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The Value of Rational Nature*

Donald H. Regan

Kant tells us in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* that rational nature is an end in itself; that it is the only thing which is unconditionally valuable; and that it is the ultimate condition of all value.¹ A striking trend in recent Kant scholarship is to regard these value claims, rather than the formalism of universalizability, as the ultimate foundation of Kant's theory.² But does rational nature as Kant conceives it deserve such veneration? Can it really carry the world of value on its shoulders? I think not.

As will become clear, I do not doubt the value of rational nature. My claim is rather that we cannot account for the value of rational nature if we conceive it as Kant does. Rational nature cannot be valuable in a Kantian world, where there are no self-subsistent principles about what are good states of affairs, or activities, or whatever, of the sort that a Moorean or a Platonist or a perfectionist believes in. My own views are generally Moorean, and I shall occasionally offer a Moorean perspective on the value of rational nature for comparative purposes, but my criticisms of the Kantian view could be made from an Aristotelian perspective as well, in which the agent pursues not the Good, but a good human life. My main object is not to develop any particular alternative to the Kantian view, but merely to show how unsatisfactory the Kantian view is when we look at it closely.

* I have read versions of this article at the University of Chicago Law School, the Australian National University Research School of Social Sciences, and a Law and Philosophy Conference at Arizona State University. I am grateful to audiences at all these places, as well as to students in my recent seminar “What Is It Like to Be an Agent?” I also wish to thank two reviewers and an editor at *Ethics* for helpful comments.


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267
Some readers may think I do not give Kant a fair shake, because I pay almost no attention to any ethical writings except the *Groundwork*. I shall explain at a few points why I think some particular claim or argument from another work is unhelpful, but it is important to remember the nature of my project. I am interested in whether Kantian rational nature is valuable. I do not dispute here any of Kant's claims about what would follow if it were once established that rational nature, as Kant conceives it, is valuable in the way he says. So far as I can see, the parts of the *Metaphysics of Morals* that discuss the value of rational nature are about what would follow.³ The *Critique of Practical Reason* contains some arguments for the value of rational nature, but none that are not already present in the *Groundwork* and discussed in Section I or Section IV below. In any event, the reader who thinks I am unfair to Kant can read this article as a critique, not of Kant himself, but of a prominent development in contemporary Kantianism.

Perhaps I should also say something about what I mean by “value.” Arguably Kantians, Mooreans, and Aristotelians all have different ideas of the nature of value. But I shall proceed without much attention to any differences. I take it that on any understanding of “value,” to say something is valuable is (normally) to express some sort of pro-attitude toward it and (invariably) to assert that there is some aspect of it that makes such a pro-attitude appropriate. My claim is that if we look closely at rational nature as Kant, or some Kantians, conceive it, we will find nothing to justify a pro-attitude of any sort.

I

First, we need to establish just what Kant and his modern followers mean by “rational nature,” and why they think it is the foundation of all value. Rational nature in the broadest sense encompasses theoretical reason, practical reason, and the faculty of judgment, the topics of Kant’s three great critiques. Some version of freedom from sensuous determination is involved in the exercise of all of these capacities. But both Kant and modern Kantians give pride of place to practical reason as the source of our special dignity. So, it is practical reason we shall focus on. (Kant’s views on value might be improved by greater attention to the intrinsic values of knowledge, involving theoretical reason, and the appreciation of beauty, involving judgment,⁴ but we shall not pursue these issues.)

Very well, what does practical reason do? Roughly, two things, according to the Kantian. First, our practical reason discovers, or constructs, or discovers-in-constructing, the moral law; it also self-applies this law.

³ See the discussion of obligatory ends in Sec. II.A.
Second, our practical reason chooses our particular projects, which we pursue subject to the moral law. It might be thought misleading to posit such a clear distinction between discovering/self-applying the moral law and choosing particular projects. It is certainly part of the “classical” view of Kant that these are distinct stages in our practical decision making, but one effect of the new emphasis on the value of rational nature as the foundation of the law may be to blur the distinction somewhat, especially in Guyer’s account. Even so, I think we can use the distinction as a means of structuring our discussion; we will look briefly at Guyer’s particular interpretation at the end of Section II.

Now, of these two activities of practical reason—discovering/self-applying the moral law and choosing particular projects—it might seem that the former, which is centrally concerned with the moral law, is the more majestic and must be the main ground of rational nature’s claim to dignity and respect. But in fact the modern literature concentrates on the second. The constant refrain is that the crucial source of the value of rational nature is its power to “set itself ends.” Negatively, this points to rational nature’s nondetermination by sensuous inclination, which is involved both in following the moral law and in choosing particular projects. But positively what is most emphasized by the talk of setting ends is just the agent’s choosing of her particular projects. Furthermore, if we look at Kant’s arguments for the value of rational nature, we shall see that by far the most interesting argument focuses squarely on this project-choosing aspect of practical reason. We will return in Section IV to the question whether the value of rational nature can be grounded in its capacity to formulate and self-apply the moral law. But for now we concentrate on the power to choose particular projects, which the Kantians put at center stage.

Aside from the suggestion that the worth of persons lies in their recognition of the moral law, the Groundwork contains three arguments for the supreme value of rational nature. First is the famous claim that since our reason is not as useful as instinct in the pursuit of natural purposes such as life and happiness, it must have been given us by nature for some other purpose, which must be the achievement of a value that surpasses any in the purely natural world. I take it this teleological argument has no force with a twentieth-century audience. It is ironic that we may have more faith in the craftsmanship of nature, the “blind

5. See the “Introduction” to Guyer, pp. 1–13.
6. It might seem that Kant’s claims about obligatory ends make “setting ends” a rather richer activity than what is suggested by the phrase “choosing projects” (as well as blurring the distinction between discovering/self-applying the moral law and choosing one’s projects). I shall explain in Sec. II why the claims about obligatory ends need not concern us in this article.
watchmaker," than Kant did: most people would now assume that our self-consciousness and ratiocinative capacities must have some evolutionary explanation in terms of their adaptive advantage. But we are not at all tempted to think the watchmaker is a purposive promoter of any value. In the end, even Kant may not have put much faith in the teleological argument for the value of rational nature. Paul Guyer concludes a substantial discussion of the argument with the observation that "the Critique of Judgment is not a simple reassertion of the teleological argument but rather a sorrowful good-bye to it."8

