

ARTICLE

Kant on Despondent Moral Failure

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Abstract

Typically, Kant describes maxims that violate the moral law as engaging in a kind of comparative judgement: the person who makes a false promise judges it best – at least subjectively – to deceive her friend. I argue that this is not the only possible account of moral failure for Kant. In particular, when we examine maxims of so-called despondency (*Verzagtheit*) we find that some maxims are resistant to comparative judgement. I argue that this is true for at least two reasons: first, the despondent agent has a maxim to avoid suffering at all costs; second, this anxious preoccupation with suffering makes the despondent agent prone to failures associated with the imagination and its role in creating an ideal of happiness.

Keywords: despondency; misanthropy; miserliness; hypochondria; imagination

1. The dear self

Among the more memorable passages in Kant's moral writings are those that offer examples of his account of moral failure. Characters in Kant's wax museum of miscreants include the friend who promises to repay a loan with no intention of doing so (*G*, 4: 422)¹ and the greedy hoarder of money who refuses to be charitable (4: 423). Moral failure is, of course, not always about money. In other texts, Kant offers further examples: everything from our desire for food and drink (*MM*, 6: 427) to our desire to be superior to others (*R*, 6: 27) serves an incentive that pulls us away from morality. Their variety notwithstanding, these examples illustrate the familiar thesis that moral failure, on the Kantian view, is fundamentally a matter of choosing the incentive of heteronomy and self-love over the moral principle. Kant thus describes the choice moral agents face as that between subordinating self-love to morality, or vice versa (6: 36), or as that of a will at a crossroads (*G*, 4: 400; *MM*, 6: 279n.). What is more, as these examples appear to demonstrate, self-love makes comparative judgements: the person who makes a false promise weighs the costs and benefits of her maxim and judges that making the false promise is in her interest.²

In this article, I will argue that we should not be led by these examples to suppose that Kantian wrongdoing always involves comparative judgement. There is, I will argue, more than one way to privilege the 'dear self' (*G*, 4: 407), and a closer look reveals another species of moral failure in Kant's ethics. Following the terminology

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that Kant and his translators tend to use, I will call this ‘despondency’.³ Unlike the examples cited above, despondency is more closely associated with anxiety and despair. In particular, the despondent agent makes it her maxim to avoid sorrow or disappointment at all costs. A central characteristic of maxims of despondency, as I will argue below, is that they do not admit of comparative judgement. Nevertheless, though despondency is importantly distinct in this regard, it still fits squarely within Kant’s fundamental description of immoral action, namely, as a privileging of the self over the moral law.

2. The deflationary strategy: Kant’s account of suicide

It might, of course, be suggested that any apparently new account of moral failure can easily be reduced to or redescribed in terms of comparative judgement. Indeed, Kant often avails himself of this type of deflationary strategy in his discussions of suicide. While some might be inclined to describe at least some suicidal maxims as involving hopelessness and despair, Kant is generally intent on describing it in terms of a more straightforward cost-benefit analysis.⁴ However, in doing so, one might argue that he runs the risk of radically under-describing the phenomenon.

Kant acknowledges in his various discussions of self-destruction that agents’ maxims and their motivating grounds can be varied: examples include the prospect of future sadness with no foreseeable end (G, 4: 421–2), the preservation of one’s honour (L-Eth-Collins, 27: 370–1), being enslaved (L-Eth-Vigil, 27: 603) and having been bitten by a rabid dog (MM, 6: 423–4; L-Eth-Vigil, 27: 603). Throughout, Kant’s stance toward suicide appears to be that it is never permissible.⁵ Most interesting, from the point of view of this discussion, is the kind of reasoning Kant offers for the impermissibility of the maxim of self-destruction. Since suicide is a maxim to destroy oneself, it cannot refer to expected future positive satisfaction. By definition, the maxim will have to have as its aim the cessation of one’s current state (pain, enslavement), or the avoidance of an expected undesirable state (suffering from rabies or losing one’s honour). Notably, Kant consistently classifies both as a kind of considered, comparative judgement. Take, for example, Kant’s gloss on the suicidal maxim in his discussion of the Formula of Universal Law in the *Groundwork*:

Someone who feels weary of life because of a series of ills that has grown to the point of hopelessness is still so far in possession of his reason that he can ask himself whether it is not perhaps contrary to a duty to oneself to take one’s own life. Now he tries out: whether the maxim of his action could possibly become a universal law of nature. But his maxim is: from self-love I make it my principle to shorten my life if, when protracted any longer, it *threatens more ill than it promises agreeableness*. (G, 4: 421–2, my emphasis)

A few things are worth noting in this passage. First, though the agent seems clearly to be despairing (his discontent has come to the point of ‘hopelessness’), he is still capable of pausing for reflection and testing his maxim. Second, the way that Kant frames the suffering agent’s maxim is remarkable. The despairing agent’s maxim is not, as we might expect, simply that continued existence seems hopeless, or too much to bear. Rather, it is explicitly described as a comparative judgement that considers the dim prospect for any future satisfaction and chooses, accordingly, to draw an end to life

because continued existence ‘threatens more ill than it promises agreeableness’. Nor is this gloss on the suicidal maxim merely an unfortunate by-product of Kant’s attempting to shoehorn the example of suicide into the universal law formulation in order to derive a clear contradiction. A similar description of the suicidal maxim appears a few pages later during the discussion of the formula of humanity. There, he argues that, ‘[i]f to escape from a troublesome condition he destroys himself, he makes use of a person, merely as a means, to *preserving a bearable condition up to the end of life*’ (G, 4: 429, my emphasis). The suggestion throughout is that the order of priorities is wrong – the suicidal maxim places empirical satisfaction (here, the cessation of pain) above the moral law. This point comes across forcefully in part of Kant’s reported discussion of suicide in the early Kaehler/Collins lectures:

