

# Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy

*Pli* is edited and produced by members of the Graduate School of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Warwick.

Special Volume. Self-Cultivation: Ancient and Modern

ISBN 1 897646 25 9

ISSN 1367-3769

© 2016 *Pli*, individual contributions © their authors, unless otherwise stated.

Editors: Bethany Parsons and Andre Okawara

Editorial Chair: Thomas Ryan

## Editorial board:

Adam Arnold

Peter Brown

Alexandra Cain

Neil Durrant

Jess Farrell

Jordan Fisher

Chris Ivins

Michael Lazarus

Amanda McLeod

Constantin Mehmel

Conor Molloy

Liam Moore

Maksymilian Sipowicz

Alex Underwood

This special volume was produced in collaboration with members of the Graduate School of the Department of Philosophy at Monash University and partially funded by the Monash-Warwick Alliance.

Contributions, Orders, Subscriptions, Enquiries:

*Pli*, The Warwick Journal of Philosophy

Department of Philosophy

University of Warwick

Coventry CV4 7AL UK

Email: [plijournal@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:plijournal@warwick.ac.uk)

Website: [www.plijournal.com](http://www.plijournal.com)

## **We Don't Need No Noumena? Freedom Through Rational Self-Cultivation in Kant**

**LOUISE R. CHAPMAN**

---

*In this paper I argue that we find in Kant a more plausible alternative to his transcendental conception of freedom. In the *Metaphysics of Morals* in particular, we find a naturalistic conception of freedom premised upon a theory of rational self-cultivation. The motivation for a naturalising reading of Kant is two-fold. On the one hand, a naturalistic conception of freedom avoids the charges levelled against Kant's 'panicky metaphysics', which both forces us to accept an ontologically extravagant picture of the world and the self, and also commits us to understanding freedom in non-spatiotemporal terms, thus excluding the possibility that the process of becoming free is progressive. And second, on a naturalistic reading we can repackage normativity back into Kant's account of freedom, which has seemed to scholars unacceptably absent. I explain how the process of becoming free, on the naturalistic view, involves cultivating certain 'aesthetic preconditions of the mind's receptivity to concepts of duty'.<sup>1</sup> Happily, these conditions incur no unpalatable ontological penalties; rather, they constitute an achievement of the rational aspect of the self. Pointedly, this is not a self who is free only in virtue of having membership in the noumenal realm. Rather, effortful self-development entails a battle to become practically free, and thereby moral. The primary attraction to this reading of Kant is that it describes freedom as a naturalistic achievement, rather than a metaphysical given. Thus I show that by jettisoning, or at least naturalising, the picture of noumenal selfhood we not only find a theory that is poorer in panicky metaphysics, but much richer in normative force.*

---

1 Paul Guyer, 'Progress Towards Autonomy,' in *Kant on Moral Autonomy* ed. Oliver Sensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 76.

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to bring to light, and critically examine, a novel and normatively richer alternative to Kant's transcendentalist account of freedom. By looking beyond Kant's most famous ethical texts and towards his final ethical treatise, the *Metaphysics of Morals*,<sup>2</sup> in particular part two of that work, *The Doctrine of Virtue*, we find Kant discussing freedom in much earthier terms—worlds apart from his earlier transcendentalist account. In particular, Kant propounds the view that as human beings we have the power to cultivate inner-freedom through a process of self-mastery, or *autocracy*.<sup>3</sup> Crucially, this alternative account of freedom *excludes* its transcendentalist predecessor, given that freedom understood as self-cultivation in accordance with a rational principle is a *temporally-extended* process, whereas freedom on the transcendentalist schema can succumb to no such rubric.

I will be following the lead of Paul Guyer in proposing a compatibilist reading of Kant that allows the possibility of freedom consistent with the laws of nature, when we understand freedom as a condition cultivated through a naturalistic process of self-mastery.<sup>4</sup> A concern that will appear germane, not to mention threatening, to any compatibilist or naturalistic account of freedom stems from Kant's claims about causation in the Second Analogy of the first *Critique*. Kant's claims in the Second

2 Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) was written nearly a decade after the *Groundwork* (1785) and second *Critique* (1788).

