

Kant as ethical naturalist: first and second natures in Kant's ethics

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Abstract: I argue that Kant's use, in the critical ethical writings, of our nature as autonomous, rational beings (if imperfectly so) to argue against the normative authority of human nature shows Kant's ethical system to instantiate its own distinctive version of ethical naturalism. The formal structure of Kant's argument fits within ethical naturalism: our nature is what explains how we get onto and are bound by ethical norms. What changes is that Kant rejects the authority of human nature to generate these moral norms by arguing that only rational nature as free and autonomous could sanction this sort of normative grip. In order to show the viability of reading Kant as an ethical naturalist, I address two problems: 1) how to specify a Kantian first nature that is not too human, nor too formal and so empty; 2) how to specify a Kantian second nature as some settled disposition towards willing morally good actions and yet compatible with reason's autonomy.

Keywords: Kant: ethical naturalism; second nature.

In this paper, I will argue for the interpretive possibility of reading Kant's critical ethical writings as engaged in a unique form of ethical naturalism. Most conspicuously in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* but throughout the ethical texts, Kant advances and defends argumentative claims through recourse to a conception of the metaphysical nature of, and our nature as, finite, dependent, rational agents who must struggle to do moral willing.¹ It may seem bizarre to describe Kant's ethical system as engaged in a form of ethical naturalism, since a central commitment within Kant's ethico-theoretic framework is the need to ground our ethical understanding on the pure *a priori* deliverances of reason and to reject any ethical knowledge claims ultimately justified by our nature as human and/or empirical evidence. I suggest Kant is not rejecting the idea that we have a teleologically-driven nature that sets the standards for good, moral behavior towards ourselves and others; rather, Kant rejects the idea that human nature or empirical evidence is suitable to play this sort of ethical and theoretical function. Instead, for Kant, this ethical standard

¹ Philosophers often more succinctly refer to this category of moral agents as persons.

must be autonomous, generated by reason itself reflecting on its own nature as autonomous, but also as embodied in finite creatures with sensibility and whose two practical ends of happiness and moral willing are dependent upon the contributions of others for achievement. For Kant, only our metaphysical nature as finite, dependent rational beings could generate the kind of obligation and necessity morality has for us. The formal structure of Kant's argument fits within ethical naturalism: our nature is what explains how we get onto and are bound by ethical norms. What changes is that Kant rejects the authority of human nature to generate these moral norms by arguing that only rational nature as free and autonomous could sanction this sort of normative grip. The structural use of our nature as autonomous, rational beings (if imperfectly so) to argue against the normative authority of human nature shows Kant's ethical system to instantiate its own distinctive version of ethical naturalism.

My suggestion that Kant employs the formal argumentative structure of ethical naturalism even as he changes the nature in question from human nature to finite, dependent, rational nature immediately encounters two problems. The first problem is that rational nature as free and self-legislating may not be capable of generating substantive normative standards that can provide concrete ethical guidance. I've already indicated the nature in question in Kant's ethical system is not rational nature simpliciter, but the more determinate finite, dependent, rational nature. However, there is good reason to be worried that this more specific kind of rational nature is still too abstract to provide the rich, ethical understanding we are searching for, especially given our lack of experience with other sorts of finite, dependent, rational beings. This first problem is the difficulty of specifying the first nature at issue within Kant's ethical framework that is not too human, nor too formal and so empty.

The second problem concerns the aptness of thinking of Kantian virtue as a second nature. The difficulty here is how to conceive of Kantian virtue as expressive of the agent's freedom and autonomy, but also a settled disposition to do morally good willing, and so a secondary if natural outgrowth of first nature that operates as a constraint upon the agent's practical reasoning. In discussing Kant's sensitivity to, yet ultimate failure to provide adequate resolution of, the problem of reconciling spontaneity and receptivity in accounting for how mindedness can produce truth, John McDowell writes:

The idea of a subjectively continuous series of "representations" could no more stand alone, independent of the idea of a living thing in whose life these events occur, than could the idea of a series of digestive events with its appropriate kind of continuity. But in the absence of a serious notion of second nature, this exploitation of the concept of life, which is a quintessentially natural phenomenon, to make sense of a

unity within the domain of spontaneity, which by Kant's lights has to be non-natural, is not within Kant's grasp. (1994: 103-4).