Kant's second argument is that any rational being necessarily conceives its existence as an end in itself.9 This hardly seems self-evident; indeed, Allen Wood treats Kant's assertion here as just recapitulating his third argument, which we will consider presently.10 Christine Korsgaard may suggest, along the lines of Kant's second argument, that any being endowed by nature with an instinct for self-preservation must in effect conceive its existence as an end in itself. "The animal's tendency to work for its own self-preservation—that is, to perform actions that tend to preserve itself—is thought of as a kind of self-concern, a kind of love the animal has for itself."11 But even if there is a sense in which any animal with an instinct for self-preservation (and therefore any animal?) can be thought of as valuing itself, that sense is not enough to establish that a rational being, qua rational, values its own existence. Rational nature is not automatically constrained to second the promptings of instinct. Of course, an embodied rational nature which does value its own existence (noninstinctively) will endorse and be glad of the instinct of self-preservation. But this, obviously, will not help us establish that rational nature necessarily values its own existence.

On a quite different tack, we might try to support Kant's second argument with the claim that the characteristic activity of rational nature is deliberation and that at least in the moment of deliberation rational nature must value itself. It seems plausible that if I am engaged in deliberation, I must, in that moment, be treating my deliberating, and hence my deliberative capacity, as valuable.12 But again, whatever truth there is in this is much less than the proposition that rational nature is valuable in itself. For one thing, my commitment to deliberation may be temporary; for anything we have said so far, my deliberation might lead to the conclusion that deliberation is not valuable, and I might

12. I have heard something like this suggestion from Michael Smith, Seana Shiffrin, and Rob Gressis.
abandon any commitment to deliberation in the future. Furthermore, even the temporary commitment to deliberation entails at most the working belief that something, not necessarily the deliberator, might be intrinsically valuable, and thus that deliberation, and the deliberative capacity, might be instrumentally valuable to some end or other.

Kant’s third and most interesting argument has only recently received significant scholarly attention. It is hardly more than hinted at in the _Groundwork_, but Christine Korsgaard has taken it up and developed it in a number of writings, making it central to her project of Kantian exegesis and reconstruction. It is the central argument in Allen Wood’s recent presentation of Kant’s ethics as well. Paul Guyer expresses some skepticism about the argument, but does find a version of it in Kant. The argument goes as follows: (1) We cannot act without the belief that our projects are valuable. For practical purposes, then, we can say that we know our projects are valuable. (2) But we also see that our projects are not valuable unconditionally; they are not valuable just because of what they are. (3) The condition of their value is our choosing of them. Therefore, (4) we ourselves must be valuable unconditionally. Only thus can we be the condition of other values.


15. Wood says that the claim about the supreme value of rational nature is “perhaps the most fundamental proposition in Kant’s entire ethical theory” (p. 121) and that it is defended “only in this brief argument in the Second Section of the _Groundwork_” (p. 132).

16. Guyer, pp. 150–53. For more detail on Guyer’s position, see the next note.

17. This statement of the argument is based primarily on Korsgaard. Guyer criticizes Korsgaard’s version of the argument and points out that as she presents it, the argument does not clearly deliver the conclusion that our freedom is the source of our value (Guyer, p. 151). But Guyer then seems to concede that the argument by regress from the value of our projects is important to Kant, who just supplements it with the assertion that it is our freedom that makes us valuable and allows us to confer value (p. 153). There may be a middle ground available here. Guyer seems to be right that Korsgaard’s presentation of the argument is incomplete, at least if we want the conclusion that it is specifically our freedom that makes us valuable. On the other hand, the argument-by-regress contributes nothing if we just supplement it with the assumption that our freedom is valuable. Korsgaard, who certainly thinks our freedom is crucial to our value, seems to be operating with the implicit assumption that if we are valuable, it must be our freedom that explains our value; there is no other plausible candidate. But now we can spell out Korsgaard’s intentions as follows: the regress argument (as in the text) delivers the conclusion that we are valuable, and the “what else but freedom?” assumption tells us that if we are valuable, freedom is the ground. So together, the regress argument and the “what else?” assumption deliver the desired conclusion. But the regress argument does some real work, and we do not need just to assume flat out that freedom is valuable. The “what else?” assumption
The primary problem with this argument is assertion 2, the assertion that our projects are not valuable just because of what they are. This simply begs the question against the Moorean view, or, in a slightly different way, against an Aristotelian view. (I shall also suggest presently that common sense sides with the Moorean or the Aristotelian against the Kantian.) To a Moorean such as myself, knowledge, for example, is valuable just because of what it is. The fact that knowledge, properly understood, is valuable does not depend on any choice by any agent. To be sure, the realization in the world of the value of knowledge depends on agents’ choices, but even so, the facts about what sorts of thing are valuable are independent of agents’ choices. Agents’ choosings are not the condition of value in the sense Korsgaard has in mind. This may be clearer if we consider a project which is not valuable. Barring some special story, grass counting is not valuable, and the mere fact of an agent’s choosing to spend her time counting grass would not make it so. The Kantian, notoriously, is committed to the claim that it would.

Of course, my confident assertion of all these Moorean claims is hardly a guarantee of their truth. The difficulties with Moorean realism, both metaphysical and epistemological, are well known. But the Kantian who advances the argument presently under discussion cannot reject realism on such grounds. The Kantian argument takes as one of its premises that our projects are valuable. Not just valuable in the naturalistic-definitional sense that we choose them; if that exhausted the sense in which our projects are valuable, the value of the projects would do nothing to establish the value of the choosers. The value of the is an assumption that specifically connects freedom and value, but it is not simply the desired conclusion.