3 It is worth explaining what separates autonomy from autocracy in Kant's practical corpus. *Autonomy* is the *legislative* power of the will, that is, the power the will has to set laws for itself, meanwhile *autocracy* can be understood as an *executive* power, without which inclination would drag us away from self-legislated maxims. Autonomy can therefore be called merely legislative, while autocracy is the strength (*fortitudo moralis*) of the will to bat away contra-moral inclinations—autonomy is the capacity of the will to set the law, autocracy the capacity to *abide* by its dictates. In Kant's discussion of self-cultivation, then, autonomy has no part to play, since autonomy is presupposed as a property of the will in virtue of our part-rational/part-sensible constitution. Autocracy, by contrast, is an empirically *acquired* disposition that we can progressively cultivate. It follows that an autonomous being that has not cultivated autocracy might be called *akratic* in the sense adopted by Aristotle, for that being has not attempted to cultivate the strength of will required to follow through on rational self-legislation. See Baxley (2010), pp. 50-60.

4 Paul Guyer, 'Naturalistic and Transcendental Moments in Kant's Moral Philosophy,' *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* (2007), pp. 444-464.

Analogy commit him to determinism of natural causes, whereby every phenomenal event must have a corresponding phenomenal cause. Thus, human action, when considered as the effect of a psychological event, must also fall within the purview of the Second Analogy.

My task here, however, isn't to attempt a way out of the mechanism of nature. To the contrary, I am interested in how *within* the remit of empirical psychology Kant believes we can enhance our susceptibility to the demands of morality, which constitutes part of his task in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. While his challenge in the *Groundwork* was to *derive* the supreme principle of morality, in the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant investigates how, as empirically situated and imperfectly rational beings, we actually become psychologically susceptible to this principle. While, therefore, in deriving the moral law in the *Groundwork* Kant makes a vehement prohibition on the role of sensibility and anthropology to the metaphysics of morals, Kant eventually concedes in *The Doctrine of Virtue* that in becoming receptive to the concept of duty (a necessary condition on becoming its executor), we must employ some mode of sensibility, which Kant discusses under the title the 'aesthetic of morals'.<sup>5</sup> There is, therefore, a positive role for feeling in Kant's ethics, *viz.* in becoming receptive to the demands of duty, where unlocking this receptivity largely consists in overthrowing contra-moral inclinations. Kant suggests that in the very removal of hindrances to acting from duty we make a substantive moral gain. Though Kant does not put this spin on his account, I consider this moral gain to be an increase in our freedom to act from duty.

Incentives in the will, Kant suggests in the second *Critique*, operate according to a hydraulic model, whereby in gaining mastery over inclination we enhance our capacity to act from duty.<sup>6</sup> How we gain mastery over inclination in the first instance involves fostering a competing *non-pathological* feeling that opposes and overthrows pathological incentives in the will: practical or moral feeling. Kant characterises moral feeling in *The Doctrine of Virtue* as our 'susceptibility on the part of free choice [*Willkür*] to be moved by pure practical reason [*Wille*]'.<sup>7</sup> Cultivating

5 Immanuel Kant, trans. Mary Gregor, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6:406.

6 '[H]umiliation on the sensible side [...] is an elevation of the moral [...] [for], whatever diminishes the hindrances to an activity is a furthering of this activity itself.' Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, [5:79].

7 Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, [6:528-9].

moral feeling as part of an arsenal of aesthetic preconditions of our susceptibility to the demands of duty has the effect of drowning out the beckoning calls of countervailing incentives and, as a result, brings the voice of pure practical reason—identifiable with the will (*Wille*) itself—into audible range. So in the process of silencing countervailing incentives, we gradually realise our capacity to listen to the voice of the will, whose ends and edicts just are those of the categorical imperative. At the empirical level, we can use the power of choice (*Willkür*) to enhance our *pro*-moral sentiments such that *contra*-moral calls to action become progressively silenced (though never fully extirpated), and the voice of practical reason becomes audible. Over time, and with consistent practice, practical reason can become the loudest voice in our entire volitional system.

