions “must be constantly pursued”. We must, he tells us, “pay constant attention to ourselves” (C 27:348). How are we to take this comment? Must we, as Collins seems to suggest, scrutinize ourselves at every turn? This is exactly the reading of the duty to know thyself that is endorsed by Onora O’Neill. Although O’Neill granted that we can, through some process of self-scrutiny, arrive at some knowledge of the content of our maxims, she held that fulfilling the duty is ‘paralyzing’. If forced to attempt to uncover the content of their motives before acting upon those motives, moral agents would be left unable to proceed—by the time they had uncovered their maxims, those maxims would be irrelevant (1996: 94).

We have reason to reject O’Neill’s fixation on maxims as the object of which this duty aims to achieve knowledge. As the Vigilantius comments helpfully point out, we have reason to understand this duty as one that concerns our moral dispositions over time. Nevertheless, if Collins gives the right treatment of the duty, we might still worry that O’Neill’s criticisms hold. How can I possibly be an effective moral agent, when my deliberative process is meant to resemble a sort of 24/7 psychoanalysis session?

In the Anthropology, Kant spoke at length about the process of self observation. We
can notice ourselves, he tells us, without observing ourselves. The latter process is a “methodical compilation of the perceptions formed in us” (A 132). This process comes with a caveat: too much observational navel gazing leads us to “enthusiasm and madness”. Kant recommended instead, that we be careful not to eavesdrop on ourselves in this methodical way. I may observe the various acts of “representative power in myself when I summon them,” but I must be wary not to attend to them when they come to my mind “unbidden” (A 134). We must not, in other words, mistake a fixation on one’s inner maxims with a sober resolve to know oneself for purpose of fulfilling one’s duty.

The duty to know thyself is expressly goal directed—it aims at obtaining self-knowledge that is relevant to our moral improvement. But, if we take Vigilantius seriously, it is also backwards-looking. How exactly are we meant to perform this backward-looking self-scrutiny? Kant’s comments on the faculty of foresight are helpful here:

To possess this faculty interests us more than any other, because it is the condition of all possible practice and of the needs to which the human being relates the use of his powers...Recalling the past (remembering) occurs only with the intention of making foresight of the future possible by means of it....Empirical foresight is the anticipation of similar cases (exspectatio casuum similium) and requires no rational knowledge of causes and effects, but only the remembering of observed events as they commonly follow one another, and repeated experiences produce an aptitude for it. (A 185-186)

Foresight involves some hindsight. But this hindsight is nothing like Haller’s morose self-scrutiny. Rather, it is an expressly goal-directed hindsight; in recalling how long it took to get past security on past flights, I can better estimate how much time I ought to give myself at the airport this time.

When we scrutinize our moral character, we perform a similar procedure. If I want to know whether my resolution to implement a strict paper-marking regime will stick, I ought to consider whether my past resolutions to implement such regimes were met with success. If the answer is ‘no’, then I have reason to figure out why the answer is ‘no’. This procedure of analyzing past behavior does not get to an answer, but it at very least establishes that I
have inconsistencies in my behavior that call for explanation.

The process of gaining knowledge of my particular moral condition is both slow and fundamentally unending. It requires first that I recognize myself as a flawed agent prone to self-deception. With this recognition in place, I can understand self-scrutiny as something that I owe myself. Only through understanding the particular ways in which I fall short of the commands of morality am I able to make moral progress. But finding the particular ways in which I fall short is difficult—I must look backward in order to discern behavioral inconsistencies, and then attempt to locate a reason for those inconsistencies. Of course, the very thing that this duty attempts to combat, viz. my propensity for self deception, makes self-scrutiny difficult. I must always be on the lookout for the ‘dear self’ that excuses or justifies my past moral inconsistencies. Nevertheless, performing this procedure should allow me to make a slow, lurching ascent towards my moral perfection.