For McDowell, Kant's conception of nature "is the realm of law and therefore devoid of meaning" (1994: 97). McDowell argues this conception of nature as normatively inert makes unavailable a "pregnant notion of second nature" to explain how reason, as autonomous and so the source of its normative standards, is actually getting a grip on what is objectively good for us in developing the habit of virtue (1994: 97). McDowell's view of the importance of second nature as a bridge concept is inspired by his reading of Aristotle's ethics: thinking of virtue as second nature accounts for the fact that the ability of reason to apprehend what counts as doing the right thing, at the right time, with the right means, etc., is not naturally given to us but must be acquired through a good enough upbringing, even as virtue represents the fruition of our human (first) nature and the attainment of our natural good. In "Autonomy as Second Nature: On McDowell's Aristotelian Naturalism", David Forman disagrees with McDowell about the usefulness of the concept of second nature for dissolving the tension between the autonomy of the "logical space of reasons" as not needing confirmation or foundation outside their own sphere, and the need to see our rational practices as integrated into natural human life, making thought constrained by the world (2008: 567). Forman agrees though, that the concept of second nature is incompatible with Kant's model of mindedness. Because "the Kantian insight is the idea that 'logos has, everywhere, only its own lights to go by'... the norms of thought cannot be exogenously given to us, not even by a re-enchanted nature... [but] are instead indigenous to thought itself or self-legislated" (2008: 564). For Forman, the naturalness of second nature as an external constraint upon the norms grasped through the formation of a second nature conflicts with reason's need to see its own conceptual abilities as self-initiated and self-legislated. Forman argues that if our ability to exercise sound moral judgment is a second nature that is acquired at least partly from without through a natural process of socialization, "the initiation will be mere conditioning and, in Kantian terms, his capacities will be characterized by heteronomy instead of autonomy" (2008: 568). For both McDowell and Forman, there is no place for the concept of second nature within Kant's ethics.

This paper will challenge the obviousness of the idea that the concept of second nature cannot find any home within Kant's ethical system. My hunch is that specification of Kant's substantive, idiosyncratic conception of our first nature goes hand in hand with explaining how Kantian virtue can be understood as a secondary, natural development of autonomous rational first nature. In the next section, I describe in more detail the two problems already indicated for

conceiving of rationally autonomous first and second natures, and then give some reasons that the interpretive project should not be rejected out of hand despite these problems. In the second section, I provide a specification of Kantian first nature and show why certain difficulties in delineating this nature are not unique to Kant's ethical framework. In the third section, I show how Kantian virtue can fit a conception of second nature. In short, the problem of reconciling the freedom and fixity of virtue is alleviated, not worsened, by thinking of virtue as the natural, teleological fulfillment of our first nature.

My arguments for the viability of thinking of Kant as an ethical naturalist and Kantian virtue as a second nature are not meant to minimize certain marks of lack of fit of the concepts of first and second natures within the logic of Kant's ethics. However, these conceptual frictions can generate insight into Kant's ethical theory as well as the theoretical uses of first and second natures within various ethical naturalist arguments. Moreover, the challenges for reading Kant as an ethical naturalist do not discredit this approach to interpreting Kant's ethical project, since the necessity of grappling with these challenges emerges as unavoidable for articulating and defending Aristotelian ethical naturalism as well.

1. *Two problems for first and second natures as normatively constraining and rationally autonomous*

In this section, I will first set out some features associated with the conception of second nature within contemporary virtue ethics, before turning to two significant objections to the feasibility of any attempt to find something like rationally autonomous first and second natures in Kant's ethics. The general aims of this first section are to temper concerns that any idea of a Kantian second nature is doomed from the start, and to clarify the grounds from which to assess the suitability of virtue to function as a Kantian second nature. This clarification is necessary because the basic features of a second nature are disputed by critics, but also defenders of this ethical categorization.

Consider, for example, McDowell's main argumentative concerns in his uses of second nature. As already shown, in *Mind and World* McDowell is interested in second nature as a reconciliation of reason and nature that can defuse certain skeptical worries about how reason gets onto what is true. In "Two Sorts of Naturalism", McDowell focuses on skeptical worries more peculiar to ethics: the worry that appeal to facts about our nature do not compel rational acceptance of virtue as the answer to how one should act, and that reasoned dispute between differing ethical viewpoints about the good life, what any

person should do, etc., does not produce the rational convergence we would expect. The seemingly irresolvable nature of moral disagreements has caused many to see ethical truths as not grounded in objective facts about our nature, but instead a projection onto nature of social practices and values that could (and do) vary. In response to these skeptical ethical worries, McDowell uses second nature to explain how a virtuous person gets onto ethical truths, and why her confidence in her grasp of these truths is well-founded, but also to explain the lack of a shared viewpoint on our nature or our happiness, and why facts about our (first) nature do not compel any ethical viewpoint or commitments. In accounting for the non-reductive nature of our ethical norms and practices, and the way individual adherence to these norms does not follow necessarily and indisputably from careful consideration of facts about our nature, McDowell implies a fairly significant break exists between first nature and second nature. The break between first and second (virtuous) nature explains why the egoist rational wolf is genuinely using his reason (if not well) to step back from, scrutinize, and ultimately reject norms about contributing to the pack when hunting, and why rational argument will not be enough to bring him back into the ethical fold.

By contrast, in "Apprehending Human Form" Michael Thompson argues that *a priori* knowledge of the human is at issue in how we make sense of ourselves and others, and, as further argued in "What is it to wrong someone? A puzzle about justice", what allows us to stand in a relation of justice to other humans. Like McDowell, Thompson aims to show how virtuous second nature makes available to its bearer a justification of moral norms as good for her and as grounded in her first nature. However, because Thompson is focused on our apprehension of the obligations of justice to others even when the individual is not desirous of nor habituated to acting justly, Thompson is interested to establish a direct through-line from the individual's ethical knowledge to her first nature, no matter the particular constellation of her character or second nature. Rather than using a break between first and second natures to explain rationally irresolvable ethical viewpoints, Thompson emphasizes how our shared first nature imparts to us fundamentally the same ethical standpoint.

