

What Romance Could Not Be

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Abstract. This essay makes a number of distinctions between the motives of love and of duty, and argues that ideally they act in concert so as to generate constancy in loving relations. The essay revolves around a case in which a husband or wife is tempted to infidelity. It is argued that resistance to the temptation is optimally grounded in love for the spouse rather than simply in a duty to resist initiated perhaps through promise or vow. This is not, however, to undermine altogether the significance of promises of this sort; it is rather to put a proper emphasis on the sentiment of love as an effective spring to action and to suggest that the sentiment itself ideally brings a past promise or vow of fidelity into present relief in a choice situation.

“Have I Told You Lately That I Love You?”
—Rod Stewart

This short essay is designed to expose an apparent weakness in much Neo-Kantian ethical thinking. The weakness concerns the tension between the basic Kantian conception of morally significant motivation and the way in which ordinary people are regularly inclined to view our “thoughts about” and “behaviors toward” them. The charge is essentially this: most people prefer that their friends and lovers act out of friendship and love rather than simply from duty as the Kantian view austere requires. This seeming “disconnect” between Kant’s basic picture of morally admirable behavior and most people’s hopes for fulfilling love and friendship will be viewed by some as a strike against Kantian ethical theory but by others as a misunderstanding thereof.¹

¹One writer who seems sympathetic to the basic charge against the Kantian is Michael Stocker in his classic essay “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976): 453–66. Writers who seem to find the basic charge to involve various misrepresentations or distortions of Kant’s relevant remarks, especially in the Doctrine of Virtue and other later writings, include Marcia Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), and Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993). By way of modest concession, the present essay draws perhaps too heavily (but by no means exclusively) on the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. In this respect I follow what some may regard as an older tradition of reading Kant’s ethics from the *Groundwork* up.

In either case it is an issue worth revisiting. In the first part of this paper I will lay out the core of Kant's view of moral motivation as presented in *The Groundwork*. I will then bring to bear love and friendship as test cases of its adequacy. The key thought behind the paper is that people's customary preference that friends and lovers act towards them in ways that express kind sentiments needs to be more clearly recognized than it is in at least *The Groundwork*, even if these things are not ultimately incorporated into any satisfactory *moral* story.

I.

We begin with some rather elementary remarks concerning Kant's shopkeeper and some variations thereupon.² This character is one of several (importantly including the chronic pain sufferer) designed to illuminate Kant's own view concerning the locus of moral worth both in actions performed and, more contentiously, agents who perform them. According to Kant, the moral worth of the action (strictly, of the maxim upon which the action is based) resides in the action's having been done *from* duty rather than, say, from an inclination on the part of the agent to be kind to her neighbor. Returning to our shopkeeper, we can readily imagine a scenario in which she quickly realizes that she has overcharged an unwitting customer just as he is leaving her establishment. She stops him and returns the amount overcharged *because* her reason commands her to do this. Insofar as she follows the command of reason Kant notes that she may act merely from *prudence*, which we can call reasoned recognition that it is in her own self interest as a merchant to maintain a *reputation for honesty* (case P). Kant rightly finds this motivation morally empty. On the other hand, the shopkeeper might act simply and solely from the motive of *duty*; we might say her reasoned recognition of her moral obligation to treat her customer with a *respect* that he deserves (qua fellow rational being) guides her conduct. It is this second case (K) that Kant finds *morally estimable*. As Kant would put it, the shopkeeper's maxim (guiding principle for acting as she does) finally acquires moral content.

What about a case in which we would be inclined to attribute benevolence to our shopkeeper? Kant wants to emphasize that the moral worth of the action of returning the overcharged sum lies *solely* in the action having sprung from the motive of duty. If the shopkeeper returned the money because she had a direct or

Lately it has become quite fashionable to answer any basic objections to Kant's presentation in the *Groundwork* by appealing to remarks from later works, especially *The Metaphysics of Morals*.

