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Corruption, Non-ideal Theory, and Grace: A Response to *Kant and the Ethics of Humility*

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Kant and the Ethics of Humility bears the subtitle: "A story of dependence, corruption, and virtue." Grenberg not only "defend[s] philosophically the view that humility remains a virtue," she also argues that "familiar Kantian principles of action . . . become character traits, and we can indeed speak then of thick, Aristotelian-style, but still deeply Kantian, virtues" (7).[1] Like Grenberg, I see Kantian virtue ethics as a story of dependence and corruption as well as virtue, but I argue that Grenberg misstates the relationship between dependence and corruption, with consequences for her overall account of Kantian virtue, her treatment of the unity of the virtues, her critiques of alternative theories of humility, and the secular nature of Grenberg's Kant.

Before I turn to my primary comments, I have two words of caution about speaking of "thick, Aristotelian-style . . . virtues" in Kant. First, for Aristotle but not Kant, virtue involves habits (*hexis*). In Kant, even morally relevant interests are tied to the higher faculty of desire and linked with choice; habitual desires are inclinations of the lower faculty of desire.[2] For Aristotle, "moral virtue comes about as a result of habit" (1103a18). For Kant, a "habit . . . is . . . not a moral aptitude" (6:407) and "moral maxims, unlike technical ones, cannot be based on habit" (6:409, see too 6:383-4). Cultivating better inclinations is at best an indirect duty for Kant; it is central for Aristotle. Second, while Kant admits a role for moral respect, respect is a feeling in only a very special sense. Unlike Aristotle, for whom every feeling has a "mean" that constitutes virtue for that feeling, for Kant, neither feelings (with the exception of respect) nor even any *degree* of feeling is good or evil

[1] Throughout, page references are to Grenberg (if without a volume number) or Kant (with a volume number).

[2] See Patrick Frierson, "Kant's Empirical Account of Human Action," *Philosopher's Imprint*, December 2005.

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per se. Great moderation of feeling is consistent with vice (4:394), and great extremes of feeling are consistent with virtue. Grenberg overplays the comparison between Aristotle and Kant in these two respects, but quasi-Aristotelian Kantian virtue ethic pushes her into distinctively Kantian contributions to virtue ethics, for which we should be grateful.

The rest of this essay focuses on the role of dependency and corruption in Grenberg's account of Kantian virtue, as well as the related issues of non-ideal virtue theory and the role of God in Kant's virtue ethics. The central problem throughout is Grenberg's implicit reduction of corruption to an inevitable consequence of dependence. Grenberg defends both a "dependency thesis"—"humans . . . must admit reliance upon persons and things external to them" (26)—and a "corruption thesis"—"humans tend to value the self improperly" (43). She ostensibly sees dependence and corruption as different features of human beings, but she ultimately erodes the distinction between them. Grenberg's deflation of human corruption begins when she juxtaposes her view to recent accounts by Henry Allison and Allen Wood. Wood, by prioritizing social dimensions of evil, may "undermin[e] individual responsibility" (35), so Grenberg makes evil an individual corruption with social consequences, rather than fundamentally social. This pushes her closer to Allison, but Grenberg agrees with Wood "that it is not the simple fact of being desiring beings that accounts for radical evil" (42). She hopes thereby to avoid Wood's charge that radical evil in Allison is little more than "a trivial practical corollary of our finitude" (32). For Grenberg, corruption is explained "not simply by the fact that one is a desiring being, but rather by the fact that our desire points toward our pursuit of happiness in the face of a lack of Stoic self-sufficiency, and this explains how the finite being is primed for *choosing* self-conceit and the resulting games of unsocial sociability" (42).

But although dependence implies corruption less directly for Grenberg than for Allison, Grenberg agrees that "it is not possible for finite beings spontaneously to prefer the demands of morality to their own pursuit of happiness" (42). Like Wood's social account, this impossibility threatens individual responsibility. Although Grenberg worries about "undermining individual responsibility" and emphasizes *choosing*, she still sees corruption as "inevitable" (42, cf. 38) or "unavoidable" (22), something "literally impossible" (78) to avoid. The extent to which "the finite being is *primed* for choosing self-conceit" (42, emphasis shifted) undermines the freedom of the choice. Given Kant's conviction that ought implies can, the impossibility of refraining from corruption compromises responsibility for evil.