These examples show that even within contemporary arguments that share the aim of advancing ethical naturalism, the basic question of how second natures relate to first nature is answered differently to suit different argumentative priorities. As will become evident, Kant, like Thompson, is most interested to theorize the immediate, *a priori* recognition of another as within the community of moral agents, and so having moral bearing upon me and my possibilities for (good) action. Unlike Aristotle, whose focus is upon illuminating virtue as the normative standard and ideal for us achieved only through a good

enough upbringing, Kant's ethics is focused upon the accessibility of moral knowledge and the capacity for dutiful action basic to all functioning adults *qua* finite, dependent, rational beings.

Furthermore, our extra-philosophical ethical intuitions about and colloquial usages of "second nature" complicate debates about how to theorize second nature(s). At minimum, "second nature" centrally concerns the naturalness of second natures: to call something a "second nature" often indicates the absence of explicit thought about how to do *x* in doing *x* because of habituation, and also places this ability to do *x* within a natural developmental trajectory. "Second nature" also concerns the secondary aspect of the natural ability so identified: the ability in question is secondary because it constitutes a rational grasp of the norms internal to the practice of *x* that reaches expression in concrete physical abilities and achievements, and so something learned or acquired. A capacious understanding of second nature that leaves underdetermined the necessary features of any second nature, best enables Kant's writings to clarify, stretch, and define (a Kantian) "second nature" and its function in his ethical system.

But as the opening of my paper illustrates, there is reason to worry that no matter how capacious an understanding of second nature we start with, such a concept is fundamentally at odds with Kant's ethical project. In addition to the McDowell-Forman problem of how virtue as a second nature could be freely chosen by reason, which authors its own standards for judgment as autonomous, yet also some fixed, externally-given constraint upon reason developed through one's behavior, there is the additional problem of how a first nature of any kind could serve as a constraint or grounding for ethical norms recognized through one's second nature. Because reason determines what should be authoritative for us, reason, and not natural normativity, must answer what rational significance natural norms should have for us. In "Why be a good Human Being? Natural Goodness, Reason, and the Authority of Human Nature", Micah Lott calls this worry the authority-of-nature challenge and poses the problem this way:

Given your [the naturalist's] view that moral goodness is natural goodness, you can hold that morality has natural authority only if we have reason to do what our form dictates for us. But why think that human form is authoritative in that way? (2014: 769).²

As Lott's formulation makes clear, the authority-of-nature challenge weighs against all varieties of ethical naturalism, even if the worry about our ability to

² De Anna describes this challenge to naturalism as the *irrelevance of nature for practical normativity dilemma* (2018b: 307).

be rationally guided by norms that are in some sense extra-rational presses all the more acutely when thinking about Kant's ethics.

Exactly how to meet to the authority-of-nature challenge is not obvious, but both Lott and Gabriele De Anna in "Potentiality, Natural Normativity and Practical Reason" outline how any response should go. For both, the first step is to diagnose how the authority-of-nature challenge gets its bite: the challenge implicitly assumes (first) nature is the realm of scientific facts and biological necessities and physical causes and is thereby external to the (second natural) realm of reason and normativity and values and freedom. The key is to recognize that our nature is rational all the way down, which means our first nature can function as a source of natural normativity for us because it does not stand apart from reason as the source of normative criteria.³ "Any substantive conception of human form...will never be normatively inert", because "facts and values are mutually entrenched" (Lott 2014: 770; De Anna 2018b: 310). As De Anna explains,

first and second nature should not be conceived as two different realities, but as the same thing seen from the point of view of its potentialities and from the point of view of the activation of those potentialities (2018b: 317).

Once we recognize that the normativity of first nature is not an imposition on rational second nature from without, but reason's recognition of how we should understand and value our natural potentialities from within, we can identify this sort of ethical thought in Kant's writings. Importantly, the overall argumentative structure of the *Groundwork* exemplifies this sort of quest to understand and weight the capacities of our rational nature appropriately. Consider Kant's explication of the Formula of the Law of Nature and the imperfect duty to beneficence:

although it is possible that a universal law of nature [that I take nothing from others and contribute nothing to those in need] could very well subsist in accordance with such a maxim, it is still impossible to will that such a principle hold everywhere as a law of nature. For a will that decided this would conflict with itself... (GMS 4: 423).⁴

Here Kant is using the *nature* of our rational will as *dependent* upon others for securing our ends, and in particular our end of happiness, to argue that willing one's isolation from others, while not incoherent, is self-contradictory. Just after the first use of the above example to explicate perfect and imperfect

³ Drawing inspiration from Wittgenstein, De Anna affirms that "rationality is our form of life" (2018a: 4).