²All remarks concerning Kant's own views derive from my readings of Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J. Gregor, intro. Allen Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and *Ethical Philosophy* 2nd Edition, trans. James W. Ellington, intro. Warner A. Wick (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994). Kant introduces the prudent shopkeeper at *Groundwork* 4:397. The subsequent variations are of course my own.

even indirect inclination to do so (say a passionate spirit of good will in the first instance, perhaps a reflective sense of shame in the second), then, according to Kant, her action would have no moral worth. *We* would probably say, especially in the first instance but probably to a slightly lesser extent in the second that the shopkeeper herself is agreeable in some morally significant sense, which is a point about our impression of her *character*, or about her as an agent; but Kant himself would not. The fact that she is moved by passion rather than reason undermines any moral worth that we might attribute to her action of returning the money. And it seems that Kant would say that someone who performs such a morally worthless action (or lives a life of such performances exclusively, to the extent that we can imagine this) acquires no moral value as an agent.³

Now what of the following three variations on Kant's own prudent shopkeeper?: (1) The shopkeeper acts from duty without any sentiment or feeling about the issue of returning the money at all (say she is in the grips of some sort of ennui, which allows her to recognize and perform her duties but without any enthusiasm); (2) The shopkeeper returns the money from duty but *against* inclination (say she could really use the funds for her own purposes, or perhaps is just by nature a tightwad); and (3) The shopkeeper returns the money from the motive of duty but with an attendant afterglow of benevolence, practically whistling as she performs the action commanded by reason. Kant certainly thinks that a case like (3) in particular creates something of an epistemic problem, but not one of much moral significance. That is to say, it will usually be hard for us to determine whether benevolent inclination or duty in fact moved the agent to act. From the moral point of view, however, the value of the act of returning the money lies in the fact that the act was performed simply and solely from duty. Certainly Kant can note that generally being in a position like (3) is preferable insofar as it makes one's life more pleasant as one strives to act as morality dictates that one should; indeed, it seems reasonable that reason itself would command the inculcation of certain sorts of customs and habits through ritual and repetition so that one finds one's self in cases like (3) far more often than not. And Kant may even want to say (again, more contentiously) that the characters of the agents in (1)–(3) are equal from the standpoint of morality.⁴

³David Velleman has suggested to me (correspondence) that in Kant's view an agent can actually live a life worthy of endorsement without having ever performed a virtuous act. Presumably an example of such an agent would be a purely benevolent being, one who regularly acts simply from internalized kind sentiment (in Kantian terms sympathetic *inclination*). I find Velleman's suggestion mysterious. I think an agent needs to behave virtuously to be evaluated positively. We may need to adjust our conception of virtuous conduct accordingly.

⁴The attentive reader will have probably noted at least two more possible cases: (4) both inclination and the motive of duty partly contribute to the shopkeeper's performance of the act; and (5) a case of simple causal overdetermination in which the absence of either inclination or duty

Indeed it has not infrequently been suggested that cases (2) and (1) demonstrate *more* moral worth at the level of character than (3). To see this peculiar-looking claim (which may or may not be Kant's) in the best light I will rephrase it and then offer an example. To rephrase: cases like (2) (and to a lesser extent (1)) especially clearly *reveal* a moral motivation just as cases like (3) and Kant's case (P) can be mistaken for one another. But further, in addition to revealing moral motivation construed as action from duty, cases like (2) can say *something* important about the agent and maybe even about the act that he performs. As an example, consider President Eisenhower's commitment to enforce the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision by mobilizing the 101st Airborne. Without delving too deeply into historical interpretation, it seems pretty clear that Ike was not at all enthused about the ruling of the Supreme Court, not so much for racist reasons but rather for more pragmatic if short-sighted ones. Nevertheless, he examined his obligations as the Chief Executive and noted that enforcing the rulings of the judiciary was one of them, however personally distasteful the prospect may have struck him at the time. Now it seems to the author that persons like Robert Kennedy exhibited a more morally admirable character than Eisenhower albeit that times and circumstances had somewhat changed, but a case can surely be made that Eisenhower's action from duty (2) revealed its moral worth clearly, exhibited strength of character of moral significance in Eisenhower, and may even have possessed greater moral worth than a similar action performed by, say, Stevenson. Suffice it to conclude this brief treatment of Kant's theory of moral motivation with the following: the thought that action from a reasoned recognition of one's obligations to others qua objects of respect and dignity is the *exclusive ground of moral worth* provides an insight into one of the ways persons ought to treat one another. But it is not, however much we soften the standard caricature of Kant's account, an especially useful idea to us when we go on to consider at least some varieties of loving interaction with one another, most especially romantic love taken here simply as eroticized higher friendship. This is the topic to which we now turn.

