

Kant's Empirical Account of Human Action

A Brief Sketch

1. Introduction

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant says, “all the actions of a human being are determined in accord with the order of nature,” adding that “if we could investigate all the appearances . . . there would be no human action we could not predict with certainty.”¹ In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he reiterates this: “everything which takes place [is] determined without exception in accordance with laws of nature.”² And in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he insists that if we knew the relevant preconditions, “we could calculate a human being’s conduct for the future with as much certainty as a lunar or solar eclipse.”³

At the same time, Kant insists that human beings are transcendently free, uncaused causes of their actions: “a rational being can . . . say of every unlawful action he performed that he could have omitted it.”⁴ Kant’s defense of freedom depends on his transcendental idealism, according to which even though our actions are determined by natural law, they are nonetheless free. Allen Wood aptly describes this as a “compatibility of compatibilism and incompatibilism,”⁵ explaining that while human actions can, on the one hand, be explained by “empirical observation and natural science, and “from this standpoint, our actions are causally determined,”⁶ those actions also have a ground that is not capable of being observed, and that ground may be free.⁷

This theory of freedom has important implications for Kant’s empirical psychology. In a lecture on metaphysics, Kant says,

Freedom cannot be proven psychologically, but rather morally If I wanted to prove freedom psychologically, then I would have to consider a human being . . . as a natural being, and as such he is not free.⁸

Kant makes room for human freedom transcendently, *not* psychologically, and thus his *psychological* account of human action is left thoroughly deterministic.⁹ Unfortunately, most contemporary discussions of Kant’s psychology take a practical perspective on human actions, a perspective wherein human freedom has an important place.¹⁰ This gives the sense that Kant’s account of action depends on what Simon Blackburn calls a

“Kantian Captain,” “free of his or her natural and acquired dispositions.”¹¹ And this conflation of Kant’s psychology with his moral theory leaves Kant open to criticisms (such as Blackburn’s) that his psychology is mistaken or overly simplistic. This paper presents a clear description of Kant’s *causal* psychology of human action, a description that absolves Kant of charges of over-simplicity and that can enrich further discussions of Kant’s moral philosophy.

There are two main aspects of Kant’s empirical account of human action. The first is rooted in Kant’s engagement with 18th century faculty psychology. In the context of a tradition that describes the soul as involving appetitive and cognitive faculties, Kant develops an account of relationships among three main faculties of soul: desire, feeling, and cognition. This provides Kant with an opportunity to explain human action as the result of a faculty of desire and to explore the causes of various kinds of desires. Kant’s most detailed accounts of this faculty psychology are found in his lectures on empirical psychology, part of his lectures on metaphysics.¹² The second aspect of Kant’s account of human action comes from his engagement with emerging theories in biology and natural history and involves Kant’s account of natural predispositions that underlie human actions. This second aspect is necessary to understand both the nature and the limits of Kant’s causal accounts. The primary sources for this aspect of Kant’s account are taken from his anthropology, including his historical essays, lectures on anthropology, and his published *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. In this paper I take up each aspect in turn before tying them together into an overall causal account of human actions.

2) Kant’s faculty psychology

Kant’s faculty psychology developed in response to three main trends in 18th century philosophy: Wolff’s Leibnizian rationalism, Crusius’s Pietist response to Wolff, and British empiricism.¹³ The overall structure of Kant’s empirical psychology is largely set by Wolff, who developed a faculty psychology in order to reduce diverse faculties to “representation” as the single “essence” of the soul.¹⁴ Kant follows Crusius in resisting this reduction, and he postulates three different faculties: cognition, feeling, and desire.¹⁵

Each faculty includes several distinct basic powers, none of which is reducible to others. Within the faculty of cognition, for instance, Kant includes distinct basic powers such as the senses, imagination, understanding, and reason. Throughout, Kant focuses on distinguishing between “higher” and “lower” faculties of cognition, feeling, and desire. The “lower” faculties are primarily receptive; the senses and imagination fall into this category.¹⁶ The higher faculties are “self-active” or “spontaneous.”¹⁷ But each power is a real determination of a specific kind.¹⁸ Finally, from British empiricism Kant adopted the practice of explaining each power in terms of various causal laws, such as the “law of association” governing the imagination.¹⁹

When it comes to explaining human action, Kant focuses his account on desire: “all desires have a relation to activity and are the causality thereof.”²⁰ Insofar as a representation is the ground of an action that brings about some state of affairs, it is a desire. But although all action proceeds from desire, that cannot be the end of the causal story. Desire is the cause of an action, but desires themselves have causes. Part of the task of empirical psychology is to trace these causes. Within this psychology, Kant engages this task by connecting the faculty of desire with the other basic faculties of the soul. For Kant, this relationship is fairly straightforward: “Pleasure precedes the faculty of desire, and the cognitive faculty precedes pleasure.”²¹ According to this structure, cognition of an object gives rise (at least sometimes) to a feeling for that object, and that feeling of gives rise (again, at least sometimes) to a desire or aversion for the object.²² We can trace the series of causes as follows.²³

Cognition → Feeling → Desire → Action

For example, one tastes a mango (cognition), that taste gives one pleasure (feeling), that pleasure causes one to desire the mango, and that desire leads one to eat (or continue eating) the mango.