[T]here is no necessity that, so long as I live, I should live happily; but there is a necessity that, so long as I live, I should live honourably. Misery gives no man the right to take his life. For if we were entitled to end our lives for want of pleasure, *all our self-regarding duties would be aimed at the pleasantness of life.* (L-Eth-Collins, 27: 373, my emphasis)

When it comes to his discussions of suicide motivated by sadness or hopelessness, Kant appears to employ a kind of deflationary strategy, according to which the maxim of self-destruction is described in terms of a simple comparative judgement. That is, he appears content to describe the maxim of the hopeless agent who still has the ability to reflect on his principle of action as a maxim to end his existence in order to maximize pleasure, at least by minimizing the amount of future suffering he must endure. Possibly this is an accurate description of some maxims of self-destruction. But in so generalizing, Kant risks oversimplifying the despairing agent’s maxim almost to the point of inaccuracy. Indeed, as Langton (1992: 494–5) observes, the sort of desolation experienced by the suicidal agent might be described as the *lack* of any inclination or desire, which poses its own set of problems for the Kantian account of moral struggle. I think there is something to this observation, though it is beyond the scope of this discussion. What I will consider below, however, are cases in which an agent *does* have desires and inclinations, but where her maxim does not appear to admit of the comparative judgement illustrated in the above passages.

3. Three non-deflationary cases

Fortunately, Kant is not always so deflationary. In this section, we examine three cases in which Kant appears to offer a slightly more nuanced account of moral failure, especially as it originates in a kind of despair or anxiety. In some cases, this failure first becomes apparent because the agent fails in her duties to others. However, in all of these cases the failure is, at bottom, a failure in the agent’s duties to herself. In the section that follows, I offer an account of the type of moral failure these cases exhibit.

3.1 *The aversive misanthrope*

Kant typically makes a distinction between two types of misanthrope – the ‘aversive’ misanthrope and the ‘misanthrope from ill will’. As Kant glosses the distinction, the

aversive misanthrope has a tendency to want to avoid other people, in part because 'he fails to find in them what he was seeking' (L-Eth-Collins, 27: 432). He explains that the aversive misanthrope tends to exhibit a melancholic temperament that cannot bring itself to like the human race – where this includes even himself. The misanthrope from ill-will, on the other hand, thinks of himself as better than others, actively hates others and 'pursues their harm instead' (ibid.).

The misanthrope from ill-will seems to exhibit an interpersonal arrogance, according to which other agents are fools or scoundrels. He is thus able to rationalize a false principle of superiority over them. The aversive misanthrope, on the other hand, does not draw any conclusion about his own superiority from observations about others' failures. His would appear to be a *universal disappointment* with humanity. For the aversive misanthrope, this disappointment in humanity encourages a kind of retreat from others. So, for example, the misanthrope has the 'tendency to withdraw from society, the fantastic wish for an isolated country seat, or even (in young people) the dream of happiness in being able to pass their life on an island unknown to the rest of the world with a small family, which the novelists or poets who write Robinsonades know so well how to exploit' (CPJ, 5: 275–6). Again, however, this retreat appears to be grounded in a kind of sadness and disappointment, and not in a hatred of others. In particular, the aversive misanthrope appears to retreat from society as a kind of protective mechanism: he would rather be alone than be faced with more evidence of humanity's moral shortcomings.

A serious moral danger accompanies the misanthrope's retreat from humanity, and this is that he will fail to participate with others sympathetically, attend to their needs and indeed offer help when needed.⁶ Of course, unlike the misanthrope who actively hates others, he does not intend harm to them or bear any ill-will toward them. Still, his disappointed retreat from humanity means that he will almost certainly fail in his positive duties towards others, where this also includes those duties he has to cultivate the dispositions that might help him perform duties of beneficence. Described in this way, the misanthrope's maxim bears some surface-level resemblance to that of the hypothetical agent described in the *Groundwork's* argument for the duty of beneficence: 'May everyone be as happy as heaven wills, or as he can make himself, I shall take nothing away from him; I just do not feel like contributing anything to his well-being or his assistance in need!' (G, 4: 423). Crucially, however, the misanthrope's motivation for having this sort of maxim is different from that of the non-beneficent agent described in the *Groundwork*. The latter is motivated by a kind of narrowly described self-interest, a simple overriding desire to pursue his own inclinations and projects, even at the expense of ignoring the needs of others. The aversive misanthrope, on the other hand, appears to form this sort of maxim because he cannot bring himself to suffer the disappointment that might occur if he engages with others. Thus, though he also fails in his duties of sympathetic participation and beneficence, the aversive misanthrope's maxim is motivated by a sadness and disappointment in others and, in particular, a fear of continued disappointment. He thus differs in this important respect from the agent who ignores his duties of beneficence out of greed.

3.2 The miser

Like the misanthrope, the miser also fails in her duties of beneficence toward others. Hers is not, however, a story of disappointment in humanity, but rather of anxiety regarding the future. Kant classifies miserliness as a kind of avarice (*Geiz*), but from the standpoint of this discussion, there are important differences between miserliness and its counterpart, greedy avarice (*habsüchtiger Geiz*).⁷ While greedy avarice is a tendency to want to accumulate as much money as possible for the purposes of enjoyment, miserly avarice only seeks to accumulate money. The miser explicitly rejects using this money for enjoyment (*MM*, 6: 432). Under ‘enjoyment’ here, we might also presumably include the enjoyment one derives from the status or power that comes from having more resources than others.⁸ Kant’s miser tends not, in any case, to be the self-satisfied counter of coins; rather, he is perpetually anxious and often irrational. In early lectures, Kant reportedly notes that ‘among the stingy, the cause of their avarice is mostly fear’ (*L-Eth-Collins*, 27: 405).

