

**Must Eudaimonism Mean the Euthanasia of All Morals?
Kant's Rigorism and the Morality of Happiness**

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In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, the last of Kant's major ethical works, he offers the following estimation eudaimonian ethics. "If eudaimonism (the principle of happiness) is set up as the basic principle [of ethics]..., the result is the *euthanasia* (easy death) of all morals." [MM 378/183]¹ An ethical doctrine is eudaimonian, in Kant's terms, if it treats acting virtuously as source of happiness or contentment. This special kind of happiness, which Kant also calls 'moral happiness' and opposes to 'empirical happiness,' is, he tells us, a "self-contradictory absurdity." [MM 377/182] Kant's use of the Greek term 'eudaimonian' to characterize this mistake is not accidental. He means to direct our attention to the doctrines of certain ancient philosophers closely associated with it, most notably Aristotle and the Stoics.

At first blush, Kant's rejection eudaimonism seems strange. He begins his first mature work on ethics with the unambiguous endorsement of the idea of a virtuous will is the central, indeed the only, concern of the ethical life. "There is no possibility of thinking of anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which

¹ The key to references to Kant's works is found at the end of the text.

can be regarded as good without qualification [that is, as morally good,] except a good will." [G 393/7] In the midst of the growing tribes of utilitarians, sentimentalists, and rational egoists who populate the landscape of modern ethical thought, Kant's call to focus on virtue for virtue's sake seems to belong to a different time. Indeed one might easily suspect that Kant will encourage us to look to the doctrines of those ancient philosophers who share his view that moral virtue perfects the person who possesses it. Like Kant, the ancient eudaimonists insist that virtue is only virtue if it is exercised for its own sake, not as a means to some other goal. Yet, it is precisely these philosophers Kant condemns.

In tonight's lecture I will explore Kant's ethics with a view to understanding why Kant thinks he must reject any form of eudaimonism. I shall begin by examining an aspect of Kant's ethics that is usually ignored and which is generally disparaged when it is noticed. This is what Kant calls 'rigorism.' I shall argue that rigorism, properly understood, is an essential aspect of Kant's ethics. By exploring the roots of Kant's rigorism, I hope to make clear that Kant's ethics is deeply teleological in its orientation, and that his treatment of duty cannot be understood apart from his doctrine of virtue. It is in his doctrine of virtue that we find his reasons for rejecting eudaimonian ethics. Virtue requires purity of motivation, and philosophers such as the Stoics and Aristotle who teach us to think that virtue is essentially related

to happiness threaten the purity of the motives of the virtuous agent and thereby undermine the practice of virtue itself.

RIGORISM

Kant's clearest endorsement of rigorism is found in the opening sections of Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone.

It is of the greatest consequence to ethics in general to avoid admitting, so long as possible, of anything morally intermediate, whether in action...or in human characters; for with such ambiguity all maxims are in danger of forfeiting their precision and stability. Those who are partial to this strict mode of thinking are called rigorists (a name which is intended to carry reproach, but which actually praises)... [R 22/18]

The rigorist is not someone who adheres unwaveringly to principles of duty, e.g., someone who tells the truth even when doing so will cause a great sacrifice of non-moral goods. Rather, rigorists are persons inclined to view every action or state of character as morally significant, that is, as either good or evil with no moral middle ground.

The scope of Kant's rigorism is not limited only to actions and traits of character. It also applies to the moral evaluation of the entire character of a person.

Neither can a man be morally good in some ways and at the same time morally evil in others. His being good in one way means he has incorporated the moral law into his maxim; were he, therefore at the same time evil in another way, while his maxim would be universal as based on the moral law of obedience to duty, which is essentially single and universal, it would be at the same time only particular; but this is a contradiction. [R 24-25/20]

Persons are either good or evil in the foundation of their moral character.

Opposed to rigorists are what Kant calls latitudinarians. Latitudinarians threaten to undermine morality by marking off categories of action or traits of character as intermediate between good and evil and as therefore falling outside of the scope of morality. Kant identifies two types of latitudinarians: indifferentists and syncretists. Indifferentists are philosophers who maintain that human beings are by nature indifferent to virtue and vice. No ancients fall into this category.[R 25/20 note] Kant seems to have in mind here modern advocates of natural rights such as Hobbes, Pufendorf, Grotius, and Locke. According to Hobbes, there is no justice or injustice in the natural condition of men. Morality consists of a set of human agreements which we make and keep because it is in our interest to do so. Locke differs from Hobbes in that he believes that there are eternal moral laws which ought to guide our behavior. But lacking human agreements to enforce these laws, and, ultimately, a divine judge to assure their perfect application, we do not have a sufficient motive to obey them. A marginal note of Locke's expresses this well.

Men have a natural tendency to what delights and from what pains them. This universal observation has been established beyond doubt. But that the soul has such a tendency to what is morally

good and from what is morally evil has not fallen under my observation, and therefore I deny it.²

For the indifferentists, moral activity has nothing to do with the perfection of the agent. Rather, the guiding light in our adherence to any moral principle is self-interest which leads us to avoid conflicts which would and render our own individual, private pursuit of pleasure impossible. Without constraints on self-interest, individuals would not have any reasonable assurance of their ability to survive and pursue even part of their private agenda. Thus even agents who are completely motivated by self-interest will be led to conform to a moral principles because by doing so they can carve out a space in which they are able to pursue their own private interest without restraint.³

By syncretists, on the other hand, Kant seems to have in mind primarily, advocates of moral sense, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and

²Cited by John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man* (London: Duckworth, 1972), p.159

³Leibniz is sharply critical of this idea the compatibility of what he calls 'internal corruption' and 'external virtue'. "While it is possible that someone, by hope or fear, will repress wicked thoughts, so that they do not harm...nevertheless he will never succeed in making them useful. Therefore, whoever is not well intentioned will often sin, at least by omission....Thus [Pufendorf's] hypothesis about a soul which is internally corrupt and outwardly innocent is not very safe and not very probable." Political Writings (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.69 Those of you who have read Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* will remember Ivan's claim that he would protect his father's life while retaining the 'right' to wish for his murder. He ends up not only wishing for his father's murder but also acting to facilitate it.