18. The error in 2 affects the proper understanding of 1 and the motivation for 3, but 2 is the crux.

19. For further discussion, see Sec. V.

20. See John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 492–93. Rawls squirms a bit here. He suggests that a desire to count grass would be strong prima facie evidence of neurosis, and he eventually qualifies his statement that grass counting is good for the agent who chooses it with the assumption that it is his nature to enjoy only grass counting and “there is no feasible way to alter his condition” (p. 492). But the suggestion that the grass counter’s condition would be better altered surely appeals to some material standard of goodness. Of course, Kantians want to believe that truly autonomous agents just wouldn’t choose worthless or objectionable projects, but without some further argument such as Tom Hill tries to supply (see Sec. III.B), this is not only a conclusion Kantians are not entitled to, but an idea they cannot even properly express, since it presupposes standards external to choice. Notice that even from a Moorean perspective, if there is an agent who can enjoy only grass counting, we should leave him to it, thus minimizing painful frustration. Grass counting is the best life possible for such a person. But to say it is the best life possible for him is not to say it is a good life. Someone whose nature is to enjoy only grass counting is someone for whom, sadly, no good life is possible.
projects establishes the value of the choosers because the projects are objectively valuable. Only conditionally, the argument assumes, but still objectively. In knowing that our projects are valuable, we really know something about our projects. The metaphysical and epistemological problems concerning this knowledge are as great, indeed are essentially the same, as the problems for the Moorean. This is easy to overlook, because if we are persuaded by the Kantian’s argument, then we believe in the unconditional value of choosers, and once we take the (objective) unconditional value of the choosers as established, we can ground the objective value of the projects in the choosers’ choices. But this merely relocates the problem, raising the Moorean difficulties about the claim that the chooser (rational nature itself) is valuable. It may be tempting to think there is at least no epistemological problem about the value of the chooser, since we have given a proof—but that of course merely pushes us back to the epistemological status of the premise that our particular projects are valuable. The point, which is easy to lose track of as the argument undergoes gestalt shifts with regard to what is premise and what is conclusion, is that any argument along these lines must start from some premises about objective value; and about those premises, whatever they are, there will be the same questions, both metaphysical and epistemological, as about Moorean value claims. The move to grounding Kantian theory in value claims as opposed to formal arguments about universalizability is a step in the right direction, but it doesn’t come free.21

The Kantian may of course claim to solve the problem by a transcendental move: we are entitled to believe for practical purposes whatever we must believe to make sense of ourselves as agents.22 To my mind, the transcendental move is very persuasive. But it is available to the Moorean as well. Indeed, I think the best justification for Moorean realism proceeds in precisely this Kantian, transcendental way: We think that as agents we choose our projects. But choice requires standards,

21. From another perspective, of course, the whole issue about realism is irrelevant. Irrealists like Simon Blackburn, in Essays in Quasi-Realism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), and Allan Gibbard, in Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), think we can say everything we might want to say about substantive normative questions within their metaethical frameworks. But even if we are persuaded by them, the substantive disagreement between the Kantian and the Moorean about whether our projects are valuable in themselves (those that are valuable at all) or valuable merely as the objects of our choice is still there for discussion. Compare Allan Gibbard, “Morality as Consistency in Living: Korsgaard’s Kantian Lectures,” Ethics 110 (1999): 140–64, pp. 140–47 on “substantivalism.”

22. I regard the formulation in the text as essentially equivalent to another more purely logical-sounding formulation, that we may and should believe whatever is entailed by (necessary to account for) the fact that we are agents. The equivalence is mediated by the fact that our knowledge that we are agents is only “for practical purposes.”
which must guide the choice and which therefore cannot be created in
the act of choosing. Our self-conception as agents therefore requires
that there be independent standards by which potential projects can be
judged. Nor can we say we should choose now by standards we created
for ourselves in some previous choice; that merely pushes back the
demand for guiding standards to the previous occasion. In sum, our
self-conception as agents requires the sort of substantive principles the
Moorean posits.\footnote{23. Again, I am not trying to make the case here for Mooreanism as against Aristo-
etelianism. For present purposes, we can regard Aristotelian principles about what makes
a good human life, principles which are independent of any agent’s choice, as within the
general “sort of substantive principles the Moorean posits.” The Aristotelian, of course,
may think she has other and better metaphysical grounding for her principles than a
Kantian transcendental argument.}

The argument just stated, that choice requires standards, is the
core of my complaint against the Kantian. The argument is embarrass-
ingly brief and far from original, but it is still to my mind very powerful.
Also, I think it is the commonsense view. Most ordinary people, who
think their projects are good, do \textit{not} think \((a)\) that their projects are
good only because they have chosen them, and thus \((b)\) that any other
projects would have been equally good if they had chosen them instead.
Even if these ordinary people have never explicitly canvassed a range
of possible projects and said to themselves “Now, after deliberation, I
choose this because it is the most valuable thing I can do,” they regard
themselves as having come to the projects they have partly by seeing
and responding to differences in the worthwhileness of the various ac-
tivities and relationships available to them. They want to have spent
their lives well, and they think there is sense to be made of the idea of
having wasted them.\footnote{24. See the discussion in Sec. III.B below of an argument of Tom Hill’s. Hill agrees
with me about this aspect of the common view and makes a valiant attempt to capture it
in a Kantian framework.}

I think there is even some support for the Moorean, commonsense
view in the Kantians’ rhetoric. Rawls, for example, says that self-respect
“includes a person’s sense of his own value, his secure conviction that
his conception of his good, his plan of life, is worth carrying out.” A
sentence later: “When we feel that our plans are of little value, we cannot
pursue them with pleasure or take delight in their execution.” Two
paragraphs later: “Unless our endeavors are appreciated by our asso-
 ciates it is impossible for us to maintain the conviction that they are
worthwhile.”\footnote{25. Rawls, \textit{A Theory of Justice}, pp. 440–41.} And so on. These remarks suggest that the agent wants
her projects to be valuable by standards which are not constituted just
by her choice, and that she regards her own value as at least partly
dependent on the value of her projects. That seems the most natural reading. To be sure, we can construe the remarks, and the whole passage, as consistent with the official Kantian view that the value of the projects is constituted by the agent’s choice. But my own reaction to the passage is to suggest that even the Kantian becomes a commonsense philosopher in unguarded moments.26

Still, common sense may need revision, and it may seem to many readers that in the end the official Kantian picture is easier to swallow than the Moorean. Even if I am right that the Kantian is as committed as the Moorean to metaphysically obscure values, the Kantian, hedgehog-like, only needs to swallow one big claim (that rational nature is valuable), whereas the Moorean needs to believe that somehow the universe provides a much more detailed set of value specifications. So, what I want to do in the remainder of this article is to look a little more closely at the Kantian picture, to see just how persuasive or unpersuasive it really is. I am happy to accept Allen Wood’s formulation of the basic question: Which theory provides the most compelling “interpretation of what we presuppose and commit ourselves to when we exercise our rational capacities in setting ends”?27

II

On the Kantian picture, our power to choose projects is the ultimate foundation of value. To see why this picture is not compelling, we need only consider the question, How exactly does a Kantian rational nature choose its projects? We know the Kantian agent (i.e., the agent in a Kantian world) cannot look to any objective standard of goodness outside herself. She cannot believe, for example, that knowledge and friendship are intrinsically valuable independently of her own choosing and, for that reason, pursue knowledge and friendship. Such independent standards of value do not exist in the Kantian world. This leaves only two possibilities. One is that the agent chooses in accordance with her empirical desires; the other is that she chooses completely arbitrarily, that she simply launches herself at some project or other for no reason at all. To my mind, neither of these possibilities can support a plausible claim that Kantian rational nature is an end in itself, possessed of a dignity beyond compare.

