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Reply to Allison

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Reply to Allison

Nelson Potter

In „Kant’s Doctrine of Obligatory Ends,“ Henry Allison offers an interpretation of this central doctrine of the *Tugendlehre* portion of Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* that partly agrees with and partly takes issue with an earlier article of mine on the same topic.¹ The disagreement between us might seem to be on a small point, and yet I think it will turn out that this point has considerable significance for interpreting and understanding Kant’s ethical theory. I wish here to explain the issues, and defend my own earlier account.

My interpretation focuses on one of Kant’s arguments for obligatory ends,² which includes the following:

Now there must be such an end [one prescribed unconditionally] and a categorical imperative corresponding to it. For since there are free actions there must also be ends to which, as their objects, these actions are directed . . .

Our dispute concerns how to read the word „free“ in the second quoted sentence. I read it more narrowly, to refer (only) to actions performed from the motive of duty. Allison reads it more broadly, to include any action which is free in the sense that we are responsible for it, whether the action is done from duty or from inclination. I frankly read it more narrowly because it seemed to make more sense of Kant’s argument read that way. According to my reading,

¹ Nelson Potter, Jr., „Kant on Ends that are at the Same Time Duties,“ *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 66 (1985), pp. 78-92. I follow here Allison’s practice of using the phrase „obligatory end“ to translate „*Zweck der zugleich Pflicht ist*“.

² At *The Metaphysics of Morals*, VI, 385. References to Kant’s works are to the volume and page of the passages referred to in the Prussian Academy edition of Immanuel Kant’s works, *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, herausgegeben von der Deutschen (formerly Königlich Preußischen) Akademie der Wissenschaften, 29 volumes, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter (and predecessors), 1902). I have used the translation of *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* by H. J. Paton, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Third edition, 1956, republished in paperback, New York: Harper & Row, 1964), with one important change (see note 19, below). I refer to this work using the first word of the German title throughout this essay (*Grundlegung*), because it has been variously translated as „Groundwork,“ „Foundations“ and „Grounding.“ I have used the new, complete translation by Mary Gregor of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991; this work consists of two parts, the *Rechtslehre*, the doctrine (or fundamental principles) of law or right, and the *Tugendlehre*, the doctrine of virtue. Both of these translations include the Akademie pagination in their margins.

This quote is from what Allison describes as Kant’s „second argument,“ which is the argument I concentrate my attention on in my 1985 article mentioned in note 1.

the problem Kant is focusing on is the end of action in a morally motivated action. Whence comes that end? It cannot come from or be based on sensuous desires, because it is the end of the action, the reason the action is undertaken. If the action is from duty, the end of action cannot have arisen from sensuous inclinations. It must be determined by, and have its source in morality. Thus in the case of action from duty the moral law determines the end, rather than inclination moving us to adopt it.

Pursuing his interpretation, Allison replies that Kant's argument fails because:

from the fact that there is a categorical imperative for action, taken together with the non-problematic premise that every action aims at some end, it does not follow that there must also be a categorical imperative for ends (in the positive sense). Why could it not be the case that the only duties we have are strict duties or duties of justice? This would leave us a limited, albeit still categorical, morality, one which would involve the conception of objective ends as limiting conditions on action and a familiar set of negative duties expressing these limiting conditions.³

Thus Allison accepts the often repeated Kantian doctrine that all action is for the sake of an end, a doctrine that is important to me in my interpretation, but he replies that in the case of perfect duties to others such ends are negative, objective ends that merely set limiting conditions on actions.

In fact according to Allison *all three* arguments that Kant offers in the introduction to the *Tugendlehre*, all of which are considered by Allison in Part I of his paper, fail for similar sorts of reasons. According to Allison, the categorical imperative, in the absence of any proper obligatory ends, would be limited to the sorts of cases of perfect duties to others where it has long seemed to some of Kant's readers to make the most sense anyway. And so Kant's various attempts at a *reductio* argument to show that there must be obligatory ends fail.

In Part III of his paper Allison shows how Kant's failed arguments can be revised to become more successful. He does this by turning his attention to the power we must attribute to pure practical reason of prescribing certain ends, viz., the positive ends that are obligatory ends (by definition). If pure practical reason were only capable of functioning negatively with respect to the merely personal ends that are parts of our happiness, it would lack the motivational and originating power that is always regarded by Kant as a part of pure practical reason.⁴ When he restates Kant's argument, this idea is expressed as follows, as step 5 of a revised argument: „5) Therefore, pure practical reason must of itself provide sufficient reason for adopting some ends, that is, it prescribes these ends.“⁵

³ Allison, p. 10. References to Allison below are to „Kant's Doctrine of Obligatory Ends,“ which appears in this journal.