Hume. {Kant lectured with enthusiasm on the these moral theories of these philosophers in the mid 1760's - about 20 years before he finally formulated his mature ethical views. He was still trying to incorporate major elements of moral sense theory in his ethics as late as 1775.} These philosophers maintain that virtuous behavior is motivated by a unique set of feelings which direct us to goals different from those of immediate self-interest. I quote here from Francis Hutcheson's *The Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*.

The author of nature has much better furnished us for a virtuous conduct than our moralists seem to imagine, by almost as quick and powerful instructions as we have for the preservation of our bodies. He has given us strong affections to be the springs of each virtuous action and made virtue a lovely form that we might easily distinguish it from its contrary, and be happy in the pursuit of it.⁴

The beauty of virtuous actions stems from the fact that they are beneficent, that is, they tend to the public good or the goods of other individuals even when they conflict with self-interest.

However, these motives are often competing with other interested motives, and there can be no assurance that the motive of virtue will be sufficiently strong to win out over other motives opposing it. Moral sense theorists, at least Hume and Hutcheson, endorse the practice of finding ways to combine appeals to the moral sense with appeals to self-interest.

⁴From *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*, J.B. Schneewind editor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Vol. II, p.506.

Beneficent actions tend to the public good; it is therefore good and kind to give all possible additional motives to them, and to excite men who have some weak degrees of good affection to promote the public good more vigorously by motives of self-interest...⁵

In the end, we have a we cannot tell and perhaps do not care which motive, love of virtue or self-interest is primary. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant expresses his distaste for this kind of theory.

[W]e find ourselves in a syncretistic age, when a certain shallow and dishonest coalition between contradictory principles is devised because it is more acceptable to a public which is satisfied to know a little about everything and at bottom nothing...[CprV 24/23]

MORAL WORTH

In order to see why Kant objects to the morality of actions in which self-interest or natural feelings of beneficence lead us to do the right thing, let us turn to Kant's argument from the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. In the much discussed examples from the first section of the *Groundwork* Kant contrasts actions that are simply in accord with duty with actions that are performed out of a sense of duty. A shopkeeper acts from the motive of his own calculated self-interest. He performs the morally required action and charges his customer an honest price. But he acts for a "selfish purpose" rather than from a sense of duty. In his second example a naturally beneficent man, one whom Kant

⁵Schneewind, Vol. II, p.512.

characterizes as a 'friend of mankind', acts in accord with his duty to help those less fortunate than himself. Even though he acts without vanity or selfish purpose and is motivated by a genuine concern for the happiness of another, his act does not spring from a sense of duty and, therefore, according to Kant, it lacks moral worth.

Kant identifies three problems with motives of the self-interested shopkeeper and the friend of humanity. First, their motives do not lead to moral actions in a universal manner, that is, under all conditions and in all circumstances. If his calculations of market forces and social pressures no longer constrain him, the shopkeeper who acts out of self-interest will fail to act in accordance with his duty. There is no necessary connection between his self-interest and honesty. In the case of the friend of humanity, feelings such as beneficence may lead him to perform actions which are even contrary to those morally prescribed. The beneficent person may, out of sympathetic feelings, protect the guilty from punishment, supply drugs to a suffering drug addict, kill someone to end suffering, or help a terrified criminal escape legal detection. If you have read *Crime and Punishment* place yourself behind the pawnbroker's door with Raskolnikov when he is on the brink of being discovered after his murders and see where your sympathy lies. Or read the concluding scenes of *Of Mice and Men* in which George kills Lennie and then

lies about his act and its motives. Sympathy is with the escaping criminal and the beneficent lying murderer.

The second problem Kant finds with motives of self-interest and beneficence is that it is a matter of chance that we find ourselves endowed with these motives. They are subject to arbitrary alteration. The sympathetic person's feelings may change. He is affected by the ingratitude of his beneficiaries or by a change in his circumstances and the feelings of sympathy weaken to the point where they are no longer sufficient to move him. Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* presents us with just such a man. Timon's generous benevolence is transformed into raging misanthropy by the ingratitude of those around him.

These problems point to Kant's third, and deeper, reason for thinking that motives other than duty for duty's sake have no true moral worth. Persons acting from self-interest or beneficence really have different ends in view from those acting from a sense of duty. The shopkeeper motivated only by self-interest, or the sympathetic person motivated only by feelings of benevolence, act without regard for duty. The person who acts from a sense of duty acts out of respect for the moral law. His end includes, at a minimum, the component that he will not violate the moral law.

For Kant, human beings are more than natural beings governed by sentiments. In so far as we are parts of nature, we find ourselves subject to various feelings and inclinations that are caused in us

independently of our wills. As rational beings, however, we find ourselves set apart from nature.

Everything in nature acts according to laws. Only a rational being has the power to act according to the idea of laws, that is according to principles; that is to say only a rational being has a will. [G 412, my translation]

Human agents are able to distance themselves from the immediate promptings of nature, consider other possibilities, order and rank incentives. That is, they can think about how they are going to act and give reasons for their choices. In calling our motives 'maxims' or 'ideas of laws' Kant means to emphasize the fact that human action contains rational reflection on both the ends of action and the motives for pursuing them. Actions which appear the same externally can be motivated by very different maxims. A shopkeeper must rank self-interest and honesty in his maxim. If he ranks self-interest above honesty, his honest dealing with his customers depends on his perception that it will promote his self-interest. His motive is very different from the shopkeeper whose honesty is not dependent entirely his self-interest. The shopkeeper who values honesty more highly than self-interest will act honestly from a principle, that is the idea of the good of honesty, even when he can see no benefit for himself from honest dealing.

A rational agent whose reason is not just instrumental, but is practical in the Kantian sense can ask why he is doing what he is doing; that is, he capable of conscious self-examination of his

motives. For Kant, practical reason does not just deliberate about means; it is also active in evaluating ends. Kant's forbiddingly titled "Categorical Imperative," in its initial formulation, really commands no more of rational agents than that they choose ends for good reasons, that is, reasons which command the assent of any rational being. For example, for the self-interested shopkeeper to say that his action is a good one, he must be able to say that it is good for people to value self-interest over honesty. The enterprise of shop keeping, however, depends on customers and suppliers keeping their promises, honoring contracts, and respecting ownership. These conditions of shop keeping would be impossible if everyone was to value self-interest over honesty. Hence it is inconsistent for the shop keeper to will self-interest over honesty. In willing his self-interest over honesty he is inconsistent in the same way a thief who wants others to respect his ill gotten gain is inconsistent. "That's my money; I stole it."