Most of Kant’s focus here is to classify the different powers of the soul. This classificatory task is important, for Kant, because “the concept of cause lies in the concept of power.”²⁴ Thus different powers reflect different specific laws of causation.²⁵ The most important distinction for Kant’s theory of motivation is between a higher and a

lower faculty of desire. Just as “there is a higher and a lower cognitive faculty . . . so it is also with the faculty of desire.”²⁶ As with the cognitive faculty, the distinction is based on the distinction between the senses and the understanding: “all desires are . . . [either] intellectual or sensitive.”²⁷ But in the case of desire, what is relevant is not the nature of the desire itself but the cognitive *cause* of the desire.²⁸ “The representations which produce determinations [of desire] are either sensible or intellectual.”²⁹ Insofar as a desire is the direct result of the senses (or even unmediated imagination), is it part of the “lower” faculty of desire. Insofar as it proceeds from the understanding or reason, a desire falls under the “higher” faculty of desire. In either case, however, a desire must have an “impelling cause.”³⁰ The difference between lower and higher desires is between motivation by immediate intuitions and motivation by principles or concepts.

However, even the “higher” faculty of desire need not be *purely* rational. Although all higher desires have “grounds of determination . . . [that] *lie . . . in the understanding*” (29:1014), these desires can be “*either pure or affected*.”³¹ Kant explains this distinction as follows:

The intellectual impelling cause is either purely intellectual without qualification <*simpliciter* . . .>, or in some respect <*secundum quid*>. When the impelling cause is represented by the pure understanding, it is purely intellectual, but if it rests on sensibility, *and if merely the means for arriving at the end are presented by the understanding*, then it is said to be in some respect.³²

When a desire is impure but still associated with the higher faculty of desire, one acts on the basis of a principle of the understanding that is directed towards fulfilling some lower desire. Such impure higher desires are those that proceed from hypothetical imperatives. By contrast, the pure higher faculty of desire involves desires that follow from purely rational considerations and issue categorical imperatives.³³ Actions that proceed from the lower faculty of desire do not involve acting on any principles at all.

Although Kant sometimes describes the higher faculty of desire as free (by which he means *empirically* free),³⁴ even the higher faculty of desire is causally determined. This might seem strange to those familiar with Kant’s moral theory because in that context, Kant insists that acting on the basis of pure reason is autonomous. But within his empirical accounts of human action, Kant explains that even when one acts on the basis

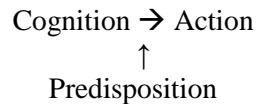
of principles of pure reason, such action is the effect of empirical causes. He explains, for example, how “a person may be compelled to duty by others,”³⁵ and in his second *Critique*, he even offers details about how one might prompt another person to act from an appreciation for the value of morality through depicting the moral law in a particular way.³⁶ The study of how to influence others to act from duty is based on “*observations* anyone can make” and is a part of Kant’s empirical anthropology.³⁷ The potential to influence the higher faculty of desire through vivid representations of virtue is an empirical fact.³⁸

3) *Human predispositions in Kant’s psychology*

So far, Kant’s empirical account of action involves a faculty psychology, within which Kant traces the sources of particular desires to their connection with other mental states. This taxonomy is the first step in giving causal laws for mental phenomena because each distinct mental power will be governed by its own causal laws. (Recall that “the concept of cause lies in the concept of power”³⁹). But Kant must also explain the causal mechanisms for connecting particular cognitive states to the states of feeling and desire to which they give rise.⁴⁰ Human beings desire some things rather than others, and this is not simply because we cognize some things rather than others. We often have cognitions that do not give rise to feelings, and feelings that do not give rise to desires.⁴¹ To flesh out his naturalistic explanation of human action, Kant explains why some cognitions but not other give rise to desires.

As with his psychology in general, Kant’s approach here is empirical and taxonomic, but he accounts for all human tendencies with his fundamental notion of a “natural predisposition” (*Naturanlage*).⁴² Kant does not give causal accounts of the origins of these predispositions. They are purposive tendencies in human nature that should be classified but cannot (easily) be explained.⁴³ Once granted, however, Kant uses predispositions to account for why certain cognitions lead to desires, others to aversions, and others to no appetitive response at all. Thus to explain why the smell of a particular food gives rise to a desire for it whereas other smells do not give rise to any desire,⁴⁴ or why certain kinds of social interactions are pleasant and others are not, Kant appeals to basic predispositions in human nature. However, predispositions are not simply additional efficient causes. One does not simply add a predisposition to a

cognition in order to cause a desire, such that [Predisposition + Cognition → Desire]; rather, predispositions for Kant play something like the role of an underlying force grounding a regular connection, such that



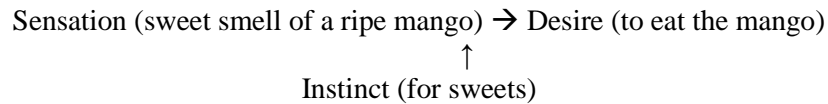
Kant describes basic predispositions in different ways for different powers of the soul. For the sake of brevity, we will focus on three sorts of predispositions that underlie the different faculties of desire.