⁴ See *ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16; see also the explanation that follows the statement of the argument, p. 16.

But this is exactly the same power of pure practical reason that is exhibited by (at least some) actions from duty, the „free“ actions (in the narrower sense) that I focused on in my interpretation. So both Allison and myself are finally focusing on *the same actions from duty*, it seems, those actions where pure practical reason has a positive originating power. And we are using those sorts of actions to show that Kant's argument goes through. In this very important respect, our interpretation of Kant's argument is exactly the same, though the structure of Allison's paper tends to obscure this fact.

The difference between our papers is that Allison, unlike me, accuses Kant of committing the same mistake in all three of his arguments for obligatory ends, and he also accuses me of committing the same mistake in interpreting Kant's argument.⁶ So we might ask: If Allison finally supports the validity of Kant's argument by referring to the same sorts of actions from duty as I do, why does he go through the exercise of finding a fallacy (the same fallacy) in three arguments by Kant and in my interpretation of Kant, only to follow up by proposing a positive account of the argument that is similar to what I proposed? Why didn't Allison follow my lead and avoid accusing Kant and me of fallacy if his final interpretation of Kant's argument, as revised, is about the same as mine was from the beginning?

The answer is that in spite of these similarities of interpretation, there is a difference in our views. Allison wishes to insist that not all actions from duty are for the sake of a positive end; some of the ends of moral action are merely conceptions of objective ends as limiting conditions. Thus there is some variety in the structure of actions from duty, with some having positive ends (that are obligatory ends) and some having merely negative ends. I make no such distinction between different sorts of action from duty, and I will here urge that Allison's description of the different sorts is not quite correct.

For someone offering my interpretation of Kant's arguments, Kant in all three arguments is limiting himself to discussing cases of action from duty, and since cases of action from duty include the performance of such perfect duties to others, I am obliged to come up with my own interpretation of the end mentioned in the maxim of such actions. It seems a difficult matter to specify the end or goal of action in cases where one pays a debt from purely moral motives, and Allison's account of this end as merely negative and limiting may seem the more reasonable, at least at first sight.

Allison points out⁷ that my interpretation seems to require that all actions from duty, including those actions fulfilling perfect duties to others, involve obligatory ends,⁸ and he adds that Kant's view is (or seems to be) that obligatory

⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

ends are relevant only in relation to the range of duties presented and discussed in the *Tugendlehre*. In the case of perfect duties to others,

if an agent tells the truth, independently of any prudential considerations, simply because it is regarded as the morally correct course of action, then that agent is acting from duty without (even indirectly) aiming at some further end that is itself a duty to pursue. As before, then, there seems to be ample logical space for a morality that includes the categorical imperative and even actions from duty, yet recognizes ends only in the negative sense as limiting conditions on action.⁹

I think that we cannot decide this interpretive dispute by looking for *textual* reasons, eg., in the context, for reading „free“ as having one meaning or another. Allison addresses my one brief attempt to argue in this way,¹⁰ and I would agree that my citing of Kant's earlier definition of freedom¹¹ is by itself quite inconclusive.

Let me note in passing a related interpretive matter that if not made explicit could cause confusion. Allison writes, „Although Potter presents [Kant's argument] as a *reductio* from the assumption of the categorical imperative, it seems to be rather a *reductio* from the assumption of action from duty (an assumption that certainly does not figure explicitly in any of Kant's actual arguments).“¹² My own view is that for Kant to justify the categorical imperative is for him to show that it could be motivationally effective as a principle of action, and hence this justification involves showing that action from duty is possible; hence the assumption of the categorical imperative and the assumption of (the possibility of) action from duty are the same assumption, in my view.¹³ Thus Allison is correct in his reading of my version of Kant's argument. The argument should refer to action from duty rather than to the categorical imperative itself, because it has to do with the motivational structure of such action.

So, who is correct about the motivational structure of negative (perfect) actions from duty? Probably the clearest and most explicit passage in Kant on this issue comes from the *Tugendlehre*:

⁸ I will here accept the interpretive burden of showing just that, viz., that all actions from duty involve obligatory ends, though I had not thought through or adopted such a position when I wrote my 1985 essay.