The moral agent who respects his reason giving capacity refuses to allow his reason to be reduced to the status of a mere instrument serving for the procurement of ends prompted by his desires. Retaining rational control of the ends of his action is the goal that a self-respecting rational agent sets for himself. Kant summarizes this line of argument in discussing the 'respect humanity' version of the categorical imperative.

Rational nature is distinguished from the rest of nature by the fact that it sets itself an end. This end would be the matter of every good will. But in the idea of an absolutely good will...complete abstraction must be made from every end that has come about as an effect....And so the end must be conceived not as an end to be effected, but as an independently existing end. Hence it must be conceived only negatively, i.e., as an end which should never be acted against and therefore as one which in all willing must never be regarded merely as means but must always be esteemed at the same time as an end. [G 437/42]

We act against humanity when we treat the rational capacity that makes us persons, as a mere means to be used in procuring any goals. This amounts to no more than saying that the ultimate end of any rational being's mode of action must respect its integrity as a rational being. It is neither possible nor desirable to eliminate pathologically conditioned incentives directed towards an indefinite variety of ends - food, drink, friends, knowledge, etc.; but these can be tested for permissibility and overridden if they fail the test.

It is a consequence of this account that Kant's rigorism holds for action. No actions can be morally neutral. Consider an agent whose maxim ranks self-interest or immediate inclination of benevolence above respect for duty. The agent is then treating the satisfaction of these incentives as unconditional goods. While this might produce permissible actions occasionally, or even in particularly fortuitous circumstances, throughout a lifetime, the maxim of the agent lacks recognition of the primacy of the moral law and expresses a willingness even to violate the moral law should it be necessary in the pursuit of its object. While such an

action may be legally permissible, it has a morally unacceptable motive. [CprR 62/64] In their maxims agents either recognize respect for the moral law as a necessary condition for the permissibility of actions, or they do not. If acts include this recognition as part of their motive, they are morally good and can be willed universally. If motives do not include respect for the moral law, they cannot be willed universally and the actions they prompt are morally evil. An action which is not one or the other is impossible.

A morally indifferent action...would be one resulting from natural laws, and hence standing in no relation whatsoever to the moral law, which is the law of freedom; for such action is not a morally significant fact at all... [R 23/18, note]

In other words, an 'action' which is morally indifferent is not really an action at all. It is rather a natural event governed by natural necessity.

HAPPINESS AND MORAL LIFE

As so far characterized, Kant's rigorism might seem fairly benign. While it recognizes an overriding duty to adopt a certain point of view when evaluating actions, it might turn out that most actions considered by most agents are in the permissible category. It need not be not an overly onerous intrusion into most lives. Furthermore, it is not yet clear why Kant's rigoristic exclusion of a moral middle ground between good and evil applies to character of

the agent considered as a whole. Why could it not be the case that one is respectful of the moral law in areas of life dealing with property and honesty but falls short when it comes to sensual pleasures such as food and drink? Why does Kant think that we cannot be good in some ways and bad in others, virtuous at some times and vicious at others?

In order to begin answering these questions let us turn to Kant's account of the place of the pursuit of happiness in a moral life. This is, perhaps, best illustrated in the genetic account of the development of moral consciousness found in a number of works - short essays on history and the *Critique of Judgment* - written in the period between the *Groundwork* the *Religion*.

The story Kant tells about the development of moral consciousness in human agents (and for which he acknowledges his debt to Rousseau [SBHH 116/54]) goes something like this. As animals human beings find themselves with a host of natural inclinations. The rational capacity of human beings complicates the way in which we respond to these inclinations. The technical rationality of human beings enables them to develop arts and sciences. Competition and jealousy among people leads to greater reliance on craft and less on nature in the satisfaction of desire. As a consequence people are able to pursue a wider variety of ends than could be prompted by mere instinct. They find themselves confronted with a range of options which are not mutually

compatible and must make choices requiring rational consideration.

This in turn requires the discipline of desires, freeing them from their immediate responses to the impulses of nature.

It is a characteristic of reason that it will with the aid of imagination cook up desires for things for which there is not only no natural urge, but even an urge to avoid; at the outset these desires go by the name of greediness, and from them arise a whole swarm of unnecessary, indeed even unnatural, propensities that go by the name of voluptuousness. [SBHH 111/51]

Worry about the future satisfaction of as yet unfelt desires, desire for honor and esteem of others, and the corresponding vices of avarice and envy as well as a taste for beauty and higher learning are the result of this expanding circle of desires.

The agent must now use his reason to impose order on the mess it has helped to create. Reason does not yet function morally. It does not dictate what ends ought to be pursued. Rather, it attempts to form a coherent idea of order out of the ends suggested by desire. The object of this idea is what we mean by 'happiness.'

The concept of happiness is not one that man abstracts (say) from his instincts and hence gets from himself as an animal. Rather, it is a mere idea: the idea of a state of his, an idea to which he tries to make that state adequate under merely empirical conditions. [J 430/317. See also, SBHH 113-4/52.]

The idea of happiness, "the greatest sum of what is agreeable in life," [J 208/50] represents a good, but one which is merely subjective, since its organizing principle is dictated by arbitrary individual preference.

When happiness is pursued as an unconditioned good it leads to incoherence. This is because happiness pursued as an unconditioned end is unattainable.

Even if we restricted the concept of happiness to the true natural needs shared by our entire species, or if instead we maximized man's skill for accomplishing the purposes he imagines, he would still never reach what he means by happiness, and reach what is in fact his own ultimate natural purpose...: for it is not his nature to stop possessing and enjoying at some point and be satisfied. [J 430/318]

In more realistic circumstances where we do have unnatural desires and have only moderate skill in satisfying them, the pursuit of happiness results in a condition even less adequate to the idea of happiness.