According to this story, it is not the case that acting from duty is directly produced by a mechanism of nature. After all, self-cultivating in the way I have described is not a *determinate* cause to acting from duty. It is, however, a process that imperfectly rational agents like ourselves must of necessity undertake in order to become receptive to the concept of duty in the first instance. The conclusions of the Second Analogy shouldn't, therefore, threaten how we understand the freedom of moral actions according to the narrative of this paper. Though we need to cultivate ourselves in order to become receptive to the dictates of practical reason (our objectively moral ends), even *then* we retain the capacity to do otherwise, that is, fail to carry out our duty. Insofar as we are capable of practising and reinforcing autocracy through the dominion of moral over pathological feeling, we progressively improve our capacity to *discern* the voice of pure practical reason. And it is insofar as our discernment improves (which I like to understand along the lines of increased audibility), that our executive capacity *correlatively* improves—but merely improving our discernment of the moral law neither guarantees nor causes its execution. Notwithstanding, without at least *cultivating* our capacity to listen to the moral law, its execution would be practically impossible. It is *this* story about cultivation that I wish to tell, and which, to the extent that it can be construed as a theory of freedom, makes it more interesting than its transcendental counterpart.<sup>8</sup> The story of self-

<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding, concerns will rightly linger regarding under what taxonomy of desire our so-called 'pro-moral' inclination falls, such that it can provide the right kind of inclination to morality, and, moreover, such that it has the right causal origin. Across his moral and anthropological work, Kant has reflected a spectrum of opinions regarding the rightful place of inclination in ethics. It is not

cultivation indexes the conditions of possibility of freedom to the empirical world, and so what grounds our freedom to act from duty must be considered as dependent upon our empirical location and constitution, since it requires both a spatiotemporally extended process, and man's faculty of sensibility.<sup>9</sup>

### The structure of this paper

In what follows, I will first (§1) outline the transcendental picture of freedom—to reject it requires giving it a fair hearing. Then (§2a) I will construct my positive thesis, namely the suggestion that our capacity for freedom can be actively cultivated through rational self-mastery or autocracy. I will explain how (§2b), in specific, the process of self-cultivation enables us to become the kinds of agents who choose in accordance with the moral law. I will then explain (§3) how this account of freedom *enriches* Kant's deontology, by suggesting that our *foremost* duty as moral agents is to cultivate the conditions for freedom. In the last section (§4) I expose the metaphysical differences between the theses in tension in this paper. Finally, I reiterate the intended scope of this paper, to anticipate objections regarding the extent of my conclusion.

### §1. (Why) We Don't Need No Noumena

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant makes commitment to transcendental idealism a requirement of all practical philosophy. He claims that if we deny transcendental idealism we lose all practical freedom and so, for the purposes of ethical theory, questions such as what *ought* to

---

uncontroversial to suggest that by the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant's once fanatical prohibition on the role of sensibility in morality had softened. Kant's considered view about inclination is quite distant from his position in the *Groundwork*, though his position in that work is often cited as though it reflects his considered view.

- 9 Is the thesis about transcendental freedom really in competition with the story about freedom acquired through self-cultivation? There are ways in which the self-cultivation story supplants transcendental freedom, but there still remains an explanatory gap about the possibility of free action. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, I am also inclined to attempt a naturalistic reading of Kant on this point, invoking a Frankfurtian model of volition, employing Kant's notions of *Wille* and *Willkür* as the respective faculties involved in reflective endorsement. On such an account we could once again do away with Kant's heavy metaphysics, and give a plausible account of free action within the parameters of empirical psychology.

have happened evaporate.<sup>10</sup> Without transcendental idealism and the freedom it discloses, Kant thinks our actions inevitably succumb to the model of the Second Analogy, which states that every event is determined by another in time, in accordance with necessary laws.<sup>11</sup> But transcendental idealism, Kant claims in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, 'negates the impudent assertions of [...] fatalism [...] and [serves] to provide moral ideas with the space outside the field of speculation.'<sup>12</sup> So how is this possible on the transcendentalist account?