4.4 The Duty to ‘Know Thyself’ as the First Command of all Duties to the Self”

Pulling some strings together, we arrive at the following account of the duty to ‘know thyself’ as a first command. I cannot grasp myself as being bound by duty to treat myself in a certain way until I recognize that I bear a particular sort of relation to the moral law. I am capable of willing it—and this makes me worthy of dignity—but I am also capable of falling short of it and subverting it to my motives of self-love.

When I grasp myself in this way, I ostensibly ‘moralize’ my practical reasoning. Considered only as a being capable of acting out of self-love, I have only prudential reasons. But considered as a being capable of acting both out of self-love and respect for the moral law, I can now recognize myself having both moral and prudential reasons for action. These moral reasons, I discover, are not on a par with my prudential considerations, but rather, ought to take precedence over these considerations. I thus see myself as having a duty to ‘reign in’ my prudential considerations whenever they violate the commands of morality. In other words, I can recognize myself not simply as having lots of prudential reasons
to avoid avarice, servility, self-deceit and so forth, but rather, also having a moral duty to avoid these problematic states. In this way, the proper self-understanding must necessarily be prior to the recognition of self-regarding duties.

4.5 Conclusion

Kant held that the “moral cognition of oneself will, first, dispel fanatical contempt for oneself as a human being (for the whole human race)” and also “egotistical self-esteem which takes mere wishes—wishes that, however ardent, always remain empty of deeds—for the proof of a good heart” (MM 6:441). The duty of self-knowledge, in other words, is supposed to be able to make us aware both that the humanity within us does not deserve contempt, and that we, as imperfect agents, are more than capable of falling short of morality’s demands.

Here is how the duty manages to strike down both of these misperceptions. When I know something about the substance of my humanity, I recognize that I have an inborn dignity and worth. I may, of course, fall short of realizing that worth, in which case, I might actually become the proper subject of contempt. But I must recognize that it is not the humanity within me—a humanity that is possessed by every other human being—that can make me contemptible. This humanity, rather, is worthy of respect (G 6:462).

Kant recognized the difficulties inherent in trying to change one’s moral character. When our moral character is too heavily guided by maxims of self-love, Kant warned, nothing short of a “revolution” or “rebirth” could cleanse it:

But if a human being is corrupt in the very ground of his maxims, how can he possibly bring about this revolution by his own forces and become a good human being on his own? Yet duty commands that he be good, and duty commands nothing but what we can do. The only way to reconcile this is by saying that a revolution is necessary in the mode of thought but a gradual reformation in the mode of senses (which places obstacles in the way of the former), and [that both] must therefore be possible also to the human being. (Rel 6:47-8)

Knowing the substance of our humanity can, at times, revolutionize our thought. Without
this ‘revolution’, attempting further more progress is very difficult. Only once we possess
the proper understanding of the substance of our humanity, will we be in a position to
undertake the ‘gradual’ process of knowing the particularities of our character.
5 RESOLVING THE SKEPTICAL CHALLENGE

There is, I have argued, a sort of self-knowledge that we need to possess before self-regarding duties can even be coherent. This reading of the duty has several upshots. First, and perhaps most strikingly, it makes good sense of why this duty is the first command of all self-regarding duties; until I fulfill it (in the sense that it can be fulfilled, of course), I can neither fully grasp nor fruitfully attempt to fulfill the other duties that I owe myself as a moral agent. Second, as I will argue in this section, my reading of the duty to ‘know thyself’ is consistent with both sorts of maxim skepticism.

5.1 First-Order Maxim Skepticism, Revisited

Suppose, after dropping a few coins into a homeless person’s hand, you were to pause and question why you performed that minor act of charity. Did you do it because it was the right thing to do? Because you didn’t want to feel like a schmuck? Because you wanted to impress your friends? Your action was consistent with all of these different maxims, but only one could have actually guided it. Which one was it?