If the value that life has for us is assessed merely in terms of what we enjoy (i.e. happiness, the natural purpose of the sum of our inclinations), then the answer is easy: the value falls below zero. [J 434 note/321]

When happiness is pursued as an unconditioned good it also leads to conflict with others because it fails to harmonize efforts of different individuals. Given the subjective nature of the idea of happiness, such conflict is inevitable. [CprR 28/27-28] The conflict among individuals leads to greater disorder, fears, frustrations, and new desires for power..The pursuit of happiness as an unconditioned good leads to its opposite of its goal. [IUH 20-21/32]

I want to emphasize two points that emerge from Kant's story about the sad fate of human agency dominated by the idea of unconditioned happiness. First, Kant illustrates the the

systematic function of reason in its practical affairs. All human end setting is mediated by rational conceptions of ends and self-awareness of the agent. In human agents reason transforms what Kant calls our "crude" predispositions from an animal-like instinctual form of end setting into a distinctly human capacity. All human end setting involves the use of 'ideas.' Even in the pursuit of non-moral ends, reason has more than a purely instrumental role to play. Second, in pursuing happiness unconditionally we are driven to recognize the futility of happiness as the final goal of human action. In this recognition, however, we discover our independence from the desire for happiness. This in turn leads to the idea of an end which can successfully introduce systematic order into our practical pursuits and successfully harmonize them with those of others. [SBHH 114/52] This is the idea of the moral law.

In his genetic accounts of the development of human moral capacities Kant does little more than hint at how a systematic moral idea of life might emerge from the failure of the idea of happiness to provide a coherent guide to action. [SBHH 114-5/52-53] His formal account of the relationship between happiness and the moral law, however, fits exactly as the end of this process. By subjecting the desire for happiness to the condition that it be pursued in accordance with the moral law, happiness first becomes a true good and not just an object of arbitrary preference. Self-love cannot be rejected. According to Kant, it is "natural and

active in us even prior to the moral law." [CprR 73/76] When self-love allows its claims to be mediated by the moral law, however, they can be willed universally; and it is then called "rational self-love." [CprR 73/76] By recognizing the necessity of considering the happiness of others and willing my happiness only when it harmonizes with that of humanity in general, willing my own happiness has the form of law and is objectively good.

Let the material content [of my maxim] be...my own happiness. If I attribute this to everyone, as in fact I may attribute it to all finite beings, it can become an objective practical law only if I include within it the happiness of others. Therefore, the law that we should further the happiness of others arises not from the presupposition that this law is an object of everyone's choice, but from the fact that the form of universality which reason requires as a condition for giving the maxim of self-love the objective validity of law, is itself the determining ground of the will. [CprR 34/35]

If I am willing to subject the claims of self-love to the form of the moral law, I have a virtuous disposition and my happiness becomes a legitimate goal. If I limit the requirements of the moral law in order to accommodate my pursuit of happiness, then I have a vicious disposition.

MORAL LAW AND FUNDAMENTAL DISPOSITIONS

As a agent endowed with practical reason, then, each of us is confronted with two competing principles of systematic order and must choose between them. The whole of each agent's moral life can be ordered either by the demands of self-love or by respect for the moral law.

The disposition, i.e., the ultimate subjective ground for the adoption of maxims, can be one and only one and applies to the whole use of freedom. [R 25/20; see also MM 410/210-11]

Both principles, happiness and obedience to the moral law, are original and indispensable. The choice of what Kant calls a "supreme maxim" [R 31/26] determines which principle will be subordinate to which. Either the pursuit of happiness is subordinated to the moral law or the moral law is acknowledged only when it does not interfere with the pursuit of happiness.

Kant's argument for the claim that the whole agency of a moral agent must be governed by a single maxim or principle is based on his insistence that human actors do have systematic conceptions of themselves as agents, and these conceptions include an estimation of the relative merits an agent assigns to moral incentives. We have the capacity to think about our lives as wholes, rather than as random sequences of unconnected actions. We do not shift arbitrarily from one set of motives and values to another. If such a shift does occur, it needs to be explained either by means of a deeper continuous value, or by means of a change in the basic disposition of the agent and the adoption or rejection of a basic maxim. In either case there is a basic maxim at work. If an agent refuses to relate his maxims to each other and is willing to allow a high degree of incoherence in his agency, he has adopted a maxim of moral indifference. The only other possibility, Kant notes, [R 21/17-18, note] is that he acts on natural impulse. But Kant

rejects this because he assumes that human agents are free, rational beings and can take an interest the coherence of their maxims if they choose to do so. What is lacking in the morally shiftless agent is not a systematic conception of his own agency. Rather it is the disposition to respect the moral law in his systematic conception of his agency.

Kant's argument concerning the 'supreme principle' of virtue in the *Metaphysics of Morals* reflects this argument. The supreme principle of virtue is that one should adopt the moral law and the promotion of humanity as the basic principle of all agency; this amounts to the same thing as adopting a fundamentally good disposition. Kant notes that this principle can be deduced from its possibility.

The basic principle of the doctrine of virtue...cannot be proved, but it can be given a deduction from pure practical reason. What, in relation to himself and others, can be an end is an end for pure practical reason. For practical reason is the capacity for ends generally and for it to be indifferent to ends, that is, to take no interest in them, would be a contradiction... [MM 395/198, emphasis Kant's]

Since reason can take an interest in the content of our maxims and the fundamental disposition of our character, it must take such an interest. Failure to do so reflects a culpable lack of virtue.

RIGORISM AND MORAL PERFECTION

The adoption of the fundamental maxim of moral goodness is only the beginning of the story of what is required of the virtuous

agent. But the adoption of a fundamentally good maxim is, however, always the beginning. Moral regeneration for Kant must always stem first from the choice of fundamental maxim and only secondarily from the reformation of habits. [R 48; MM 409] The original choice of a fundamental disposition reforms the "cast of mind and the grounding of the character." [R 43] In doing so, it orients the character toward the ideal of moral perfection in which all aspects of the agent's character and actions are in complete harmony with the commitment to the supremacy of the moral law.

Now it is our duty as men to elevate ourselves to this ideal of moral perfection, that is, to the archetype of the moral disposition in all of its purity. [R 61/54]

The duty to moral perfection follows from the basic maxim of moral goodness. To choose the end is also to will the means. The individual who is good in his fundamental disposition must also will that the elements of his character and passions do not present obstacles which tempt him away from or make him inattentive to duty.