To see how this is the case, we can look to Kant’s account of how miserliness comes about. Miserliness begins when the agent is forced to deprive herself of an ‘an object [or] pleasure in life’ because of limited means (*L-Eth-Collins*, 27: 402). This deprivation is painful, so the miser institutes a principle of savings so that she will not have to experience the same sort of disappointment again (*ibid.*). So far, of course, there is nothing morally problematic or even particularly irrational about the agent’s maxim; most of us have at some point or another had a similar experience. The miser’s mistake comes at the next stage: she gets used to squirreling away money, and instead of saving money for some later purpose, she begins to save money *just for the sake of saving money* (*ibid.*). On Kant’s view, this is both a prudential mistake and a moral mistake. The miser’s maxim is prudentially questionable because the point of having money, on Kant’s view, is to do something with it (*MM*, 6: 286). And though Kant sometimes suggests that the miser exhibits a kind of Stoic detachment from her desires (e.g. *L-Eth-Collins*, 27: 402), more often, he describes the miser as retaining her desires, and also being tormented by the fact that she cannot allow herself to satisfy them, despite presumably having the resources to do so. (e.g. *L-Anth-Mensch*, 25: 959). Further, the miser also obviously makes the moral mistake of non-beneficence, since to be charitable would be occasionally to part with one’s money.

Miserliness does not, on Kant’s view, afflict all agents equally. Some agents are more susceptible to the mistake than others – the first of these is women, since they have little or no control over their resources and tend to hoard money when they can. Other groups of people who seem particularly susceptible to miserliness include ‘melancholy’ people who worry excessively about the future (*L-Anth-Parow*, 25: 431), and people whose livelihood is insecure, for example, scholars and clergy. (*L-Eth-Collins*, 27: 404). In sum, Kant often associates miserliness with groups of people whose circumstances are either objectively insecure, or who have a disposition to worry excessively about the future.

The miser thus clearly differs in her maxim from the person who has the more straightforwardly greedy maxim. Of course, both subordinate the moral law to self-concern, broadly understood, since both have maxims of non-beneficence that cannot be universalized. Nevertheless, the source of the miser’s non-beneficence, when it is not merely a bad habit, is often a kind of bottomless anxiety or insecurity.

Each of us has reason to think about how we will sustain ourselves in the future, but the anxious miser becomes, as it were, a kind of slave to these thoughts.

3.3 *The hypochondriac*

In many respects, Kant's description of the hypochondriac is similar to that of the miser, except that, instead of an anxiety about financial security, the hypochondriac is, of course, preoccupied with concerns about his health. Another thing that sets hypochondria apart from misanthropy and miserliness is Kant's own admitted struggle with it: Kant has a good deal to say about his own health and about his own tendencies toward hypochondria in pre-critical and critical writings, letters to others and various unpublished reflections.⁹ In the *Anthropology*, Kant characterizes hypochondria as a mental affliction, but contrasts it with thoroughgoing 'derangement', in which a person's thoughts follow an involuntary rule that is contrary to the laws of experience (*Anth*, 7: 202). Instead, hypochondria is a kind of *melancholia*: the person suffering from *melancholia* may have difficulty controlling her thoughts, but she is aware that 'something is not going right' with them (*ibid.*). For the hypochondriac, this manifests as a kind of hyper-vigilance regarding bodily sensation: 'certain internal physical sensations do not so much disclose a real disease present in the body, but rather are mere causes of anxiety about it' (*Anth*, 7: 212).

In his discussion of hypochondria in the *Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant offers a similar account, explaining that hypochondria consists of 'abandoning oneself despondently to general morbid feelings that have no definite object' (*CF*, 7: 103). Throughout, there is a clear sense that hypochondria is brought about and sustained by the imagination's getting away from itself (*CF*, 7: 103). This sort of runaway, anxious imagining is the 'opposite of the mind's self-mastery . . . a faint-hearted brooding about the ills that could befall one, and that one would not be able to withstand if they should come' (*CF*, 7: 103). This last statement is ambiguous. Kant might mean that the hypochondriac broods *despite* the fact that he will not be able to withstand the ills he fears. In other words, he is in the state of mind which might prompt a friend to say, 'why worry about it? There's nothing you can do about it anyway!' But the text may also (or instead) suggest that he broods *precisely because* he will not be able to withstand those ills.¹⁰ On this interpretation, it is the *very inevitability* of failing health that bothers the hypochondriac so much that he anxiously imagines ailments where there are none, or when he feels the slightest discomfort. Both interpretations are consistent with Kant's description of his own overcoming of the tendency toward hypochondria, namely, by acknowledging that the source of his 'oppression of the heart was purely mechanical [and thus] nothing could be done about it' (*CF*, 7: 104). The suggestion, in other words, is that there is no way out of one's hypochondria by 'sheer resolution' (*CF*, 7: 104). Rather what is required is that one abandon one's insistence that there always be a way to avoid illness. One must resign oneself to the fate of sensible existence.

As long as the hypochondriac gives in to his imagined illnesses, he will have a tendency toward a kind of inner fixation. Like the misanthrope, he withdraws, but inwardly, by always worrying that aches and pains are symptoms of a serious illness. Like the miser, the hypochondriac has a tendency to seek constant reassurance, not about financial security, but about his imagined illness. This explains his tendency to visit the doctor repeatedly and read about his imagined ailments. Of course, none of

this will do anything to dismiss his conviction that there is something wrong with him, since the source of his ailment lies in the imagination, and not in anything physical.

