

THE ROLE OF EXEMPLARS IN KANT'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

On the subject of moral exemplarism, Immanuel Kant is perhaps best known for his warnings about the futility as well as the potential dangers of trying to base morality on examples or on the imitation of exemplars. This has led many scholars to conclude that Kant leaves no room for exemplars in his moral philosophy. However, as the work of Onora O'Neill and Robert Louden has shown, Kant's position on the subject is in fact more ambiguous than it appears at first glance. Kant writes both of the need for a kind of archetype [*Urbild*] that can "make the law intuitive," and of a positive role for examples and exemplars in the sharpening of moral judgment. Yet, O'Neill and Louden disagree about the exact role and the stage of moral development where they come into play. O'Neill claims that examples only play a role at a stage of moral development prior to the agent's assimilation of the moral law, and they never play a role in moral deliberation per se, while Louden sees a role for examples in moral deliberation subsequent to the assimilation of the moral law. Neither scholar specifies whether they play a role with regard to some specific duties or with regard to all duties indiscriminately. In this paper, I address these disagreements arguing that the key to their resolution and to gaining a correct understanding of Kant's position lies in a closer examination of Kant's taxonomy of duties, especially his distinction between 'perfect' and 'imperfect' duties. Such an examination, leads to the conclusion that is precisely in the fulfillment of imperfect duties, such as the obligation to perfect our talents and capacities and the obligation to aid the happiness of others, that Kant sees a necessary role for moral exemplars.

KEYWORDS

Kant, moral education, imperfect duties, exemplars.

The name 'Immanuel Kant' is not usually the first off the tongue when the topic of moral exemplars is raised. Kant is perhaps best known for his warnings about the dangers involved in basing morality on the imitation of exemplars, as when he states: "Nor could one give worse advice to morality than by wanting to

derive it from examples [*Beispielen*]. For every example of it represented to me must itself first be appraised in accordance with principles of morality” (GMS 4:408), or when he states, “As for the power of examples (good or bad) that can be held up to the propensity for imitation or warning, what others give us can serve as no maxim of virtue” (MS 6:479).¹ Statements like these have led many to conclude that there is simply no role for examples or exemplars in Kantian practical philosophy.² Pushing back against this view, Onora O’Neill and Robert Loudon have each in their own way argued that Kant does in fact make room for exemplars and even sees them as being in some sense necessary. In support of this view, they point to passages where Kant discusses the need for a kind of archetype [*Urbild*] that can “make the law intuitive” and to passages where Kant suggests that examples and exemplars may help to sharpen the faculty of judgment by providing it with experience of applied cases.

Yet, despite their appeal to identical passages of the Kantian text, their respective accounts of how this plays out in practice differ markedly and even contradict one another in fundamental ways. O’Neill, for instance, claims that examples only play a role at a stage of moral development prior to the agent’s assimilation of the moral law, and they never play a role in moral deliberation per se, while Loudon sees a role for examples in moral deliberation subsequent to the assimilation of the moral law. Further complicating the picture is the fact that both scholars discuss the matter at a high level of generality, preferring to speak of ‘the moral law’ or ‘moral principles’ indiscriminately, without specifying which duties are under discussion. Therefore, much remains unclear about the precise role that exemplars play in Kant’s practical philosophy, if any at all.

In what follows, I address these problems and argue that there is indeed a role for exemplars in Kant’s moral philosophy, and that the key to understanding it, and to clarifying some of the confusion that has so far surrounded the debate, lies

¹ Citations from the works of Immanuel Kant, except for the *Critique of Pure Reason*, are made using the standard *Kant-Gesellschaft* abbreviations combined with the volume and page numbers of the *Akademie* edition – *Immanuel Kants gesammelte Schriften*. Ausgabe der Königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1902. Citations from the *Critique of Pure Reason* are made using the standard A / B edition pagination.