26. For passages that are similarly ambiguous but similarly suggest the commonsense view, see Wood, pp. 128–29; and Korsgaard, Creating the Kingdom of Ends, p. 114 (quoted and discussed in Sec. III.A below).
27. Wood, p. 132.
Already we must digress. I shall pursue the discussion of the two possibilities I have identified—following desire and launching oneself arbitrarily—in the next section. But first, it may seem that I have overlooked a third possibility. I said that the Kantian agent cannot look to any objective standard of goodness outside herself, and it is true that the Kantian worldview does not countenance a Moorean Good or even an Aristotelian human essence. But in the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant does tell us that there are two obligatory ends, one’s own perfection and others’ happiness. Choosing on the basis of these obligatory ends would be neither following empirical desire nor launching oneself arbitrarily. However, Kant makes no attempt in the *Metaphysics of Morals* to establish that these ends are in fact obligatory, aside from some conclusory references to the value of humanity. (The only real argument is about why one’s own happiness and others’ perfection are not obligatory ends.) Kant assumes in effect that he has already established the value of humanity, and with it the obligatoriness of these ends, in some other work. That other work is clearly the *Groundwork*. That is where Kant argues for the value of humanity (or rational nature), and that is in effect where he introduces the obligatory ends, without calling them that, in the third and fourth of the famous four examples. So, we are back to the question whether there is an argument for the value of rational nature in the *Groundwork*.

We have, however, uncovered a new possible argumentative strategy. If Kant’s arguments about the third and fourth examples were compelling, then with only a little further argument, they would establish the obligatory ends of one’s own perfection and others’ happiness. We might then infer from the obligatoriness of these ends to the value of rational nature, in somewhat the same way that the Korsgaardian argument considered above infers from the value of our projects to our value as choosers. However, Kant’s arguments about the third and fourth examples are either unpersuasive or unhelpful. The arguments on the first pass through the examples are unpersuasive; the arguments on the second pass, though much more persuasive, are unhelpful in the present context because they take the value of rational nature as a premise.

Consider the duty of self-development. The first time Kant argues for the duty of self-development, relying on his formula of universal law, he says that an agent set down in a tropical paradise could not rationally choose a life of indolence, because “a rational being . . . necessarily wills that all his powers should be developed, since they serve him, and

are given him, for all sorts of possible ends."30 I agree with Kant that a life of nothing but lying on the beach is unworthy of a human being, but Kant’s argument here will not do. Either it depends on attributing a purpose to nature which is binding on us, or else it supposes that we are required by reason to develop our powers just in case we might eventually adopt projects for which they would be useful, even if we do not have those projects now and even if we are confident we never will. This unaccountably subordinates the agent’s actual present choice of indolence (which cannot be rejected as unfree or contrary to reason in advance of the argument’s successful completion) to the agent’s merely possible future choice of something else.

When Kant returns to the four examples a second time, he has in hand the formula of humanity,31 and his argument for the duty of self-development is much stronger given its premises. The argument is now that self-development is required by respect for rational nature. But this of course takes as a premise the value of rational nature, which Kant thinks he has established in the interim, in the passage we discussed in Section I. If the arguments of that passage are inadequate to establish the value of rational nature, as I have claimed, there is no help to be found in the new argument for self-development. (The correct, though hardly uncontroversial, argument for Kant’s belief that it is wrong just to lie on the beach is simply that there are more intrinsically valuable things we can do with most of our time, and so we ought to do them.)

Much the same can be said about Kant’s arguments that we should help others in need. If the argument given in the first pass through the four examples were persuasive, we would have established an obligation to help others without appealing to the value of rational nature as a premise, and we would have a conclusion which might be parlayed into an argument for the value of rational nature as chooser—first an argument for the value of the other whom I must help, and then by symmetry an argument for the value of myself. But Kant’s argument in the first pass is not persuasive. He says that if I try to will (wollen) universal refusal of aid, I will contradict myself by wanting (wünschen) aid when I am myself in need.32 This is true, in a sense, but inconclusive. We can say with precisely equal truth and force that if I try to will universal aid, I will contradict myself by wanting to refuse aid when I am the one called upon to give it. Obviously, the argument form is inadequate. (The reason is clear enough. Willings cannot be contradicted in the relevant sense by mere wantings.) Once again, Kant gives a much better argument on the second pass through the examples, but the new argument

30. Ibid., p. 423.
32. Ibid., p. 423.
presupposes that the other who is in need of assistance is an “end in himself.” In other words, Kant is now taking as a premise the value of rational nature.

The upshot of all this is that if we are to argue for the value of rational nature as the power to set ends, we must do so without relying on the existence of obligatory ends. If we find an argument that establishes the value of rational nature as the power to set ends, the obligatory ends will follow as a corollary.

B

We are now back to where we were before the digression of Section II.A. We have two possible ways for a Kantian agent to choose her projects—following empirical desire and arbitrary self-launching—and we have the question whether an agent who relies on either of these possesses a dignity beyond compare.

Consider first arbitrary self-launching. I suppose someone with existentialist intuitions might find this admirable, but to me it seems pointless and empty. At the end of “The Normativity of Instrumental Reason,” Christine Korsgaard suggests that perhaps the only way we can account for the bindingness of the Hypothetical Imperative is to think reason requires us to be “heroic existentialists,” who choose projects for no reason at all and then stick to them in the face of competing inclination for no reason except that we chose them. This is a version of self-legislation, but it is not one Korsgaard is happy with. She sees that the agent ought to have something to say to himself about why his project is worth pursuing, and she hopes to find resources within Kantian theory for allowing the agent something to say. But Korsgaard does suggest that heroic existentialism might turn out to be the only way we can give ourselves an identity, the only way we can be persons. To my mind, such an identity is not an identity worth having. A person constituted solely by her perseverance in a completely arbitrary and groundless choice (which is recognized as groundless even by the agent herself) is not a person it is worth any effort to be.