The duty to moral perfection does not allow any accommodation to inclination. Kant calls the duty to elevate oneself to moral perfection "narrow and perfect" in its quality. [MM 446/241] In non-Kantian terms, this means that it is a duty which, like repaying a debt, has only a single path to its completion, and it should be completely accomplished. In practice the duty to moral perfection must be treated as "wide and imperfect" because of the

overwhelmingly imperfect condition of human beings. There is simply so much work to do in bringing our empirical natures into harmony with the idea of moral perfection that we cannot do it all at once. The choice to adopt the basic maxim of moral goodness is made in the context of a will which also has what Kant calls the 'propensity to evil in human nature' and which has already made claims on our characters. [R 29-32/23-29]

[I]n the moral development of the predisposition to good implanted in us, we cannot start from an innocence natural to us but must begin with the assumption of a wickedness of will in adopting maxims contrary to the original moral predisposition; and since this propensity [to evil] is inextirpable, we must begin with incessant counter action against it. [R 46]

We can never eliminate the propensity to evil. No matter successful one is in reforming his character, there is always the possibility of slipping into a fundamentally evil disposition. The best we can hope for in the struggle against evil in us is that we make continual progress.

The person who has adopted the basic disposition of moral goodness confronts two major obstacles to its realization in practice. Much like the characters at the bottom of the mountain in Dante's *Purgatory*, their souls have the right fundamental orientation, but they need to undergo a cleansing. According to Kant what needs to be cleansed are conditions he identifies as 'frailty' and 'impurity'. Frailty is the condition that results when

I adopt the good into the maxim of my will, but this good which objectively in its ideal conception ...is an irresistible incentive, is subjectively...when the maxim is followed the weaker. [R 29/25]

The frail agent does not incorporate an immoral maxim into his fundamental disposition. Rather, he is overwhelmed by impulses, such as when a generally well disposed individual is momentarily overcome by anger or by passion, e.g. when an alcoholic who has sworn off drunkenness, has no idea how to resist the passion for drink. The will is frail when it has adopted the fundamental maxim of moral goodness, but confronts irresistible obstacles to its achievement.

Kant's initial description of frailty makes it seem not so much a quality of a human will failing as a case of the will encountering the limits of its capabilities. If the incentives that lead us to act against the moral law are truly irresistible, the acts are really beyond our control and should more properly be considered events than actions. A disposition which requires moral self-condemnation for events beyond the agent's control seems more like pathological psychosis than a moral imperative.

Looked at more closely, however, Kant is concerned here with barriers to moral perfection which originate in the will itself.

Virtue is...the moral strength of a man's will in fulfilling his duty...but because this constraint is to be irresistible, strength is required, in a degree that we can assess only by the magnitude of the obstacles that a man himself furnishes through his inclinations. The vices, the brood of dispositions opposing the law, are the monsters he has to fight. [MM 405/206]

We 'furnish' ourselves with incentives that lead us to act contrary to the moral law, and these are to some degree alterable.

Likewise, our defenses against these incentives can be strengthened or weakened by our own practice. The will which is overcome by incentives contrary to duty may have virtue in its fundamental orientation, but it lacks virtue in the narrow sense in which it is opposed to specific vices.

The struggle against frailty requires a wide range of strategies. We must avoid adversity, pain, and want to the degree to which that is possible if these present us with overwhelming temptations. [MM 388/192-3] We must also, however, seek out adversity when it will strengthen the will against immoral incentives.

With regard to the principle of a vigorous, spirited and valiant practice of virtue, the cultivation of virtue, that is moral ascetics, takes as its motto the Stoic saying: Accustom yourself to put up with the misfortunes of life and to do without its superfluous pleasures....This is a kind of regimen...for keeping a man healthy. [MM 485/273, emphasis Kant's]

Kant calls this 'ethical gymnastics'.

Ethical gymnastics...consists only in combatting natural impulses sufficiently to be able to master them when a situation comes up in which they threaten morality... [MM 485/274]

In assessing progress against frailty Kant's rigorism requires that we accept nothing less than perfection. This means that we must measure ourselves not against our own past performance, our present abilities, or the condition of other people. Rather it must be measured only by perfect conformity with the moral law.

Ethical duties [that is, duties of virtue] must not be determined in accordance with the capacity to fulfill the law...On the contrary, man's moral capacity must be estimated by the law, which commands categorically and so in accordance with our rational knowledge of what man ought to be in keeping with the idea of humanity, not in accordance with the empirical knowledge we have of men as they are. [MM 404-5/205/6]

Since the struggle against human frailty is never over, at least not in this life, the basic moral disposition of the agent must be estimated in terms of effort to make progress against weakness rather than in absolute terms of moral strength. [MM 409/209]

The condition of impurity, like frailty, is a condition of the will which is compatible with a fundamentally good disposition.

The impure will allows incentives other than pure respect for the moral law to be incorporated into its basic maxim. Rather than treating the moral law as the fundamental incentive to permissible action, the impure will incorporates other incentives such as self-interest, pride, or hope for eternal salvation into his basic maxim. In condemning impurity, Kant cannot mean to condemn the presence of incentives other than respect for the moral law. Many incentives other than respect for the moral law are compatible with a fundamentally good disposition. The problem with the impure will is that it places these incentives on an equal footing with the moral law. Since these motives will conflict, at least in principle, with the moral law, the person with an impure will becomes confused and corrupted. [G 411/22] This corruption is a large part natural propensity to evil. By this Kant does not mean

that incentives other than the moral law are intrinsically evil. Rather it is the tendency of the will to confuse the proper ordering of the incentives in its maxims. This tendency cannot be completely overcome, it can only be combated. We begin in a corrupted condition. The fundamental disposition of the agent must be judged not in terms of its purity or impurity in absolute terms, but rather in terms of its willingness to combat the condition of impurity which is always present to some degree.

The method Kant recommends for fighting impurity is scrupulous examination of conscience. Indeed the "First Command of All Duties to Oneself" is to gain moral self-knowledge.

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 of self-knowledge. [MM 441-442/236]

Sincere pursuit of self-knowledge helps to undermine a number of vices, not the least of which is egotistical self-esteem of the person convinced of the goodness of his own heart. The basic disposition of the will is never immediately manifest in our experience of even ourselves as agents. It can only be inferred from the more limited intentions we have in particular actions and projects. Yet even with regard to these, Kant notoriously maintains, we are never certain and are subject to a great deal of self-deception in interpreting the moral worth of our acts.