Kant denies that we can ever be certain which maxims guide even our most seemingly virtuous actions. Given this, if the duty to ‘know thyself’ requires that we know the maxims upon which we act, then it is unfulfillable. But, as my analysis illustrates, we have strong reason to resist this interpretation. There is, I believe, nothing within the duty itself that requires us to scrutinize our first-order maxims. Indeed, on my account, even if it were possible to obtain knowledge of particular maxims, this knowledge would not be particularly helpful to the fulfillment of my duties. This is because maxims, considered in isolation, reveal little, if anything, about one’s moral character. Were I to discover that I
had, in some particular instance, acted purely from duty, that discovery would not license me to any substantive conclusions about my moral character. A single action done from duty could just as well be a fluke as it could be proof a particularly good moral character.

Some scholars—Onora O’Neill and Lara Denis most notably—have interpreted the duty to ‘know thyself’ as a requirement to uncover the content of our first-order maxims. There is something in the text of the duty to recommend this interpretation. The duty does, after all, tell us that we must know “whether the source of your actions is pure or impure’ (MM 4:441). If we take ‘source’ to refer only to first-order maxims, then it would seem that the duty requires something of us that we simply cannot provide. But we needn’t adopt this reading. The way we act, on Kant’s view, is determined not simply by discreet maxims of action, but also by the fundamental principles of action that we freely adopt throughout our lives. These fundamental principles—or ‘second-order’ maxims—shape what course of action we see as available or permissible. If I adopt a maxim to overlook the suffering of others as much as possible, I will, eventually, become oblivious to this suffering.

5.2 Second-Order Maxim Skepticism, Revisited

Even if we grant that the duty does not require us to know our first-order maxims, we might still worry that it conflicts with ‘second-order maxim skepticism’. Kant repeatedly denies that we can know our ‘hearts’. That is, he denies that we can know what principles fundamentally guide us (MM 6:447; R 6:50).

And yet, as my reading demonstrated, there is a great deal that we can discover about the second-order maxims that dwell within our hearts. We can investigate “our moral condition over a period of time” with “laws in view” so that we can “judge our actions honestly” and consider “which resolutions have been left uncompleted” (V 27:608). We can, in other words, gain insight into the overarching principles that guide our actions by looking at the patterns of behavior that we exhibit over time. I cannot determine whether or not I donate to charity only when it is convenient by looking at one instance of charitable donation. If
I, however, were to examine all of the previous times in which I was given the opportunity to donate to charity in order to uncover a ‘pattern’ to my donation, I might come closer to discerning the maxim that guides my charitable spirit.

Here, we might worry that my reading of the duty has purchased its textual consistency through a process of revision. Recall that the duty to know thyself appears amidst the ‘perfect duties’ to oneself as a moral being. For something to be a perfect duty, according to Kant, there must be some way of ‘discharging’ it. There must, in other words, be some particular action or actions that we must fulfill or avoid in order to fulfill the duty. Fulfilling the duty to refrain from suicide, for instance, requires only that I never commit suicide. In contrast, imperfect duties have “no rational prescription” that prescribes how far one must go to attempt to fulfill them (MM 6:392). The duty of benevolence to others, for instance, neither determines how, or how often, I ought to be benevolent to others.

If we can never fully uncover our second-order maxims, as I content, how can the duty to ‘know thyself’ be perfect? There are two answers that I can provide here. I could say that the duty to ‘know thyself’, like the duty to pursue my moral perfection, is “a narrow and perfect one in terms of its quality, but wide and imperfect in terms of its degree, because of the frailty (fragilitas) of human nature” (MM 4:446). Alternately, we could read the duty as a two-part duty, wherein the first part, to know the substance of my humanity, is a perfect duty, while the second part, to know the particularities of my moral condition, is imperfect. I do not have a preference for either reading, and I am not sure exactly how much rides on this issue, given the general murkiness of the distinction between ‘perfect’ and ‘imperfect’ duty.¹ Nevertheless, I do think that my reading does not require that we reinterpret the duty as an imperfect one.