As to the other possibility, that the Kantian agent chooses her projects on the basis of her desires, it is clear that the agent’s choice cannot be determined by her desires. That way lies heteronomy, and the heteronomous will is not what Kant thought deserved respect. The autonomous agent must choose freely to act upon some desire. But then, this sounds like arbitrary self-launching again. To be sure, it is self-launching

33. Ibid., p. 430.

in a direction that happens to be suggested by a desire. But desire itself is essentially arbitrary, from the point of view of the free will. Kant says in the *Groundwork* that "inclinations themselves, as sources of needs, are so far from having an absolute value to make them desirable for their own sake that it must rather be the universal wish of every rational being to be wholly free from them." To be sure, he seems to contradict this when he says in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* that "Considered in themselves natural inclinations are good, i.e. not reprehensible, and to want to extirpate them would not only be futile but harmful and blameworthy as well." But there is no real inconsistency, once we consider the context of each quote. What Kant is saying in the *Groundwork* is that inclination is at best irrelevant and at worst a traitorous distraction when we are trying to decide what is valuable—either at the level of finding what is unconditionally valuable or at the level of choosing particular projects. Inclination contributes nothing at any stage to the constitution of value. On the other hand, once Kant thinks he has established the unconditional value of rational nature, he can argue (in the *Religion*) that inclination plays a helpful role in nature’s plan to produce and perfect rational nature in human beings; hence it might have bad consequences, and it would in any event disrespect nature’s plan, for us to try to extirpate inclination.

Clearly, it is the *Groundwork*’s judgment on inclination that is rel-

37. It might be suggested that inclination has an indispensable role to play in the selection of projects because it is the source of "incentives." Guyer says that “in order to act, we must have something specific we intend to do, which can only be some particular action proposed as a way to fulfill some human need or inclination,” and that extirpating all our natural inclinations “would be both impossible and also incoherent, for it would leave us with no actions to undertake at all” (Guyer, pp. 225, 227). This is not the place for a full discussion of the role of incentives in a Kantian theory of action, but the claim that we can act only on need or inclination threatens the very possibility of a nonsensuously affected rational nature, whereas Kant wants such natures to be possible, for both good and evil. Similarly, it might be thought that we need inclination to give us projects for our moral "free time." It is widely believed that Kant’s imperfect duties impose only limited demands on us, and that when we have done enough toward satisfying the imperfect duties, then we are entitled to cater to our inclination (always within the bounds set by our perfect duties, of course). I think this misunderstands the imperfect duties, though again this is not the place for a full discussion. It is worth mentioning that in the *Religion*, discussing whether an individual can expiate the debt of earlier guilt by good behavior, Kant says, “Nor can he produce, in the future conduct of a good life, a surplus over and above what he is under obligation to perform each time; for his duty at each instant is to do all the good in his power" (*Religion*, 6:72).
evant to our present inquiry. That I desire something, in the sense of feeling a brute, unreasoned inclination to it, is no reason at all to pursue it,\textsuperscript{38} and therefore choice on the basis of desire is really just a version of arbitrary self-launching, as I have said. In a different context, Korsgaard answers an objection similar to this by suggesting that what is objectionable about acting on desire is not the contingency of desire (what I have referred to as its “arbitrariness”), but rather passivity of the will in the face of desire which allows the will to be determined by desire. So long as the will acts only on desires which it has first freely endorsed and taken up as reasons, there is no problem, she suggests.\textsuperscript{39} I agree that this way of acting on desire avoids the charge of heteronomy, which is Korsgaard’s concern in context; but so far as I can see, it does nothing to assuage doubts about the value of autonomy, which is our present concern. What is the value in being able to take up as a reason an arbitrary desire?

It may seem that I am selling rational nature short. After all, we deliberate. We reflect on our desires, we choose between them. But what do this “reflecting” and “choosing” amount to in a world where there are no standards of value outside ourselves? We can take time over the choice of projects; we can work at informing ourselves fully about what the pursuit and achievement of various projects would really be like. But when we have taken time and informed ourselves, what then? We pick some project, either arbitrarily, or on the basis of our now-strongest desire. It is not clear what we have accomplished by taking time and informing ourselves. We think of reflection as good because it leads to a better choice. But we cannot properly talk of a “better” choice in this world where there is no value except from our choosing. We could define ‘better’ as “informed and deliberated,” but that would obviously do nothing to explain why informed and deliberated choices are to be encouraged.

To be sure, we may, as the result of our cogitation, select efficient means to our ends. Similarly, we may satisfy Rawls’s “counting principles,” which tell us, for example, that we should satisfy maximal sets of desires.\textsuperscript{40} But these are essentially mechanical results, and the process that accomplishes them hardly seems to deserve the name of deliberation. It involves no “setting of ends” in any substantial sense. Nothing in the process of selecting efficient means to our ends or discovering maximal sets of ends involves serious choice among ends. So it remains unclear why the nature that can pause and go through a process of

\textsuperscript{38} For a useful discussion, see T. M. Scanlon, \textit{What We Owe to Each Other} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 41–49.
\textsuperscript{39} Korsgaard, \textit{Sources of Normativity}, pp. 240–42.
\textsuperscript{40} See Rawls, \textit{A Theory of Justice}, pp. 407–16.
exhaustive self-informing before it directs itself (efficiently) on the basis of desire or on the basis of nothing at all is worthy of special respect. Let me emphasize: I do not question the value of deliberation about what ends are good; I insist upon it, precisely because I believe in choice-independent facts about value. What I am saying is that the Kantian cannot account for the value of deliberation, and that is a strike against the Kantian.