With respect to the lower faculty of desire, Kant explains the role of natural predispositions in connecting cognitions and desires terms of instincts, propensities, and inclinations.⁴⁵ The role of instincts in explaining human action is the most straightforward. In his *Anthropology*, Kant explains, “The inner *necessitation* of the faculty of desire to take possession of [an] object before one is familiar with it is *instinct*.”⁴⁶ In his lectures on anthropology, Kant claims that “instincts are the first impulses according to which a human being acts.”⁴⁷ Examples of instincts include the sexual instinct, the parental instinct to provide for young, the “sucking instinct” of infants, instincts for various foods, the “natural instinct to test [one’s] powers,” and natural sympathy, which Kant treats as an instinct.⁴⁸ The clearest example of the way in which instincts function in causal explanations of human behavior is from Kant’s short essay, “Conjectural Beginning of Human History,” where Kant discusses the role of instinct in determining which foods the earliest human beings would have eaten. He says,

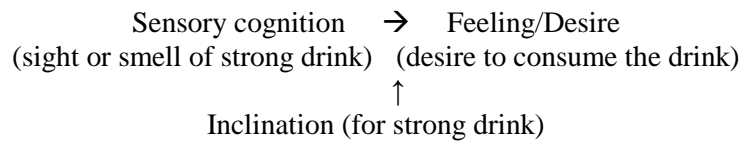
Initially, the newcomer must have been guided solely by instinct, that *voice of God* that all animals obey. It permitted him to use some things as food and forbade him to use others It could simply have been the sense of smell and its affinity with the organ of taste, along with the well-known sympathy between the latter and the digestive organs – in other words an ability . . . to sense in advance whether a given food is suitable for consumption or not.⁴⁹

A human being has a sensory – here olfactory – cognition of a particular food, and this cognition gives rise to a desire because of an instinct for that particular food. Similarly, Kant explains in the case of the sexual instinct that “as soon as one comes into society,

one's instinct will quickly find an object."⁵⁰ In both cases, the appeal to instinct explains why the mere sensible cognition – of food or of another person – becomes a desire of a particular kind. Thus for cases of instinct,



While Kant thinks that instincts explain *some* human actions, he does not explain most actions in terms of instinct. Even most desires associated with the lower faculty of desire are not explained by reference to instincts, but by reference to *inclinations*. Unlike instincts, which are relatively few in number, the types of inclination are too many and too varied to give even a partial list. Inclinations cover a wide range of human desires, from inclinations for smoking and drinking⁵¹ to love as an inclination⁵² to inclinations for honor, money, and power.⁵³ When explaining actions in terms of inclinations, Kant's model is similar to that for instincts. Like instincts, an inclination is "a lasting ground of desire"⁵⁴ or a "subjective necessity of desiring."⁵⁵ Thus for the case of an inclination to "strong drink,"⁵⁶ for example, we get



Unlike instincts, however, inclinations are not themselves natural predispositions, and thus Kant's causal story cannot end with this picture. Inclinations are *acquired*, so for Kant's account to be complete, he needs to explain the causal origin of the inclination itself.

Kant's explanation of the causal origin of inclinations is fairly straightforward: we acquire inclinations by past experience, which develops a *habitual* desire, or more properly a "habitual *ground* [*Grund*] of desires."⁵⁷ In some cases this relevant past cause of the inclination need only be a single instance of experiencing the relevant object of desire.⁵⁸ At other times, developing an inclination depends on "frequent repetition"⁵⁹ of experiencing the object of inclination. But now, of course, there is another causal connection – between past experiences of an object and the inclination for that object – that needs to be explained. To explain that connection, Kant appeals to a different kind of natural predisposition, a "propensity" (*Hang*). As Kant says, "Propensity . . . is the

inner possibility of an inclination, i.e. the natural predisposition to the inclination.”⁶⁰ A propensity is a “subjective *possibility* of generating a certain desire,”⁶¹ which “can be found even when there is not yet the actual desire.”⁶² For example, Kant claims that “northern peoples have a propensity to strong drink,”⁶³ and in the *Religion*, he clarifies what this means (changing the relevant people-group!):⁶⁴

Propensity is actually only the *predisposition* to desire an enjoyment which, when the subject has experienced it, arouses inclination to it. Thus all savages have a propensity for intoxicants; for although many of them have no acquaintance at all with intoxication, and hence absolutely no desire for the things that produce it, let them try these things but once, and there is aroused in them an almost inextinguishable desire for them.⁶⁵

Inclinations are not themselves predispositions; rather, they are the result of experiences of objects for which someone has a propensity. A “northern person” who experiences strong drink will develop a habit of desiring such drink; such a habit is an inclination. In explaining a particular human action, then, one can appeal to instincts or inclinations to explain why a particular cognition gives rise to a desire, whereas another does not, as show in figure 1. In either case, particular desires can be traced back to sensory inputs and natural predispositions (marked with *s).