3.4 *Anxious maxims*

As the above examples demonstrate, the tendencies of the misanthrope, the miser and the hypochondriac are based in anxiety or a fear of future disappointment. It is important to note, however, that Kant does not think that these agents suffer from a kind of ‘derangement’ that makes them unable to accurately represent reality. Their focus is singular, but they are not delusional. People do get sick, fall into poverty and find themselves disappointed by others. Indeed, as far as Kant’s description of the miser goes, despondent agents sometimes have very good reason to worry about the future. The despondent agent is not wrong about the risk attendant upon sensible existence generally, nor is she necessarily wrong about the risks in her particular case. Below, I will argue that the despondent agent has a tendency to exaggerate these dangers; still, the dangers of finite existence are those we all face.

In the case of the misanthrope and the miser, in particular, this tendency occasions the moral failure of non-beneficence. Though Kant does not to my knowledge say the same thing about the hypochondriac, we can easily imagine his inward fixations also distracting him from duty. Importantly, however, it is also Kant’s view that each of these agents fails in a more fundamental way by exhibiting so-called despondency, which he describes as a failure in one’s duties to oneself. We turn to this next.

4. A Kantian account of despondency

The examples in the previous section share a tendency to recognize the disappointments and risks of sensible existence and to respond with anxiety and, in some cases, withdrawal. This anxious response appears at times to be a kind of protective mechanism. All of these tendencies are characteristic of what Kant calls despondency. In what follows, I outline the moral failure at the basis of despondency; I then consider how this moral failure might bring about a failure with respect to the imagination’s role in constructing the ideal of happiness.

4.1 *Despondency as a moral failure*

In the *Vigilantius* lectures on moral philosophy, Kant discusses the various duties that agents have to themselves and offers a list of vices associated with failure in this regard. Some of these duties are familiar – lying and self-deprecation, for example. But here Kant also includes begging, assuming debts and retraction (assuming one is not simply correcting an error). Finally, and somewhat mysteriously, he also includes the duty to avoid despondency (*Verzagtheit*):

Despondency. Mistrust in his powers is always unfounded; a human being has a capacity to sustain himself independently of any other beings. This he must keep active in the greatest degree. He must be able to learn to bear all sorrows in the world. – He possesses himself, and his existence does not, therefore, depend on others; so he must locate it in his own person, not in things outside

him. The despairing man is thus wholly forgetful that he is subject to a right of humanity. (L-Eth-Vigil, 27: 606)

Despondency is best understood as a failure in one's conception of oneself. In particular, the despondent agent rejects the notion that she will be able to bear hardship or suffering when it arises, and instead seeks assurance from external sources – an assurance that is, of course, impossible to achieve.

To see this, we can begin by looking at the passage above. At first glance, Kant's reported focus would appear to be on simply remaining independent: the human being ought to 'sustain himself independently of any other beings', 'learn to bear all sorrows in the world' and locate his existence in himself, not outside himself. Following this line of thought, one might think that despondency consists in being needy and dependent, or not being able to pursue one's own happiness independently. By itself, however, this would be at odds with Kant's conception of human beings as finite, sensible creatures who often find themselves in need of assistance from others. This, after all, is an important premise in his arguments for a duty of beneficence (G, 4: 423). So, Kant cannot be claiming that we ought to remain wholly independent and self-sufficient at all times, since this is something we simply cannot do.

Another interpretation might be that Kant is making a claim about the attitude that we ought to take toward our sensible ends, namely, that we should never compromise our independence for the sake of desire or happiness. To interpret the passage along these lines would be to see it as arguing for a broadly Stoic point: we ought to disregard happiness, or at least regard it as having only very minor importance when considered alongside the virtue of self-sufficiency or independence. On this account, the self-possession referred to in this passage would be a characteristic of a person who conceives of herself first and foremost as moral agent, and not as a happiness-seeking agent. This interpretation would also have the benefit of explaining why Kant thinks that despondency is a moral failure, since it would be a tendency to give one's own happiness a special place in one's self-conception, or a tendency to forget that the only thing that really matters is that one is a moral person, 'subject to a right of humanity'.

Tempting as the interpretation may be, we should avoid taking it to extremes. In particular, we should not interpret Kant as accusing the despondent person of mistaking merely apparent goods or 'preferred indifferents' for the actual good, namely, virtue. Kant is not a Stoic. Happiness matters to us. It is a conditional good, and it cannot serve as the ground of morality, but it is important to us nonetheless. This is why the highest good, for Kant, includes both virtue and happiness.

Thus, Kant's rejection of despondency is neither a facile assurance that we will always be able to 'go it alone', nor a dismissal of happiness as an important end. Instead, I think, Kant's warning against despondency is a reminder that we need to practise our ability to face disappointment and sorrow if – and, alas, when – they come. As he puts it, 'the despondent agent must learn to bear all despair in the world'. This interpretation is borne out by other passages in which Kant discusses despondency. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, for example, he argues that every affect 'of the courageous sort (that is, which arouses the consciousness of our powers to overcome any resistance . . . is aesthetically sublime' (CPJ, 5: 272). This includes anger

and even despair, but only if despair is of the enraged variety, not if it is of the despondent variety ('nicht aber die verzagte'). The suggestion, then, would appear to be that the despondent person *lacks* this 'consciousness of [her] powers to overcome any resistance'. Similarly, recall Kant's discussion of hypochondria in the *Conflict of the Faculties*, where he observes that the hypochondriac lacks a kind of 'self-mastery' and finds himself brooding about the ills that might befall him (CF, 7: 103).