II.

We can begin with the thought that a high form of romantic love (although in this day and age not the exclusive one), what many regard as its culmination, is the institution of marriage. And a marriage is indeed in most instances char-

would not have prevented the shopkeeper from returning the money. A specific sub-class of (4) is what I think in fact really does and should capture a good part of our customary interactions with one another, and (5) reduces to either a case of action from inclination (hence no moral worth) or a case of action from duty (hence moral worth) depending on how various counterfactuals would have turned out. More will be said about (4) in what follows.

acterized by explicit promises made by each party to the other to do certain sorts of things, to love and honor one another being first and foremost. Let's consider the promise to honor one another by itself, the notion of promising to love one another over an extended period of time being at least somewhat more conceptually complex at first glance. The traditional way of understanding the reciprocal promises to honor each other is at the least to remain faithful to one another so long as the marriage endures, this to be taken by most couples as a commitment to sexual fidelity. Now the promise to do this certainly creates an obligation; whatever else a (simple) promise might be, it surely is an act that creates obligations to do what it specifies. So one way of understanding the relationship between loving partners in marriage is as persons bound by standing obligations to remain sexually faithful to one another, at least until the point that for whatever good reasons these obligations are understood to be dissolved by either one or both parties as the case might be.

Now consider a case where a partner in a marriage is afforded an opportunity to engage in sexual relations outside of wedlock. One reason a partner might resist the temptation (take the term objectively for now) is out of a sense of duty. Ricky, as we shall call him, may reflect on the promise that he made to Lucy to remain sexually faithful to her, note his obligation to do so, and act from a desire to fulfill his obligation. From the roughly Kantian point of view to be motivated to remain faithful from a sense of duty in this way is morally praiseworthy. I would add, perhaps contra Kant, that to have made himself into the sort of person who, practically speaking, quickly recognizes his obligation and forms his judgments about how to act based on this recognition is morally praiseworthy as well. (This is the virtue-ethical spin I have opted to either add to or use to elucidate the Kantian picture so as to give moral weight to voluntary character development that makes a person more able to recognize and act from his duties).⁵

⁵While this is not intended to be a substantive contribution to Kant scholarship *per se*, it is worth noting that even the most austere commentator may allow that development of one's *reasoned capacities* for judging what duty demands through some sort of self-discipline is morally praiseworthy by Kantian lights. What such commentators most likely will not allow is that habituation through training of the sort that Aristotle advocates will yield morally praiseworthy conduct, insofar as this conduct will not be sufficiently grounded in reason at the time of choice but rather substantially in inclination. At this juncture what we might call the "Kantian purists" and I simply part company, and will likely further part company in short order as we turn to acting from love. The contrast between Kantian ethical theory and that of Aristotle on this point regarding habituation strikes me as well made by Robert Johnson in the following passage: "virtue is for Kant a strength of will, and hence does not arise as the result of instilling a 'second nature' by a process of habituating or training ourselves to act and feel in particular ways. It is indeed a disposition, but a disposition of one's will, not a disposition of emotions, feelings, desires or any other feature of human nature that might be amenable to habituation. Moreover, the disposition