When turning to the higher faculty of desire, the underlying explanation for the connection between cognitions and desires is *character*.⁶⁶ Just as instincts and inclinations ground a consistent connection between the lower faculty of desire and sensuous cognitions, so character grounds a similar connection with respect to the higher faculty of desire: “Character . . . makes up what is characteristic of the highest faculty of desire. Each will . . . has its subjective laws, which constitute . . . its character.”⁶⁷ Kant compares sensuous people and those with character in terms of the grounds of their desires: “the man of principles, from whom we know for sure what to expect, not from his instinct, for example, but from his will, has character.”⁶⁸ Those who act from instinct or inclination and those who act from character are both predictable – we “know what to expect” – but for different reasons. Instincts and inclinations ground a regular connection between lower cognitive states and desires. Character grounds a regular connection

between higher cognitive states – principles – and desires.⁶⁹ For Kant, in fact, character just *is* such a connection between principles and actions: “the essential characteristic of character . . . belongs to the firmness of the principles.”⁷⁰ A person whose actions are explained by reference to their “character” is someone whose faculty of desire is determined by *principles* flowing from the *higher* cognitive faculties.⁷¹

Unlike instincts, however, which are natural predispositions and thus do not need to be explained, “character comes not from nature, but rather must be acquired.”⁷² In this respect, character is like inclination, and like inclination, character depends on both a prior propensity – a “propensity to character”⁷³ – and on various influences that cultivate this propensity into character itself.⁷⁴ One of the further influences that develop one’s propensity to character is temperament, which is itself a predisposition that even can “be influenced . . . by the physical condition of a person,”⁷⁵ but which nonetheless affects the ease with which one develops character.⁷⁶

Most of the influences on character development are external influences, among which education is the most important:⁷⁷ “The acquisition of good character with people happens through education.”⁷⁸ Even when Kant is most insistent that “the act of establishing character is . . . a kind of rebirth,” he points out that “*education, examples, and instruction* . . . produce this firmness in our principles.”⁷⁹ The “transformation”⁸⁰ whereby one’s character is established is something that is *produced* (*bewirkt*) by education. Other empirical influences on character development include politeness, which plays an important role in the cultivation of character by combating passions and promoting self-control,⁸¹ stable and just political regimes, peace, and even progress in the arts and sciences.⁸² Because of the role of empirical influences on character development, “experience and history” can provide reasons that “we should not despair about our species’ progress toward the better.”⁸³ The increasing presence of stable political structures and advancing culture, like the presence of stable norms of polite society, can help the cultivation of constancy in principled action. These external influences, like the more direct influence of education, help to “produce” character.⁸⁴

Filling in Kant’s overall account of character, one gets the account depicted in figure 2. This account is more complicated than those in figure 1, but a more complex

causal account is still a causal account. Because all actions are caused by either higher or lower desires, Kant has provided, at least in outline, a causal account of human actions.

4) Conclusion

Kant's empirical account of human action is deterministic. It is based on his classification of the human faculties into the faculties of cognition, feeling, and desire. Every action follows immediately from a desire. Desires themselves are the result of particular kinds of pleasures following from particular kinds of cognition. And desires can be caused by a variety of types of cognition, from raw sense-perceptions – as when a delicious smell draws us to eat food – to principles of reason. Whether a particular cognition will give rise to a desire (and thereby an action) depends on one's "natural predispositions" and the ways that these have been cultivated to generate the inclinations and character that one has. The biological structures in human beings provide the foundation for any particular explanation of behavior in empirical psychology. And every such explanation will be thoroughly deterministic, accounting for action on the basis of desires that are caused by one's nature, background, and circumstances.

¹ A549/B577.

² 4:455.

³ 5:99. Despite these apparently clear statements, some have recently claimed that "there is no Kantian basis for maintaining causal determinism in the psychological realm" (Westphal 1995: 362). These objections are dealt with in more detail in a longer version of this paper. Put briefly, opponents of determinism in psychology often appeal either to Kant's limitations on psychology as a science or to the requirements for practical freedom. Against the first argument, Hatfield (1990, 1992) and Sturm (2001) convincingly argue that Kant's limitations on psychology as a science do not preclude determinism. With respect to the second, Kant's transcendental idealism makes room for freedom despite psychological determinism, not within psychology.

⁴ 5:98.

⁵ Wood 1984:74. Wood's phrase here gives a nice way to distinguish different accounts of Kant's moral psychology. Some, such as Henry Allison, basically endorse Wood's view (see Allison 1990:28). Others, such as Hud Hudson (and arguably Christine Korsgaard), defend Kantian compatibilism at the cost of Kantian incompatibilism. And still others, such as Reath and Baron, implicitly defend Kantian incompatibilism without sufficient attention to Kant's compatibilism.

⁶ Wood 1984:74.