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The failure to recognize that corruption is a universal but *contingent* (and thus culpable) fact about human agency[3] leads to overstating the *importance* of corruption: "any Kantian account of virtue must find its starting point in the acceptance of the Corruption Thesis" (49), such that, "whatever is virtuous for Kant is in some way a counteraction against human corruption" (73). There is something *right* about this, both as an interpretation of Kant and as a positive contribution to virtue ethics. Grenberg rightly insists that Kantian ethics attends to corruption more than Aristotle's and rightly argues that Kantian virtue ethics includes attention to amelioration. She rightly points out that "many, perhaps most, contemporary accounts of virtue have avoided the consideration of human corruption" (49), and thus "seem . . . inappropriate to normal human life; the[ir] portrayal of the virtuous person can end up seeming . . . somehow beyond being human, more like a little god" (51). This problem arises not just for virtue ethics but for ethics in general. One who holds a picture of human beings as not essentially different from gods risks developing an unlivable ethic. Worse, one cannot account for virtues that are linked to humans' corrupt nature, such as an alcoholic's extreme temperance or the practice of articulating moral commitments to others who can hold one accountable.

Grenberg deepens virtue ethics by highlighting that human beings are flawed beings and that any account of human virtue must take that fact into account. And Grenberg's emphasis on moral amelioration as the most essential component of virtue is a plausible one, worth further articulation and defense. But this emphasis not Kant's. In two passages that seem to support Grenberg's reading, Kant claims that "[we] cannot start out in the ethical training of our connatural moral predisposition to the good with an innocence which is natural to us but must rather begin from the presupposition of a depravity of our power of choice" (6:51, cf. Grenberg, p. 50), and he defines virtue as "the capacity and considered resolve to withstand a strong but unjust opponent . . . to . . . the moral disposition within us" (6:380). Given that virtue requires a "strong but unjust opponent" and that we must "begin from . . . depravity," one might think that Kant sees amelioration as basic to virtue. But neither of these passages *define* virtue in terms of combating corruption. The first, which does speak of corruption, is not about the nature of virtue but about what must be done as part of a program of ethical *training*; *becoming* virtuous involves counteracting human corruption. The second passage is about the essence of virtue,

[3] See my *Freedom and Anthropology in Kant's Moral Philosophy* (CUP 2003), chapters 2 and 5.

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but the opponent is not human *corruption*, but human *dependence*, as manifest in "sometimes powerful" "impulses of nature," which, in particular instances, are internal "obstacles . . . to the fulfillment of duty" (6:380; cf. 6:23, 397, 405).

For Kant, virtue always involves counteraction against human *dependence* because dependence leads to inclinations that can contradict the moral law, so humans need moral strength (6:35). But one could be dependent in this sense and not be *corrupt* (6:35), as Kant imagines Christ to be (6: 61-6, 128-9; 8:338). Though a *proper* model of virtue, Christ lacks a tendency to counteract *corruption* because he lacks corruption to counteract. Nonetheless, all human beings (possibly excepting Christ) *are* corrupt, so normal human ethical *life* (but not human *virtue*) involves counteracting corruption.

Kant's account of virtue thus falls between Grenberg's, which makes amelioration part of virtue itself, and Aristotle's, which ignores the importance of amelioration. Kant's account has the advantages of Grenberg's. Because virtue is due to humans' dependent nature, the Kantian ideal is deeply human, not the "godlike" ideal of Aristotle. And Kant's account does not ignore human corruption. Kant has a place for character traits that are themselves constitutive of a Christlike ideal of perfect humanity. He just doesn't think that these traits are directly constitutive of virtue itself.

And because Kant does not build these character traits directly into his conception of virtue, he is better able than Grenberg to make sense of why corruption is *corruption*. Without a perfect ideal, and in particular without an *in principle attainable* ideal of perfect *human* virtue, it would make no sense to hold people guilty for corruption. Moreover, by keeping traits needed for *attaining* virtue out of the *definition* of virtue, Kant holds to higher standards of excellence than Grenberg. Incorporating corruption into one's definition of virtue tempts one to conclude, as Grenberg does, that perfect virtue is neither "a human possibility, nor ultimately a proper human standard" (78). While this is true of *holiness*, an adherence to the moral law by one not even *tempted* to stray, it is not true of moral *perfection*, a consistent adherence to the moral law that is tempted, but without any self-wrought tendency to give in to temptation. Moral perfection in this sense remains the standard for human beings, even as we regretfully recognize our self-wrought inability to fulfill that standard (in finite time). An excellence-based account of virtue must be prior to an ameliorative one.