Another discussion of despondency appears in the *Anthropology*, where Kant wonders if suicide might sometimes be an act of courage, and not always an act of despondency (*Verzagen*). He observes that the act can sometimes aim at preserving one's honour. However, 'if it is due to exhaustion in patience in suffering as a result of sadness, which slowly exhausts all patience, then it is an act of despondency (*so ist es ein Verzagen*)' (*Anth*, 7: 258). Notable in this passage is Kant's identification of despondency with a lack of patience with suffering. The suggestion, then, is that a person who avoids despondency should be able to cultivate an ability to endure her suffering – as the Vigilantius lecture puts it, she will learn to be able to 'bear all the sorrows in the world'.

The despondent agent fails to cultivate this disposition of patience or endurance toward inevitable suffering; correspondingly, she has a conception of herself according to which she thinks or fears that she will not be able to withstand future pain and suffering. She doubts her ability to weather the storm, as it were, when the storm comes. But all of this raises another question: why does Kant think – as he clearly does – that despondency is a *moral failure*? The answer emerges when we consider the maxims associated with despondency. The despondent agent conceives of herself as unable to withstand suffering, and so she makes it her maxim to avoid suffering at all costs. This is apparent in all three of the cases discussed in section 3. The maxim of despondency is not the perfectly permissible: 'I will make happiness my aim and do what I can within the limits of morality to achieve it.' It is instead: 'Because I cannot bear suffering, I will do all that I can to avoid unhappiness and pain.' The despondent agent does not think she can weather the storm, so she makes it her maxim to avoid storms at all costs. Note, however, that this latter maxim, poignant thought it may be, puts self-love ahead of the moral law. This is why despondency is a moral failure, and it also begins to explain why the inclinations associated with despondency are fundamentally unsatisfiable: a person aiming to avoid suffering *at all costs* will never be done with her task.

The maxim of despondency – to avoid suffering at all costs – should not be confused with an agent's reaction to moments of fear or panic. Kant would characterize fear and panic as affects, or particularly strong feelings that make reflection and deliberation impossible (*Anth*, 7: 252–3). Indeed, on the basis of the discussion so far, despondency would appear to be a Kantian passion. Unlike affects, which are a kind of feeling, passions belong to the faculty of desire. But passions are distinct from mere inclination in several respects. First, they develop gradually, typically over a longer period of time (*Anth*, 7: 252). Second, and relatedly, this gradual development tends to depend a great deal on the use of reason. Of course, garden-variety inclination depends on the use of reason as well (cf. Frierson 2014: 69), but passions have a tendency almost to conjure up their own objects. As Melissa Merritt (2021: 340) notes, the 'important point about passions is not the future orientation they may have as a

species of inclination (and thereby as expressions of desire); rather it is that passions are internally sustained movements of thought, and thereby express entrenched practical commitments'. The person who falls prey to passion does not simply succumb to this or that inclination; rather he 'torments himself more or less under his own steam' (*ibid.*). Though Kant does not – to my knowledge – ever describe despondency as a passion, these characteristics are all plainly evident in the examples considered so far. Further, Kant does explicitly characterize miserliness as a passion on several occasions (L-Anth-Fried, 25: 612; L-Anth-Mensch, 25: 1122). This is clear, for example, in the way that the miser's maxim becomes entrenched over time.

A second point about passions relevant to the discussion of despondency is that they are particularly resistant to revision. Kant notes that passions are 'incurable because the sick person does not want to be cured' (*Anth*, 7: 266). Curiously, perhaps, the suggestion here is that we have a strange kind of 'affinity' for our passions (Merritt 2021: 343). This is true even despite the fact that passions tend to torment their possessors – hatred, for example, would not appear to bring anyone any particular joy. But passions are products of our own faulty reasoning, and we seem therefore to demonstrate a partiality and attachment to them: 'we nurse them through habits of thought, and find them fitting and appropriate when, in fact, they are not' (*ibid.*). This, too, seems an apt description of the despondent maxim: it is resistant to revision in part because it has become so large a component of the agent's understanding of herself and her world.

4.2 *Happiness as an ideal of the imagination*

Despondency is a moral failure best characterized as a passion. But this is only part of the story when it comes to understanding why despondency should make comparative judgement difficult or impossible. A further complication of despondency is that it interferes with the agent's ability to form a conception of happiness. To see how this is the case, we need to consider the role of the imagination in devising a conception of happiness, and how despondency can corrupt this process.

Kant gives us an important clue by describing hypochondria as a failure of productive imagination (*CF*, 7: 103). The imagination, for Kant, is a faculty that is put to use in many different contexts.¹¹ He defines it as 'the faculty for representing an object in intuition even **without its presence**' (*CPR*, B151). So, for example, the faculty of imagination is at work when I represent a four-legged table in intuition, even if parts of the back legs are obscured by parts of the front legs. With this example, we can also see how imagination is not a purely passive capacity, since it mediates between concepts and intuition (A124, B151). So, for example, the imagination could not serve to represent the four legs of the table without the concept of legs, table, etc.

Imagination also plays a crucial role in Kant's practical philosophy. Specifically, Kant argues in the *Groundwork* that happiness is an ideal of the imagination (*G*, 4: 418). To see why Kant would say this, it is helpful to think of the imagination as being responsible for putting together a whole when parts of that whole are missing (as with the table in the previous paragraph), or even when the whole object is missing (as in the case of memory or fantasy). And, crucially, Kant describes *happiness* as a kind of whole – not, to be sure, as a whole object that we intuit, but, rather, as a whole thing that we construct over the course of our lives.