⁷ This defense of freedom might not be fully satisfying, but it is Kantian. Wood 1984, Allison 1989, and Frierson 2003 have offered more detailed arguments for this view. For the purposes of this paper, I simply take this general account of Kant's theory of freedom for granted, with the little support I have already offered here. I generally agree with Wood's account of Kant's theory of freedom, as developed in Wood 1984. The one issue on which Wood and I may disagree is that I see Kant as claiming that actions that follow from reason are just as causally determined as actions that proceed from purely sensuous influences. Occasionally (e.g. pp. 78, 83, 87) Wood seems to suggest that nature only determines action through

sensuous influences. As we will see in the course of this paper, “reason” is just as natural as the senses, from within the perspective of empirical psychology.

⁸ 28:773, cf. 28:682, A535/B563.

⁹ At this point, there is room for Kant to tell *some* causal story about human action, but this does not imply any particular story. Given Kant’s transcendental philosophy, freedom of the intelligible character can be preserved regardless of the picture at the empirical level. Paul Guyer has even suggested, on these grounds, that “the subjective state of one’s feelings” can, perhaps even directly, “reflect the moral choices of one’s will” (Guyer 1993: 367). In fact, Kant develops a very particular conception of human action at the empirical level, one that is influenced by and related to his contemporaries’ accounts, but not identical with them, but his overall transcendental philosophy could support a variety of different empirical psychologies.

¹⁰ For examples, see Reath 1989, Baron 1995, Grenberg 2001, and Korsgaard 1996.

¹¹ Blackburn 1998: 252.

¹² The recent publications of these lectures in English, as part of the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, will make the study of Kant’s empirical psychology much easier within the English-speaking world. The forthcoming publication of Kant’s works and lectures on anthropology in the same series will hopefully have a similar result.

¹³ For details on the relationship of these three strands to Kant, see Beck 1969, Henrich 1957/58 and 1994: 20-7, 70-2, and Schneewind 1998. For a close study of the reception of Scottish philosophy in 18th century Germany, see Kuehn 1987.

¹⁴ Kant initially developed his empirical psychology in the context of lectures on metaphysics using the textbook of the Wolffian Alexander Baumgarten. The structure of Baumgarten’s text sets the overall structure of Kant’s empirical psychology (and eventual anthropology) throughout his lifetime.

¹⁵ cf. 29:877.

¹⁶ 28:228, 29:880, 28:584.

¹⁷ 28:228, 29:880, 28:584.

¹⁸ Kant explains that he groups the essentially distinct powers into 3 classes “in order to treat empirical psychology all the more systematically” (28:262).

¹⁹ 7:176, cf. 28:674.

²⁰ 25:1514, cf. 29:1024. For Kant, *all* action proceeds from a prior determination of the faculty of desire. Thus within Kant’s empirical account, at least, it is not the case, as Simon Blackburn has suggested, that “motivation by means of desire was one thing, motivation by apprehension of the Moral Law a different thing” (Blackburn 1998: 214). “Desire,” as the faculty giving rise to action, is necessarily involved in *any* human action. (That said, Kant distinguishes between different sorts of desire, including a “desire in the narrow sense” (6:212) that is not necessarily involved in every action.) As Kant explains,

To the extent it [desire] appertains to anthropology, it is then that in the thinking being, which [corresponds to] the motive force in the physical world . . . [L]iving things do something according to the faculty of desire, and lifeless beings do something when they are impelled by an outside force. (25:577)

Desire thus plays the same role in psychology that motive forces (momentum, etc) play in physics.

²¹ 29:877. This account of human action is identical for animal action. Like humans, other animals have cognitions, feelings, and desires. Kant even describes animals as having “choice [*Willkühr*]” (cf. 6:213, 28:588, 29:1015). The difference between humans and animals is that humans have a “higher” faculty of cognition, and hence of desire, and this gives humans a kind of empirical freedom that animals lack. This shows that at least Kant’s general picture of human action does not imply any transcendental freedom. Kant nowhere suggests that animals have transcendental freedom, so insofar as they are motivated by similar structures as human beings, there is nothing “free” about these structures in themselves.

²² Kant is quite interested in the cases in which these progressions do *not* occur. In particular, his aesthetics is largely foreshadowed in his empirical psychological discussions of feelings that do not give rise to any desire. This is a rich and complex part of Kant’s empirical psychology that we will forego for the present, but for more, see Kant’s accounts of feeling in his lectures on metaphysics and anthropology, and his account of the beautiful in the *Critique of Judgment*.

²³ There is one crucial complication to this picture that I will not discuss here. When discussing the “higher” faculty of desire (see below), Kant sometimes suggests that pleasure does *not* precede desire. Some of the strongest language here is from the second *Critique*, where Kant says,

What is essential to any moral worth of actions is *that the moral law determine the will immediately*. If the determination of the will takes place *conformably* with the law but only by means of a feeling, of whatever kind, that has to be presupposed in order for the law to become a sufficient determining ground of the will, so that the action is not done *for the sake of the law*, then the action will contain *legality* indeed but not *morality*. (5:71-2)

Even in that work, however, Kant articulates a “positive feeling” of “respect for the moral law” (5:73), a “moral feeling . . . produced solely by reason” that serves “as an incentive to make this [moral] law its [the will’s] maxim” (5:76). For detailed studies of these passages, see Allison 1989, McCarty 1993 and 1994, and Reath 1989.