⁹ Allison, p. 12. This is perhaps not the happiest of examples for Allison's own case, since in *The Metaphysics of Morals* lying is discussed as a violation of a perfect duty to oneself, and hence a duty of virtue. There is perhaps a special problem, from Allison's point of view, about perfect duties to oneself, since they, like the perfect duties to others, may seem to have merely negative ends, as Allison says the perfect duties to others do.

¹⁰ Allison, p. 12.

¹¹ *The Metaphysics of Morals*, VI, 226-7.

¹² Allison, p. 12.

¹³ See my unpublished piece, „The Synthetic A Priori Proposition of Kant's Practical Philosophy,“ where the argument for this claim is developed at length.

Negative duties forbid man to act contrary to the end of his nature, and so have to do merely with his moral self-preservation; positive duties, which command him to make a certain object of choice his end, concern his perfecting of himself. Both of them belong to virtue, either as duties of omission (*sustine et abstinere*) or as duties of commission (*viribus concessis utere*), but both belong to it as duties of virtue.¹⁴

This is a general characterization of the distinction between negative and positive duties, and I think it applies quite well also to duties to others, perfect and imperfect. It might be objected that Kant explicitly limits the contrast here to duties of virtue.

But what is in question is not merely the action required by a perfect duty to others, but also the correct moral motivation for that action, and hence the duty is an ethical duty that is not a part of *Recht*; we are interested in the characterization of the self-constraint, the inner moral motivation.¹⁵ Hence it is plausible to make reference to inner commitment to ends in talking about such actions, as I will try to make clear with an example.

To expand on Kant's thought in the quote, when I pay a debt owed, leaving aside all issues of legal retribution for non-performance, and also all issues of the benefits coming to the recipient as a result of the payment, and I perform this obligation from the motive of duty, this action has the character of actually being the performance of a negative duty (ie., avoiding wrongful non-payment). The end of such an action is, first of all, the preservation of one's intact moral character, and, since the duty is negative, we refer to what we could call a second-order end¹⁶ of the avoidance of violations. The first order end is the perfection of one's moral nature, though that is only indirectly aimed at, because the action we are considering is a negative action, a refraining. The second order end is the maintaining of the integrity of the first order end, through an action that avoids violating it. But Kant's basic thought of the first-order end of moral action as some part of the highest good and hence as an obligatory end, is retained and maintained, and is present as a motivational element of the action, whose aim is to preserve and protect the integrity of this end. Allison's perception that the end of such actions is merely negative and limiting is also correct, but it is not correct in a way which maintains his sharp distinction between the two kinds of action. For even in the performance of a perfect duty to others, the positive end of action that is a part of the highest good is still the end of the action, once allowance is made for the distinction between first order and second order ends of such negative duties, and for the fact that in the case of such duties first order ends are only indirectly aimed at. As should be obvious, we cannot pursue a

¹⁴ The *Metaphysics of Morals*, VI, 419.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, VI, 220.

¹⁶ This terminology was suggested to me by my colleague Mark van Roojen.

second-order end without presupposing a first order end, which is hence present as a motivational element of the action and the maxim, at least by way of presupposition. To put this point more directly: paying a debt from the motive of duty entails a commitment to the obligatory end of maintaining the agent's moral integrity.

One surprise in this line of interpretation is as follows: Although paying a debt is a perfect duty to others, the obligatory end involved is the end of the agent's own perfection, which we might have thought was the obligatory end only for duties to oneself. In introducing this example I suggested leaving aside any benefit the recipient obtains from timely debt payment, with the thought that providing such a benefit would be merely an imperfect duty, and that not all debt repayments actually provide such benefits. For even more complication, consider the Good Samaritan, who, in providing assistance to the robbery victim, pursues the obligatory end of the happiness of others; such a person may also be motivated by a wish to not be selfish, and to do his duty with regard to the victim, and this argues for the presence of the obligatory end of one's own perfection, at least through the presence of a secondary end of not acting in violation of that perfection. The pursuit of these two obligatory ends in this case does not have them conflicting or competing with each other. Perhaps this complication is what Kant is getting at when he insists¹⁷ that if there were no duties to oneself, there would also be no external duties either, viz., that all dutiful actions involve the obligatory end of self-perfection.