² See, for example, Peterson et al., who write: “Kant’s major works on ethics do not place even minimal consideration on moral exemplarity, nor do they give any significant reference to moral exemplars in the course of the arguments put forth” (2010, 141). See also, Nussbaum 1986, who argues that the “enormous influence of Kantian ethics on our intellectual culture” is the primary obstacle to understanding Greek ethics in general and the kind of exemplar-centered practical deliberation espoused by Aristotle in particular (1986, 4-7).

in a closer examination of Kant's taxonomy of duties, especially his distinction in the *Groundwork* between 'perfect' and 'imperfect' duties, and his later elaboration in the *Metaphysics of Morals* of what is involved in fulfilling imperfect duties in concrete cases. Perfect duties, such as the proscription of lying, are characterized as allowing no exceptions, while imperfect duties, such as the obligation to perfect our natural talents and capacities, are characterized as allowing for some leeway [*Spielraum*] in their fulfillment. Beyond this, imperfect duties are distinguished by several unique features, including their teleological structure, their comprehensive nature – pertaining, as they do, to concepts like 'complete perfection' and 'happiness' – and by the fact that actions done in fulfillment of them are always underdetermined by the moral law itself. They therefore call for a very different type of deliberation from that involved in the application of perfect duties. These unique features of imperfect duties suggest that it is precisely here that moral exemplars come into play. To see how this is so, and to see how some of the confusion about the matter has arisen, it is best to turn directly to what Kant has to say.

SHARPENING JUDGMENT

Some of the confusion about the role of examples and exemplars in Kantian moral philosophy undoubtedly stems from the fact that Kant himself devoted significantly more attention to the dangers of attempting to derive morality from exemplars than he did to developing a positive account of their role. Kant was concerned above all else to stress that exemplars are never sources of normativity, that moral actions are never motivated by the imitation of others, and that moral education beyond early childhood is most often corrupted because its teachers "have not brought their concepts to purity" (GMS 04:411 note). Kant also emphasized that the identification of certain individuals as morally exemplary is always a theory-dependent endeavor. Exemplars are picked out based on their embodiment of certain admirable characteristics, but those characteristics are only deemed admirable on the basis of a theory or principles that have already been adopted. Kant went so far as to say that not even the example of Jesus Christ provides us with an original source of normativity; to the extent that we can recognize Christ as being morally perfect we are able to do so only because we can compare him against a pure standard, which is antecedently given in pure reason itself (GMS 4:408).

Kant was equally clear that acting morally is a matter of giving *myself* the law – not of getting it from others. Moreover, the moral worth of our actions, according to Kant, lies in the internal motive [*Bewegungsgrund*], and only those actions motivated by respect [*Achtung*] for the law can truly be called moral. Actions done out of a desire to be like this or that person, no matter how admirable that person may be, can never truly be called moral. Finally, Kant stresses the pedagogical impact of teaching morality in its ‘pure’ form, without the admixture of any empirical elements, even when teaching children “of a moderate age” (GMS 4:411 note). Kant argued that teachers who sought to improve the effectiveness of their moral pedagogy by introducing additional incentives and illustrations were making a mistake, and that by “trying to make their medicine really strong, they spoil it” (GMS 4:411 note).³ It is therefore not difficult to see why some would be led to conclude that Kant was opposed to the use of exemplars in moral philosophy. He was unquestionably opposed to many of their common, historical uses, especially in virtue-ethics traditions, and one of his chief goals in elaborating a metaphysics of morals was to distinguish his own position from these earlier traditions.

However, the story does not end there, because Kant also left suggestive remarks about the positive role that examples and exemplars can play. The first has to do with sharpening judgment through experience. As Kant says in the opening pages of the *Groundwork*, moral philosophy gives the human being “as a rational being, laws a priori, which no doubt still require a judgment sharpened by experience [to make them] effective *in concreto* in [the] conduct of life” (GMS 4:389). Morality requires judgment, and judgment requires experience. There are no a priori rules to aid in the application of a priori rules. In this way morality is confronted with one version of a more general problem, which Kant addresses in all three *Critiques* – that judgment, taken as the faculty of subsuming concrete particulars under universals, seems to call for rules to guide the process. However,