Paul Guyer might object that we have missed what is most valuable in rational nature by focusing too much on how the agent chooses individual projects. Guyer suggests that the value of rational nature lies in its ability to systematize and unify our sensuously given inclinations. “The essence of morality is nothing other than the use of reason to systematize happiness, that is, to regulate our attempts to satisfy our inclinations so that we satisfy only those which fit into an intra- and interpersonal system of happiness.”41 “The unity of a life cannot be seen as a product of mere nature but can only be seen as a product of our free and active intellect. . . . Although our pleasures considered separately are merely natural, the principle of their unity is intellectual, therefore a product of freedom rather than nature, but also itself a source of pleasure even greater than that of our particular sensory gratifications.”42 I find Guyer’s rhetoric more appealing than Rawls’s, but in the end I do not see that Guyer is pointing to any source of value we had overlooked. Guyer’s reference to an “interpersonal system of happiness” reraises the issue of the value of recognizing and following the moral law, which we will consider in Section IV. For the moment we focus on the “intrapersonal system.” Insofar as systematization and unification are merely other names for means-end efficiency and the satisfaction of Rawlsian counting principles, we are still talking about a merely theoretical/mechanical process. Insofar as Guyer means to be describing genuine choice among ends, preferring some to others on substantive grounds, it is no clearer than it was before what those grounds might be. In particular, it is not clear what is available as an “intellectual” principle of the unity of an agent’s pleasures. Even if we imagine the agent as choosing a whole unified life all at once instead of choosing individual projects seriatim, it still appears that the agent must either choose on the basis of empirical desire (which may now include desires about whole lives) or else must launch herself arbitrarily. Our problem simply reproduces itself on a higher level. Perhaps a whole-life choice provides an opportunity for even greater existentialist heroism, but if the heroic existentialist previously seemed forlorn rather than admirable, nothing in the new scenario seems to alter that.

41. Guyer, p. 100.
42. Ibid., p. 116.
I have argued that our power to deliberate, if it amounts only to pausing, and informing ourselves, and satisfying various essentially mechanical principles of rationality as we act on desire, does nothing to establish the value of rational nature. But it is clear why the Kantian attempts such a move. The Kantian wants to identify a way that reason can be genuinely practical—a way that reason (and not just ratiocination, which could be entirely subservient to desire) can contribute to our choice. In this section I shall consider two further suggestions about how reason might be involved in the selection of particular projects.

A
Korsgaard has suggested that reason is involved not just in our decision about which desires to act on, but in the origination of the desires themselves. She takes as her text Kant’s “Conjectural Beginning of Human History,” a splendid jeu d’esprit with the biblical book of Genesis. Kant says, perhaps disingenuously, that this essay is not “serious business” but rather a “mere pleasure trip.” But Korsgaard describes it as the “best piece of evidence for the role of reason in the selection of ends in general,” and it deserves attention.

The simplest example of reason creating a new desire is this: suppose we have an instinctive desire for oranges, but not for apples. In the Garden of Eden, we happily eat oranges, and only oranges, for some time. Then one day it occurs to us that apples are a lot like oranges. They are much of a size, they are more or less round, they are brightly colored, and they grow on trees. Reason suggests to us that if we like oranges we might like apples as well, and a new desire is born. Kant is not entirely clear about just how the motivating force of desire is transferred by the perceived analogy between oranges and apples, but the most obvious suggestion is that we are looking for another source of pleasure. Kant says man may have been tempted to eat the apple “because of its similarity to tasty fruits of which man had already partaken.” So what we have here is an essentially theoretical operation of reason, which does no more than extend the sway of an existing natural inclination. This is not practical reason originating a new desire, except in a trivial and uninteresting sense. It might be said that the multiplication...
of desires gives new scope for practical reason to choose between desires, but we have already seen that the "choice" between desires seems to be nothing more appealing than arbitrary self-launching. We were trying to do better precisely by looking at reason as an originator of desires. Now that doesn’t seem to be working either. There is nothing particularly worthy of respect in a process that extends our desire for oranges to a desire for apples in this way.47

Korsgaard describes the agent who acquires a new desire for apples in this way as "tak[ing] a rational interest in something: decid[ing], under the influence of reason, that something is desirable, that it is worthy of pursuit or realization, that it is to be deemed important or valuable, not because it contributes to survival or instinctual satisfaction, but as an end—for its own sake."48 This language seems eminently well suited to describe what a Moorean thinks we are doing in deliberating about the Good, but it does not seem apt as a summary of what happens in the example from Kant. To my mind, forming a new desire simply by the analogical extension of an existing instinctual desire, without even inquiring into whether or why the instinctual desire itself is worth cultivating or acting on, does not count as "taking a rational interest in something," or as deciding that something "is desirable," or that it "is worthy" of pursuit. It might be said that making any analogy requires the operation of practical judgment to select relevant characteristics. If that is true in principle, it shows merely that the process Kant seems to describe is not even properly the making of an analogy unless there is in the background a judgment that sensual pleasure is worth pursuing for itself, a proposition both intuitively un-Kantian and also either meaningless or arbitrary in the Kantian world without external values.

The orange-to-apple move is only the beginning of Kant’s story. Later there are more sophisticated transformations. For example, human love develops out of animal sexual instinct after we discover that sexual desire can be heightened and prolonged by donning fig leaves and involving the imagination.49 But for myself, I cannot see that we

47. For similar remarks, see Ginsborg, pp. 15–16. Responding to Ginsborg, Korsgaard says that the creation of the new desire for an apple produces the first experience of freedom, since man now has a choice which is not settled by instinct, and he is introduced to the need for a principle of his action (“Motivation, Metaphysics, and the Value of the Self,” pp. 52–53). This is not clear; why can’t whatever mechanism has already been in place for arbitrating between different instinctual desires when they conflict be pressed into service to deal with this new conflict of desires? But in any event, even if the new desire occasions the first experience of freedom, the argument in the text undercuts the possibility of establishing the value of freedom or rational nature by pointing to the involvement of practical reason in the origination of desires. And it is the value of freedom we are concerned with.


manifest incomparable dignity by wearing clothes to enhance sexual desire. After Kant has introduced the move into clothes as a way of prolonging and increasing desire, he continues with this striking remark: "Refusal was the feat which brought about the passage from the merely sensual [empfundenen] to spiritual [idealischen] attractions, from merely animal desire gradually to love, and along with this from the feeling of the merely agreeable to a taste for beauty, at first only for beauty in man but at length for beauty in nature as well." But the change from animal desire to love cannot be explained just by a succession of stratagems to prolong or intensify animal desire, or even to displace it from its instinctual object to some other real or symbolic object (i.e., a fetish). What is required is an essential change in the nature of the desire itself, which such stratagems cannot effect. The quoted passage from Kant echoes the progress in Plato’s *Symposium*, and that is part of its appeal. But in Plato, the faculty of reason that is being awakened is the faculty for apprehending the Good.

