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## Chapter 9 How Common is Common Human Reason?

### The Plurality of Moral Perspectives and Kant's Ethics<sup>i</sup>

Martin Sticker

Kant claims to systematize and ground a conception of morality to which every human being is already committed in virtue of her common human reason. In my paper, I have two goals. First, I argue that Kantians should be concerned about the possibility that common human reason is, in fact, not universally shared across all cultures and historical epochs. Second, I present five resources that can help Kant take the edge off this concern. I will explain Kant's commitments concerning a universally shared moral perspective, and argue that his commitments are, in fact, relatively modest.

Kant believes that his ethics systematizes and vindicates significant insights that can be uncovered even in the cognition of an agent who did not enjoy philosophical or other academic education and who can only avail herself of a "common rational cognition of duty" (*GW* 4:393). Especially in the last decade, Kantians have explicitly acknowledged the central role of the common cognition of duty and of common human reason for a correct understanding of Kant's ethics.<sup>ii</sup> Some Kantians have also emphasized that Kant's systematization of common moral experience presents an appealing way of ethical theorizing, which can and should enrich current ethical debates (see Grenberg 2013, 2). However, there is still relatively little debate about whether common human reason is indeed universally shared across all human beings (from different cultures and epochs). As a matter of fact, given some of Kant's claims about the vast majority of the world's population (such as women and non-Europeans), it is not clear that he even intended common human reason to extend beyond a small and homogenous group of white men. The problem that Kant's ethics might only be a systematization of the moral convictions of such a group potentially affects so many aspects of Kant's ethics, political philosophy and conception of philosophical methodology that I cannot discuss it exhaustively here. Instead, I restrict myself to two goals: Firstly, I will show why Kantians need to pay closer attention to the problem. Secondly, I develop five resources that can help Kant and Kantians address this problem. I explain what Kant commits himself to concerning a universally shared moral perspective when he says that his ethics is one of common human reason, and show that his commitments are, in fact, more

modest than we might expect given his strong claims about the importance of common human reason for his ethical theorizing.

I will begin by briefly explaining Kant's conception of common human reason in ethics (section 1). I will then introduce the challenge that there might not be one conception of morality shared by all rational agents. Kant himself sometimes acknowledges a variety of different and conflicting moral beliefs and practices across cultures. However, he sees no need to walk back on his assumption that there is a common human reason we all share (section 2). In response, I will develop five resources that can help salvage Kant's commitment to a common human reason (section 3). Finally, I will look in more detail at the case of senicide as an example of the problems my paper is concerned with (section 4).

1.<sup>iii</sup>

In a Second Critique footnote, Kant claims that it is not his intention to introduce a new principle of morality, and he even wonders: "who would even want to introduce a new principle of all morality and, as it were, first invent it?" (*CPracR* 5:8). In fact, philosophy may even "seem superfluous" (*CPracR* 5:36), since the requirements of morality can be "seen quite easily and without hesitation by the most common understanding" (*ibid.* 28-9). The aim of Kant's ethics is merely to present new formulations of a principle that has always been present "in the reason of all human beings and incorporated into their essence" (*CPracR* 5:105).<sup>iv</sup>

In what follows, we should bear in mind that Kant's contentious assumption that there are moral insights that all rational human agents share reflects an "egalitarian ideal of enlightenment" (Ameriks 2000, 102), namely, that "what is expected of, and most significant about, human beings must be in principle equally accessible to all and should not depend on the accident of particular external conditions" (Ameriks 2000, 228). We might worry that Kant's assumption is a subtle (or not so subtle) form of cultural imperialism and projection onto ways of life different from ours, yet it is ultimately intended to express respect for the rational nature of human beings and based on the assumption that, at bottom, we are all equals.<sup>v</sup>

Kant believes to have uncovered three central moral commitments of common human reason. It is upon ethicists to bring out clearly, systematize and vindicate these commitments.

The first and most important of these commitments is acknowledgement of the *authority* of morality in the sense that duty is unconditional and must be obeyed for its own sake. This becomes most apparent in the Second Critique's Remark to §6<sup>vi</sup>, in which Kant presents the case of a prince who demands, on pain of immediate execution, that an agent "give false testimony against an honourable man whom the prince would like to destroy under a plausible pretext". When presented with such a scenario an interlocutor "will perhaps not venture to assert" whether he, if in the position of the agent in question, would succumb to the threat of the prince or change his mind and refuse him. The interlocutor will, however, judge "without hesitation" that it is *possible* to decide against his self-interest and do the right thing (*CPracR* 5:30). His judgement reveals that he believes that he can do something, because he is aware that he ought to do it. Kant believes that this shows that ordinary rational agents can be brought to admit that they are compelled by morality in a way radically different from all other incentives. Moreover, they acknowledge that morality can require them to act against all their inclinations. Their judgement reveals that morality holds authority over them, which is in no way contingent upon inclinations.