³ Kant clearly saw a role for exemplars in early childhood education, prior to the age at which the child was capable of grasping abstract rational principles. For example, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he writes: “The *experimental* (technical) means for cultivating virtue is good example on the part of the teacher (his exemplary conduct) and *cautionary* example in others, since, for a still undeveloped human being, imitation is the first determination of his will to accept maxims that he afterwards makes for himself” (MS 6:479). However, Kant was no less clear that such a method should be dispensed with as soon as the child reached a ‘moderate age’ and was capable of grasping rational principles. The focus of the current article is limited to a consideration of the role of exemplars beyond early childhood.

the appeal to rules by which to guide judgment, would itself seem to require a further set of rules to guide the application of the first set of rules – and it is not difficult to see where this ends up. Soon it is rules all the way down. When explaining this problem in the first *Critique*, Kant explicitly says that in the absence of further rules, one of the ways that judgment is able to work and to be strengthened is by experience – both by making judgments ourselves and by seeing others make judgments. In other words, judgment is sharpened by observing concrete examples. Kant writes that one may fail in the application of rules

either because he is lacking in natural power of judgment [...] and to be sure understands the universal *in abstracto* but cannot distinguish whether a case *in concreto* belongs under it, or also because he has not received adequate training for this judgment through examples and actual business. This is also the sole and great utility of examples: that they sharpen the power of judgment (KrV A134/B172).

In the second *Critique*, Kant argues that this applies no less to practical judgment than to theoretical judgment (KpV 5:68). This would seem therefore to indicate a first, positive role for the use of examples in moral philosophy: they sharpen the power of judgment. Yet, based on these passages alone, we still know tantalizingly little. We do not know what kinds of examples Kant has in mind, nor do we know at what stage of moral development they are most useful, nor do we know if they are equally useful for all types of moral judgment or for some more than others. What he says about a further use for examples helps to clarify what he has in mind.

MAKING THE MORAL LAW INTUITIVE

Exemplars, according to Kant, can help to make the moral law intuitive [*Anschaulich*] by providing a kind of image or visual representation of what is otherwise a merely conceptual or verbal formulation. At first glance, this would seem to sit uneasily with what Kant says throughout the *Groundwork*, where the emphasis lies on the ability of every rational, moral agent to form and test maxims based on immediately intuitive principles, such as the categorical imperative. These principles exist only in propositional form. For example, the first formulation of the categorical imperative is: “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (GMS 4:421). According to Kant, understanding the proposition in

this form and grasping its underlying logic of self-consistency, are all that is needed to be able to use it as a test for maxims. To see why the imperative excludes, for example, a maxim to lie when it is to my benefit to do so, does not seem to require any kind of visual representation of embodied liars or truth-tellers. The operative principle is the merely logical consideration that when universalized, the maxim is self-undermining.

Yet elsewhere, Kant clearly states that because of our finitude, we need something like an image of embodied moral principles. In his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant writes: “Yet for the human being the invisible needs to be represented through something visible (sensible), indeed, what is more, it must be accompanied by the visible for the sake of praxis and, though intellectual, made as it were an object of intuition [*Anschauung*]” (RGV 6:192).⁴ Kant is clear that such a visible representation can never supplant the original ‘invisible’ principle, which is the true source of normativity, but he is equally clear that the visible representation is needed for limited beings, such as we are, to be able to make the law effective in practice.

This naturally raises the question of what kind of image is required. Kant gives only two examples, but the way in which he characterizes them is telling. His initial example, found in the first *Critique*, is that of a Stoic sage. When he introduces this idea, he does so by comparing it to a Platonic form:

[W]e have to admit that human reason contains not only ideas but also ideals, which do not, to be sure, have a creative power like the Platonic idea, but still have practical power (as regulative principles) grounding the possibility of the perfection of certain actions. [...] Virtue, and with it human wisdom in its entire purity, are ideas. But the sage (of the Stoics) is an ideal, i.e., a human being who exists merely in thoughts, but who is fully congruent with the idea of wisdom. Thus, just as the idea gives the rule, so the ideal in such a case serves as the original image [*Urbild*] for the thoroughgoing determination of the copy; and we have in us no other standard for our actions than the conduct of this divine human being, with which we can compare ourselves, judging ourselves, and thereby improving ourselves, even though we can never reach the standard (KrV A569 / B597).