²⁴ 28:564.

²⁵ Of course, because all “causality is . . . posited according to general rules” (28:564), an important part of classification is the description of the general rules governing each power. For example, in his *Anthropology* Kant describes various laws that govern the cognitive faculty of imagination, or the “constructive power belonging to sensibility” (7:174), including the “law of association” – that “empirical representations [*Vorstellungen*] that have often followed each other produce in us a mental habit such that when one is produced, this causes the other to arise as well” (7:176, cf. 28:674) – and the “affinity” between representations, according to which the imagination moves from one representation to others that have some relation (either subjectively or objectively) to it (7:177). These rules of the imagination affect the sensible faculty of desire, such that associations in the imagination can give rise to new desires. Following Rousseau, Kant describes how our natural instincts can be transformed through comparing objects of instinctual desire with others: “reason . . . is able, with the help of the imagination, to invent desires” (8:111). For example, “by comparing [one’s] usual diet with anything which a sense other than that to which his instinct was tied – for example, the sense of sight – represented as similar in character” or through “the example of an animal,” one generates desires for new kinds of food (8:111).

And just as causal laws governing imagination affect desire, the feeling of pleasure and displeasure is governed by various causal laws, including such principles as that “pain must precede any enjoyment,” “no enjoyment can follow directly upon another,” and “the more quickly we make time pass, the more we feel enjoyment” (7:231, 233). These principles governing pleasure and pain will in turn affect the nature of our desires.

²⁶ 29:877.

²⁷ 29:894.

²⁸ Kant makes the same claim in the context of pleasure, but there Kant is careful to insist that although all pleasure is sensitive *in itself* (hence lower), there is still a lower and higher faculty of pleasure.

²⁹ 28: 674-5.

³⁰ 28:254, cf. 29:895.

³¹ 29:1015.

³² 28:589.

³³ This distinction is somewhat different than the discussion of higher and lower faculties in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. There Kant discusses the distinction in the context of arguing against heteronymous ethical theories, and he downplays the difference between pure and affected higher desires. In the account in the second *Critique*, he argues against those who describe the higher faculty of desire as one within which intellectual cognitions cause pleasure and thereby move the will. By contrast, he insists upon a higher faculty of desire as the ability for “pure reason . . . to determine the will without some feeling being presupposed” (5:24).

³⁴ For a discussion of empirical freedom, see Beck 1987.

³⁵ 28:521.

³⁶ 5:155-7.

³⁷ 5:152, my emphasis. For the empirical nature of anthropology, see Frierson 2003: 31-47.

³⁸ Kant does, of course, *also* think that one can give an a priori argument that shows the necessity of this kind of possibility for human agents. Once Kant establishes a link between a good noumenal will and an empirical will the actions of which are the effects of the influence of the purest higher cognitive faculty, he can give an a priori argument from the conditions of possibility of moral responsibility to the fact that one

can be motivated by the sorts of causes that correlate with morally responsible behavior. In fact, Kant thinks that an a priori argument is the only way to reliably prove that human beings have the capacity to be motivated by pure practical reason. In the course of a more general argument for transcendental freedom as a condition of the possibility of moral responsibility in the second *Critique*, Kant adds an argument for the empirical-psychological claim that there is a “basic power or basic faculty” by which pure practical reason can influence the faculty of desire. Because “no example of exact observance of [the law of pure practical reason] can be found in experience,” the argument for such a faculty is based on the “fact of pure reason,” and hence this argument is a priori (5:47).

³⁹ 28:564.

⁴⁰ For his account of human action to be complete, Kant must also explain the underlying causal mechanisms for the origin of each kind of cognitive state. I discuss Kant’s accounts of these origins in detail in a longer version of this paper, but for the sake of time I have cut out that discussion here.

⁴¹ Feelings that do not give rise to desire or aversion are particularly important for Kant’s aesthetics (cf. footnote x-ref).

⁴² This concept is closely related, for Kant, to the notion of a “germ” (*Keime*). For more on Kant’s account of *Anlagen*, as well as the relationship between *Anlagen* and *Keime*, see Munzel 2000 and Sloan 2002.

⁴³ As he explains in his “Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History,” “we must begin with something that human reason cannot derive from prior natural causes – that is, with *the existence of human beings*,” including all of their natural predispositions (8:110). In an important respect, this reflects a backing off from the implicit commitment of his first *Critique* to the possibility of fully mechanistic accounts of human action. But the backing off with respect to human psychology is not unique. It is part of a general realization that the study of “organized beings” – including humans as well as birds (2:434) and even grass (5:400) – cannot always proceed mechanically. This limitation on mechanistic explanation is particularly important in the context of explaining the *origins* of organized beings or their specific natural capacities.

⁴⁴ 8:111

⁴⁵ Kant also discusses passions (*Leidenschaften*) in connection with the faculty of desire, but these are derivative on his notion of inclination. For more on the nature of passions, see Borges 2004, Frierson 2000, and Sorenson 2002.