Put succinctly, transcendental freedom is a pure transcendental idea that must be regarded from two points of view. On the one hand it can be regarded as a *thing-in-itself*, a causality intelligible in its action, whilst also belonging to the natural world, wherein it is sensible in its effects. So when we bring the *subject* into the picture, we can say that the transcendental self *qua* noumenon enjoys *agent-causal libertarianism*: the power to be a causality given its fundamental membership in the world of intelligence. At the level of phenomenon, however, the self is situated in a world where 'every event is causally determined.'<sup>13</sup> Thus, according to Kant's transcendental picture, it is in virtue of the self's noumenal membership that our actions can be called free.

As Kant sees it, the two-part self can begin a causal process in the noumenal realm, the effects of which are reflected in the phenomenal realm, in the form of free actions. So when we as agents take these two points of view, we are entitled to think of ourselves as free, given our primitive noumenal identity. This identity, Kant believes, sufficiently grounds the belief that when we act morally, we act freely. This is because moral action, *ex hypothesi*, eliminates all sensible impulses, and therefore, what instigates our action is the rational, noumenally-free aspect of us. So, when we act morally, we act under the 'idea' of freedom,<sup>14</sup> adopting the noumenal standpoint, which suffices (Kant believes) to make our actions free. Kant claims that we are entitled to assume that underlying appearances there are things as they are in themselves. But, as

---

10 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), A534/B562.

11 Ibid.

12 Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. Gary Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), [4:363].

13 Ralph Walker, *Kant: The Arguments of the Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 148.

14 Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, [4:448].

I see it, Kant is not entitled to any such assumption since he violates his own epistemology.

In essence, Kant is not permitted to make any positive or negative property attributions to the noumenal self. As a thing-in-itself, outside of time and space, noumenal realms and selves are not an accessible part of our epistemology. This can only mean that the postulation of the noumenal realm is mere fideism and a gratuitous circumvention of determinism. But this is the central tenet of his transcendental idealism. Kant might be right, we might be free – but he can't know it, he can't say it, and he has no reason to think it. If he's right, it's a blind guess. As Strawson notes, this conclusion looks disastrous for Kant, since human freedom and moral justice would be illusory if the natural world were all there was.<sup>15</sup> Thankfully, however, Kant's moral theory can survive without what Onora O'Neill dubbed his 'panicky metaphysics',<sup>16</sup> and I will be arguing for a conception of freedom that requires no such thing.

It is worth noting, finally, that Kant's motivation for invoking transcendental freedom at the end of *Groundwork* III is *metaphysical* and not *normative*. That is, Kant does not invoke transcendental freedom to show *why* the moral law *should* govern us as human beings, but simply *that it does*, given that, Kant claims, the moral law *just is* the fundamental grounding to us as transcendently free agents.<sup>17</sup> Since transcendental freedom does *no* normative explanatory work in his moral theory, I believe that Kant's transcendental view can be unproblematically divorced from his practical philosophy without doing violence to his *normative* moral theory.

By contrast, my account makes a normative call on us from the start. Since, I shall argue, freedom can be cultivated through self-mastery, our *foremost* priority as agents is to develop ourselves in such a way that can ultimately set us free. Moreover, since freedom is the ultimate *condition of possibility* in Kant's moral philosophy, I shall argue that we have a *second-order* moral duty to develop ourselves in this way. To this end my thesis *repackages* moral normativity back into freedom, leading to an

---

<sup>15</sup> Peter F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (Methuen: Routledge, 1966), p. 241.

<sup>16</sup> Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 210.

<sup>17</sup> 'The moral "ought" is then his own necessary "will" as a member of an intelligible world.' Kant, *Groundwork*, [4:455].



even fuller and richer deontological theory of freedom than that which we find in Kant's transcendental account.