⁴ In the same text, Kant also writes: “It is plainly a limitation of human reason, one which is ever inseparable from it, that we cannot think of any significant moral worth in the actions of a person without at the same time portraying this person or his expression in human guise, even though we do not thereby mean to say that this is how things are in themselves [...] for we always need a certain analogy with natural being in order to make supersensible characteristics comprehensible to us” (RGV 6:65, footnote).

Kant is claiming that the ideal of a morally perfect sage furnishes us with an ‘archetype’ [*Urbild*] against which we can compare ourselves. The emphasis on an image of total perfection or completion, rather than on a specific virtue, suggests the role of the archetype is to help us picture what it would look like for all the elements of a moral life to come together in a single package.

Caution should be taken when interpreting this passage because it expresses an early view – one which would develop in significant ways with the publication of the *Groundwork* four years later. It is clear, for example, that by the time of the *Groundwork*, Kant would never say that “we have in us no other standard for our actions than the conduct of this divine human being.” As we have already seen, Kant’s mature view is that no individual, whether human or divine, provides a moral standard beyond that given in the moral law. However, the basic claim that we need an *Urbild* persists into his mature philosophy. With the publication of the *Religion* text, which was written well after the *Groundwork*, the need for such an ideal is reaffirmed. Except now the example provided is not that of the Stoic sage, but that of Jesus Christ:

In the practical faith in this Son of God (so far as he is represented as having taken up human nature) the human being can thus hope to become pleasing to God (and thereby blessed); that is, only a human being conscious of such a moral disposition in himself as enables him to believe and self-assuredly trust that he, under similar temptations and afflictions [...] would steadfastly cling to the prototype [*Urbild*] of humanity and follow this prototype’s example in loyal emulation, only such a human being, and he alone, is entitled to consider himself not an unworthy object of divine pleasure (RGV 6:62).

In this way, Kant reasserts the central claim of the earlier passage about the Stoic sage, that the visual representation of complete perfection provides a useful point of comparison, but he takes it even further, adding the additional claim that such an archetype also provides a rightful object of emulation.⁵ While in and of itself, this is a relatively straightforward idea, it is hard to see how it can be reconciled with things that Kant says elsewhere, especially those having to do with

⁵ Jeanine Grenberg argues that Kant’s invocation of Christ as the *Urbild* constitutes a renunciation of the earlier example of the Stoic sage. She writes: “Later in the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant rejects the idea of the sage as an image which fails to appreciate fully the corruption of human nature [...] but appeals instead to the figure of Christ” (Grenberg 2005, 203). However, in his final work of moral philosophy, the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant once again invokes the sage, writing “In its highest stage [virtue] is an ideal (to which one must continually approximate), which is commonly personified poetically by the *sage*” (MS 6:383).

moral deliberation and the proper motivation of moral actions. As has already been discussed, Kant took great pains to emphasize that morality is never a matter of imitating others and that the only proper motivation for actions that can be called ‘moral’ is one of respect for the law itself. Kant tries to reconcile the two, in part, by drawing a distinction between ‘imitation’ [*Nachahmung*], which is never justified, and ‘emulation’ [*Nachfolge*], which is. However, this appears largely to be a distinction without a difference, and in any case, it fails to solve the problem of proper motivation. ‘Emulation’ is no more a suitable motivation for moral action than ‘imitation.’ Hence, the question of how comparison against, or emulation of, an archetype functions in the moral life, remains open.

One way of resolving these apparent inconsistencies is found in Onora O’Neill’s classic essay “The Power of Example.” O’Neill attempts to solve the problem by assigning a rather restricted role to the use of exemplars in Kantian morality. O’Neill explains that exemplars, including the *Urbild* of Christ, “help us to see what might be involved in applying the Categorical Imperative” (O’Neill 1986, 9), but she further clarifies that exemplars are never action-guiding. Their true use is restricted to an early stage of moral development, prior to the apprehension and internalization of the moral law. O’Neill writes:

On Kant’s view actual cases of moral deliberation do not use examples at all. When we have to decide what to do we are required to test the principle on which we propose to act according to the Categorical imperative. It is only at a prior stage of assimilation of the Categorical imperative and its more central implications that examples may be useful illustrations of moral action rather than as applications of moral theory (O’Neill 1986, 7).