In the rest of this paper, I highlight three further consequences of Grenberg's conflation of corruption and dependence, the first related to the unity of the virtues, the second to her criticisms of alternative

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accounts of virtue, and third to the role of God in Kantian virtue ethics. First, with respect to the unity of virtues, Grenberg first articulates a clear two part treatment of the unity of virtues in Kant, but her subsequence discussions of the particular virtues involved in humility fail to take her explicit treatment sufficiently seriously. In her explicit discussion, Grenberg insists (rightly) on a very strong unity of virtues claim in Kant:

> [A]ny character trait to be called a virtue must be so called in virtue of its relation to the single, common virtuous principle of the will; [and] . . . this means that a logical understanding of one virtue demands reference to all others; [and] . . . perfect acquisition of any one virtue would thus demand perfect acquisition of all the others. (78)

This account shows how Kantian virtue ethics can contribute in meaningful ways to longstanding debates within the virtue ethical tradition. The role of a "common virtuous principle" both is distinctively Kantian and helps explain the unity of the virtues. But for Grenberg, the strong Kantian unity of virtues is only half the story. It accurately describes a Kantian *ideal* of *perfect* virtue, but "such perfect acquisition cannot be expected of finite agents" (78), so "for finite agents . . . individual virtues—each of which represents a different internalization of that maxim of the moral disposition . . .—must be pursued more piecemeal, throughout time" (76). Grenberg's Kant distinguishes between an ideal unity of the virtues and a non-ideal ethic wherein virtues are acquired piecemeal.

Whether or not this distinction between ideal and non-ideal virtue theory is one to which Kant could adhere—and Kant's rigorism (6:22-4) at least raises problems for the distinction—the distinction requires Grenberg to clarify several important discussions in the rest of her book. Chapters 5-9 set up a series of reciprocity theses: between mutually dependent judgments and feelings (chapter 5); between "humility$_1$"—"an awareness of limitation" (166)—and respect for oneself (chapter 6); and between humility and proper self-other comparison (chapter 7), self-knowledge (chapter 8) and respect for persons (chapter 9). In each case, it is unclear whether the relevant reciprocity is a mere ideal or must also apply to the non-ideal case in which humans pursue individual virtues piecemeal.

To take one example (from chapter 6), if Grenberg means that self-respect and humility$_1$ must be conjoined for either to be *completely* virtuous, she need only appeal to her earlier discussion of the unity of virtues to defend this claim. But if Grenberg means that self-respect and humility$_1$ are mutually dependent in the sense that for these

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particular traits, piecemeal acquisition is impossible, then she needs much stronger arguments that those provided in chapter six. Her arguments there show that either self-respect or humility$_1$ would be incomplete, but this does not show that either alone would lead to corruption or even be inaccurate. If one simply saw oneself as dependent and corrupt (humility$_1$), without further attitudes one way or the other about one's self-worth, this needn't give rise to self-deprecation, and it would not be inaccurate. One is, after all, both dependent and corrupt, and as long as one doesn't take this to have implications about ultimate worth, one makes no inaccurate judgments. Likewise, it is not clear why one who has self-respect without humility$_1$, especially where self-respect is respect for oneself as a moral agent, is either inaccurate (one isn't *denying* anything about corruption or dependence), nor necessarily conducive to corruption. Grenberg is correct that excessive attention to one's limits or one's dignity can lead people astray, but given that "self-respect and humility$_1$ are conceptually distinct" (189), this common tendency is not sufficient to show—as Grenberg claims to show—that it is "impossible" to acquire one without the other (189). In other words, if humility$_1$ and self-respect are necessarily conjoined only in *perfect* virtue, then (contra the claims of chapter six) each can be present, at least as much as any virtue is actually present in flawed humans, without the other. But if Grenberg wants to make a stronger claim, she needs to show that humility$_1$ and self-respect are not good *at all*, or at least not even virtues of the flawed sort of which we are capable, unless they are conjoined.

Similar problems arise for the other reciprocity theses in chapters 5-9, problems arising from insufficient attention to the implicit distinction in chapter two between ideal and non-ideal virtue theory. The failure to appreciate this distinction is not surprising, since Grenberg's conflation of dependence and corruption, and especially the prominent role of amelioration in her account of virtue, undermines the most natural basis for distinguishing ideal and non-ideal virtue theory in Kant. The failure to adhere to this consistently also affects Grenberg's critiques of accounts of humility based on self-other comparison. Grenberg's key argument against these views is that "[w]hen . . . [comparative] judgments are made by a . . . corrupt agent, her already difficult situation is made even worse. This agent is already . . . prone to fear inferiority or overassert herself as superior. And there is nothing in the process of self-other comparison that provides this agent with a point of view for escaping that state" (118). But alternative accounts of humility do not claim that *corrupt* self-other comparison constitutes, or even leads to, the virtue of humility. And Grenberg does not show that perfectly virtuous self-other comparison is impossible *as an ideal*,

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however difficult it is for corrupt humans. Moreover, *any* account of the *ideal* virtue of humility—even Grenberg's own—is impossible and even manipulable for corrupt humans. Kant is particularly attuned to dangers even with comparing oneself to the moral law: "one is never more easily deceived than in what promotes a good opinion of oneself" (6:68, cf. Grenberg 230). Just as corruption infects self-other comparison with either superiority or inferiority, it transforms moral self-assessment into hopeless despair or complacent self-satisfaction.