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...and that in other circumstances, could just as well serve vice. [MM 447/241]

Examination of conscience must, therefore, always recognize the possibility that lawful actions are motivated by an impure will and work to guard against it. Persons lacking self-knowledge may frequently mistake impure motives for virtue.

Very often he mistakes his own weakness, which counsels him against the venture of a misdeed, for virtue...; and how many people who have lived long and guiltless lives may not be merely fortunate in having escaped so many temptations? In the case of any deed it remains hidden from the agent himself how much pure moral content there has been in his disposition. [MM 392-3/196]

To the outside observer, and perhaps even to the agent himself, an impure will may seem no different than that of the purely dutiful agent. The greedy shopkeeper may always act in accord with duty and may be smugly self-satisfied on account of his conformity to the law. By contrast the frail individual who often acts against duty may have a much greater purity of will. He may feel the full force of his transgressions, have a firm resolve to reform, and take steps for his improvement. Yet, to the external observer he seems much worse than the agent with the impure will who happens to act in legal conformity with duty. The agent with an impure will is, nevertheless, in the more dangerous condition because he is much closer to slipping over into a fundamentally evil disposition.

Kant's rigoristic approach to character, then, allows him to make subtle and nuanced judgments about variations in and types of vice and virtue. By distinguishing between the fundamental

disposition of the agent and his state of progress in incorporating the ideal of moral perfection into his character, Kant is led to some rather surprising conclusions for a rigorist, who, it seems should divide everyone into sheep and goats. For example, he maintains that one should never attempt to make a final estimation of the basic moral worth of oneself or others. A tendency to moral self-condemnation and disgust with the evil state of one's character suggests a degree of respect for the moral law and may indicate a fundamentally good disposition. In judging others we can never acquire enough information to determine the true state of their basic disposition. Another surprising conclusion is his recognition that the frail character who acts against prescribed duties may have a fundamentally good disposition, while the impure agent may act in accord with duty but be fundamentally evil in his disposition.

KANT'S CRITICISM OF EUDAIMONISM

How does all of this help us understand Kant's condemnation of eudaimonian ethics? Let us put his criticism before us. I quote here from the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

When a thoughtful man has overcome incentives to vice and is aware of having done his often bitter duty, he finds himself in a state that could well be called happiness, a state of contentment and peace of soul in which virtue is its own reward. Now a eudaimonist says: This delight, this happiness is really the motive for acting virtuously. The concept of duty does not determine his will *directly*. He is moved to do his duty only *by means of* the happiness he anticipates....[T]here is a contradiction in this

reasoning. For on the one hand he ought to fulfill his duty without asking what effect this will have on his happiness, and so on *moral* grounds; but on the other hand he can recognize that something is his duty only when he can count on gaining happiness by doing it, and so in accordance with a *sensibly dependent* principle, which is the direct opposite of the moral principle. [MM 377-378/183]

While the eudaimonist pursues a course of action that is in accord with virtue, as here characterized he is moved primarily by the happiness he anticipates will result from his action. He understands the nature of duty for its own sake; but his motive is so mixed with consequent satisfaction that he cannot even recognize his duty unless he can count on it. He will act in accord with duty, but his motive is fundamentally impure.

Kant's condemnation of eudaimonian ethics certainly does flow from the core of his moral theory. If we see his criticism as directed at modern eudaimonians, the people who we earlier saw Kant characterizes as latitudinarians, it also seems well considered. These philosophers do base morality on sensibly conditioned motives and argue that without such motives we would be unable to recognize or do our duty. Hume, in the closing pages of the *Treatise*, certainly sounds like just the sort of eudaimonist Kant has in mind.

[W]ho can think any advantages of fortune a sufficient compensation for the least breach of the social virtues, when he considers not only his character with regard to others, but also his peace and inward satisfaction entirely dependent upon his strict observance

of them; and a mind will never be able to bear its own survey, that has been wanting in its part to mankind and society.⁶

It is not difficult to understand Kant's negative reaction to the kind of duplicity he sees here. For Hume, as for any moral sense advocate, ethics is based on an empirical impulse of benevolence that may or may not be stronger than conflicting motives of self-interest. Trying to bolster this tenuous basis for ethical life with appeals to contentment and self-satisfaction merely adds one more empirical and contingent motive to the mix.

Yet, Kant's condemnation of eudaimonian ethics does not seem fair or accurate when applied to the ancient philosophers whom he also seems to have in mind, namely, Aristotle and the Stoics. For both Aristotle and the Stoics, virtuous activity must be undertaken for the sake of the virtuous activity itself without regard to external goods the individual might acquire by being virtuous. One need not look far in their works to find passages asserting the necessity of being virtuous even at the expense of the sacrifice of all goods Kant associates with happiness. I quote here from the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book III.

[In] the case of courage...death and wounds will be painful to the brave man and against his will, but he will face them because it is noble to do so and base not to do so. And the more he is possessed of virtue in its entirety and the happier he is, the more he will be pained at the thought of death; for life is best worth living for such a man, and he is knowingly losing the greatest goods, and this is painful. But he is none the less brave, and

⁶Treatise of Human Nature, L.A. Selby-Bigge, ed., p.620.

perhaps all the more so, because he chooses noble deeds of war at that cost.⁷

The virtuous activity that Aristotle considers essential to eudaimonia is not motivated by a desire for happiness as a consequence of virtuous actions. The virtuous man must choose virtue for its own sake. He is possessed of eudaimonia to a higher degree precisely because he is able to sacrifice goods external to the exercise of his virtue in order to exercise that virtue more perfectly. The Stoics, likewise, consider concern for anything external to the exercise of virtue for its own sake to be an impediment to virtue. Only one who has achieved a state of complete apathy to goods external to virtue is really acting virtuously. Indeed, the Stoics do maintain that this leads to a state of tranquillity, but the state of tranquillity is a result of living in harmony with one's true rational nature. Although stoic rhetoric on this point is at times confusing, desire for tranquillity cannot be the primary motive for virtuous action if the action is really virtuous.

Hence, it seems that what Aristotle and the Stoics mean by 'eudaimonia' is very different from what Kant means by 'happiness.' Eudaimonia essentially involves the pursuit of virtue. For Aristotle, practicing moral virtue for its own sake is an intrinsic part of eudaimonia. For the Stoics, it is the whole of eudaimonia.