On this interpretation, exemplars have nothing to do with moral deliberation or the ability to apply the moral law in concrete situations. They merely provide a kind of heuristic for coming to understand how the categorical imperative functions as a maxim-guiding principle in the first place. All of their work is done prior to the assimilation of the categorical imperative.

Just as Aristotle, at the outset of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, stresses the importance of getting clear about whether our arguments are moving *from* or *towards* first principles, so O’Neill clarifies that, insofar as we are talking about examples and exemplars in Kantian theory, we are still moving *towards* the principles. After the principles have been ‘assimilated,’ moral deliberation is about testing maxims against the categorical imperative and acting out of respect for the law. While this accords well with Kant’s account of moral deliberation in

the *Groundwork* and in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, it is more difficult to reconcile with Kant's claim that the *Urbild* is a proper object of comparison and emulation, and his claim that the application of the moral law requires a judgment sharpened by experience, which is in part accomplished by means of examples.

Seeking to do full justice to the latter considerations, another eminent Kant scholar, Robert Louden, interprets things precisely the other way around – examples and exemplars are useful after the assimilation of the categorical imperative, and they are useful precisely for helping us to apply the moral law. Louden states that Kant's point

clearly applies to adults as well as children, and thus implies a life-long need for moral exemplars. [...] Obviously, most adults have a much easier time with abstract concepts than do children, and in this sense adults may need less resort to specific examples. But adults are continually forced to decide whether and why a given principle is relevant to every new case they encounter; to discern relevant similarities and differences between the situation at hand and previous cases to which they thought the principle was relevant; to unpack the underlying metaphors in which principles are inevitably couched (e.g., "treat people as ends in themselves"). Reflecting on specific examples can and does aid us in each of these life-long tasks (Louden 1992, 314).

In arguing this way, Louden's interpretation fits more closely with the passages about emulating an *Urbild*, and using exemplars in the application of the law. His interpretation also does better justice to the fact that these passages are clearly not discussing early moral education, but rather the reflection of rational, autonomous adults. However, it seems to fit less well with Kant's considered account of moral deliberation and motivation. Louden does not explain how, for example, moral deliberation can simultaneously involve testing maxims against the categorical imperative and the emulation of an exemplar. So, despite their diametrically opposed interpretations of Kant with regard to these two questions – the stage at which exemplars are useful and whether they are useful for moral deliberation or application – Louden and O'Neill are in the same position: their interpretations seem to cover only half of the story, without any indication of how the two might be reconciled in a single coherent theory.

This is due in part to the fact that both scholars speak in general terms of 'moral laws' and 'moral principles' as well as an undifferentiated 'deliberation' and 'application' without getting into the specifics of concrete cases or particular duties. In their defense, Kant himself speaks in the same way. His highly

schematic thoughts on exemplars make no distinctions between their use with regard to one type of duty as opposed to another. Nevertheless, attention to Kant's taxonomy of duties, and especially his distinction between perfect and imperfect duties is capable of clarifying exactly where and how exemplars come into play in his moral theory. And it is capable of showing what Louden and O'Neill get right and what they get wrong in their respective interpretations.

PERFECT AND IMPERFECT DUTIES

In the *Groundwork*, Kant makes a simple distinction between duties that admit of exceptions in their application, and those that do not. The former, which he terms 'perfect' duties, include all of the 'juridical' duties, that is the duties that pertain to matters of right, as well as certain non-juridical duties, such as those that prohibit lying and suicide. Not only are the perfect duties characterized by their exceptionless, and therefore context-independent nature, they are characterized by the fact that their rightness is immediately apparent from the simple contemplation of the categorical imperative. Maxims drawn up in opposition to these duties, such as the maxim that "I will lie when it is to my advantage to do so" directly produce a contradiction when universalized and treat others as means to my ends rather than as ends in themselves. No additional considerations are needed to see what makes such maxims wrong.⁶ Because of this, there is something of a direct line from the moral law (i.e. the objective principle) to the maxim (i.e. the subjective principle) to the action itself. There is no ambiguity about what the correct maxim is, nor about how the maxim applies in concrete circumstances. Hence there is no need for any additional moral deliberation to weigh the vagaries of situation or the possible outcomes of action.⁷

⁶ The immense body of literature debating the question of what it means for maxims to 'contradict' indicates that the business of universalizing maxims is probably not as transparent as Kant took it to be. But the operative point remains that Kant did not see it as requiring complex or multi-stage deliberation.