⁴ For all works by Kant, citations appear in the order of abbreviation, volume number, and page number from the Akademie Ausgabe (AA), Kants Gesammelte Schriften. All translations come from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.

duties, Kant introduces the Formula of Humanity:

Now I say that the human being and in general every rational being *exists* as an end in itself, *not merely as a means* to be used by this or that will at its discretion... Beings the existence of which rests not on our will but on nature, if they are beings without reason, still have only a relative worth, as means, and are therefore called *things*, whereas rational beings are called *persons* because their nature already marks them out as an end in itself... The ground of this [*objective*] principle [of the will] is: *rational nature exists as an end in itself* (GMS 4: 428).

Rational nature cannot help but see itself as normatively constrained by the existence of this same nature it sees in others.⁵

Yet both Lott and De Anna worry that the bringing together of natural normativity and reason empties (human) first nature of its ability to provide substantive normative constraint. For Lott, we risk sliding into Kantianism inasmuch as “it now seems that talk about ‘human form’ is merely a loose way of talking about ourselves as *reason-responsive beings*, or rational agents” (2014: 772).⁶ In “What is it to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle about Justice”, Thompson raises the related worry whether finite dependent rational being is a unified, substantive natural kind:

Thus, on Kant’s view, the recognition of another animal agent as reasoning practically is always at the same time recognition of him as a person in relation to oneself. There is no difficulty in specifying the manifold of persons into which our heroine judges herself to be inserted: it is, after all, just the class of all practically reasoning animals in nature, the class of all bearers of ‘humanity’. ...I have nothing to oppose this orthodox Kantian conception of the matter, apart from a mild naturalism. But that is enough, I think we should grant, to make a serious difficulty...[for] the strange and wonderful metaphysics of reason which would permit us to make sense of it (2004b: 383).

The problems raised by Lott, De Anna, Thompson, and others, suggest finite dependent rational being nature is too open-ended and encompassing to function as a determination of natural goodness.⁷

⁵ See Wilson 2013 for a realist interpretation of Kant as arguing that the value of persons is due to their nature.

⁶ De Anna similarly questions whether, in bringing reason and first nature together, we must inhabit a Kantian picture where “fundamental norms of practical reason are elaborated independently from considerations concerning human nature and then – once they are ready and defined – they are ‘applied to the human case’” (2018b: 324).

⁷ To be precise, Thompson argues that finite dependent rational being may be a substantive enough conception of natural goodness, but the metaphysical grounds for such a (super)natural kind are too extravagant.

There is no easy nor obvious answer as to whether there is enough conceptual meat on the bones of finite dependent rational being nature to answer what our good is and how we should pursue it. Lack of experience with would-be non-human bearers of finite dependent rational being nature means our ethical intuitions regarding these questions can go a bit wonky. For instance, I do think, as Thompson acknowledges many may, that we have reciprocally-structured ethical obligations to alien life forms, but I am not at all confident we would be able to identify finite dependent rational being nature wherever and however it may occur, such as in some sort of rational goo. This objection – that finite, dependent, rational being first nature is too encompassing to secure substantive ethical norms – is an iteration of the objection McDowell and Forman voice: that Kantian virtue, as free, self-legislated moral strength of will, cannot constitute some specified, concretized second nature. In both cases, the Kantian emphasis on reason as autonomous seems to undermine the possibility for reason to function as some determinate first or second nature. However, whether these autonomous rational first and second natures are in fact too indeterminate for our theoretical interests is a question best explored through examination of how they are specified and utilized by Kant.

2. *The specification and importance of Kantian first nature*

Without question, Kant's ethical framework foregrounds the special nature of all rational beings as possessing and deserving freedom, autonomy, and respect: for Kant, "the human being and in general every rational being *exists* as an end in itself" (*GMS* 4: 428).⁸ What is less clear is whether Kant thought we can give articulation to the nature and aims internal to finite dependent rational being nature as something distinct from human nature and from rational nature in general. It is necessary to fill out the nature of the rational being that is Kant's ethical subject, as the conceptual linkage of every rational being and autonomy (cf. *KpV* 5: 132) is too formal to specify a way of living substantive enough to function as normative standard.

Because Kant's aim is to make explicit the moral law as the practical normative standard *for us*, a central concern is to explain how this norm for good action is revealed within *our kind* of rational being. The key to delineating the kind of grip the moral law has as a practical norm for us and relevantly similar rational beings, is our experience of being morally obligated yet having the ability to act to fulfill our duty from reason alone, or what Kant calls necessitation:

⁸ The general category of rational being is also at issue at *KpV* 5: 93 and *KpV* 5: 131-132.

The very *concept of duty* is already the concept of a *necessitation* (constraint) of free choice through the law. ...Such constraint, therefore, does not apply to rational beings as such (there could 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. (*MdS* 6: 379).