Awareness of the supreme authority of morality is the most basic insight common human reason affords agents. However, this awareness can be spelled out in very different ways, some of which would be incompatible with Kant's own normative prescriptions.<sup>vii</sup> The insights common human reason affords and that Kant seeks to systematize and vindicate are more substantive than mere awareness of the supreme authority of morality. After all, this awareness still leaves open what it is that morality requires agents to do. To determine their specific duties common agents can orient their reasoning on the notion of *universality* in the form of pre-theoretical universalization tests. Kant maintains that a common agent "always has [...] before [his] eyes" the principle "never to proceed except in such a way *that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law*" (*GW* 4:402).<sup>viii</sup> He thinks that the principle of morality is already employed in ordinary reasoning as a "standard of judging" (*GW* 4:403). However, common agents do not think of the supreme moral principle "as separated [...] in a universal form" (*GW* 4:403, see also *CPracR* 5:155) or as a proper philosophical formulation, such as the Formula of Universal Law (FUL). The moral law figures in common agents' active engagement with moral cases and questions in the form of morally salient standards that they employ in their reasoning.

In *Groundwork* I, we learn more about the way common agents cognize their duties. In morally relevant situations, a common agent can ask herself "would I actually be content that

my maxim [...] should hold as a universal law” (GW 4:403)?<sup>ix</sup> Common universalization tests can also take the form of pre-theoretical Law of Nature Formula tests: “I always consider what [my maxim] would be if it were to hold as a universal law of nature”.<sup>x</sup> Kant is aware that universality can figure in different ways in ordinary reasoning. Common agents exhibit rational commitment to the standards of universality when they ask simple questions such as “what if everyone did this?”, reflect on whether they are consistent in their assessment of others and themselves, and whether they make exceptions for themselves.<sup>xi</sup> Often the standard of universality is tacit rather than explicit, for instance, when a common agent calls someone “hypocritical” (holding oneself and others to different standards) or objects to double standards. By doing so, she implicitly draws on the standard of universality and acknowledges the normative significance of this standard.<sup>xii</sup>

It is a widely shared assumption that ethicists are, among other things, tasked with finding a normative principle that systematizes a list of duties, which rational agents, without any explicit commitments to a specific ethical theory, already acknowledge as binding. The closer the principle’s verdicts about concrete cases match this list of duties the better the principle. The underlying picture here is that a philosophical theory is supposed to systematize and vindicate common agents’ judgments or intuitions *about concrete cases*. Kant, by contrast, ultimately aims to systematize and vindicate *rational commitments* apparent in common universalization tests, which agents employ to arrive at their specific moral judgments. These commitments are much more abstract than concrete duties and, as I will argue in section III, they can be expressed in different ways by different agents.

The third central element of the common cognition of morality that Kant uncovers is the *special moral status of rational agents*. This status finds its philosophical systematization in the Formula of Humanity, which aims to systematize how human beings understand themselves and others as rational beings and what constraints this imposes on their actions. Kant argues that “*a rational nature exists as an end in itself*. That is how a human being by necessity represents his own existence” (GW 4:429). Every rational human being thinks of his own existence and of the existence of other rational creatures as ends in themselves. This status becomes apparent in ordinary discourse in such exclamations as “That’s inhumane!” (Grenberg 2003, 231). There are certain things you cannot do to rational agents, no matter what. Certain forms of mistreating others, such as exploiting them, go against their nature as rational agents.

Kant maintains that all Categorical Imperative formulations systematize the same pre-theoretical perspective of morality and that they are “formulae of the selfsame law” (GW 4:436). There is a lively debate concerning whether this is true.<sup>xiii</sup> What matters for our purpose is that given that there is more than one way for the common agent to cognize her duty, it is one of the central tasks of the critical philosopher to show how different common ways to cognize duty can become part of one coherent system grounded in autonomy. I will come back to this in section 4.

2.

Friedrich Nietzsche famously expressed his amusement about the goal of Kant’s ethics when he calls it ‘*Kant’s Joke*’ that

Kant wanted to prove, in a way that would dumbfound ‘the whole world’, that ‘the whole world’ was right: that was the secret joke of this soul. He wrote against the scholars for the sake of the people’s prejudice, but for scholars and not for the people. (*Fröhliche Wissenschaft* sec.193, my trans.).

One of the concerns Nietzsche here expresses is that common human reason might consist in nothing more but widespread *prejudices*. If that were so, we would expect that there are great variations and even contradictions in the commitments Kant seeks to vindicate. After all, different cultures and different epochs, as well as different socio-economic or otherwise distinct groups tend to share different prejudices. Moreover, Nietzsche does not have in mind here prejudices we all share due to our human nature or as a result of how our psychology evolved. He specifically speaks of prejudices of the *people* as opposed to scholars. Whilst in what follows I will not discuss the validity specifically of Nietzsche’s criticism, I will look at the idea that something other than an immutable rational faculty could be responsible for the content of a supposed common moral cognition.