So far this is all well and good; Ricky remains faithful to Lucy because he recognizes a commitment to honor her and acts from duty or, equally, obligation. Now suppose Lucy is a fly on the wall throughout this attempted seduction of Ricky. How exactly might we expect her to *feel* about his behavior? (Suppose further that Ricky's thought processes are relatively transparent as well). My contention is that whatever one thinks about the locus of moral worth in actions/omissions and perhaps even agents/characters, Lucy should be a bit depressed. To be sure, fidelity at the gunpoint of duty, even if Ricky himself is holding the metaphorical gun as Neo-Kantians seemingly would have it, is better than sexual infidelity from Lucy's point of view. But there seems to be another, perhaps even clearly preferable motivation that she should like to see bring Ricky back to her embraces. This motivation is, I suggest, the motivation of love itself. Lucy would like Ricky to honor her out of, or from, love. Now we must spell out in some detail how love differs from obligation as a motivation, and, lest we lose an important aspect of committed partnership, explain how love and obligation ideally intertwine.⁶

III.

Our work in first section will now bear some fruit. We can consider Lucy looking in on Ricky's behavior and thought processes, including intentions, desires, and inclinations of various sorts, and try to gauge her respective sentiments in response to what she sees. In the first instance, Ricky finds himself drawn powerfully to his temptress, either purely physically, largely psychologically, or

is to overcome obstacles to moral behavior that Kant thought were ineradicable features of human nature. Thus, virtue appears to be much more like what Aristotle would have thought of as a lesser trait, viz., continence or self-control." Robert Johnson, "Kant's Moral Philosophy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2004 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2004/entries/kant-moral/>.

⁶As noted at the outset, it will be obvious to many familiar with the relevant literature that my point here is quite closely related to one made by Michael Stocker in his "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories." There he asks whether you would prefer your friend to visit you in the hospital out of friendship or out of duty. I take it that as the question stands (but see below in the discussion of various possible motivational structures), the former is the clearly preferable motivation, provided the former does not reduce to sets of duties in some way that eludes this writer. This essay in large part attempts to develop Stocker's insight by making explicit the precise way in which persons regularly hope to see kindness *and* respect expressed towards them in the ways their friends and lovers choose to behave in potentially hurtful scenarios. I contend that the case of sexual fidelity that I introduce puts significantly more pressure on the Neo-Kantian than does Stocker's own example of the hospital visit insofar as it does not strike me as falling victim to the admirable analysis provided by Marcia Baron in her *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology*, 117–45. This is due to some extent to the fact that his case is somewhat underdescribed as Baron suggests.

(worst case) in both ways in good measure, yet he resists the available opportunity to act on his urges by reflecting on the promise that he made to Lucy and extracting from that reflection a purely reasoned motive of duty to abandon Ethel, as we shall call her. This case is in important respects analogous to the case of the miserly shopkeeper who nevertheless (grudgingly) returns the overcharged funds to her customer solely and simply from the motive of duty. There is indeed something morally admirable about Ricky's conduct in this case. But I would not expect Lucy to be especially thrilled. His thoughts and actions register an absence or at least dearth of *affinity* or *enthusiasm* as we might call it for Lucy at the level of motivation to fidelity. For most people to see their partner keeping him or herself "in line" in this way is disconcerting at least, deeply upsetting at worst, the worst case scenario being a resistance to infidelity grounded entirely in a prior promise and reflection upon its particular moral demands.

A happier instance resembles what the Kantian takes to be the morally worthless case of the benevolent shopkeeper who acts purely from inclination, in that case a general *feeling* of good will for the customer as opposed to and absent a reasoned recognition of a duty to return the overcharged sum. Our counterpart to this involving Ricky, Lucy, and Ethel would have him easily and effortlessly resisting Ethel, charmer though she be, from an overriding inclination to remain faithful to Lucy. It is important in this case that the inclination be directed towards *Lucy* herself, just as we can suppose that Kant's inclination-driven shopkeeper directs her good will towards her customer; Lucy would hardly be pleased if she discerned a "narcissistic"⁷ sort of self-satisfaction that inclined Ricky to resist temptations from Ethel. This latter sort of inclination-driven fidelity should likely prompt some sort of tepid response such as "it's nice to see you so pleased with yourself."