The experience of being duty-bound marks out a kind of rational being: “imperatives are only formulae expressing the relation of objective laws of volition in general to the subjective imperfection of the will of this or that rational being, for example, of the human will” (*GMS* 4: 414). The relevant contrast is between “a holy will” not “capable of any maxim conflicting with the moral law”, and rational beings like us, where “the relation of such a will to this law is *dependence* under the name of obligation, which signifies a *necessitation*, though only by reason and its objective law, to an action which is called *duty*” (*KpV* 5: 32).⁹ Being pulled by our inclinations is an identifying feature of “the causality of a [rational] being that belongs to the sensible world” (*KpV* 5: 94). But this sensible pull at the same time makes apparent another identifying feature of our nature: freedom as a “transcendental predicate” of our kind of causality (*KpV* 5: 94).¹⁰ Freedom as something we cannot but think of our will as having (*GMS* 4: 455) and necessitation as the ability to do our duty from reason alone, makes evident the proper, good ordering of our kind of rational nature. Our recognition of and ability to act from duty despite the unavoidable pull of sensible interests shows the moral law to be “valid for us as human beings, since it arose from our will as intelligence and so from our proper self” (*GMS* 4: 461).

For Kant, there are two crucial methods by which we cotton on to finite, dependent, rational being nature as normative standard. The first method is interrogation of what Kant calls “common understanding”. The structure of the *Groundwork* exemplifies this method, for it starts from “common human reason” or common rational moral cognition in order to generate a metaphysics of morals, and then to an explanation of sorts of how the presupposed autonomy of the will is possible (a presupposition “as impossible for the most subtle philosophy as for the most common human reason to argue away” (*GMS* 4: 456)).¹¹

⁹ See also *GMS* 4: 414.

¹⁰ Kant writes, “it is this self-constraint in opposite directions [to his inclinations and to the inner law] and its unavoidability that makes known the inexplicable property of *freedom* itself” (*MdS* 6: 379n).

¹¹ See Kant’s own description of *Groundwork’s* argumentative structure as transitioning from “common moral appraisal” and “popular philosophy” to a metaphysics of morals that “goes if need be all the way to ideas” (*GMS* 4: 411).

Thus, then, we have arrived, within the moral cognition of common human reason, at its principle, which it admittedly does not think so abstractly in universal form but which it actually has always before its eyes and uses as the norm for its appraisals. Here it would be easy to show how common human reason, with this compass in hand, knows very well how to distinguish in every case that comes up what is good and what is evil, what is in conformity with duty or contrary to duty, if, without in the least teaching it anything new, we only, as did Socrates, make it attentive to its own principle. (*GMS* 4: 403-404)

By focusing on the commonality, even inescapability, of common human reason, we can find the necessity that Kant argues is definitive of our experience of moral duties as demanded by universal reason: "The practical use of common human reason confirms the correctness of this deduction" (*GMS* 4: 454).¹²

But to truly capture the necessity proper to the moral law, ongoing critical effort to cleanse common moral cognition of the human and the empirical is required. Kant tells us in the *Preface* that "from the common idea of duty and of moral laws" "everyone must grant" that a moral law "must carry with it absolute necessity", which means "the ground of obligation here must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world which he is placed", even if "a judgment sharpened by experience" can help us see and act upon moral demands (*GMS* 4: 389).¹³ By appealing to common understanding, Kant uses what we *see as* morally relevant, i.e., our subjective experience of morality, to elucidate the metaphysical features of finite, dependent rational nature.¹⁴ For "it is different with moral laws. They hold as laws only insofar as they can be seen to have an a priori basis and to be necessary" (*MdS* 6: 215). Seeing *x* as morally salient and justifying how so is part of filling out our account of the kind of rational nature that partakes in common understanding.

The second method for determining finite, dependent, rational being nature as normative standard is abstraction. Kant makes clear that coming into an understanding of this nature through conceptual abstraction and as distinct from human nature is an important ethical achievement, for this sort of conceptual work venerates and expresses reason's autonomy.¹⁵ For Kant, "common human

¹² Kant also appeals to "the commonest understanding" and what is "found even in the most common understanding" (*GMS* 4: 450; 452).

¹³ See also *GMS* 4: 425-427 for how the unconditional necessity of the moral law cannot arise from "the special property of human nature" nor "everything empirical".

¹⁴ For example, Kant asserts, "We take ourselves as..." "we think ourselves as..." (*GMS* 4: 450). See De Anna 2018b: 324ff for how *seeing as* is the beginning of self-knowledge.

¹⁵ See *Anth.* 7: 131-2 where Kant claims the ability to abstract "demonstrates a freedom of the faculty of thought and the authority of the mind". For the practical importance of this theoretical work, especially for moral instruction, see *GMS* 4: 411-412.

reason is impelled [...] on practical grounds themselves [...] to take a step into the field of practical philosophy” (*GMS* 4: 405). The aim is to make perspicuous a moral law that “does not hold only for human beings, as if other rational beings did not have to heed it”; a law of reason having this kind of necessary, general applicability is found through abstraction (*GMS* 4: 389).¹⁶ To carry out the purifying process of abstraction, “we shall often have to take as our object the particular *nature* of human beings, which is cognized only by experience, in order to *show* in it what can be inferred from universal moral principles” (*MdS* 6: 217).¹⁷ The freedom and autonomy of reason is displayed through such conceptual clarification, which goes beyond the instruction learned “through observing himself and his animal nature or from perceiving the ways of the world”; “Instead, reason commands how we are to act even though no example of this could be found” (*MdS* 6: 216).