More recently, scholars have expressed scepticism concerning the very existence of a common human reason: There might not be a “single, unified common sense morality” (Schneewind 2009, 153) and “ordinary moral thinking is not of one piece” (Kerstein 2002, 167). After all, there is plenty of pre-theoretical disagreement about morality, and this calls into question the idea that there is a universal and unified common conception of morality.<sup>xiv</sup> Furthermore, the fact that different cultures, religions and social groups instil and foster

different ethical views in their members raises the concern that any moral perspective shared amongst members of one group could simply be the product of their specific upbringing and indoctrination, not the expression of a universally shared notion of morality. A philosopher who spends all his life in a place that is inhabited primarily by members of a relatively homogenous group – for instance, call this place “Königsberg” – might, simply because he never encountered anyone with a radically different perspective, assume that the views endorsed by all members of this group are universally shared. Members of a group that share a different perspective, by contrast, would not accept this philosopher’s theory as a systematization of *their* commitments. This runs counter to Kant’s aspiration that a philosophical theory is of universal validity, unless we are willing to declare all other perspectives to be fundamentally mistaken. On top of this, diverging perspectives also call into question the very project of basing an ethics on the commitments of common rational agents. What would be so special about these commitments if they were just reflections of culturally transmitted views or of “prejudices”?

For examples of how widespread moral disagreement is between cultures and for how much of our own, contemporary Western, understanding of morality might just be one perspective among many others, we only need to look at the many moral practices that appear at odds with our moral outlook: “arranged marriages, suicide as a requirement of honor or widowhood, severe punishments for blasphemy or adultery, female circumcision or genital mutilation” (Gowans 2015). Of these examples *suicide* might be the most immediately troubling issue for Kant, as the absolute prohibition of suicide functions as a supposedly commonly accepted illustration of a perfect duty (*GW* 4:397 f., 421 f.). However, in some cultures suicide is far less of a taboo than in cultures dominated by a Christian value system that condemns suicide as a grave sin. In fact, our contemporary view of suicide is quite different from Kant’s own. We now see suicide rather as a tragedy and indicative of failings in a person’s social and work environment and the (mental) health care system, not as a paradigm of immorality. The 18<sup>th</sup> century Prussian conception of suicide as a clear violation of duty might simply be an expression of a culturally transmitted prejudice reinforced by religious doctrine, not of insights obtained by reasoning according to universally shared moral standards.

It is surprising that the tension between Kant’s supposedly universal ethics, on the one hand, and the plurality of moral perspectives, on the other, does not receive more extensive treatment in the Kant literature. The reason for this might be that Kant interpreters do not

sufficiently appreciate that for Kant insights and commitments supposedly shared by every rational human being function as starting point and point of reference for ethical theorizing and that this puts an extraordinary burden of proof on Kant.<sup>xv</sup>

Kant himself seems to be unaware of this as a problem. He believes that, due to the cosmopolitan spirit of Königsberg (*Anth* 7:120 f., fn.) and due to his many conversations with well-travelled friends and acquaintances, he has ample knowledge of distant peoples and their customs. Furthermore, we know from his lectures that he was indeed aware of cultural differences as they were reported in the writings of anthropologists, travellers and enlightenment philosophers. In his lectures on moral philosophy from the mid-1780s, Kant, for instance, mentions ancient Egypt where supposedly all rogues were punished with death except those who were part of a Bedouin tribe. The latter were handed over to their chiefs for punishment. Montaigne and Mandeville consider this evidence that the source of morality is education, habit and political authority (V-Moral Mrong II 29:621 f.). Moreover, Kant mentions the Inuit as a possible example for how vice might be culturally relative: The Inuit strangulate their parents if they become a burden.<sup>xvi</sup> I will come back to this particularly stark example of a different conception of duty in section 4. In a different pre-critical lecture on moral philosophy, Kant mentions the Innuits' parricide alongside that theft is supposedly legal in Africa and child abandonment accepted in China and that in Brazil children bury their parents alive. Once more, Kant acknowledges that Montaigne draws on these examples to show that an agent's conception of morality is due to habit, custom and education (V-Moral Mrong I 27:1405).

Kant neither tries to debunk examples of cultural practices that other philosophers draw on for their arguments that morality is culturally relative, nor does he seem to think that these practices constitute challenges to his assumption that there is a common moral perspective. This is presumably so because he believes that if a human being is endowed with reason then this agent can be brought to explicitly acknowledge the authority of morality and the salience of universality and her own rational nature as well as the rational nature of other agents. Cultural differences only reflect customs that are on the surface of our interactions and self-understanding.

Before I discuss how Kant could respond to the cultural plurality of moral norms, one reminder is in order: That agents disagree about duty and that different societies and religions can instil different conceptions of duty in their members and followers is potentially a problem for any ethical theory that draws on or assumes a shared pre-theoretical



understanding of morality. Kant is not the only ethicist who claims to have the common perspective on his side, and Kant is not *per se* in a worse position than other ethicists who aim to develop a universally valid ethical theory from a supposedly common perspective. Yet, Kant does stress that his ethics is one of common human reason and that it serves to uphold and defend the equality and dignity of common people by showing that their conception of morality can be given a philosophical foundation. If Kant cannot make good on these promises, then this would be a considerable disadvantage for his ethics and more so than for approaches that are open to demanding that the philosophically uneducated adapt their commitments according to the reflected and systematized conception of the philosopher.<sup>xvii</sup>

3.