⁷ Kant's later inclusion of duties such as the prohibition against 'Stupefying Oneself by the Excessive Use of Food and Drink' among the perfect duties (MS 6:427), would seem to complicate this picture, since, as Kant's 'casuistical' discussion of this shows, there is no clarity about exactly how much food and drink one is justified in consuming in a given situation. Additional deliberation of the kind discussed below is therefore called for. Yet, insofar as this is the case, such duties simply do not meet Kant's own definition of 'perfect duties' despite his categorization of them as such.

Imperfect duties, on the other hand, admit of some leeway in their fulfillment. According to Kant there are two such duties. The first is the duty of self-perfection [*eigene Vollkommenheit*] and the second, the duty to promote the happiness of others. The first stipulates that we ought to aspire as far as possible to bring both our moral and our natural capacities to perfection. The second stipulates that we ought to promote the happiness of other people, as a way of indirectly promoting their morality, since “adversity, pain, and want are great temptations to violate one’s duty” (MS 6:388). With regard to these duties, the moral law requires that I adopt a maxim that sets the promotion of my self-perfection and the happiness of others, respectively, as ends to be pursued. Yet, the moral law does not stipulate anything about how I ought to construe those ends (i.e., how to determine the content of ‘happiness’ or ‘perfection’), nor does it tell me how to go about pursuing those ends. That is, it does not stipulate which actions should or should not follow from the maxim. There is no direct line from the maxim to the action, as there is in the case of perfect duties. Kant explains that “if the law can prescribe only the maxim of actions, not actions themselves, this is a sign that it leaves a playroom [*latitudo*] for free choice in following (complying with) the law, that is, the law cannot specify precisely in what way one is to act and how much one is to do by the action” (MS 6:390). In other words, the fulfillment of imperfect duties is a matter of judgment, it is context-dependent, it requires means-end deliberation, and the correct course of action is always underdetermined by the moral law itself.

Speaking in general terms of ‘the moral law’ or ‘moral deliberation’ obscures the very different natures of these two types of duties and the very different nature of what is involved in their fulfillment. To make this even more explicit, compare what is involved with deliberation about a perfect duty like the prohibition of lying, which we have already discussed, with deliberation about the imperfect duty of self-perfection. In the latter, once a moral agent has adopted the maxim to seek to bring all her natural capacities to the highest possible perfection, what does she do next? Does she read a book? Or, does she go to the gym? If she decides to read a book, which one? As soon as one begins to deliberate about such questions, it is easy to see why Kant advises us not to look to the moral law for help – it has none to give. Making this even more difficult is the fact that Kant’s conception of perfection is one that allows for many ‘right answers.’ Perfection is not an exhaustive totality; it is rather a kind of balance or harmony between one’s capacities and the ends to which those capacities might

reasonably be put. It therefore varies according to context. To list only some of the possible factors determining one's concept of 'perfection,' Kant tells us it might vary according to (a) "the different situations in which human beings may find themselves" (MS 6:392); (b) "what sort of life he would like to lead" (MS 6:445); (c) "whether he has the powers necessary for it" (MS 6:445); and (d) the different ends people happen to have (MS 6:445).

The case of the second imperfect duty – the obligation to promote the happiness of others – is arguably even more difficult. One of Kant's reasons for rejecting eudaimonism as a moral theory is that the concept of 'happiness' is too indeterminate to serve as a ground for action.⁸ Yet, we are now asked not only to understand it, but to promote it in those around us. However we go about doing this, it is clear once again that the categorical imperative provides us with no help. We are left to our own judgment. As with self-perfection, there is no ready-made decision calculus that can do the heavy lifting for us.