⁴⁶ 7:365; cf. 8:111f.; 25:796, 1109, 1111-4, 1334, 1339, 1514, 1518-9.

⁴⁷ 25: 1518, cf. 8:111f., 25:1109.

⁴⁸ For the sexual instinct, see 7:179; 8:112; 25:797, 1334, 1339. For the parental instinct to provide for young, see 7:265; 25:797, 1113, 1518. For the sucking instinct, see 25:1339, 1514, 1518. For instincts for food, see 8:111. For the “natural instinct to test [one’s] powers,” see 7:263. And for natural sympathy (*Mitleid*), see 25:1518.

⁴⁹ 8:111.

⁵⁰ 25:1518.

⁵¹ 6: 29; 25:1112, 1339, 1517.

⁵² 4:400, cf. too 27:676.

⁵³ 7:271.

⁵⁴ 25:1114, cf. too 25:1514.

⁵⁵ 25: 1519.

⁵⁶ 25:1339.

⁵⁷ 25:1114 my emphasis, cf. too 25:1514.

⁵⁸ 6:29.

⁵⁹ 25:1514.

⁶⁰ 25:1111-2. Kant adds here, “One can put instinct between propensity and inclination.” Like propensities, instincts are innate in human beings. Like inclinations, instincts provide direct explanations for various desires. (Kant is not entirely consistent about the relationship between inclinations and instincts. Generally (e.g. 25:111-2 and 7:265) he distinguishes between them as two different sorts of explanation for desire. But elsewhere he draws lines a bit differently. In a metaphysics lecture from 1782-3, Kant reportedly says, “If the stimuli <stimuli> have become habitual, then they are inclinations and their source is instinct or habit” (29:895), suggesting that the “source” of some inclinations is instinct. And elsewhere (25:1518) Kant says that the “inclination [*Neigung*] of parents towards their children is also instinct.” The account that I give here of the relationship between instinct, inclination, and propensity is the dominant one in Kant’s published works and lectures, but occasionally, at least according to his students, Kant relates

instinct and inclination in different ways.)

⁶¹ 7:265, cf. 25:1517.

⁶² 25:1339.

⁶³ 25:1339.

⁶⁴ In fact, Kant periodically changes the relevant people-group in discussing this example. His overall view seems best captured by his claim that “Human beings across the whole world have a propensity to drink [alcohol]” (25:1112), as an example of which he sometimes uses “northern peoples” (25:1339), sometimes “the wildest peoples” (25:1112), sometimes “nations that have wine” (25:1518), and once even the “people in Kamtschatka, [who] have a certain cabbage, which when they eat it, works in them a kind of madness, for which they love to have it” (25:1518). The point of these examples is not to pick out any particular group, but to show that this propensity is universal. Thus the passage in the *Religion*, often taken as an offensive way of distinguishing “savages” from Europeans, actually reflects the fact that the propensity to drink was undeniable in the case of Europeans, but some might claim that this propensity itself is acquired, against which Kant cites the case of savage, or “raw” (*rohe*), people.

⁶⁵ 6:29.

⁶⁶ Kant uses the term character in several senses throughout his writings, and it is important to keep those distinct here. In the broadest sense, the character of a thing is the “law of its causality, without which it would not be a cause at all,” such that “every effective cause must have a character” (A539/B567, cf. 25:634. For more on the importance of character for Kant’s moral philosophy, see Munzel 1999 and Kuehn 2001). In this sense, gravity reflects the “character” of matter, and one’s instincts are part of the “character” of one’s faculty of desire. In a quite different sense, Kant uses “character,” in the context of one’s “intelligible character,” to refer to the free ground – “which is not itself appearance” – of one’s appearances in the world (A539/B567). Character in this sense has no role to play in any sort of empirical explanation of action. One can not, in particular, empirically explain actions that flow from the higher faculties of cognition in terms of intelligible character.

The sort of character that plays an important role in Kant’s empirical theory of action is distinct from intelligible character and more specific than the character of an efficient cause in general. Kant refers to this sense of character in his anthropology as “character simply [*Character schlechthin*],” and defines it as “that property of the will by which the subject has tied himself to certain practical principles” (7:292). This more specific sense of character plays, for the higher faculty of desire, the role that instincts and inclinations play for the lower. In the rest of this paper, I use character in the narrower sense of *Character schlechthin*.

⁶⁷ See Kuehn 2001:147.

⁶⁸ 7:285.

⁶⁹ Kant even suggests that those who do *not* act consistently on the basis of principles have a kind of “bad character” (*schlechte Character*, cf. 25:650, 1172). This character is not a character in the strict sense, because it does not involve acting *consistently* on principles of the understanding, but it is a state of character in that it provides a basis for explaining why the connection between principles and desires is *not* constant. Thus it plays an explanatory role in an unstable causal account.

⁷⁰ 25: 1175, cf. 25: 630, 651-52, 1384.