¹Take, for instance, the perfect duty to avoid servility. In one sense, it is narrow in scope (MM 6:434). It demands that I avoid being servile. But how do I do this? The duty offers no recommended actions, nor does it provide a standard to tell me when I have met its demands. We might worry, then, that the duty is unfulfillable—I could, presumably, always strive to be a little less servile.
5.3 Fathoming our Unfathomable Hearts

How are we to square the unfathomability of our hearts with our duty to fathom our hearts? Here is a preliminary response: when Kant speaks of our hearts being ‘unfathomable’, he means that the process of fathoming our hearts can never be completed. Completely knowing our hearts would require that we ‘remove the obstacle within us’—that is, our proclivity to privilege our self-love over the moral law—which we cannot, by virtue of the beings that we are, actually do. Indeed, the fact that we will never be fully translucent to ourselves is implied by the knowledge that we are meant to acquire as part of the duty. Only when we grasp that we are less than perfect agents, capable of being pulled in opposite directions from conflicting motives, does the possibility of self-deception and opacity become a live one. If we grasp ourselves as purely good, or as purely evil, self-deception becomes a rather puzzling, if not wholly implausible, phenomenon.
6 THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DUTY OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

We are now in a position to come full-circle. This thesis started out by discussing the problem of self-conceit. Self-conceit, on Kant’s charge, is a propensity to ground one’s moral worth in something other than one’s rational agency. Most typically, the self-conceited agent locates her moral-worth in the opinions that others have of her. Self-conceit represents a veritable threat to moral goodness. It is very difficult for a self-conceited agent to either recognize or fulfill the duties that she bears towards herself. But it is also very difficult to break out of self-conceit. This is because the ‘tools’ that we usually employ to correct our moral deficiencies have been subverted in cases of self-conceit. The self-conceited agent still feels respect, guilt, shame and so forth. She just recognizes these phenomena as responding to something other than her rational capacity to will the moral law. When she feels guilt, for instance, she might take it to be a sign that she has failed to live up to the opinion that others have of her, rather than as a sign that she has failed to live up to the moral law.

The duties that appear in the Doctrine of Virtue, which Kant considers to be the “highest duties of all” (V 27:604), are those duties that make possible self-respect. These duties set the standards of behavior that we must meet lest we violate our dignity and treat ourselves as a ‘mere means’.

The connection between self-respect and many self-regarding duties is clear. Consider the duty to avoid avarice. To act avariciously is to value one’s possessions over oneself. But the connection between self-knowledge and self-respect is not so clear. Given that respect is treated as a “natural predisposition” that all members of humanity possess, we
might wonder why exactly we need to know ourselves in order to create the conditions for self-respect.

The duty to ‘know thyself’, as I will argue in this section, is best understood as a requirement to locate the proper grounds of respect within ourselves. Only once we recognize how we ought to respect ourselves, can we make judgments about whether we actually are respecting ourselves.

My argument proceeds as follows. (1) According to Kant, we have a natural predisposition to respect the moral law, and by extension, ourselves. This respect allows us to be ‘put under obligation’. As such, self-respect involves the recognition of self-regarding duties. (2) We also, according to Kant, have a deep propensity towards ‘improper’ self-respect. By this I take Kant to mean that we have a tendency to misunderstand the ‘proper grounds’ of self-respect. We often, Kant argues, mistakenly tie our self-respect to the opinions that others have of us. (3) Improper self-respect is a type of self-knowledge failure. It is, further, the type of self-knowledge failure at which the duty to ‘know thyself’ explicitly takes aim. (4) When we fail to properly respect ourselves we frustrate our ability to the fulfill self-regarding duties. (5) The Formula of Humanity requires us to act in such a way that we “treat humanity, whether in [our] own person or in any other person, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (G 4:429). (6) When we fail to know ourselves, we violate FH. (7) Therefore, we must fulfill our duty to know ourselves lest we violate FH.