It is precisely here that exemplars have a role to play. First, the very indeterminacy of the concepts of 'perfection' and 'happiness' means that they conjure up very little to the mind without the help of some kind of concrete image. Thinking about 'happiness' without thinking about happy people reminds one of Nabokov's quip that philosophy is like trying to think about potatoes without imagining any potato you've ever seen. Second, the context-dependent nature of the concepts seems to require the type of judgment that Kant describes as being sharpened by experience. There are no extra-judgmental rules to guide the process. Third, the comprehensive nature of the concepts, involving a notion of something like 'maximal harmony' or 'maximal integrity' fits well with Kant's description of the *Urbild*. Whether or not we find it convincing that Christ or the Stoic sage are the optimal representations of completeness or perfection, matters less than seeing that that is how Kant understood them. Finally, the teleological structure of both duties suggests a nice parallel with Aristotelian virtue ethics, where exemplars function in large measure by illustrating how the possession of particular character traits is conducive to the achievement of a broader, overarching telos.

Situating the role of exemplars here – in the application or fulfillment of imperfect duties – also helps to explain how their emulation is consistent with

⁸ In the *Groundwork*, Kant writes that "one can form no determinate and sure concept of the sum of satisfaction of all inclinations under the name of happiness" (GMS 4:399). This is one of several considerations in his larger case against eudaimonism.

Kant's account of moral deliberation. With regard to imperfect duties, there is first the formation of a maxim, which is achieved by testing it against the categorical imperative. If the maxim is to count as moral, the motivation for adopting it can only be respect for the law itself. To this point, the process is largely the same as that for perfect duties.⁹ But in the second stage, the processes of deliberation diverge. As we have already seen, actions follow from maxims of perfect duties in a somewhat linear fashion. Once a maxim is adopted, there is no further thought process required; it should be immediately clear what action ought to follow. With imperfect duties, it is quite different. The fulfillment [*Erfüllung*] of the maxim in concrete actions cannot be directly determined by the law; it is not immediately clear what action ought to follow. For this reason, Kant assigns it a kind of intermediate status where the fulfilling actions, and their omissions, are categorized neither as 'moral' nor as 'immoral,' but rather as 'merit' and 'deficiency in moral worth' (MS 6:390).

Therefore, Onora O'Neill's claim that Kant's account of moral deliberation excludes the emulation of exemplars is correct, but only if 'moral deliberation' refers strictly to the adoption of maxims. If it also refers to the fulfillment of those maxims in concrete actions, she might be right once again with regard to perfect duties, but she is certainly wrong with regard to imperfect duties. Deliberation over the fulfillment of imperfect duties is not only consistent with the use of maxims, it seems to call for it. Correspondingly, Robert Louden's account of the necessity of exemplars to moral deliberation is correct, but only when applied to imperfect duties. Exemplars have no role to play in deliberation regarding perfect duties.

CONCLUSION

Though Kant's account of moral exemplars is largely critical and cautionary, he also makes room for a positive role in the fulfillment of imperfect duties. Examples are useful for sharpening judgment so as to be able to make better decisions in cases that are unique and context-dependent – the kinds of decisions we face when deliberating about how to achieve self-perfection or how to aid the

⁹ Technically, there is some difference in the respective tests for maxims. While perfect duties involve what has come to be called the 'contradiction in conception' test, imperfect duties involve a 'contradiction in the will' test. Nevertheless, both processes involve testing maxims against the categorical imperative.

happiness of others. Secondly, they provide us with an archetype or *Urbild* that helps us to visualize highly indeterminate, comprehensive concepts such as ‘perfection’ and ‘happiness.’ Attention to the unique features of imperfect duties, helps us to understand that emulation of exemplars can be entirely consistent with acting out of respect for the law, and that Kant’s account of deliberation is not exhausted by rule-based, calculative procedures such as testing maxims against the categorical imperative. Fulfilment of imperfect duties requires the kind of practical wisdom discussed at great length by Aristotle. For this reason, Kantians have much to gain by a more substantive engagement with the Aristotelian tradition and with the expanding body of recent work on exemplars and exemplarism, including the essays in the present collection.

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