In the *Groundwork*, Kant reminds us to keep in mind two important points about happiness. First, ‘the elements that belong to happiness are one and all empirical’ (G, 4: 418). This much is unsurprising. But happiness is not any ordinary empirical concept. Rather, ‘for the idea of happiness, an absolute whole is required, a maximum of well-being, in my present and every future condition’ (G, 4: 418). Understood in these terms, Kant argues, it is *impossible* for any finite being to form a determinate concept of happiness. Say, for example, someone decides that the best way to ensure happiness over the course of her life is to pursue wealth and set plenty of money aside for old age. But then perhaps she realizes that her wealth makes those around her envious, thus making it difficult to form any sincere friendships. Or perhaps she looks back on her youth and regrets not spending it in a more carefree manner. Or perhaps her strategy of pursuing wealth does bring her happiness after all. The point is just that, since happiness is an ideal of a whole that stretches over the course of a lifetime, it is impossible to have a determinate concept of it. We need the imagination to fill in the gaps, as it were: this is why happiness is an ideal of the imagination, and not an ideal of reason. More specifically, it is an ideal of productive imagination, since it creates or invents the object of happiness, rather than simply reproducing it, as in the case of the table. In principle, any number of elements could be included in our conception of happiness, including the happiness of others (Hills 2006: 245). The imagination must find a way to put these together and balance them against each other, despite uncertainty about the future.

The hypochondriac, miser and misanthrope seek happiness – as do we all. But their productive imagination goes wrong somewhere along the line. This is an important point: Kant does not appear to think that these agents differ merely *in degree* from the rest of us in attempting to cobble together and pursue a conception of happiness. The miser is, in other words, not simply an extreme version of the person who sets aside money for old age. That these characters differ in kind from other happiness-pursuing agents is evident from the fact that Kant describes them as engaging in a kind of *self-undermining* activity of productive imagination. The miser can find satisfaction neither in saving money nor in spending it; the hypochondriac makes himself ill with worry; and the misanthrope deprives himself of what he seems to seek most, namely, moral relationships with others.

At this stage, we can offer an account of how the despondent maxim corrupts the imagination’s role in creating a conception of happiness. The account is speculative but, I think, well-supported by the examples in section 3. The maxim to avoid unhappiness at all costs often includes a tendency to seek external reassurance and be on guard against potential ills and dangers. As part of this defensive strategy, despondent agents will thus sometimes have a tendency to imagine that the worst-case scenario is not just likely but ever-present and real. The misanthrope supposes that people are all awful; the miser supposes that she will go completely broke; and the hypochondriac supposes that she is seriously ill. Yet, in their attempt to stave off any and all misfortune, they create what Kant would call a ‘delusion’ via imagination. Of course, every person must contend with the dangers of sensible existence – some, unfortunately, more than others. But the despondent agent does not just keep a wary eye on her surroundings; she supposes she is already and always beset by danger.

The despondent agent’s maxim to avoid suffering at all costs, together with the tendency for despondency to corrupt the agent’s use of her imagination, explain

why despondency is resistant to comparative judgement. Once the agent has a despondent maxim – again, this is likely associated with a passion that has taken some time to develop – there is in principle nothing that can counterbalance or change her maxim. Whereas a person with a principle of saving money for a rainy day might have the aim of saving enough so that she can survive for six (or twelve, or forty-eight) months if she loses her job, the miser's maxim is to collect money *no matter what else is true*. Further, since the despondent maxim appears to have a corrupting influence on the imagination, it might be more accurate to say that the despondent agent cannot even *entertain* thoughts about what she would do under different kinds of circumstances. She is already convinced that the worst is true.

5. Despondency and duties to others

Thus far, we have considered how despondent maxims might differ from other, more commonly cited cases of moral failure by examining how they come about. However, one might reasonably ask whether these maxims also differ in their interpersonal manifestations. In particular, it may seem that despondent maxims do not seem to wrong or take advantage of others quite as obviously as other, more straightforwardly greedy maxims. Part of this is certainly explained by the fact that despondency is, in the first instance, a failure of one's duty to *oneself*. Further, to the extent that this failure occasions failures with regard to others, the examples that Kant gives concern a failure with respect to imperfect duty: the misanthrope fails to cultivate sympathetic participation, and the miser fails to be beneficent. Thus, in neither example does despondency occasion a violation of owed duty. Nevertheless, we can easily imagine a case in which despondency occasions a failure with respect to owed duty: a parent's anxious preoccupations with her own health might incline her to overlook duties of care, for example. Such a case may seem closer to negligence than calculated advantage-taking.

A similar hypothesis might be that despondent maxims do not seem to make claims of superiority over others. They seem, on their face, less arrogant. They may make the mistake of subordinating the moral law to self-love, but they do not additionally make a claim about the relative worth of others. There may be a grain of truth to this suggestion, but some caution is nevertheless warranted, since it is a mistake to describe the 'core cases' of Kantian moral failure (e.g. false promising) in terms of a tendency toward arrogance or status-seeking generally. To be sure, some Kantian vices clearly take this form – one need only consider Kant's concerns with *amour propre* in the *Religion* to see this (*R*, 6: 27). Nevertheless, much of what counts as Kantian moral failure is most straightforwardly described as a tendency to make an exception for oneself, not necessarily as an expression of arrogance or superiority. So, while anxious maxims may not exhibit arrogance or seek elevated status, this feature is unlikely to set them apart completely from more central cases of Kantian moral failure. Further, agents with anxious and despairing maxims do often exhibit a selfish or solipsistic tendency to make an exception for themselves, and this solipsism can certainly take the form of overlooking or disregarding the claims that members of the moral community make. Iris Murdoch, in the context of a criticism of Kant, offers an accidental and eloquent description of this phenomenon, when she notes that a great moral challenge is to 'keep the attention fixed upon the real situation and to prevent

it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy, and despair' (Murdoch 1970: 89). Not every instance of sadness or anxiety is also an instance of self-pity or narcissism. Still, the claims of others may be drowned out by feelings of fear and sadness, just as they are by selfish desire.