In what follows, I will not attempt an all-out defence of Kant's assumption that there is a universally shared perspective of morality. I shall restrict myself to developing five resources for Kant to accommodate diverging notions of duty. This will largely take the form of working out what Kant does and does not maintain concerning a common human reason and its function for ethical theorizing.

(i) For Kant moral cognition requires that an agent must still be "in the possession of his reason".<sup>xviii</sup> In the *Feyerabend* lecture notes, he indicates that there can be creatures endowed with technical rationality only and who are not under the moral law (*Feyerabend* 27:1320). He also entertains the possibility of human savages without reason and thus without any knowledge of the moral law.<sup>xix</sup> Kant himself, when confronted with a non-European culture with a very different set of values and norms, might simply dismiss this culture's members as less than (fully) rational. I will ignore this response here, since it would do Kant's ethics little good to point out that Kant himself did not worry about cultural differences because he was quite racist.<sup>xx</sup>

More importantly for my purposes, Kant also acknowledges that there can be human beings who *temporarily* do not share his moral framework, such as young children whose rational capacities are not yet fully developed. There is a time when an agent is not yet under the commands of pure practical reason and we can assume that there can be such times at the end of a life (due to dementia, etc.).<sup>xxi</sup> Kant also stresses that human beings have to be

“educated to the good” (*Anth* 7:325, see also *Ped* 9:441, 443, 448). He does not think that every biologically human creature, regardless of her upbringing, is a competent moral agent. He holds the weaker claim that every creature who *can* exercise pure practical reason has the capacity to determine what morally ought to be done and to act on it. Whilst moral agency cannot require specialized education, a very basic form of education is required to turn biological human beings into moral agents. In fact, Kant argues that *because* human beings are potentially rational they require education to develop their rational capacities (see *Ped* 9: 441, 443).<sup>xxii</sup>

Kant is open to the possibility that some biological humans lack rationality altogether, or that they are only endowed with instrumental rationality but not moral agency. His claims about common agents’ moral competences are only about those human beings who pass a (low) threshold of rationality. For the purposes of his ethical theorizing Kant is thus free to dismiss notions of duty, if those who articulate them are socialized in a culture or group that propagates extremely parochial views such that its members are unable to develop the use of pure practical reason at all. These members would fall outside of the scope of common human reason. The best example for this might not be Kant’s own racially charged ones, since he was clearly wrong about the rational capacities of non-Europeans, but societies with a very high level of efficient political indoctrination, such as Nazi Germany. Committed Nazis presumably only wonder about what is beneficial to their “race”, not about universalizability. Furthermore, everything they do and believe is conditional on commands from a *Führer*. This, however, does not call into question the idea of a common perspective as Kant holds it. It merely shows that there truly are human savages with only limited use of reason, so limited, in fact, that they lack common human reason.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The mere fact that someone articulates views radically at odds with Kant’s ethics does not need to worry Kant, if he can show that we have reason to believe that the individual in question lacks common human reason and if that claim is not based on racial or other prejudices but on a plausible way to analyse social pathologies and ideologies that undercut the full development of rational capacities. I will say more about ideology in (v).

(ii) In two important senses, Kant is not committed to the view that all moral agents *de facto* agree with him and with each other about everything concerning morality. Firstly, Kant could relatively easily give up some of the examples of duties he himself sets out in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, such as prohibitions against masturbation and extra-marital sex (*MM* 6:425). These prohibitions do not follow from any sensible moral criterion. Most likely, Kant

here simply tries to plug his personal moral convictions into his theory.<sup>xxiv</sup> A more contentious issue than sexual ethics is suicide, which, as I mentioned, we nowadays do not find as abhorrent as Kant thought it was and which is quite accepted in some cultures. Kant does think suicide is an apt illustration of perfect duties to self, but he might simply be mistaken about that. What matters for Kant's systematization of common human reason are not specific duties that agents are aware of, but the means available to agents for moral cognition and the acknowledgement of the authority of morality. Kant thus could be open to quite drastic revisions of the supposed duties he himself presents, especially if these do not (clearly) follow from his principles.

Secondly, Kant only needs to assume that all common agents, if they make appropriate use of their rational capacities, reason about morality guided by the same general standards. Concrete moral cognition can come about in different ways, such as through different applications of the standard of universality and what we owe to rational agents. Furthermore, agents can occasionally misapply their standards and there can be different interpretations of these standards and of what they show. Kant does not need to maintain that all rational agents *de facto* agree about all concrete moral issues. He believes that philosophers can show that common ways of thinking about morality and of justifying and criticising one's own and others' actions draw on standards of universality and respect for oneself and others. He does not have to be concerned about cultural and other differences regarding specific duties, as long as agents are committed to the authority of morality and the significance of universality and human dignity, and as long as agents are in principle willing to revise their conception of concrete duties in the light of their more fundamental commitments.