To be sure, it is only further along the path Kant describes, after the agent has developed a concern for her future, that the agent realizes she is the end of all nature, and an end in herself. She bases this conclusion mainly on her (self-attributed) superiority over the animals. But I see nothing in Kant’s story about how desires are multiplied and manipulated to justify this claim of superiority. The sort of “reason” that multiplies and manipulates brute desires (to sustain and intensify or even mechanically redirect them) seems more like the curse that Kant says it often feels like.

We are still looking for a plausible way practical reason might be involved in the choice of projects. Let us consider a very interesting argument of Tom Hill’s. Hill’s discussion is the most extensive I have found of how a Kantian agent actually goes about choosing her projects, but his focus is less on how we choose good projects than on how we avoid bad ones. As I have noted previously, the Kantian appears to be committed to the notion that whatever (self-regarding) project the autonomous agent chooses is ipso facto good. The Moorean thinks otherwise: some projects are base or frivolous, and to choose them is a mistake. Hill recognizes that common sense sides with the Moorean on this point.

B

50. Ibid., p. 113.
51. Ibid., pp. 112-15.
so he sets out to explain, within a Kantian framework, why we should eschew such projects.\footnote{53. Hill also attempts to explain why concern for one’s own future is obligatory, but that strand of the argument I shall ignore.}

Hill begins from the idea that the agent engaged in deliberation about ends wants to choose in such a way that he can be satisfied with himself, that he can respect himself as the author of the choices he makes. In addition, since the agent views himself as continuing over time, he wants to choose in such a way that he can continue in the future to respect himself when he considers his past (that is to say, his present) choices. Loosely, the agent’s present self wants to secure the respect of the agent’s future selves, though Hill emphasizes that there are not actual separate time slices, but one self continuing over time. How does this desire for present and future self-respect exclude substantively unworthy ends? Hill’s suggestion is that a rational agent will not choose an end that is “persistently and widely” (“across many cultures”) regarded as base, frivolous, or animalistic. Unless one has reason to think one has “turn[ed] up something that others have missed,” one should assume that even if one is inclined to opt for such an end now, one will contemn it, and oneself for having chosen it, in the future. So the principle of maintaining self-respect over time directs one not to choose an end that is widely contemned.\footnote{54. Hill, p. 187.}

Superficially, this appears to be heteronomy of the worst sort. The agent takes as her guide others’ opinions. This would be defensible, to an extent, if others were making judgments of baseness and so on according to independently existing standards. If the agent disagreed with the near-universal opinion of mankind on such a matter, she might well think she was in error. But in the Kantian world, all anyone can be doing when she describes something as base is announcing that she rejects it, and perhaps categorizing it with other projects she rejects that seem to her similar. Why should any agent care about even strong statistical regularities in others’ decisions of this sort?

The reason Hill suggests is that if the agent’s present view is aberrant, then her future view is likely to be different from her present view. In the future, she will contemn her present “base” choice. But is it so clear that the agent ought to care, or that a conflict between the present and the future views should be resolved in favor of the future? It seems possible that the agent would or should have less respect for herself in the present if she kowtows to her future view. Ordinarily, of course, we might defer to our anticipated future view on the ground that greater experience and longer reflection will have improved our view. But we can give no sense to “improved” in the Kantian world. Any
change of view must be seen as essentially arbitrary, even if it is a change toward the view of the multitude.

Indeed, once we realize that for Hill’s agent any change in inclinations to choose (or to approve or disapprove choices) must be arbitrary, the expectation of such a change seems to cast doubt on the unity of the agent over time. I can do a mathematical calculation today, and again tomorrow, and get different answers, and be the same imperfect mathematician. It is less clear that a Kantian agent can make one standardless choice today, and the opposite one tomorrow, and be the same agent. In this world, the agent’s choices seem to constitute her identity. It might now be said that is just why Hill recommends making a choice in line with one’s expected future views—in order to allow consistency of choice and identity over time. But is an identity forged by caving in to expected but arbitrary changes in one’s views worth having? Would it not be better to go with one’s present inclination and try to stick to it—like Korsgaard’s heroic existentialist? I have already indicated that I do not find the heroic existentialist attractive, but he seems more attractive than Hill’s slave to her own later opinion.

It seems to me that any persuasive force Hill’s argument has depends on a covert assumption that the near-universal opinion of mankind on such a question as this must be right. To my mind, this is further confirmed by Hill’s suggestion that the agent may be constant in his aberrant view if he has “turned up something that others have missed.” Surely the overwhelming implication of this language is that the agent has turned up something others have missed that tends to justify his choice. Why else would whatever he has turned up tend to stabilize his aberrant view? But of course, to speak of justifying his choice in this way is to concede that there are standards external to the agent’s choices. Hill’s attempt is valiant, and necessary if the Kantian approach is to succeed. But it seems to me that the attempt fails.

IV

Time now to tie up a loose end, the question of whether rational nature may be valuable not because of its operation in choosing particular projects, but because of its operation in discovering/constructing and self-applying the moral law. The moral law limits our pursuit of our own projects, out of deference to other beings like ourselves who have projects of their own. But to my mind, the value of this sort of self-limitation depends on the prior assumption that others’ choosing is valuable. Not necessarily that the objects of their choice are valuable, but at least that their choosing is. Else why should I constrain myself for others’ benefit? I am not suggesting that my choosing is valuable and theirs is not. My choosing may not be valuable either. But even if my choosing is not valuable, and even if my projects are not valuable, inclination will move
me to pursue my projects unless practical reason offers a counterforce. That counterforce, I am suggesting, can come only from the proposition that others' choosing (or in a Moorean world, their projects) deserves respect. So the bindingness of the moral law depends on the value of other agents as choosers, which is just what we have been calling into question.