So what exactly does freedom as self-cultivation consist in? In short, it amounts to becoming as psychologically attuned as possible to the moral law—like tuning in to *Categorical Imperative FM* with as little interference as possible from the background noise of inclination. So the more successfully we can approximate ourselves with the moral law as our guiding action principle, the weaker heteronomous calls to action will be.<sup>18</sup> As Kant remarks in *The Doctrine of Virtue*, it is only when duty *itself* becomes 'irresistible'<sup>19</sup> that we 'prove our freedom in the highest degree.'<sup>20</sup>

## §2a. From Noumena to Naturalism about Freedom: The Progressive View

Kant's progressive view of freedom, as I shall call it, involves positive self-compulsion.<sup>21</sup> In this vein, Kant remains close in spirit to Rousseau who claims that to in order to escape the slavery of our appetites we must impose a law onto ourselves.<sup>22</sup> The notion of self-compulsion, understood as the capacity to prevail over inclination, is fundamental to the acquisition of freedom on the progressive view.

---

18 There has been substantial discussion as to whether Kant's account of freedom as *virtue* instead amounts to freedom as *continence*. I follow Stephen Engstrom (2002) in regarding Kant's naturalised account of freedom as suggesting that the more we succeed in self-compulsion, the fewer countervailing incentives there will be to action. That is, the more successfully we have self-cultivated, the further we are from mere continence, and the closer we are towards *bona fide* virtue. It seems that the process of self-cultivation will always *begin* with continence, since all dually-constituted (rational and sensible) beings have naturally imperfect wills, which become *perfected* (freed from the tugs of sensibility) through rational self-cultivation. It could only be on account of your possession of a *holy* will that you would not need to self-cultivate the inner conditions of freedom on the view I am propounding. As Baxley (2010) comments, an infinite holy will 'is *wholly immune to the very possibility of temptation*' and a finite holy will 'is *constitutionally incapable of succumbing to temptation*'.

19 Kant, *Doctrine of Virtue*, [6:382n].

20 Ibid.

21 Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Peter Heath, ed. Peter Heath and J.B. Schneewind (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), [27:269-270].

22 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Christopher Betts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 59.

Crucially, Kant remarks that, no man is *above* self-compulsion.<sup>23</sup> If this is true, if we really are *all* capable of this self-compulsion, we can retain the possibility of moral accountability, since self-compulsion is consistent with a compatibilist theory of freedom: it's up to us. Therefore, on the progressive view, you are *pro tanto* morally accountable, that is, *to the extent that* you have developed yourself through self-compulsion.

This thought is developed by Guyer, who argues that freedom as self-compulsion is nothing more than moral discipline that can be cultivated by regulating our inclinations according to a rational principle.<sup>24</sup> According to Guyer, if we are going to realise our freedom whilst rejecting the transcendental picture, we will need to achieve control over our other feelings through our determination to act in accordance with the moral law. For this, he claims, we require certain '*aesthetic preconditions* of the mind's receptivity to concepts of duty',<sup>25</sup> which turn out to be the same conditions of possibility for freedom on the progressive view.

## §2b. Naturalistic *Conditions of Possibility*

In his discussion of the 'aesthetic of morals',<sup>26</sup> Kant's first stop is *moral feeling*—the feeling of respect we have for the moral law. In cultivating moral feeling as a precondition of self-mastery, Kant says we must learn to 'strengthen it through wonder at its inscrutable source',<sup>27</sup> namely the moral law itself. In strengthening our affective respect for the moral law we increase our capacity for self-mastery over inclinations, whereby the practical moral feeling, 'self-wrought by means of a rational concept',<sup>28</sup> defeats competing *pathological* hindrances to our ability to act from duty. Furthermore, since this affect is rational, its cultivation can be guarded against the charge of heteronomy.

A further precondition of successful self-mastery is to cultivate *conscience*.<sup>29</sup> Conscience for Kant consists in 'the voice of the inner

---

23 Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, [27:270].

24 Paul Guyer, 'Progress Towards Autonomy,' in *Kant on Moral Autonomy* ed. Oliver Sensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 76.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 82. My emphasis.

26 Kant, *Doctrine of Virtue*, [6:406].

27 *Ibid.*, [6:400].