(iii) Kant famously distinguishes between *perfect and imperfect duties*.<sup>xxv</sup> Perfect duties specify concrete action-types we ought to refrain from no matter what. Imperfect duties, by contrast, require that agents adopt certain ends, such as beneficence and self-perfection. Moreover, they allow for "latitude" (*MM* 6:390) when working out the concrete situations in which obligatory ends can be furthered, and the appropriate actions for this.<sup>xxvi</sup> Imperfect duties do not require specific actions or omissions in concrete cases, as there are typically many different types of actions that can further one end. Reason alone does not determine how they are to be applied. We can distinguish three separate normative questions: (a) "Which actions are morally forbidden?", (b) "Which ends are duty to adopt into maxims?", (c) "How are we to apply a maxim to concrete actions?".<sup>xxvii</sup> The difference between (a) and (b) is that (a) is settled by universalization and a contradiction in thought or lack thereof<sup>xxviii</sup>,

whereas (b) is settled by whether a course of action can or cannot be willed when universalized (*GW* 4:424). In contrast to both (a) and (b), (c) cannot be answered via any kind of universalization procedure or “in accordance with rules of morality (moral rules)” (*MM* 6:433). Instead, (c) poses “a technical problem, a question of skill” (Timmermann 2006, 302).

It is an important and often overlooked feature of Kant’s ethics that many questions that philosophers as well as common agents might wonder about, such as how much we should donate to the poor, whether beneficence permits preferential treatment to people near and dear to us (and if so how much), whether in a specific situation we should spend resources on developing our skills or rather help the needy, etc., are for Kant matters of application and not moral questions in the strict sense of the term.<sup>xxix</sup> Matters of application often require empirical knowledge of likely consequences, of other agents’ needs and of the history and structure of one’s society. Moreover, different agents can reasonably disagree about how to promote others’ happiness and about whether a situation rather calls for promotion of someone else’s happiness or for perfecting oneself, and different agents might prioritize different aspects of the end of others’ happiness (and of self-perfection). Some might think it more important to take care directly of others’ basic needs, others might prefer to work towards political and social change, etc. For Kant, it is perfectly acceptable that agents have different ideas about how to help others and to improve themselves as long as they have adopted these ends and do promote them.

(iv) Kant believes that there is a realm of duties that allows for no, or almost no, latitude, namely, perfect duties. However, Kant leaves open that there can be situations in which it is culturally dependent whether certain actions fall under prohibited action types. Examples for this we can find in the *Doctrine of Virtue’s* discussion of casuistic cases. Kant here entertains that it is permissible to say something untrue to someone, if, due to social conventions, this other person cannot expect that we tell the truth (*MM* 6:431). It could hence be the case that in one society some false statements are morally permissible in a specific situation, whereas in other societies this would count as lying, since expectations differ.

Something similar might be true for suicide (*MM* 6:423 f.). The German word for suicide, “*Selbstmord*,” translates literally as “self-murder” and “murder” clearly is a morally loaded term. It might be to a certain degree culturally dependent, which acts of killing oneself count as self-*murder* and which do not.<sup>xxx</sup> Take as an example a terminally ill patient who takes a medicine that relieves her of her pain but that also foreseeably ends her life. This case

might be better described as something like “self-induced euthanasia” than as “suicide” let alone “self-murder”.<sup>xxxix</sup> At least to some extent it might depend on our linguistic customs and societal attitude towards euthanasia and suicide how we would describe and assess cases like this. Strictly speaking, Kant only has to maintain that actions that constitute self-murder are always impermissible. He can allow for some cultural variations when it comes to the question of the circumstances under which we have to exercise our perfect duties.<sup>xxxix</sup>

(v) Kant is acutely aware of the constant threat of self-deception or as he calls it “rationalizing” [vernünfteln]. Finite rational agents are caught in a “*natural dialectic*” (GW 4:405) and “easily seduced” (ibid.1) to prioritize happiness over morality. This endangers the proper functioning of their rational capacities. Furthermore, Kant warns that self-deception has a social dimension and that the social world can corrupt agents: “dishonesty, by which we throw dust in our own eyes [...] extends itself also externally, to falsity or deception of others” (Rel 6:38). The sheer quantity of other agents’ immoral behaviour already suggests an excuse: Others are immoral, why should I be (much) better?<sup>xxxix</sup> In addition, a self-deceived offender, when challenged by others, will likely present the rationalize justification of his immoral actions to others. If an interlocutor accepts the rationalized story, then he might consider himself justified in similar cases. The practice of demanding and providing (pseudo-) justifications and (pseudo-) excuses can inspire new strategies for rationalizing and agents can mutually reinforce each other in their rationalizing.