According to Kant, respect is a “feeling of a special kind” that “every human being” has a “natural predisposition” towards (MM 6:402; 6:448; CPrR 5:73). In this sense, respect—or more specifically, respect for the moral law—is prior to the judgments that we make about our duty.1 Indeed, these judgments are made in light of our “feeling” of respect: “It

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1It is unclear how exactly we are meant to make the transition from respecting the moral law to respecting agents capable of willing the moral law. We might have a sort of derivative respect for persons. On this reading, we respect people insofar as they “give us an example” of the moral law (G4:400). There is an alternate reading, offered by David Velleman, that I am much more sympathetic towards. Velleman holds
cannot be said that he has a duty of respect towards himself, for he must have respect for the law within him in order even to think of any duty whatsoever” (MM 6:403). Crucially, respect is that capacity that allows us to be “put under obligation” (MM 6:339). When we understand someone as worthy of respect, we grasp that they are capable of putting us under certain obligations—their status as rational agents prohibits us from acting in certain ways towards them, makes our promises to them binding and so forth. The same holds true in the personal case. That I am worthy of respect (as a rational agent) means that I owe myself certain things unconditionally—my rational will obligates me to act in certain ways towards myself.

And yet, like so many other attributes that are present in us as natural predisposition, or that strike us immediately in consciousness, respect can be distorted. Recall, most notably, Kant’s treatment of self-conceit and timorousness. As previously discussed, we have a deep propensity towards both of these failings. They are, Kant warns, “the two rocks a man runs into, if he departs, in one direction or the other, from the moral law (C 27:351).

It is quite natural to want to understand both of these cases as involving improper amounts of self-respect. On this reading, the self-conceited agent simply has too much respect for herself, and the timorous agent, too little. But this reading, as I demonstrated in Section I, is significantly mistaken. Rather, on Kant’s view, both self-conceit and timorousness involve improper types of self-respect. The self-conceited agent sees respect as tied to the position that she bears towards others. So long as she believes herself to be better than those around her in some sense or other, she feels entitled to more respect. Conversely, the

that “respect for the law is an attitude towards the rational will”. Our rational wills constitute our ‘real selves’—we are, on Velleman’s charge, essentially rational, lawgiving entities. Hence, there is no transition needed between ‘respecting the law’ and ‘respecting persons capable of willing the law’, since respecting the law involves treating with reverence “that which constitutes the true or proper self of a person” (1999: 80-81).

2Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov from Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s Crime and Punishment is a paradigmatic example of a self-conceited agent. He believes that he belongs to an elite class of “extraordinary men” who needn’t follow the moral codes that apply to ordinary men. This, he thinks, licenses him to commit murder. He fails both to recognize that he is not in the same class of great men as “Napoleon” and “Muhammed”, and
timorous person compares his moral character to those around him, he feels that he comes up short, and thus, determines himself to be unworthy of respect (*C 27:350; MM 6:435*).

Of course, I am using ‘respect’ very loosely here. Respect is, as I have said, a very special sort of feeling that only arises out of an appreciation of the inborn dignity of humanity (or, by extension, for the law that grounds our inborn dignity). Kant sharply distinguishes respect from other ways of valuing human beings—admiration, love, fear, awe and so forth—that involve an appreciation of our ability to achieve our ends, and not an appreciation of our status as ends in ourselves. I shall call the first sort of respect ‘proper respect’. The second sort of ‘respect’, which is based on something other than an appreciation of the moral law, shall be called ‘improper respect’. Of course, to the self-conceited person, respect and improper respect are indistinguishable. Indeed, she is only able to take herself to be more worthy of respect than others by grounding respect in something other than the dignity of her humanity. This is because she simply cannot distinguish herself from others of she properly understands the dignity out of which her moral worth arises. Her dignity, after all, is no more dignified than anyone else’s. Thus, to get her exceptionality, the conceited agent must find something special about herself that other people lack. Thus, she is forced to ground her moral worth in some natural predisposition, just as Raskolnikov justifies his exemption from the moral code by appeal to his superior intelligence.³

That self-conceit and timorousness ought to be considered failures of self-knowledge should now be clear. The conceited agent mistakenly takes her moral worth to be dependent on something other than her status as a rational agent. Thus, she fails to know what it is that being a ‘great man’ in no way licenses one to any moral exceptions.