28 Kant, *Groundwork*, [4:401n].

29 In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant invites us to think of human being as bearing a dual *personality* [DV, 6:439n]. His motivation for this comes from his discussion of

judge',<sup>30</sup> to whom an agent can listen more successfully the better that person gets to know himself. As Kant states in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the moral law itself has the power to '[humiliate] every human being when he compares the sensible propensity of his nature with it.'<sup>31</sup> So when we develop our consciences, we succeed in holding our inclinations up to rational scrutiny, whereby this scrutiny can serve to humiliate and humble us when we notice how far our incentives deviate from the standard demanded by the categorical imperative. Accordingly, conscience requires that we learn to discriminate between autonomous and heteronomous incentives.

But this does, admittedly, look like a dodgy move on Kant's part. Across his practical philosophy, Kant maintains that we cannot be sure whether our incentives are moral or non-moral. His position in *The Doctrine of Virtue* might, therefore, amount to no more than wishful thinking. For while he grants that 'a human being cannot see into the depth of his own heart so as to be quite certain of the purity of his moral intention',<sup>32</sup> Kant maintains that an agent must nevertheless 'strive with all [his] might that the thought of duty for its own sake is the sufficient incentive of every action conforming to duty.'<sup>33</sup>

Thus far, then, the naturalistic picture of self-cultivation as a means to acquiring freedom has shown how the achievement of self-mastery necessary for freedom involves that we practice techniques that help support the reign of the moral law, where the better we become at this, the better able we are to judge countervailing inclinations as productive of unfit, heteronomous maxims for action. When freedom is acquired through this process of self-mastery, the cultivation of moral feeling and conscience help us suppress competing inclinations. When we become able to *surmount* inclinations we finally realise what Kant calls 'inner-

conscience—the concept of which he says would be 'contradictory' if we didn't conceive of man as bipartite. That is, the idea that we have an inner, authoritative juror (in what Kant calls the 'inner court') is absurd if there is not also part of us standing trial. It seems that Kant can maintain the fundamental *idea* of bipartition without having to commit to any panicky metaphysics. The contemporary analogue of the bipartite (moral) personality could be the picture of human agency found in Frankfurt's 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person.'

30 Ibid., [6:401].

31 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), [5:74].

32 Kant, *Doctrine of Virtue*, [6:392].

33 Ibid., [6:393].

freedom',<sup>34</sup> which he also describes as the 'virtue of moral self-constraint'.<sup>35</sup>

It should be apparent therefore that, according to the view I am propounding, freedom constitutes an *achievement* of the rational aspect of the self. Pointedly, this is *not* a self who is free *only* in virtue of having membership in the noumenal realm; instead, effortful self-development entails a *battle* to become practically free. Kant remarks that our inclinations are 'monsters [we have] to fight',<sup>36</sup> and only through the process of rational self-development do we emerge victorious, earning ourselves a place in a possible realm of ends. So as we progressively become better autocrats, we earn and enhance our capacity for agency, and so for freedom.

Added corroboration for these sympathies is found in Kant's *Lectures on Anthropology*. Here Kant speaks of the battle between sensibility and the power of choice as a battle we have the power to win.<sup>37</sup> It seems that if Kant were wholeheartedly committed to the transcendental picture of freedom, there would be no *sense* in discussing a power of choice and our requirement to discipline sensibility through the understanding. This is brought out further in Kant's claim that sensibility deserves blame since 'it draws us against our power of choice in the direction where the understanding did not want to go'.<sup>38</sup>

On this point, it bears recalling Sidgwick's objection to Kant's transcendental theory of freedom.<sup>39</sup> Sidgwick contends that the picture of freedom and morality jointly issuing from the self *qua* noumenon renders paradoxical the possibility we can do wrong willingly. In short Sidgwick's objection is this: if we do wrong freely, we are, in fact, not acting freely after all, since on Kant's picture when we act freely we are *ex hypothesi* acting morally. Sidgwick's objection can, however, be met if we accept a naturalisation of Kant's account of freedom. That Kant discusses the possibility of censuring immoral conduct is an invitation to think

---

34 Denis, 'A Kantian Conception of Human Flourishing,' p. 182.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Anthropology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), [25:1231].