Kant especially warns of the “*religion of ragation (of mere cult)*” (Rel 6:51), “external religion” (Vigil 27:729), or “*fetish-faith*” (Rel 6:193). Activities such as praying, church-going, and ceremonies such as baptism, communion, public sacrifices, penances, castigations, pilgrimages, etc. are supposed to be a “hidden path” (Rel 6:193) to divine grace (Rel 6:192-202).<sup>xxxix</sup> According to Kant, “[t]he more useless such self-inflicted torments are, the less aimed at universal moral improvement of the human being, the holier they seem to be” (ibid.169, see also *Kaehler* (in Stark 2004) 153). Kant is fully aware that rational agents can hold false views about duty, even about relatively general aspects, such as whether religious authorities have the power to excuse or forgive moral violations or whether rituals influence one’s moral standing. These mistakes can inform agents’ conception of what they are obligated to do in specific cases, and they can be widely shared among a group of people and even be constitutive of their group identity. Yet, as attempts to rationalize against the authority of duty they should be discarded by the ethicist and, in fact, it is the task of the ethicist to purge or cleanse individuals and society from these misconceptions. Of course, this

critical analysis can be extended to other cultural practices than religion and it can offer an explanation for why agents in other times and cultures, as well as in Kant's own, hold many beliefs that conflict with Kant's ethics.

I should note three important points here. Firstly, agents who rationalize are still committed to morality. They are merely looking for ways to make the requirements of morality easier on them. After all, if they gave up on morality altogether, they would not feel a need to morally justify their actions to themselves. Rationalizers are unlike the Nazis I discussed in (i) who have lost their use of pure practical reason or never developed it. Rationalizing is much less extreme but also much more common than complete lack of pure practical reason. Secondly, adjudicating whether certain moral convictions are the product of (collective or individual) rationalizing or expressions of universally shared rational commitments might be very difficult in certain cases. Making rationalizing work as a notion that can solve substantive problems for Kant's ethics requires a much clearer grasp of the criteria for a rationalizing use of rational capacities than what I can provide here. Thirdly, uncovering supposed rationalizing is not a strategy to reconcile different and equally valid conceptions of morality with each other, but rather a way to show how certain conceptions of morality that diverge from Kant's own should be disregarded for the purpose of ethical theorizing. It thus cannot capture the idea that rational moral agents might be able to agree to disagree about morality.

4.

The common denominator of all five resources that I developed in behalf of Kant is that his methodological commitments concerning the common perspective are more modest than we might expect given some of his strong claims about how his ethics is a systematization of common human reason. When Kant talks about common agents he is not talking about absolutely everyone, but he assumes that these agents pass a certain threshold of rationality. Moreover, he is only concerned with general moral insights pertaining to the authority and most general criteria of duty. These insights can be expressed in different ways of thinking and reasoning about morality. Furthermore, agents have leeway when it comes to exercising imperfect duties and what they prioritize might be a cultural or personal matter. In some cases, it might depend on cultural norms and use of language how we would characterize an

action and whether this action would count as a violation of perfect duty. Finally, Kant is aware that agents can be corrupted and that there can be collective forms of corruption.

None of this proves that Kant's conception of common human reason generalizes across all cultures and ages, but it shows that Kant has ways to respond to challenges based on the cultural and historical plurality of values and norms. He is not committed to the implausible view that irrespective of when and where a particular person lives or lived and what her cultural, religious and ideological identity is, she would buy into the same conception as everyone else and as Kant himself of what, in specific cases, is morally permissible or impermissible.

Let me close with a discussion of an exemplary case that can demonstrate some of my points and that will also make a remaining problem apparent. As we saw, Kant is aware of reports that Innuits regard *senicide*, killing the elderly, a morally acceptable practice.<sup>xxxv</sup> I suggested that we should not accept Kant's willingness to disqualify non-Europeans as irrational. In fact, Kant himself thinks that there is a certain rationality inherent in the practice of senicide, as it only happens if the elderly become a serious burden on the community and he acknowledges that senicide is performed out of love to protect elderly parents from slowly starving to death when the children leave home for many weeks to look for food (V-Moral Mrong II 29:622, see also *PhysGeo* 9:432).<sup>xxxvi</sup> It seems that, in these cases, the Innuits deem senicide as their duty and might even perform it against their self-love, for instance, when they have to kill an elderly parent that they are emotionally attached to. It also seems that such a course of action could survive at least some universalization tests, for instance, if someone who commits senicide acknowledges that his own life can and should be ended like this in the future, if this is the only way to protect the tribe and to protect himself from a more gruesome end.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

The Innuits, despite their supposed acceptance of senicide, could still be buying into the authority of morality and the ethical relevance of universality. However, it is less clear, I believe, that Kant's notion of *rational nature* is in line with any kind of senicide. After all, rational nature imposes absolute constraints on our treatment of self and others no matter the benefits for us and others. If certain groups or cultures deem senicide an acceptable practice and there is no straightforward way to show that this is only due to collective rationalizing, then this strongly suggests that there are important differences in what agents believe can never be done to rational agents. Some might think that killing someone for the greater good is always ruled out, whereas others accept certain forms of killing for the greater good and it

is difficult to tell which interpretation of the moral standing of rational nature should inform ethical theorizing.