Nevertheless, the observation that anxious maxims do not seem, on their face, quite as arrogant or self-serving has something of a clue in it. I suggest we may be able to make some sense of the intuitive difference between sad or anxious maxims and their greedy counterparts by briefly returning to Kant's discussion of the three types of action that coincide with duty in the first section of the *Groundwork*: (1) actions that are in accord with duty, whose maxims are prudential and calculating (the prudent shopkeeper), (2) actions that are in accord with duty, but where the agent has an immediate inclination to perform the action (the 'friend of humanity'), (3) actions performed out of the motive of duty alone (G, 4: 397–9). Crucially, Kant thinks that common sense makes a distinction, not just between the shopkeeper and the person who acts only from duty, but also between the friend of humanity and the person who acts only out of duty. And Kant appeals to this common-sense distinction to argue for the (unfortunately unstated) proposition that dutiful action must be non-contingently motivated.

Crucial to our discussion here, however, is Kant's distinction between the prudent shopkeeper and the friend of humanity. Neither acts from the motive of duty of course, but the former acts out of calculated self-interest, while the latter acts out of an immediate inclination – in this case, out of a love of others and a joy in helping them. While both have motives that only contingently align with duty, common moral judgement tends to judge the friend of humanity more favourably, at least at first glance.

How does all of this relate to anxious and despairing maxims? I think that we can appeal to the distinction between calculated action and immediate motivation in the case of moral *failure* as well. In particular, we can make sense of the intuitive difference between sorrowful or anxious maxims and their self-seeking counterparts by describing the difference in just these terms. As I have argued above, the anxious or despairing maxim is formed on the basis of an inclination to protect oneself against pain or suffering at all costs. These maxims may ultimately treat another person as a mere means, but they do not tend to set out to do so in quite the same way that greedy maxims do. Of course, we should also temper this claim: anxious maxims can certainly also be calculating – take, for example, the colleague so afraid of failure or embarrassment that he diminishes the successes of others. Still, however, many despondent maxims tend to be immediately motivated by their desire to avoid suffering.

That Kant's account of moral failure admits of such a distinction is supported by a distinction that he makes in the Doctrine of Virtue between mere and 'aggravated' vice.¹² These emerge as part of Kant's discussion of the three 'duties of love' that agents have toward one another – beneficence, gratitude and sympathetic participation. Each duty of love corresponds to a 'vice of hatred for human beings' (MM, 6: 458). These are envy (opposed to beneficence), ingratitude and malice (*Schadenfreude*, opposed to sympathetic participation). Each of these vices, in turn, has both a simple variant and an aggravated variant – thus we find Kant distinguishing between envy

and aggravated envy (*MM*, 6: 458–9), ingratitude and aggravated ingratitude (*MM*, 6: 459) and malice and aggravated malice (*MM*, 6: 459–60).

What makes something an ‘aggravated’ vice? Initial appearances may suggest that the distinction has to do with whether the vice in question translates into action. Simple envy, for example, ‘is a propensity to view the well-being of others with distress, even though it does not detract from one’s own. When it breaks forth into action (to diminish their well-being) it is called aggravated envy; otherwise it is merely jealousy’ (*MM*, 6: 458). But Kant’s distinction between simple and aggravated vice is not in the first instance about action, but rather about whether an agent has made a *principle* of the vice in question. Kant appears to acknowledge that instances of simple vice are altogether common, even if we should aim to avoid them: we all have a tendency to fall into moments of envy or forget our duties of gratitude. Aggravated vice occurs, however, when these garden-variety vices become principled. This feature of aggravated vice comes across most clearly in Kant’s detailed discussion of aggravated ingratitude. Sometimes ingratitude, though a failure to perform one’s duty, can be ascribed to mere forgetfulness. Kant would call this ‘mere unappreciativeness’ (*MM*, 6: 459). Aggravated ingratitude, on the other hand, expresses a kind of confused resentment toward one’s benefactor. Expressing gratitude makes us feel as though we stand a step lower than our benefactor, and we ‘fear that by showing gratitude we take the inferior position of a dependent in relation to his protector, which is contrary to real self-esteem’ (*MM*, 6: 459).

Aggravated ingratitude thus makes a principle of ingratitude. But more than this, we can also see through this example that aggravated ingratitude involves a kind of calculation that mere unappreciativeness or forgetfulness do not. The agent who exhibits aggravated ingratitude first makes the mistake of confusing a debt of gratitude with a diminution of status more generally, and then sets out to correct this merely imagined imbalance by refusing to acknowledge a debt of gratitude and express her thanks. In contrast, the merely unappreciative person surely has some moral work to do: perhaps she should attend more carefully to her interactions with others and take note of kindnesses performed. However, her failure to express gratitude is not the expression of a principled attempt to assert her status.

The distinction that Kant draws between the simple and the aggravated vice may thus help to further explain the difference between anxious maxims and more central cases of greed or self-seeking. Specifically, the ends associated with despondent maxims are often immediately motivating, and not usually expressions of principled vice. This is not to say that these maxims are permissible, or that acting on them is excusable. Still, perhaps because there is something of a desperation present in the despondent maxim, it may not exhibit features of principled wrongdoing quite as often.