38 Ibid.

39 Henry Sidgwick, 'The Kantian Conception of Free Will', *Mind*, Vol. 13 (1888), p. 405.

pragmatically about his theory of freedom. In this vein, naturalising Kant's account of freedom enables us to move away from the cramped and unhappy disjunctions of 'free or un-free' and 'moral or immoral' towards thinking about such normative concepts as operating in matters of *degree*. I imagine that Kant with his anthropological hat on would welcome this interpretative move. At the very least, the texts to which I have been referring give license to this reading.

### §3. The Duty to Self-Master

It should be apparent, then, that according to the progressive view of freedom, we have a *second-order duty* to cultivate ourselves as autocrats. Accordingly, normativity is restored to Kant's theory of freedom. As I see it, the duty to self-master is a duty preceding all other duties. For example, first-order duties would include particular moral acts themselves, namely those that conform to the categorical imperative. A second-order duty, however, would involve cultivating the kind of *character* that is maximally *susceptible* to the normative force of the categorical imperative. As Guyer sees it, and to use Kant's deontic terminology, this kind of self-cultivation constitutes an *imperfect* duty to oneself, whereby we 'perfect [our] moral [personalities]<sup>40</sup> and 'make [ourselves] more perfect than mere nature created [us]'.<sup>41</sup> Recall, furthermore, that, according to Kant, imperfect duties *promote* the very possibility of free choice. Therefore, if free choice *itself* depends upon self-cultivating the aforementioned *aesthetic preconditions* of the mind's receptivity to duty, then through self-cultivation we *make possible* our capacity for freedom and morality—all the while without noumenal membership. As Kant states in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, 'whatever diminishes the hindrances to an activity is a *furthering of this activity itself*'.<sup>42</sup> In cultivating the aforementioned aesthetic preconditions, we wrest power from *pathological* inclination, which would otherwise thwart the practical efficacy of the moral law. But whilst removing this merely negative condition—like freeing a prisoner from his shackles—we simultaneously achieve something positive: the ability to act from the motive of duty itself. We might otherwise call this an enhancement in our freedom.

---

40 Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 32.

41 Ibid.

42 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, [5:79]. Own emphasis.

However, while Kant stipulates that the duty to self-cultivate is imperfect, he also claims that it is a *wide* duty.<sup>43</sup> It bears recalling that, according to Kant, *wide* duties are those that are not absolute, that is, no *rational* principle prescribes the degree to which we must engage in them. However, given what's at stake, I think Kant is wrong on this point—surely the duty to self-cultivate should be made more stringent? For self-cultivation is, on the view I have propounded, the very *condition of possibility* for freedom itself—shouldn't its cultivation therefore constitute a *narrow* duty? After all, failure to self-cultivate entails our failure to fulfill all further moral duties through aesthetic unresponsiveness to the dictates of practical reason itself. I grant that Kant may be right insofar as reason cannot dictate *exactly* how far we should self-cultivate: reason would, I presume, suggest we self-cultivate *as much as possible*, allowing a degree of latitude, or 'space of permissions.' Notwithstanding, in his discussion of the duty to self-cultivate as contributing towards one's moral perfection, Kant *does* himself recognise that this duty 'promotes [our] capacity to realise all sorts of possible ends',<sup>44</sup> thus rendering it, he says, a 'duty in itself'.<sup>45</sup> So perhaps the distinction between wide and narrow duties is really a moot point: Kant *does* recognise the foremost importance of self-cultivation, since our capacity to set moral ends *tout court* depends upon it.