Furthermore, we might have uncovered a situation in which common universalization tests and rational nature do not issue the same verdicts, since we can presumably universalize certain forms of senicide, whereas some conceptions of our special status as rational agents rule out all killings for the greater good. Kant might be overly optimistic when he stresses that different formulae only represent different ways to cognize the same duties. There might be divergences between the pre-theoretical standards that underly these formulae, and it remains a task for the ethicist to discern which standard is truly at the bottom of common moral cognition and whether different standards can be reconciled in a reflected ethical theory.

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<sup>ii</sup> See many works by Ameriks, such as Ameriks 2003; also Grenberg 2013, Zhouhuang 2016, as well as Geiger 2010 and Sticker 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a and 2017b.

<sup>iii</sup> This section is a brief summary of my interpretation of common human reason that I argue for in more detail in my works cited in the previous footnote.

<sup>iv</sup> We already find this foreshadowed in the First Critique (*CpR* A/B:830-1/859-60) and, most prominently, expressed in the title of *Groundwork* I: “Transition from common to philosophical moral rational cognition” (*GW* 4:393).

<sup>v</sup> Kant himself indicates that it was Rousseau who inspired his egalitarianism (*Notes* 20:44). See Callanan 2019 for more on Kant’s reception of Rosseau.

<sup>vi</sup> Other passages that make this apparent are Kant’s discussions of how common agents would judge that it is inappropriate to do the externally right thing only as a means to something else, since there is nothing of higher authority than morality (*GW* 4:397.18-9, *TP* 8:284, *Tone* 8:403, *Ped* 9:493 f.).

<sup>vii</sup> I argue for this in detail in Sticker 2020.

<sup>viii</sup> I discuss the relationship between common cognition of duty and universality in greater detail in Sticker 2015a.

<sup>ix</sup> See also *GW* 4:403, 422, 423, *CPracR* 5:27 for examples. Geiger 2010, 281 maintains that common agents are aware of “what moral laws bind them without employing the universalization test”. In Sticker 2015a, I argue that common agents do employ a *common* universalization test (albeit not a reflected philosophical formula).

<sup>x</sup> *CPracR* 5:44. See also *GW* 4:421-423, *CPracR* 5:44, 69-70. Yet, another version of the common universalization test is taking “account (*a priori*) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought” by “holding one’s judgement up not so much to the actual as to the merely possible judgements of others, and putting oneself in the position of everyone else” (*CPJ* 5:293.32-294.3). Since this *Maxim of Enlarged Thought* is not explicitly introduced in a moral context, I will bracket it here. See *Anth*: 7:200.31-37, 228.22-229.2, and Zhouhuang, *sensus communis*, 23-32, 44-6 for more.

<sup>xi</sup> See Piper 2012, 246 for a formulation of the universalization procedure along those intuitive lines. See Sensen 2014, 169 for an interpretation of the Categorical Imperative based on a “demand of fairness: One should not make an exception for oneself in the sense that one should not regard oneself as something better” (see also *GW* 4:424). According to Sensen 2012, 175, this notion of fairness is “more or less a human universal”.

<sup>xii</sup> I here cannot address well-known empty formalism and false positives/negatives objections against universalizability as an ethical criterion. See instead Wood 1999, 102-6, Sensen 2014, Nyholm 2015, Bojanowski 2018, Sticker forthcoming for discussion. We should bear in mind that the claim that certain moral insights and criteria of moral evaluation are universally shared among rational human beings is different from and independent of the notion that universality or universalizability can function as such a criterion of evaluation. I am only concerned with the former claim.

<sup>xiii</sup> For sceptical takes see Kerstein 2002 and Formosa 2017, ch.1. For a defence of a strong version of this equivalence, see Mariña’s contribution to this volume.

<sup>xiv</sup> The modern *locus classicus* for this observation is J.L. Mackie 1977, 37 who bases his argument from relativity on the “actual variations in the moral codes”. These variations are supposedly better explained by how moral norms reflect different ways of life than by an underlying objective framework of moral values.

<sup>xv</sup> Even philosophers who do stress the importance of common human reason for Kant avoid discussion of this problem. There is no discussion in Zhouhuang’s monograph on the topic (Zhouhuang 2016) and no extended discussion that I am aware of in the works of Ameriks. Likewise, Grenberg 2003 does not discuss the problem, presumably because she believes that the element of the common perspective she focuses on, the experience of unconditional obligation, is sufficiently uncontentious to be widely shared. It is also striking that there is now a fair amount of literature on Kant’s discussion of ethnic and other diversity, but not of different fundamental moral principles and values prevailing in different cultures. See, for instance, Larrimore 2008 who shows that Kant was very concerned with human variety and diversity, but who only discusses this diversity in terms of races, temperaments and national character. Kleingeld 2014, 46 notes that “Kant’s characterizations of the different ‘races’” extends to “politically relevant mental and agential characteristics”. She does not indicate, however, whether it also extends to different notions of the good and duty.