The problem of human corruption undermining ideal accounts of virtue raises a concluding concern, not just for Grenberg's ethics but for Kant's, and indeed for any ethic that seeks to admit human corruption while preserving the integrity of morality. Grenberg articulates a "secular account of Kantian morality" (209), for which there are good reasons, both textual and philosophical. Kant explicitly seeks an ethic that does not depend upon divine decree or lead to monkish self-abnegation; religious conceptions of humility are often associated with inferioriority; and theism itself raises problems one may want to avoid in virtue ethics. But in Kant's ethics, human nature as dependent and (especially) corrupt *requires* an appeal to religion. There are several reasons for this, including Kant's infamous argument for the existence of God from the necessity of the highest good. But Kant struggled with one particular role for God more than Grenberg, a role closely tied to the theory of human nature at the root of his account of humility. In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant defends two claims that, together, pose serious problems for his moral theory. First, he defends rigorism (a strong unity of virtue claim), the view that there is no middle ground between virtue and vice because any immoral action shows a fundamental dispositional commitment to subordinate the moral law to other incentives. Second, Kant argues, in part based on rigorism, that human corruption "is . . . not to be *extirpated* through human forces, for this could happen only through good maxims—something that cannot take place if the subjective supreme ground of all maxims is presupposed to be corrupted" (6:37, cf. 6:45). The corrupt ground of *all* human decision-making seems to undermine the possibility of reform.

Here Kant turns to religion: "some supernatural cooperation is also needed to [a person's] becoming good or better" (6:44, see too 7:43). The importance of appealing to a supernatural supplement is highlighted by Kant's concern with "lenient justice" (27:331, see too 6:406). Like John Hare (107n, 181n), Kant suggests that addressing human corruption *without* appeal to God leads to lowering standards for human excellence. Grenberg exemplifies this, allowing that perfect virtue is neither "a human possibility, *nor ultimately a proper human standard*" (78), such that "we can speak of someone being 'virtuous'

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without needing it to be true of them that they have perfectly internalized the moral disposition" (78).

It is not clear how postulating God helps here,[4] but Kant seems to think that postulating God's grace preserves the purity of the moral law while avoiding moral despair. Moral despair is avoided because human beings can hope that God will "supplement" human striving towards virtue (27:331). But because a supplement is needed, the moral ideal is not compromised. We meet the highest standard despite corruption only because we have help.

It is not clear how satisfying this solution is, nor how satisfied Kant himself ultimately was with grace as a solution to the problem of radical evil (cf. 6:117-8). What is clear, however, is that any account of truly *Kantian* humility must find a way to reconcile the fact of human corruption with the dignity of human moral agents, and must find a way to do this *without* compromising the rigorous demands of the moral law. Kant, it seems to me, saw grace as necessary to accomplish this reconciliation (unlike Grenberg), but was also acutely aware of the dangers that introducing grace has for undermining the very moral commitments it is meant to preserve. Grenberg made Kant more secular, and thereby largely avoided those dangers, but she thereby compromised the strict rigorism of Kant's moral ideal. The challenge for any secular Kantian virtue ethic that takes corruption *and* moral purity seriously is how to reconcile that purity with human corruption without slipping into moral despair.

Jeanine Grenberg's excellent defense of humility should serve as a paradigm for what could become a new "Kantian virtue ethical" approach in moral theory, one that doesn't just talk about how Kant can have a virtue ethics, but actually *does* Kantian virtue ethics. But Grenberg's proper emphasis on dependence and corruption in the book suffers from a failure to highlight the *distinctive* contribution that corruption—as opposed to dependence—plays in Kant. This failure prevents Grenberg from sufficiently exploring the implications of Kant's account for the unity of the virtues generally and her specific examples of unity claims in the second half of the book. The failure to highlight corruption as distinct from dependence also encourages Grenberg into an all-too-easy ethic that fails to solve the deepest philosophical *problem* of corruption that any serious ethic for real people must face: how to reconcile human corruption with an uncompromising morality without slipping into despair.

[4] For more on grace in Kant (and its problems), see *Freedom and Anthropology*, 114-22; and "Providence and Divine Mercy in Kant's Ethical Cosmopolitanism," in *Hekmat va Valsafeh* 3 (000): (000) and forthcoming in *Faith and Philosophy*.

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