Allison might object that this quote from the *Tugendlehre* cannot be read back into the earlier *Grundlegung*. But the very distinction quoted above from the *Metaphysics of Morals* between negative duties and their ends of not violating or interfering with positive ends is to be found in the *Grundlegung*, for example in the second discussion of the development of talents example: „. . . in regard to contingent (meritorious) duty to oneself, it is not enough that an action should refrain from conflicting with humanity in our own person as an end in itself; it must also *harmonize with this end*.“ The neglect of talents, Kant adds, „can admittedly be compatible with the *maintenance* of humanity as an end in itself, but not with the promotion of this end.“¹⁸

Allison may have thought that the *Grundlegung* outlines and develops a conception of an „end“ of a purely negative, limiting sort, and that reading is probably where Allison gets his conception of negative ends of action that are merely objective limiting conditions. The main texts for such an interpretation would be those surrounding the statement of the second formulation, the humanity as an end in itself formulation in the *Grundlegung*. My reply here is that in fact,

¹⁷ The *Metaphysics of Morals*, VI, 417-8.

¹⁸ *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, IV, 430.

and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, this entire discussion of „ends“ can be read as having the characteristics of later obligatory ends, in particular, of being at least in some cases positive ends, and second, of being in every case conscious ends or goals of action that are elements of the agent’s maxims, and hence elements of the motivational structure of the agent’s actions. So there is not really a different sense of „ends“ being developed there, as Allison and other interpreters seem to suppose. I cannot give full support to this interpretation of these passages here, but let me present a couple of supporting comments: Kant defines end as „ . . . what serves the will as an objective ground of its self-determination . . . “¹⁹ I take it „objective ground“ just means „ground in the object.“ For example, my object in swinging the bat is to hit the ball, and so „hitting the ball“ is the objective state of affairs that is the end of my action. Whether the word is „objective,“ as I have it, or „subjective,“ as Paton prefers, it seems fairly clear that the end being mentioned here is a conscious goal of action, and not a *merely* objective end. When Kant a little later starts talking about „objective ends,“ and „ends in themselves,“ such expressions seem readily understandable as „states of affairs that *ought* to be conscious goals of action for us.“ How can Jones be a end in himself for Smith, as Kant insists should happen according to this formulation of the categorical imperative? This would happen through Smith’s making Jones’ welfare a goal of Smith’s actions, and through Smith’s limiting his own actions out of respect for Jones’s ends, by, for example, not stealing Jones’ property.

Further, still in the *Grundlegung*, when the main formulations of the categorical imperative are reviewed later in Chapter II, each is reviewed as a characteristic of the agent’s *maxim*, including the end.²⁰ So just as with the later obligatory ends, the objective ends of the *Grundlegung* are and can be read as being positive ends that are elements of the agent’s maxim. It is helpful in realizing this to understand that sometimes such ends are only indirectly aimed at, as in dutiful actions that are refrainings. There is less difference between the *Grundlegung* doctrine of ends and that of the *Tugendlehre* than some have thought.

Here we have, then, an alternative to Allison’s understanding of the structure of actions from duty that fulfill perfect duties, an alternative that I think makes better sense of a large range of Kantian texts, as I will now explain, including Kant’s three arguments for obligatory ends that Allison and we began by discussing.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, IV, 427. See the note on this sentence in Paton’s translation of the *Grundlegung* (op. cit., p. 138). Paton feels he cannot make sense of Kant’s text here, and as an emendation substitutes „subjective“ for Kant’s „objective“ in his translation. I have returned to the original text, which I propose an interpretation of.

²⁰ *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, IV, 436.

If we follow my interpretive line, which says that Kant is discussing free actions in the narrow sense of actions motivated by duty, and that obligatory ends are involved in all such actions, then all three of the Kantian arguments that Allison discusses in Part I of his paper turn out to be valid, or at least to be less broken-backed than Allison finds them to have. The first argument²¹ tells us that reason can check tempting inclinations only by putting against such inclinations its own positive ends. Allison replies with the distinction between negative and positive ends, saying negative ends can do the job without obligatory ends, which are positive. In contrast, I would say that, although this „argument“ is quite incomplete, Kant is saying that complete moral maxims, including ends, i. e., maxims of action from duty, are necessary as a counterforce against temptation. Kant's argument, so far as it goes, is an effective one.

The second argument is the one I present and discuss in my earlier essay, and that has been quoted above. Oddly enough, Allison ends up accusing both Kant and me of the same error, the failure to distinguish the two kinds of ends.²² It might be urged that if the error of my own interpretation mirrors Kant's error, then at least I am the one who has presented more accurately Kant's (fallacious) argument. In addition, I hope the above discussion of my and Allison's interpretations has vindicated my approach to this argument.