<sup>xvi</sup> In *V-prac* Herder 27:43, the Innuits’ parricide is mentioned as seeming support for Voltaire’s claim that conscience is not innate but acquired (and hence sensitive to cultural standards).

<sup>xvii</sup> See, however, Sticker 2017b who argues that Kant, in fact, also does call for some revisions of the common cognition of duty and proposes that these revisions be made popular by educators and popular philosophers. These revisions are, however, still part of Kant’s larger project of systematizing and vindicating the most essential insights of common agents.

<sup>xviii</sup> *GW* 4:422, see also *ibid.* 454, *CPracR* 5:61, 98.

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<sup>xix</sup> See *Refl* 15:877 f., *Menschenkunde* 25:1187, 28:290. Ludwig 2014 emphasizes that at least since the *Religion* Kant explicitly acknowledges that there can be agents endowed with empirical practical rationality only and not under the moral law (see esp. *Rel* 5:26).

<sup>xx</sup> There is now a lively scholarly debate about Kant's racism. Bernasconi 2001 argues that Kant was an influential theorist of the notion of different human races. Kleingeld 2007 partly defends Kant by arguing that he renounced his earlier views on race in the 1790s. Larrimore 2008 argues that Kant did not even change his racist views in the light of his developed conception of moral equality and autonomy. Most recently, Allais 2016 has proposed that Kant's views on race are instructive objects of study for a deeper understanding of the structures of racism. See also her contribution to this volume, where she argues that Kant's conception of self-deception can help us understand racist structures we are unable to change as individuals.

<sup>xxi</sup> Saunders 2018, 5 points out that it is, in fact, a challenge for Kant to accommodate childhood, dementia, mental illnesses and other conditions that impact rational capacities. For Kant, rationality and freedom are not in time, whereas childhood, dementia and mental illnesses are occurrences in time.

<sup>xxii</sup> See Sticker 2015b for more on this most basic form of moral education as well as Moran 2012, 162-3 who stresses that education, which fosters the development of moral agency, is so basic that almost all human beings undergo it.

<sup>xxiii</sup> I should note that if we accept that (some) Nazis are savages devoid of common human reason, then this implies that agents can lose common human reason. After all, Nazi war criminals, the architects of the Holocaust, etc. did not grow up in a society that was completely controlled by Nazi ideology, as this ideology was the state-imposed doctrine only from 1933-45.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Even otherwise staunch defenders of Kant admit that some of Kant's normative claims are "ill-advised" and cannot be "sustained in the light of his own theory" (Timmermann 2005, 244).

<sup>xxv</sup> See Kant's provisional distinction in the *Groundwork* (*GW* 4:421.fn.), and the definite one in his *Metaphysics of Morals* (*MM* 6:390).

<sup>xxvi</sup> There is debate in the literature about whether latitude also extends to the question of *how much* obligatory ends are to be furthered. See van Ackeren & Sticker 2018 for discussion and a proposal.

<sup>xxvii</sup> See *MM* 6:375.fn., 390, 392, 393 for the distinction between (a) and (b) on the one and (c) on the other hand.

<sup>xxviii</sup> I here assume that the Formula of Universal Law is the basic formula of the CI, but a similar distinction could be made based on other formulae.

<sup>xxix</sup> See Illingworth et. al. 2011, 3-7 for a long list of applied questions pertaining to charitable giving that philosophers nowadays consider philosophically relevant.

<sup>xxx</sup> Cf. Mariña's discussion of suicide in her contribution to this volume.

<sup>xxxi</sup> David James (1999, 48-52), for instance, argues that some of the casuistic examples concerning self-killing are not cases of self-murder and hence permissible.

<sup>xxxii</sup> To be clear, I am not claiming that Kant himself was aware of the distinction between self-murder and other forms of suicide, but merely that he has the resources to draw this distinction. I should also note that, of course, Kant could also drop suicide as an example for perfect duties to self, as I contemplated above. My point here is one about the application of perfect duties in general and the example of suicide is intended as an illustration.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> "It suffices that they are there, that they surround him, and that they are human beings, and they will mutually corrupt each other's moral disposition" (*Rel* 6:94).

<sup>xxxiv</sup> See also *Rel* 6:168.8-170.11, *MM* 6:430, *Theo* 8:265 f., 200,

<sup>xxxv</sup> It is of course an oversimplification to speak of "Innuits" as one homogenous group. It is now well established that there was and is great diversity between different groups of Innuits, as well as that senicide was relatively rare and that some groups were strongly opposed to it.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> It seems that what is doing the work here is not age *per se* but independence or the ability to provide for oneself. Kant might be to some extent sympathetic to the children's and parents' plight, because he himself places great emphasis on independence, for instance as a necessary condition for full citizenship (*MM* 6:313 ff.). I am grateful to Ansgar Lyssy for this point and to Kate Moran for discussion of the role of personal independence in Kant.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> This, of course, greatly depends on how we formulate the maxim. For instance, if we think that the maxim is something like "Killing people" we would think that a universalization procedure should rule it out.