³Self-conceited agents might also try to deny that other people have dignity. To justify this conclusion, they must be able to locate something that they possess and that others lack. Whatever they end up locating, it will not be something that is actually relevant to moral worth. If an agent considers herself to be more worthy of respect than her friends, for instance, because she is a better philanthropist than her friends, then she is mistakenly conflating ‘moral worth’ with ‘moral performance’.
about herself that makes her worthy of respect. While there are other failures of self-
knowledge, the duty to ‘know thyself’ takes aim at this particular sort of self-knowledge
failure. That is, the duty is primarily meant to instill within the agent an appreciation of the
‘substance’ of humanity, which includes an understanding of that within her that makes her
worthy of respect.

What exactly have we lost when we have failed to exhibit proper respect for ourselves?
Within Kant’s ethical framework, the answer is clear: only when we respect something,
do we appreciate it as an end in itself, and not simply as a means. When we violate the
command of FH—to treat ourselves only as an end, and never as a mere means—we deny
ourselves our rightful status as rational, autonomous, morally responsible agents.

In some cases of improper self-respect, this denial is obvious. Consider the servility of
Mr. Smithers from *The Simpson*. Mr. Smithers is an intelligent, capable, rational agent. He
is, in other words, an agent who is perfectly worthy of respect from both himself and others.
But Smithers’ actions belie his inner worth. He is the paradigmatic example of a servile
agent; he wants nothing more than to please the devious Mr. Burns, his longtime boss.
Smithers believes himself to be worthy of respect only insofar as he is an effective means
to whatever ends Mr. Burns happens to set. In one episode, for instance, Mr. Smithers
attempts to drown himself after he fails to protect Mr. Burns from the pestering of a town
drunk.4

To take oneself to be valuable only as a means to other people’s ends is, of course, a
failure to respect oneself. It is also a failure to *know* oneself—the servile agent, on my
account, fails to know something very fundamental about her agency. But servility is not
the only, or even the most paradigmatic self-knowledge failure. Kant, as we have seen,
devotes much more energy to discussing the phenomenon of self-conceit. Self-conceit,
too, involves a failure of self-knowledge. But it is not so clear how self-conceit involves a

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4“Homer the Smithers”. Air Date: February 25, 1996.
corresponding failure of self respect.

To understand why self-conceit can constitute a failure of self-respect, let us look at the following sort of case. There is much hullabaloo made when celebrities perform even the most mundane and mandatory moral acts. Consider two anecdotes taken from a website that profiles the ‘good deeds’ of celebrities:

“Zoe Saldana knows how to help a lady in need. When a poor elderly woman was involved in a car accident, Zo[sic] was the first on hand to make sure she got the attention she needed, by calling 911. She even stayed with her to until the paramedics arrived to make sure she was OK.”

“LeAnn Rimes fills her good deed quota by handing over some money to a homeless man as she heads to the shops.”

The gossip magazines and websites that track these sorts of anecdotes seem to sincerely believe that there is something morally exemplary about even the most basic acts of moral benevolence and good will. The thought seems to be that there is something special about celebrities that makes our normal judgments about moral worth not apply. If we take this view of celebrities, we arrive at the conclusion that their celebrity, which arises out of some combination of natural perfection and good luck, makes them more worthy of respect than the average Joe. When we take up this view, we commit ourselves to the idea that the celebrity’s ability to achieve certain ends is the ground of her distinct moral worth.

No doubt, many of the celebrities do not buy into the gossip-rag reading of their moral worth. Those who do, however, would constitute clear cases of self-conceit. And they would also, I believe, constitute clear failures of self-respect. The agent who sets the moral

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5See p://skyliving.sky.com/celebrity/jennifers-good-deed. As it so happens, almost all of the examples on this website concern wealthy celebrities giving homeless people spare change.