⁷*Nichomachean Ethics*, David Ross tr., Book III ch. 9.

The happiness Kant speaks of is distinct from and consequent upon the exercise of virtue. For Kant, there is no intrinsic happiness in the exercise of virtue and there is no necessary connection between happiness we might have and the exercise of virtue.

Is Kant then just wrong in his blanket condemnation of eudaimonian ethics? Does his criticism, at least in the case of the ancients, simply rest on a linguistic confusion, taking the ancient idea of eudaimonia for his own idea of happiness? I think not. I believe Kant is right to be suspicious of ancient doctrines of eudaimonia, if not quite for the same reason he rejects the modern eudaimonists.

Central to the idea of ancient eudaimonian ethics is the belief that desire can be cultivated in such a way that reason and desire really share the same goals. In the man of perfect virtue, reason and desire are in perfect harmony with each other. Kant rejects this not only because he thinks it is a false conception of desire, but he also sees in it a threat to his rigoristic account of moral virtue. The mixture of reason and desire in the eudaimonist's ideal of virtue Kant perceives as a threat to the purity of virtue.

It is useful in this light to consider Kant's criticism from the *Metaphysics of Morals* of Aristotle's account of virtue as a mean between extremes.

[T]he well known principle (Aristotle's) that locates virtue in the mean between two vices is false.* [Note]*...What distinguishes

avarice (as a vice) from thrift (as a virtue) is not that avarice carries thrift too far but that avarice has an entirely different principle (maxim), that of putting the end of economizing not in enjoyment of one's means, but merely in the possession of them, while denying oneself any enjoyment from them. In the same way, the vice of prodigality is not to be sought in excessive enjoyment of one's means but in the bad maxim which makes the use of one's means the sole end, without regard for preserving them.
[MM 404/205, text and note]

As Kant puts it elsewhere, if proper thrift is a mean between avarice and prodigality, one would pass through the virtue in moving from one vice to the other. One could be virtuous by simply being a little less vicious. [MM 432/228] While Kant's condemnation of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean is certainly hasty in that he ignores the role of practical wisdom in the choice of the mean, the point he is making is clear enough. Maxims are either vicious or they are not. The path from vice to virtue requires first and foremost the conversion of the character from an evil maxim to a good one. Habituation of desires is valuable in enabling an agent to overcome his frailty and build strength that is necessary for consistently acting on a moral maxim. If his actions are not based on the proper maxim, however no amount of habituation to the mean will make the action virtuous.

This criticism of the doctrine of the mean suggests a deep and unbridgeable chasm between Kant and Aristotle. For Kant, the end that Aristotle proposes for moral life, the perfect harmonization of inclination and reason, is neither possible nor desirable. For Aristotle desire is a fundamentally different animal than it is for

Kant. Desires points us at a something good. That something is desirable tells us something about its intrinsic value. Untutored desire may attach to a good in the wrong context or to the wrong degree, but desire itself has an affinity with reason in that it indicates something about the true value of objects to which it attaches. Thus Aristotle can say

[W]e must none the less suppose that in the soul too there is something beside the rational principle, resisting and opposing it...Now even this seems to have a share in the rational principle...; at any rate in the continent man it obeys the rational principle--and presumably in the temperate and brave man it is still more obedient; for in him it speaks, on all matters, with the same voice as the rational principle. [NE I.13]

Desire is capable of education in the Aristotelian scheme of things; it makes sense to talk of "those who desire and act in accordance with a rational principle..." [NE I.3] In the case of the virtuous man, the good is indicated to him both by his desires and by his reason. The completeness of his virtue is indicated by the pleasure he takes in virtuous actions.

[N]ot only is a horse pleasant to the lover of horses, and a spectacle pleasant to the lover of sights, but also in the same way just acts are pleasant to the lover of justice and in general virtuous acts are pleasant to the lover of virtue. Now for most men their pleasures are in conflict with one another because they are not by nature pleasant, but the lovers of the noble find pleasant things that are by nature pleasant; and virtuous actions are such, so that these are pleasant for such men as well as in their own nature. [NE I.8]

Because desire participates in the rational principle the two faculties can come to share the same goals, take pleasure in the same things, and speak with one voice.

Like Aristotle, the Stoics find a strong natural affinity between reason and desire. The Stoics, of course, reject Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. They opt instead for the extremes of complete elimination of desires directed at goods external to the will and complete attachment of desire to the one true good internal to the will itself, namely correct willing and rational control of life. But the Stoics share with Aristotle the beliefs that desire is always directed at what is good and aversion at what is bad and that desires participate in the rational faculty. Indeed, they often speak as if desire is nothing more than a confused way of thinking and as if desires are really judgments concerning the value of objects. Epictetus tells us,

Remember that what is insulting is not the person who abuses you or hits you, but the judgment about them that they are insulting. So when someone irritates you be aware that what irritates you is your own belief. Most importantly, therefore, try not to be carried away by appearance, since if you gain time and delay you will control yourself more easily. [*Encheiridion*, Aphorism 20; see also Seneca, *On Anger*, II.1-3]

To desire something is to judge it good. To have an aversion to something is to judge it bad. Since they are really forms of judgment, desires can be educated by philosophical moral guidance which reveals the true value of the object of desire. If reflection reveals an object of desire not to be a true good, the will is naturally led to detach itself from the desired object. The true good for the Stoic is to be found in the perfection of the act of willing itself and his virtue is an inner attitude that is

indifferent to the consequences of actions. It is, however, passionately attached to the good of the will itself, that is, maintaining control over the faculty of choice and acting in harmony with the agents true rational nature.⁸

Kant will have none of this. For him reason and desire have very different objects. A desire to be dutiful is a contradiction in terms. The main task of moral development is the separation and purification of reason from desires. As his reflection on ethics develops Kant does devote a great deal of attention to the need to habituate the empirical components of our characters to strengthen emotions and feelings that can assist and to weaken desires and emotions that can hinder the performance of duty. But he rejects the idea that desires can have a share in or participate in the rational faculty. Desire is always subject to arbitrary factors of individual preference and is always empirically conditioned.