The two previous quotes draw attention to an important distinction. On the one hand, “moral concepts [...] cannot be abstracted from any empirical and therefore merely contingent cognitions” because this would violate the autonomy of reason as the ability to freely determine its own normative standard, and not be given it in experience and by our (human) nature (*GMS* 4: 411). On the other hand, since “it is clear that all moral concepts have their seat and origin completely a priori in reason, and indeed in the most common reason”, our experiences and what is often called human nature are necessary starting points for working towards and filling out our representation of finite, dependent, rational being nature as autonomously bound by its own moral law (*GMS* 4: 411).¹⁸ The critical work of reason on itself, exemplified in the use of abstraction and common (practical) understanding, is how we secure the necessity and autonomy proper to moral normativity. Moral normativity is given by rational nature to itself, but rational nature as specified through a finite, dependent way of being.

It may seem the resultant conception of finite, dependent, rational being nature is too abstract, too inconclusive, to provide the sort of normative guidance

¹⁶ While Kant is not perfectly consistent, his contrasting uses of “human nature” and “humanity” work to distinguish possible characterizations of us (the biological species human) derived from empirical observation, from those characterizations relevant to finite, dependent, rational being nature as moral standard.

¹⁷ As Markus Kohl explains, “the property of non-anthropocentricity is a necessary condition for two features that Kant deems essential to normative principles: their *a priori* necessity and their role as autonomous laws of freedom” (2018: 240).

¹⁸ I cannot here provide the discussion of Kant’s account of abstraction it deserves. I think it fair to say that our representation of finite, dependent, rational being nature is an abstraction, for it is shorn of that which we come to identify as particular to human nature and everything else not relevant to this moral norm.

we receive from our immediate familiarity with human nature. But Kant's use of common understanding should reassure us that he too thinks that whatever we can say about the practical normativity proper to us, we start from our immediate experience of being that sort of thing, and so from the inside of the kind of nature in question. For Kant, we are just as much finite, dependent rational beings as we are humans; in neither case is everything we do and that happens to us equally revelatory of finite, dependent, rational being or human natures. Kant's use of common understanding works to focus in on what is relevant for articulating the true (necessary, autonomous) moral standard. Likewise, Aristotle's use of *what is said* elevates particular claims as especially pertinent to the correct determination of the (human) ethical standard.

For both Kant and Aristotle, the dialectical structure of their ethical arguments begins from experience ("what is the case"), but there is need to move beyond empirical examples in order to articulate the ethical normative standard fit for us ("what we ought to be and do"), using reason to make clear the conceptual features that must belong to the normative standard as an ideal. In neither ethical system does experience supply the normative ideal, even though identifying the salient features of our experience is how we start the search for this ideal. The possibilities rational nature opens and the self-regulatory functioning of reason means no actual, particular human or finite dependent rational being's life can fully instantiate the normative ideal. This is perhaps most evident in Aristotle's closing argument for the superiority of the happiness found in the contemplative life:

One should not follow the advice of those who say "Human you are, think human thoughts", and "Mortals you are, think mortal" ones, but instead, so far as is possible, assimilate to the immortals and do everything with the aim of living in accordance with what is highest of the things in us (*EN* X.7, 1177b33-1178a1).

For Aristotle, "the human" as normative ideal is an abstraction we must continually strive after.¹⁹ While "human" may be a more intuitive natural category and normative ideal than "finite, dependent rational being", in both cases, in order to function as a normative ideal, we must use reason to make explicit the conceptual features of this ideal, and so go beyond our experiences as such a

¹⁹ One could object that "human" designates a biological species characterizable through empirical observations (including by Aristotle in other works), and this material foundation of the biological species is necessary for any ethical naturalism. However, biological descriptions of the human will be largely irrelevant for the work involved in characterizing the human as normative standard. To insist that biological features are determinative of the relevant ethical standard is to hold "certain philosophically contentious interpretations of what naturalism must involve" because prioritizing efficient causal explanations over teleological (Boyle, Lavin 2010: 190).

creature. Finite, dependent, rational being first nature is not inadequate to the task of structuring an ethical system as normative ideal, even if less initially compelling. Moreover, consideration of Kant's objections to experience and (a certain conception of) human nature for satisfying this task makes evident unappreciated features of Aristotle's ethical naturalism and use of the human.

3. *How Kantian virtue can fit a conception of second nature*

How to understand Kant's conception of virtue as expressive of the agent's freedom and autonomy but also a settled disposition to do morally good willing, is a complex question.²⁰ I believe Kant provides two complementary descriptions of his conception of virtue.²¹ The first, more structural description is virtue as the virtuous agent's committed practice to the prioritization of the principle of morality over the principle of prudence in her practical reasoning. In the *Religion*, Kant describes how virtue (or vice) can be viewed as a practical ordering principle, because consisting in the disposition to make the principle of morality (or the principle of self-love) primary in reasoning towards action through the subordination of the other practical principle to it.

[T]he difference, whether the human being is good or evil, must not lie in the difference between the incentives that he incorporates into his maxim (not in the material of the maxim) but in their *subordination* (in the form of the maxim): *which of the two he makes the condition of the other* (*Religion* 6: 36).