⁷¹ The relevant principles here need not specifically be *moral*; any principles can be practical in that they guide action. As Kant makes clear in his *Anthropology*, acting on the basis of firm principles, regardless of the content of those principles, determines whether or not someone has character (7:292). For more on the nature of character, and especially how one’s character can be evil, see Frierson (forthcoming – JHP).

⁷² 25:1172; cf. 7:294.

⁷³ 25:1172.

⁷⁴ Whereas Kant gives a fairly straightforward account of origin of inclinations, he gives no equally simple account of the origin of character, and he even makes some claims that seem to suggest that character, unlike inclination, cannot be explained naturalistically. He says, for instance that “having character simply characterizes man as a rational being, one endowed with freedom” and that character “shows what man is prepared to make of himself” as opposed to “what can be made of a man” (7:285). In fact, however, Kant explains the origin of character in ways that are more complicated than those of inclination, but no less deterministic. That said, Kant does hold that character, unlike inclination, is an empirical *marker* of freedom. (For more on this, see *author’s paper – under review elsewhere*.)

⁷⁵ 7:286.

⁷⁶ 7:285, 290; 25:1388.

⁷⁷ Munzel 1999 examines the role of pedagogy in the cultivation of character in detail. See especially chapter 5.

⁷⁸ 25:1172.

⁷⁹ 7:294-5. Emphasis is my own.

⁸⁰ 7:294.

⁸¹ For more on the role of politeness in cultivating character, see Brender 1997, 1998, and Frierson 2005.

⁸² 8:375. Brian Jacobs has pointed out that “as he makes clear from his ‘Idea’ essay of 1784, Kant thinks that precisely *these* aspects of human life [“social, cultural, political, and historico-teleological characteristics”] are as determined as natural events” (Jacobs 2003: 112).

⁸³ 7:329. For more on the role of such influences on moral development, see Wood 1999, Loudon 2000, and Frierson 2003.

⁸⁴ Kant’s account of the origin of character is not limited to external influences on character. He claims, for instance, that the cultivation of one’s propensity to character comes “through understanding and reason” (25:1172). (Immediately after saying this, however, Kant reiterates that “the acquisition of . . . character . . . happens through education.” For Kant, cultivating character through reason and understanding is a pedagogical task, not a solely individual accomplishment.) In that context, Kant discusses several specific rules that one can follow in cultivating character in oneself and others:

- a) Not to speak an untruth intentionally . . .
- b) not to dissemble . . .
- c) not to break one’s legitimate promise . . .
- d) not to join the company of evil-minded people . . .
- e) not to pay attention to slander . . .” (7: 294, cf. 25:1387-88, 1392, LA 1789-90: 130)

These are all practical principles that support and constitute the development of character as such. The pursuit of these methods for developing character depends on already having at least some level of character. Unless one can act on the basis of principles, one will be unable even to follow the principles for developing character. But keeping these principles even sporadically can have some beneficial effect. The more one avoids duplicity, bad company, and slander, the easier it will be for one to stick to principles in the future. Insofar as one has some minimal level of constancy, these principles can reinforce one’s character. They are important aids to self-improvement, even if they are not sufficient.

It is important to note, however, that these are not *simply* maxims for self-improvement but maxims based on causal laws governing the formation of character. Some of the maxims conducive to character actually embody what character *is* (for more on this, see Frierson (forthcoming – JHP)). Thus refraining from untruths and dissembling is crucial to actually being consistent to who one is, to one’s principles. To have character just is, in part, to follow these rules. But the rules also depend on certain regular connections of causes and effects. Thus one should not join bad company or pay attention to slander because bad company and slander can *causally* interfere with one’s development of character. And even refraining from speaking untruth is an activity that can have a negative *effect* on one’s development of character.

The emphasis on practical rules rather than mere causal explanations is, moreover, particularly appropriate in the context of a *pragmatic* anthropology, which seeks not *simply* to “ponder natural causes” but to “*use* our observations” for self-improvement (7:119). (For more on the nature of “pragmatic” anthropology, see Frierson 2003: 48-56, Loudon 2000: 68-70, Wood 1999: 202-7, Brandt and Stark *Einleitung* to Ak. 25, and Stark 2003.) For Kant, explanations of character in terms of natural causes are possible and helpful, but only if *put to use*. Thus it is natural for him not only to give causal explanation but to formulate these in terms of rules that one can follow in cultivating one’s capacity for character. Kant appeals to causes of character that are within a person’s control for the same reason that he focuses on causes that are within the control of educators, because these causes can be put to pragmatic purpose.

The rules for the cultivation of character suggest that there is the possibility of a causal loop in the cultivation of character. Insofar as one begins to develop a character, one can more easily act on the basis of principles. And some principles are conducive to further cultivation of character, so acting on the basis of those will contribute (causally) to a deeper cultivation of character. A causal circle is possible here where small improvements build on each other to produce a character in a full sense. (Admittedly, there is some tension here between this circle, which suggests a gradual development, and Kant’s appeal to the

importance of an “explosion” (7:295) that suddenly gives rise to character, but a full exploration of problems arising within Kant’s account of the development of character is beyond the scope of this paper.)