6. Conclusion

Kantian moral failure remains an instance of privileging the ‘dear self’, but it is important to appreciate the variety of ways this can happen. The misanthrope, the miser and the hypochondriac all exhibit a failure of duty to the self that originates in a kind of despair or anxiety. In particular, they have a despondent maxim of attempting to avoid hardship or disappointment at all costs, and this puts self-love ahead of the moral law. Despondency also appears to have an effect on the practical use of the

imagination: the misanthrope, the miser and the hypochondriac all imagine a kind of worst-case scenario to be real, perhaps as a kind of protective or defensive mechanism. Together, these features of despondency make it unlike other maxims, since they make the maxim resistant to comparative judgement. Finally, though the failure of despondency violates a duty toward oneself, it can certainly be the occasion of failure with regard to others, for example, by causing the agent to overlook other duties.

All of this matters not just from the standpoint of understanding Kant's ethics, but also from the standpoint of reactive attitudes like blame and forgiveness. We may tend to be more understanding or forgiving of a person who fails us out of a maxim of despondency, even if we cannot excuse such actions entirely. There is something poignant, perhaps even relatable, about the despondent person's maxim. After all, each of us is susceptible to the risks bound up with finite, sensible existence. Indeed, our finitude is a premise not only in Kant's argument for the duty of beneficence, but also in his argument that we have a duty to remain independent and self-sufficient (e.g. L-Eth-Collins, 27: 341–2). Ironically, many indirect duties suggested by the duty to remain independent bear some surface resemblance to actions associated with despondent maxims. Going for a walk outside and visiting the doctor for check-ups are useful ways to look after one's health so that one does not become dependent on others; assuming every ache spells doom, on the other hand, is to submit oneself to one's anxieties. Saving money in case of emergency or unemployment may help us to remain independent; saving money out of despondency makes us a slave to money once again. Kant makes an observation that is not so far removed from this in the Collins lecture: 'Because money makes us independent, we at length come to depend on money, and since money makes us free of others, it enslaves us once more to itself' (L-Eth-Collins, 27: 399). Despondent maxims would thus appear to be especially good candidates for self-deception and rationalization. The hypochondriac can say she is just tending to her health; the miser can say she is just saving for a rainy day.

In the end, however, Kant's suggestion is almost certainly not that we should examine other agents' actions for clues of despondency. As is so often the case, the discussion of despondency and its associated tendencies probably serve more as warnings against allowing the passion to develop in ourselves. We must put morality ahead of self-concern, even if this means accepting the dangers and disappointments of sensible existence.

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Notes

1. References to Kant's work follow the standard Akademie pagination (Kant 1900–). I use the following abbreviations and translations: *G* = *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant 2011); *MM* = *Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant 1996a); *R* = *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (Kant 1998); *CPJ* = *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (Kant 2000); *CF* = *Conflict of the Faculties* (Kant 1996b); L-Eth = *Lectures on Ethics* (Kant 1997). Translations from L-Anth (*Lectures on Anthropology*) and L-Met (*Lectures on Metaphysics*) are my own.

2. This is not, of course, to claim that the person who makes the false promise acts under the guise of the good, *all things considered*. However, she does act according to what she takes to be her own, subjective good. See e.g. Martin (2006: 105–9).
3. Kant typically uses the term *Verzagtheit* and its cognates. Translators for the Cambridge edition of Kant's texts variously translate the term as 'despondency' and 'despair' and their cognates.
4. In fairness, Kant does acknowledge that extreme sadness can sometimes make choice impossible, for example, when he notes that 'deep sadness' can restrict a person's power of free choice (L-Met-Pölitz, 28: 255). This would be consistent with his account of so-called 'affects', particularly strong (and fortunately short-lived) emotions that make reflection impossible (*Anth*, 7: 252).
5. See e.g. L-Eth-Vigil, 27: 603: 'To destroy oneself . . . through an act voluntarily undertaken by the sensory being, can never be permitted, so that a suicide (*autocheiria*) can never, under any circumstances, be regarded as allowable.' I say that this seems to be his view because some of the discussions of suicide appear in the context of so-called 'casuistical questions' in the Doctrine of Virtue, and the status of these is debated. Some, e.g. O'Neill (2002) and Herman (1993), read Kant as offering problem cases for each type of duty, intended as a method of sharpening judgement. This view is supported by their role in Kant's account of moral education. Others, e.g. Schüssler (2012), read Kant as offering examples meant to reinforce the strictness of duty.
6. See *MM*, 4: 456–8 and Fahmy (2009) for a helpful discussion of this duty.
7. *MM*, 6: 432. For further discussion of the miser in Kant, see Bacin (2013) and Moran (2016).
8. On the other hand, Kant sometimes appears to be sceptical that the mere possession of money could bring pleasure. At one point, he suggests that the pleasure associated with having money is fleeting (L-Anth-Collins, 25: 171), at another that the mere knowledge that our money gives us the power to do certain things cannot yield pleasure, presumably since this is only a potential power (L-Anth-Parow, 25: 371). The passages are not decisive and, in any case, appear in lecture notes. Nevertheless, neither precludes the possibility of deriving enjoyment from money when it gives its possessor real power over others.
9. See Shell (1996: 268–305) for a thorough summary of these discussions.
10. 'nämlich Verzagtheit, über Übel, welche Menschen zustoßen könnten, zu brüten, ohne, wenn sie kämen, ihnen widerstehen zu können' (*CF*, 7: 104).
11. See Matherne (2021) for a helpful overview of the faculty of the imagination.
12. The German term is *qualifiziertes Böse*, which Mary Gregor translates as 'qualified evil' or evil 'proper'. But that translation does not reflect the legal aspect of the term, since a *qualifiziertes Verbrechen* is something like an aggravated crime. I thus use the terms 'aggravated evil', 'aggravated envy', 'aggravated ingratitude', etc.

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