Kant further describes the transformative practical resolution involved in making primary the practical principle of morality primary in one's practical reasoning and the subsequent, continuing labor this requires at *Religion* 6: 46ff.

The second description of virtue as moral strength (e.g. *MdS* 6: 394, 397, 405) shows how the individual's rational commitment to virtue as practical ordering principle builds upon itself, shaping the virtuous agent's will (as strong) and sensibility (as better disposed). For Kant, virtue is the *capacity* developed by practice to master one's inclinations, not merely an aptitude (*MdS* 6: 383). Thus, the description of virtue as moral strength helps answer how virtue can be both a condition of the virtuous agent's will and an exercise of the agent's practical freedom. Analogous to how the physically strong person moves through the world, the virtuous, strong agent has more freedom because more capable of performing a range of actions, and she accomplishes difficult tasks with more

²⁰ There is much good scholarship on Kant on virtue, but I have especially benefitted from Baxley 2010.

²¹ See Holberg 2018 for more on my view of Kant's account of virtue.

ease because of her acquired strength of will. But also like physical strength, this condition of the will is not capable of being chosen or produced in the moment, but requires prior practice to be in this good, healthy condition.

With this rough outline of Kant's conception of virtue, we can begin to address the assumption shared by McDowell and Forman that there cannot be Kantian second natures, since any second nature, as some determinate shape of an agent's practical reasoning developed through her past experiences that functionally constrains how the agent perceives and acts, must by definition violate the fundamental Kantian commitment to practical reason's autonomy. The first issue is to show that Kant indeed thinks of virtue as something like a *nature*, so a settled, fundamental disposition or constitution of individuals that characterizes how they think and act. Kant tells us that a doctrine of virtue is only for finite, dependent rational beings as tempted to violate duty, but as also conscious of "the *capacity* to master one's inclinations when they rebel against the law" (*MdS* 6: 383). We are given "certain moral endowments" that "are natural predispositions of the mind (*praedispositio*) for being affected by concept of duty, antecedent predispositions on the side of *feeling*" (*MdS* 6: 399). These subjective conditions of receptiveness to the concept of duty are what make it possible to for us to be obligated to the moral law, and also to cultivate how we are affected by the moral law (our subjective, aesthetic response to duty). The enhanced capacity, developed and strengthened by practice, to master one's inclinations is virtue. Moreover, as the practical commitment to the priority of the moral law is lived over time, it shifts the agent's pleasures and so also how the agent perceives the world.²² Kant indicates that he thinks of virtue as a settled, fundamental disposition characteristic of an individual's entire way of moving through the world when he suggests we should think of virtue in its complete perfection as if "virtue possesses [a human being]", for otherwise "it would look as if [the virtuous person] still had a choice" whether or not to choose to act virtuously (*MdS* 6: 406). The fixity of virtue in structuring how the virtuous person practically reasons is shown in Kant's claim that, "the virtuous man cannot lose his virtue" (*MdS* 6: 405).

To explain this surprising claim concerning the fixity of virtue, we need to examine the ways virtue is not like any sort of nature, but is a *secondary* nature. I doubt Kant means to deny the possibility that a virtuous person may do actions that fall short of duty.²³ Instead I see Kant as asserting that,

²² See *Anth.* 7: 236 for evidence virtue enhances an agent's sensitivity to others, and Holberg 2018 for a more complete argument regarding how virtue shifts the virtuous agent's sensibility.

²³ For good reasons, Kant has traditionally been read as more open to such a possibility than Aristotle.

given the import of the commitment to virtue and the necessary, intentional, practical work already put into developing one's nature to virtue, the virtuous person could but will not choose to change her character towards vice. This claim – that the virtuous person may fall short of virtue in her actions, but will not violate her chosen commitment to virtue as the structural prioritization of the moral principle in her practical reasoning – makes sense only if one is thinking of virtue as the natural, teleological fulfillment of our first nature. Although both virtue and vice are stable, ongoing, reasoning patterns that circularly shape how the agent perceives and moves through the world, virtue has a fixity vice lacks because it is the knowing experience of empowerment from coming into one's own. Kant declares, “Only in [virtue's] possession is he ‘free’, ‘healthy’, ‘rich’, ‘a king’ and so forth and he can suffer no loss by chance or fate, since he is in possession of himself” (*MdS* 6: 405). Kant likens virtue to health of the soul: while one may be in physically healthy condition through good fortune (however unlikely), one cannot be healthy in one's soul without having done the work of good, dutiful willing, meaning one cannot be virtuous without valuing virtue as practical freedom and strength (*MdS* 6: 384). For life forms with finite, dependent rational being first nature, that is, rational creatures with sensibility and thus the two practical ends of happiness and good, dutiful, willing, virtue is the good, healthy ordering of our practical reason. This good order of finite, dependent, reason cannot be given to reason as necessarily entailed by its first nature, but instead must be established by reason itself as a secondary, developmental achievement. Additionally, practical reason is able to recognize its achievement of its *telos*: virtue is “called wisdom in the strict sense, namely practical wisdom, since it makes the final end of [a person's] existence on earth its own end” (*MdS* 6: 405). As our healthy rational second nature, virtue is what we should grow into; it represents the natural progression and aim, not of our capacities as human beings, but rather, of our moral capacity as finite, dependent, rational beings “and so [proceeds] in accordance with our rational knowledge of what they [our kind of rational being] ought to be in keeping with the idea of humanity” (*MdS* 6: 404-405).