With that last qualification out of the way I am tempted to think we have made important progress in our quest to distinguish the motive of love from the motive of duty at least with respect to marriage and sexual fidelity. Love much more closely resembles a sentiment in the family with benevolence and cheerfulness as it disposes persons to honor each other sexually than it does a cognitive state that commands them to do these things, and though it be a sentiment it not only has a power to motivate action, it is the power preferred to the alternative offered so far by most women in Lucy's position. But I think we do best to consider a third sort of case which might obtain, one in which Ricky readily or at least reasonably readily resists Ethel from loving/friendly feeling for Lucy together with reflection on what that feeling *demand*s in terms of sexual (and now I add psychological, to the extent possible) fidelity. This de-

⁷This term is being used in the plain sense of self-absorption. It has a technical usage in psychoanalysis quite different from its customary one and unintended here.

mand surely recognizes the promise made to honor Lucy, but it optimally does not so much look back to find its authority as it does renew itself in the choice scenario. This forms a characteristic feature of what I have elsewhere called an *active romantic loving relationship*.⁸ The active romantic loving relationship is importantly signaled by the disposition to readily or at least reasonably readily renew commitments made in the past (such as a promise to honor one another) in light of ongoing feelings of warmth and affinity, simply put a delight in each other that stretches from the mundane to the heights of the erotic.⁹ Reflection on this delight ideally couples with an appreciation of promises made perhaps years in the past so as to move the agent in the position of Ricky through the temptations and *onward* rather than *back* to Lucy.

We should slow to a crawl here and make sure that this intertwining between feeling (affinity, loving enthusiasm) and recognized duty (vow, promise) is perspicuous, seeing as we are asserting that exactly this intertwining is viewed as optimal from Lucy's point of view. There really are five basic cases to consider: (1) Ricky resists Ethel exactly from the motive of duty; (2) Ricky resists Ethel because, by golly, he loves Lucy in the sentimental sense; (3) Ricky resists Ethel partly out of love and partly from duty, where these really don't interact but rather merely serve as jointly sufficient springs to action; (4) love and duty overdetermine (Ricky would resist Ethel in the absence of either but not both sentimental love and recognized duty); and finally (5) Ricky resists Ethel because his sentimental love for Lucy inclines him to fully *appreciate and enthusiastically embrace* what he owes Lucy as a promise-maker.¹⁰ The proper or preferred direction is this: I love you and in virtue of this fully appreciate and embrace my standing commitment; not, obviously: I made a vow of fidelity, and because of

⁸See my "Romantic Love and Loving Commitment: Articulating a Modern Ideal," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 33 (1996): 339–56, slightly but importantly revised in "Essays on Ethics and Action" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1997).

⁹Nancy Sherman has very nicely pointed out to me that active romantic loving relations importantly revolve around such vitalities as loving gazes, touches, maybe even pleasant pesterings, and so forth. There is, as she puts it, much more to active romantic love than a readiness to renew vows. Indeed, I would suggest that such renewals of commitment are so to be taken for granted in a happy marriage/partnership that to find focus in them is rather tedious. Love is an ongoing excitement by, for, and with the other.

¹⁰I suggest that Hume, or at least a Neo-Humean, would be inclined to characterize this special sort of *appreciation* for the promise as akin to a recognition that the Washington Monument in the distance is in fact larger than the table sculpture before you. This sort of recognition seems to play the major role in our personal determinations as to which things really *matter*. But I leave this for another time.

Very strictly speaking it seems that there is a case (6), according to which love and duty intertwine while being individually sufficient so as to produce resistance to the temptation. (6) in fact seems to be the ideal motivational structure from Lucy's standpoint. I leave this complication to the side in the interest of clarity of exposition.

this I am lovingly inclined towards you. This last direction actually seems close to capturing something common in parent-adult child relations, but we leave this for another occasion.¹¹ The key point is that Lucy would view (5) as ideal. More generally, (5) describes what persons commonly would like to see in the minds of their partners (or friends, *mutatis mutandis*) were they given front row access to treacherous scenarios like opportunities to cheat.