6There is, of course, nothing wrong with the actions profiled on this website. Rather, the celebrity featured really are doing morally good deeds. The problem, however, comes when the website (and presumably, its viewers) take these good deeds as more than they are. While we understand calling 9-11 when we see someone injured, or donating a pocket-worth of change to someone in need as squarely within the realm of what is to be expected from moral agents, such actions somehow become ‘exceptional’ when performed by celebrities.
bar for herself so low to the ground that she cannot help but jump over it in her day-to-day life fails to appreciate her potential as a rational agent. She fails, in a sense, to take herself seriously as an agent who is capable of being morally virtuous. Certain self-regarding duties, then, become perfectly unintelligible. When one considers herself a moral saint, it is not at all clear how she could set moral perfection as a goal. Other duties become, if not intelligible, then impossible. It is not clear how the self-conceited agent could effectively avoid servility, lying, avarice, or lustfulness (except by mere accident), given that she is so deeply oblivious to the sort of person that she is. By failing to know something crucial about herself—that is, that she is a subject under the moral law—she has effectively eradicated her ability to perform those duties that that are meant to foster self-respect.

The Formula of Humanity tells us that we ought to treat humanity, whether our own or the humanity of others, as an end in itself and never merely as a means. This formula, as Hill notes, has two incommensurate parts. First, I must never treat myself or any other rational agent merely as a means. Second, I must “act in such a way as to always treat humanity as an end” (1980, pp. 87). We are capable of fulfilling the first part without fulfilling the second, more demanding part.

To treat someone as a mere means is to use a person as a means to an end that that person does not (or cannot) share. When I treat myself as a mere means, I use myself to pursue to which I cannot rationally consent. When Smithers subverts his own will to the will of Mr. Burns, he acts in a way that he cannot actually rationally condone.

Treating oneself as an end is a bit more challenging. Humanity, according to Kant, involves a complex cluster of “rational capacities and dispositions” (1980, pp. 87). It is also something that has “an unconditional and incomparable worth” (G 4:436). Treating oneself as an ends involves appreciating both one’s rational capacities and one’s dignity. When I grasp that I have dignity, I simultaneously understand that certain actions are off-limits to me insofar as they undermine this dignity. I also see my rational capacities, which
are what give me dignity as worthy of cultivation. Out of these two recognitions, I can generate both the positive and negative duties that I owe myself. On the one hand, I have a duty to cultivate both my natural and moral perfection. On the other, I have a duty to avoid actions and dispositions that demean the dignity that defines my humanity. The conceited agent renders herself impervious to the demands of self-regarding duties. This is because she fails to see herself as standing under duties—she is, after all, above the very law that generates duties. In this way, she too has violated the FH. While she does not necessarily treat herself as means, she most certainly falls short of treating herself as an end in herself.

Respect, Kant stresses, is a natural disposition. By this, I take it to mean that we are by nature struck by feelings of respect for ourselves and for others. But we also are quite naturally drawn to improper forms of self-respect (C 27:349). These improper forms of self-respect constitute failures of self-knowledge: only when I fail to know that I am a rational, autonomous agent capable of willing in accordance with the moral law, do I open myself up to the possibility of improper self-respect. Given what is ‘on the line’ when it comes to self-knowledge, the necessity of the duty to ‘know thyself’ comes into focus. We must know ourselves, in the particular ways the duty demands, if we are to treat each ourselves as ends, and not as means.
Kant thought that the “descent into the hell of self-cognition” was the “beginning of all human wisdom”. We must, he argued, “remove the obstacle within (an evil will actually present in [us])” before we could develop our “original predisposition to a good will” (MM 4:441). On my reading, descending into hell primarily involves arriving at the right conception of our moral agency. That is, we must understand ourselves as both capable of willing the moral law, and as capable of falling short of the demands of that law. Unless we understand our moral agency in this way, we will not be able to fully conceive of our other duties—including our duty to scrutinize our moral condition—as duties.
REFERENCES