#### §4. Naturalising the Noumenal

Finally, I want to draw attention to the fact that the metaphysics of transcendental freedom is incompatible with the mechanics of the progressive view of freedom I have offered here. At bottom, the transcendental claim that the moral self is properly located in a non-spatiotemporal realm *cannot coexist* with a naturalistic reading of Kant, which, by contrast, describes the act of becoming free as a *temporally-extended* process. That Kant did in fact accept such a view is intimated throughout *The Doctrine of Virtue* by his very choice of language. For example, Kant describes freedom from contra-moral inclinations<sup>46</sup> in

---

43 Kant, *Doctrine of Virtue*, [6:392].

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid. Kant's choice of language here is quite revealing. If a 'duty in itself' is intended in the same sense as 'an end in itself' (when Kant speaks of respect for humanity in *Groundwork* II), is Kant not suggesting that the duty to self-cultivate can and should be made universal law—of objectively, unconditional value? If so, then the duty to self-cultivate looks not to be wide after all.

46 Kant, *Doctrine of Virtue*, [6:477].

temporally-extended terms, citing 'strength',<sup>47</sup> 'cultivation' and 'striving'<sup>48</sup> as properties required on the part of the agent to make inner-freedom possible. Furthermore, Kant claims that these character attributes arise from '*deeds* and not *gifts*'.<sup>49</sup> It seems that if Kant *repudiated* the idea that freedom could be gifted to us, the 'freebie' of noumenal membership is something of an unwanted present. Freedom understood as a *de facto* disposition is an unwelcome notion in *The Doctrine of Virtue*.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, on a more *technically* linguistic note, the very talk of 'becoming' is nonsensical when it comes to noumena. As Paul Guyer notes, if we uphold the ontology of transcendental selfhood, the act of moral choice amounts to nothing more sophisticated than merely 'throwing an on-off switch in the noumenal world'<sup>51</sup> and thus not describable in progressive terms at all. Accordingly, the intelligibility of terms such as 'strength', 'striving' and 'success' (and even virtue itself) is annulled if transcendental selfhood is upheld. By contrast, these terms cohere unproblematically with Kant's naturalised stance in *The Doctrine of Virtue*, whereby the *degree* to which we succeed in matters of freedom and morality is necessarily correlated with our success in the foremost task of self-cultivation.

## Conclusion

Thus, to reiterate a claim I made in the introduction to this paper, my task here was to make a case regarding the role of self-cultivation as a precondition of our responsiveness to the concept of duty. It was not my intention to proffer a naturalistic account of freedom concerning the *moment* at which actions are taken. Rather my interest was to expose and evaluate Kant's claim that without cultivating a primitive susceptibility to concept of duty, the moral law could not affect us. I have developed this claim into a theory of freedom whose scope is necessarily limited. According to my account, in growing susceptible to the concept of duty we do not guarantee that we become the law's unerring executors. Rather, we merely become *responsive* to its dictates, and only subsequently

---

47 Ibid., [6:405].

48 Ibid., [6:446].

49 Ibid., [6:386]. My emphases.

50 Owing to this, Kant's dogmatic assertion in the second *Critique* that the 'fact of reason' is the grounding of the freedom of the will is as unpalatable a claim as the ontological dogmatism of noumenal membership we find in *Groundwork III*.

51 Guyer, *Progress Towards Autonomy*, p. 78.

*responsible* for its execution, according to a principle that stipulates *ought implies can*.

Thus, given that my focus here was on our *susceptibility* to the moral law, transcendental freedom might appear to be a false opponent, in tension only *prima facie* with my thesis. After all, these theories might not be in competition, rather, they might be concerned with different and non-overlapping aspects of agency: self-cultivation as an aesthetic precondition of Kantian agency, and transcendental freedom as a guarantee that moral action can, after all, be causally adduced to pure practical reason. However, transcendental freedom according to Kant, at least at the end of the *Groundwork*, is invoked as the *whole* story about agency: everything from susceptibility to efficacy is, Kant holds, accounted for by the theory. But according to the evidence of *The Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant explicitly naturalises the part of the story concerned with susceptibility, and new terminology (in particular *Willkür*, which is notably absent in the *Groundwork*) is brought in to help explain our capacity to develop, for example, susceptibility to the concept of duty in the first place. Freedom as self-cultivation should therefore be understood quite apart from Kant's theoretical commitments, instead as part of moral anthropology, for which we need do no heavy metaphysics.