Clearly none of what has just been said suggests that a promise to honor made in the past has no significance; rather, it is to suggest that the present-directed renewal stemming from warm feeling and subsequently working in tandem with it so as to produce a *mixed motivation* between love and what we may call *updated duty* is ideal. It is almost certainly ideal from Lucy's point of view, *with whose psychological satisfactions as a nearly perfect observer we are properly concerned* (we call her a nearly perfect observer in the sense that she has nearly perfect access to Ricky's thoughts and relevant intentions regarding Lucy herself and Ethel).

To forestall one possible significant objection to what has been said, it is not strictly denied by anything that has been offered so far in this short essay that the moral value of action done from the motive of duty determines the moral worth of the action and possibly even the moral goodness of the agent as Kant would seemingly have it.¹² It is quite possible that from the moral point of view Ricky's resistance to his temptress grounded in his recognition of what his prior or even updated promise to Lucy demands is exactly where all the moral action is, as it were. What I *am* suggesting is that insofar as we are interested in what will produce psychological fulfillment in most modern Western lovers, persons may be concerned with more or maybe even something other than what they are *owed* at the level of morality. Which is in the present case neither more nor less than to say that they desire to have their partners treat them in friendly, indeed romantically loving ways that at the same time reveal respect for them as persons. Although in our treatment infidelity itself is avoided, maybe it captures something of relevant import to say that to cheat on one's spouse is not merely morally wrong; oftentimes it is *mean*, *brutal*, or, sometimes, maybe even *cruel*.¹³ It may even be most accurate to say that at least repeated cases of grudging resistance to infidelity exhibit a kind of *callousness*.

¹¹To say: "Of course I love you; I'm your father," sounds fine. To say: "Of course I love you; you're my wife," signals defect on one reading. Being a father generates love and sustains it. Being a husband does not so often do this in my opinion. But this is very difficult terrain.

¹²Here my language respectfully echoes the title of Barbara Herman's provocative essay "On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty," *The Philosophical Review* 90 (1981): 359–82.

¹³I suggest that one consider, with respect to the term "cruel," a rather brilliant paper from a different context, Philip Hallie, "From Cruelty to Goodness," in Louis Pojman and Lewis Vaughn, *The Moral Life* 3rd Edition (New York: Oxford, 2007), 93–107. Bernard Williams famously

The terms just introduced (*meanness, brutality, cruelty, callousness*) strike me as at the very minimum so intimately bound up with morality that they need to play a significant role in our final ethical descriptions of relations between persons and between persons and other sentient creatures. Perhaps it is best to follow Bernard Williams here and take the propositions of moral theory to form a proper subset of those that characterize the ethical. In any event it seems obvious that we *ought not* to behave in ways that can be properly so described. To stay focused on wanton or willful infidelity for present purposes, *The Groundwork* might be more satisfactory if Kant were to emphasize the ways in which persons can wrong other sentient (for him rational) creatures insofar as people fail to be loving or friendly or otherwise nice to them rather than simply dutiful towards them. We close with the suggestion that excessive reliance on promises made in the past in the absence of present warmth and affinity and the resultant choice to update duty is the signature of declining relations between lovers or even the onset of a different sort of relation altogether, usually falling somewhere between the purely sentimental (in the heirloom sense) and more hopefully old friends.¹⁴

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distinguishes *brutal* behavior (wantonly hurtful conduct) from *cruel* behavior (that which is intentionally hurtful) in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). It strikes me that, for our purposes, unfaithful behavior in partnerships and marriages can exhibit either one. I thank the editorial staff for encouraging me to say more about this distinction.

¹⁴Thanks to Paul Benacerraf, Alasdair MacIntyre, Karl Ameriks, David Forman, Bill Ramsey, Ian Dove, Barbara Herman, Karen Stohr, Douglas Lackey, David Velleman, William Earle, Robert Roberts, Rig Hughes, Nancy Sherman, Sibyl Schwarzenbach, Natalie Mayerhofer, Thomas Lawson, and an anonymous referee for excellent comments. Ancestors of this paper were presented at the University of South Carolina, the Inaugural Baylor Symposium on Faith and Culture, Friendship: Quests for Character, Community and Truth, Providence College, and most recently UNLV.