⁸ The Stoics were notorious for their doctrine that 'externals' can add nothing to the happiness of the virtuous person. "'But look you,'" it is objected, 'is not the wise man happier if he has lived longer, if no pain has distracted him, than if he had always had to wrestle with misfortune?' 'Tell me [, ' responds Seneca,] 'is he better or more honorable? If not, then neither is happier.' [Seneca, "On the Happy Life," The Stoic Philosophy of Seneca, Moses Hadas, ed., p.244; see also Epictetus, Discourses, 3.11, or Cicero, De Finibus, III.17-21] For extensive treatments of the relationship between reason and desire in the Stoics, see Nancy Sherman, *Making a Necessity of Virtue*, (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), Ch. 3; J.B. Schneewind, "Kant and Stoic Ethics," in *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics*, S. Engstrom and J. Whiting editors, (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), pp.285-301.

Only experience can teach us what brings joy. Only the natural drives for food, drink, sex, rest, and movement, and (as our natural predispositions develop) for honor, for enlarging our knowledge, and so forth can tell each of us, and each only in his particular way, in what he will find these joys.... [MM 215/43]

The arbitrary and personal nature of desire means that it can never tell us anything about the true value of the objects to which it is attached. Desire can never be educated. It can only be controlled. While Kant does admit that the cultivation of the taste for the arts and sciences may heighten sensitivity to our higher moral purpose, he views it as just as likely to corrupt the will by engendering false pride and vanity incompatible with duty.

If duty and desire cannot have the same objects as their goals, the very idea of loving virtue is an impossibility. True virtue requires complete separation of motives of duty from motives based in the desires. The process of the acquisition of virtue requires distillation of the motive of duty, separating it from impurities. It is a process that requires no unique philosophical knowledge or special learning.

[W]e do not in the least try to teach reason anything new but only make it attend, as Socrates did, to its own principle - and thereby do we show neither science nor philosophy is needed in order to be honest and good or even wise and virtuous. [G 404/16]

Rather than pointing us toward the simple unadorned principle of moral duty, eudaimonists direct us to ideals which mix duty for duty's sake with other elements.

The problem with the ancient eudaimonist, then, is not that he advocates a goal that is completely wrong or directly opposed to

duty. Rather, he places before us a moral ideal which cannot but foster an impure will. The impurity in question, however, is not a simple garden variety impurity in which the will is led to hedge and trim adherence to duty for duty's sake to accommodate easily understood passions and desires. It is rather an intellectual's perversion of duty in which impurity is painted in a deceptively attractive light. The product of this deception Kant terms 'moral fanaticism,' a vice engendered, he tells us by novelists and sentimental educators as well as the strictest of all philosophers, the Stoics. [CprV 86/88-89] In the following passage Kant contrasts the disposition of the moral fanatic with that of the dutiful agent.

The moral condition which he [the dutiful agent] can always be in is virtue, that is, moral disposition in conflict [with desire], and not holiness in the supposed possession of perfect purity of the intentions of the will. The mind is disposed to nothing but blatant moral fanaticism and exaggerated self-conceit by exhortation to action as noble, sublime, magnanimous. By it people are led to the illusion that the determining ground of action is not duty, i.e., respect for the moral law whose yoke must be borne whether it is liked or not (though it is only a mild yoke, as imposed by reason). This law always humbles them when they follow (obey) it, but by this kind of exhortation they come to think those actions are expected of them not because of duty but only because of their own bare merit. [CprR 84-5/87]

The moral fanatic is likely to forget the condition of moral degeneracy from which he has progressed, he will probably fail to correctly examine his own moral condition, and neglect to guard against the real threats to his virtue. One of the few useful things that the moral philosopher can do for the ordinary moral

agent is warn him about the temptations of moral fanaticism.

Because it is an intellectual's pipe dream, it needs a philosopher to diagnose it correctly.

[I]t is indeed an important article for morality to warn us emphatically against such empty and fanciful desires, which are often nourished by novels and sometimes also by mystical presentations, similar to novels, of superhuman perfections and fanatical bliss. But such empty desires and longings, which expand the heart and make it weak, have an effect on the mind. They make it languish by depleting its powers, showing well enough how the mind is repeatedly strained by [these] ideas in trying to bring their objects into being. With each effort the mind sinks back into consciousness of its own impotence.⁹

If a moral agent is seduced into believing he possesses the virtue advocated by the moral fanatic he will inevitably overestimate his own virtue. On the other hand, if he accepts the ideal of the fanatic, but honestly evaluates his own inability to make progress towards it, he will be discouraged. The goal he has adopted is not just stern and difficult; it cannot even begin to be approximated. Finding no way to it, he is liable to despair about the efficacy of moral effort.

What then would Kant have us do? Other than avoiding novelists, sentimental educators, and eudaimonists, (and we do seem to spend a lot of time in the company of these characters here at St. John's) Kant would have us see that the conflict between duty and inclination is not just insurmountable, it is providential. It

⁹ *First Introduction to the Critique of Judgment*, Academy edition of Kant's work, Vol. 20, p.231 note, my translation.

is a creative tension without which we could not come to understand the nature of our moral purpose. Consciousness of duty is born of the awareness of the tension between duty and desire. Finite moral agents like us with one foot in the world of the sense and the other in the intelligible world of reason can flourish only with the recognition of the tension between the two and the claims of each. The aesthetic character of virtue is not that of beauty or harmony. Virtuous acts are not beautiful; they are sublime. They contain the subjugation of the finite and conditioned value of desire and its objects to the unconditional and infinite value of respect for the moral law. If Kant is right in this, then he is also right to see attempts to bridge the gap between reason and desire as destructive of the very core of moral agency. The illusion that better life awaits us in the happy land beyond our present divided moral condition is not only mistaken, it is potentially lethal to morality itself.

In closing let me suggest that what I have done here is no more than scratch the surface to expose some of the major differences between Kant and the ancients. In order to adequately evaluate Kant's criticism much more needs to be done. At minimum the differences between Kant, Aristotle, and the Stoics on the nature of practical reason and its relation to desires will have to be explored. Thorny issues such as why Aristotle says that practical reason is primarily involved in deliberation about means not ends

and while Kant holds exactly the reverse to be the case need to be explored. This will have, however, to wait until a later occasion.

Key to Citations

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