Kant's third argument²³ makes excellent sense according to my interpretation. Kant is making the point that in action determined by pure practical reason (=actions purely from duty) maxims are set and adopted only through a process of choosing or adopting an end as well as an action, since all action is for the sake of an end (an often repeated Kantian doctrine), and since all maxims as a result themselves include ends. The adoption of such ends must be based on reason, not inclination, or they would not be, as hypothesized, the product of pure practical reason; this setting of ends is the prescribing of their pursuit as a duty. Since action from duty must be possible, so must obligatory ends.

An additional advantage of my interpretation of actions from duty fulfilling perfect duties is that it makes better sense of the systematic comments about ends or goods that Kant presents in the second *Critique*. Chapter Two of that work is about the *object* of pure practical reason. This object would be the end or goal of action, and it is obviously intended as a perfectly general theory of the end or goal of moral action. Nothing is said there about either negative or positive ends, or the distinction between them. The discussion of this chapter helps prepare the way for Kant's later presentation of the doctrine of the highest good.

²¹ From *The Metaphysics of Morals*, VI, 380-1.

²² Allison, p. 17, the penultimate paragraph of his Part III.

²³ From *The Metaphysics of Morals*, VI, 395.

The doctrine of the highest good in the second *Critique* is also a doctrine of the goal of action, and it is a doctrine that is probably closely related to the doctrine of obligatory ends in the *Tugendlehre*. Both Allison and I remark that the content of the obligatory ends is stated in the Introduction to the *Tugendlehre* by limitation. That is, the highest good cannot include my own happiness or the virtue of others. So it is easy to see the doctrine of obligatory ends as a *specification* of the highest good, to those parts of the highest good that we as individual finite agents can have some effect upon, and that have some moral relevancy to us (we can have no direct moral concern with our own happiness or the moral goodness of others). But then this takes the idea of the highest good to be a perfectly general conception of the goal of moral action, for all rational agents. Again, no distinction between positive and negative ends. According to my interpretation, this doctrine of the highest good as end of all moral action is retained and spelled out, and supported. Allison still has the problem of explaining how the doctrine of the highest good would relate to actions from duty that fulfill perfect duties to others (and, I would add, to oneself).

This means that according to my interpretation Kant can maintain his basic thought that *all* action from duty has as its end a positive good, which is some part of the highest good, and that the doctrine of obligatory ends is a direct result of these general views about the ends of moral action. And for this reason Kant's three arguments (and my interpretation of the second one in my 1985 article) do *not* exhibit the fallacy that Allison claimed for them, a fallacy said to be a result of the failure to distinguish between different sorts of duties, and different sorts of ends of dutiful actions. It also means that, although Kant never explicitly tells us so, the doctrine of obligatory ends is a perfectly general doctrine of the ends of *human morally motivated action*, and hence it is a doctrine not limited to the sorts of duties discussed in the *Tugendlehre*. It rather has application to all duties having to do with inner freedom or self-constraint.

Thus if we interpret „free action“ in Kant's second argument as referring only to action from duty, and we add the supplementary points about Kant's doctrine of objective ends in the *Grundlegung*, about the object of pure practical reason, and the highest good in the second *Critique*, and finally, about the character of the end of action in the case of perfect duties of virtue from the *Tugendlehre*, we are able to defend Kant more thoroughly than Allison does. This is because we are able to take back Allison's criticism of Kant for failing to observe a distinction between different sorts of ends of action, and as a consequence also to take back Allison's criticism of my interpretation of Kant's argument for obligatory ends.

I regard this alternative to Allison's interpretation as fully in accord with his general aim of extending Kant's doctrine of freedom, about which he has recently written an important book, to the doctrine of obligatory ends, and hence as not at all undercutting that goal. In fact according to my interpretation the doctrine

of free action represented by the notion of obligatory ends embraces and includes as elements the doctrine of the highest good from the second *Critique* and the doctrine of objective ends that surrounds the second main formulation of the categorical imperative in the *Grundlegung*.²⁴

²⁴ Henry Allison first shared an earlier draft of his paper with me some two years ago, and since then we've been having some correspondence and, when we see one another, discussions of its issues. He presented and discussed this paper in a visit to the University of Nebraska on 2 April 1993, from which I derived the stimulation of my colleagues's questions and Allison's responses. I wish to acknowledge this important assistance from Allison and from my colleagues at the University of Nebraska, especially Mark van Roojen, in the development of this comment.

Rezensionen