While one could worry that the fixity of virtue as the proper finite dependent rational being second nature constrains reason's *autonomy*, this is not a worry for Kant, who describes virtue as “inner freedom” and a “free aptitude” (*MdS* 6: 407). Indeed, as the free choice by reason to prioritize moral concerns in practical reasoning, and so to prioritize the doing of dutiful, autonomous actions, this practical “policy” serves to increase one's freedom, understood as the capacity to will autonomously. Virtue is no threat to autonomy, but instead constitutes the autonomously procured enhancement of autonomy.

But perhaps the worry is better put thus: the states of being virtuous or being vicious, as concretized conditions of the agent's sensibility and practical reason, constrain autonomy, which shows second nature, understood as marking some condition of one's will, to be incompatible with Kant's ethical system. This worry requires a three-part response.

Firstly, there is no condition of the agent's will nor sensibility that prevents that agent from acting from and for the sake of duty; as Kant states clearly, "Human choice, however, is a choice that can indeed be *affected* but not *determined* by impulses" (*MdS* 6: 213).²⁴ The condition of a person's practical sensibility can make certain actions easier or more difficult, but we are always free to choose any (moral or immoral) action and responsible for that choice.

Secondly, Kant confronts the difficulty of attributing responsibility for bad actions that flow from bad habits "which by gradual neglect of attention he has allowed to grow in him" or even from "the hopeless natural constitution of the mind", by arguing that our freedom and responsibility for individual actions means we are responsible for the bad habits we have developed, and also the individual actions we (freely) do from within this bad condition (*KpV* 5: 98, 100). For Kant, "whatever arises from one's choice (as every action intentionally performed undoubtedly does) has as its basis a free causality" so that "vicious constitution of the will [is not] necessary but is instead the consequence of the evil and unchangeable principles freely adopted" (*KpV* 5: 100). This is similar to Aristotle's argument that because only a thoroughly stupid person does not know that we become what we do and because we voluntarily choose individual actions, vicious persons are responsible for their bad characters, even though for Aristotle, in the moment, a vicious person lacks the power to choose to be vicious or not (*EN* III.5, especially 1114a5ff).²⁵

Thirdly, Kant pushes us to see an asymmetry between virtuous and vicious conditions of the will. The previous account of Kantian virtue suggests there are two ways to be vicious within Kant's ethical system: a person may explicitly commit to the prioritization of their happiness to moral considerations in their practical reasoning, or a person may *de facto* do this in their actions, but lack any commitment or explicit thought about how the proper relation of moral to prudential concerns. These possibilities for viciousness do flow from our

²⁴ See Engstrom 2002 for more on this distinction.

²⁵ McDowell is interested to emphasize the lack of shared perspective and reasons between persons with virtuous and vicious second natures, an idea he draws out of Aristotle. However, Kant's emphasis on the accessibility of the moral law and the ability to do dutiful actions as inherent to all finite dependent rational beings no matter the condition of their will makes Kantian second nature more accordant with Thompson's interest to theorize how a shared first nature situates each individual agent in a relation of justice to each and every bearer of this first nature.

nature. However, vicious character formations are in some sense an extension of what we must first, most properly identify as finite dependent rational being second nature. There may be durable, characteristic, vicious formations of our rational first nature, but vice lacks the fixity of virtue;²⁶ as malformations of practical reason, vicious character formations do not stand in the right sort of teleological relation to our first nature, making vicious lives in some important sense less natural and less self-reinforcing.

I have argued that Kantian virtue can be understood as a second nature. Being a virtuous person is an autonomous exercise of reason even while virtue constitutes a settled nature accrued through one's past behavior. Key to reconciling virtue as an exercise of freedom and autonomy and as a condition that constrains the agent's practical reasoning is to see virtue as the natural, teleological achievement of finite, dependent, rational being first nature. Virtuous condition of the will is no constraint upon autonomy, for virtue is the proper development of autonomy within finite, dependent, rational being nature. Together, our reliance upon finite, dependent, rational being first nature to correctly characterize virtue as a condition of freedom, and the usefulness of virtue as healthy second nature for specifying the underlying first nature, suggests that accounts of (Kantian) first and second natures should proceed conjointly. Finally, the exploration of Kant's ethical system as a variant form of ethical naturalism helpfully presses the question of what is absolutely crucial and what is more peripheral for being an ethical naturalist. Kant's idiosyncratic use of finite, dependent, rational being nature as normative standard brings into relief the particular emphases and concerns of Aristotle's use of human nature as normative standard. In thinking through the desirability and inferential connections between particular theoretical decisions by Kant and Aristotle in characterizing our moral nature, we too take up the task posed by reason to understand and weight our moral experiences and potentialities appropriately.²⁷

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²⁶ As seen, for instance, in the possibility of (moral) conversion experiences.

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