In Kant’s third formulation of the Categorical Imperative, he tells us that the moral law is legislation for a kingdom of ends, that is to say, of rational natures.55 His notion of a kingdom is a systematic union of ends, in which each rational nature pursues its individual ends, and relations between the rational natures are subjected to law so that all ends may be pursued harmoniously. It would seem, then, that the function of the law is precisely to make possible each rational nature’s pursuit of its own ends, consistent with every other rational nature’s being able to do the same. This confirms that the majesty of the moral law depends on the value of the agent as chooser of projects. If rational natures as choosers and pursuers of projects are valuable, or worthy of respect, then the willingness to subject oneself to constraint in the pursuit of one’s own projects out of respect for others’ choosing and acting seems an extra value. But there is no value in a system of mutual constraint which harmonizes the various rational natures’ choosing unless that choosing is itself valuable. For one valueless rational nature to constrain itself out of deference to other valueless rational natures is just one more version of arbitrary self-launching.

Nor can we bootstrap value into the picture by pointing to the achieved whole of all those rational natures practicing mutual arbitrary self-restraint. We might claim that this mutual self-restraint allows every valueless rational nature the best chance of achieving its own valueless goals. But even if that were true, so what? What is there to value in that? It might seem that each self-restraining rational nature acquires nobility by recognizing that “I am no better than he” and acting accordingly. But “I am no better than he” provides a reason for respecting him only if it is presupposed that I am valuable. “I am valuable” and “I am no better than he” together entail that he is valuable. But if neither of us is valuable, then I am indeed no better than he, but that gives me no reason for constraining myself on his behalf (nor no reason not to, of course—the choice, as I have said, is arbitrary). I will concede that there might be value in mutual restraint even between heroic existentialists, if heroic existentialists were valuable. Asserting the value of heroic existentialism actually seems to me the Kantian’s best hope. But a slender one.

There remains, of course, the approach of "classical" Kantianism:

ground the moral law exclusively in the formalism of universalizability, and then simply assert the supreme value of the capacity to follow the moral law. I think this approach is self-defeating. I accept the claim about the value of the capacity to follow the moral law, properly understood. I can read with approval Kant’s most enthusiastic effusions on this theme, such as the famous apostrophe to Duty in the *Critique of Practical Reason.* 56 And I fully agree with Kant that avoiding both self-preference and, in self-regarding choices, present-moment preference is central to morality. What I cannot agree with is the idea that there is supreme worth in following a moral law which consists of nothing but the command to avoid self-preference and present-moment preference. Such a law is not entirely empty; it imposes some constraints on the agent’s practical reasoning, even though it generates no concrete prescriptions or prohibitions on its own. 57 But for reasons we have already canvassed in this section and in SectionII.A, the value of following such a law depends on there being some other values already in the picture. (And once there are other values, the principles against self-or present-moment preference appear, not as fundamental principles, but as corollaries—and of course as indispensable heuristics for checking our moral bona fides.)

Modern Kantians are right (within the Kantian worldview) to focus on the value of rational nature as a power to choose projects. Unless we have an argument for the value of rational natures as choosers of projects, we cannot ground the value of adherence to the moral law. But that means that if rational nature as a power to choose projects is not valuable in the Kantian world, then the Kantian project collapses.

V

I think we have made a strong case that the Kantian agent cannot be specially valuable in the world Kant describes, because there is no way to view her standardless choosing of her projects as a respect-worthy activity. It is either determination by desire or arbitrary self-launching. In truth, nothing that can go on in the Kantian world even deserves to be called “choice.” There is neither agency nor choice without some independent standard of value, a Platonic or a Moorean Good, or perhaps an Aristotelian essence. And yet . . . I said earlier that the question was which picture was most appealing overall. Certainly there are at-

57. To take the strongest example for Kant: the moral law against self-preference is violated by an agent who makes a false promise in order to gain personal advantage as a free rider on the institution of promising. But the same moral law says nothing against an agent who makes a false promise and is genuinely willing (in either sense) that the institution of promising be destroyed.
tractive features of the Kantian picture, which we might hate to give up. Most obviously, there is some appeal in the Kantian picture of the value-conferring agent, who is responsible for whatever value there is in the world.

But it turns out that the Moorean can also recognize a way in which agents “confer value” and are responsible for whatever value there is in the world. Consider a great painting, say Caravaggio’s St. Jerome. The physical object in the Villa Borghese in Rome has no intrinsic value by itself. But if it is viewed appreciatively by an agent, it becomes part of an intrinsically valuable whole. In that sense, the agent can “confer value” on the Caravaggio. What is more, I would say that every intrinsically valuable state or event must include the appreciative participation of an agent. (This is obviously a substantive claim about what has value, and not one I can argue for here. My object for the moment is just to illustrate what a Moorean can plausibly say.) If this is so, then rational nature, which includes the capacity for the appropriate sort of appreciation, is essential to the realization of value in the world. No value is ever realized except with the participation of rational nature. In sum, agents can confer value (in a sense), and they are indispensable to the realization of any value whatsoever.

Still, the basic facts about what is valuable and what is not—the fact that the Caravaggio by itself is not valuable, and likewise the fact that an appropriate complex including an agent and her appreciation of the Caravaggio is valuable—are neither constituted nor affected by the agent’s choice. To be sure, the situation is a bit more complicated than I have suggested. The agent’s frame of mind when she is engaged in a potentially valuable activity may be crucial to its actual value. For example, even though doing mathematics is a potentially valuable activity, the mathematical activity of Rawls’s grass counter, who supports himself by doing mathematics in which he has no nonpecuniary interest, is not (intrinsically) valuable. So, the details of the agent’s choosing activity may well affect the value of what she chooses. But it remains the case that the underlying facts about what activities done in what frames of mind are valuable are not amenable to revision by the agent’s choice. There are standards external to her choice, which she looks to for guidance. And the agent who chooses badly creates no value at all.

58. In 1903, when he wrote Principia Ethica (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), Moore would have held that the painting did have intrinsic value (p. 196). By 1912, in Ethics (London: Oxford University Press, 1912), he was more inclined to believe, as I do, that there is no value without the participation of consciousness (pp. 39, 43).


60. Arguably, this is an overstatement. It could be said that a being is not an “agent” in any sense unless she aims at the Good; and if she aims at the Good, then her doing that is itself valuable in some degree, even if she misapprehends the Good and misses the
But doesn’t looking to external standards make the agent heteronomous? In one sense it does, as I shall explain in the next paragraph; but in a more important sense it does not. Notice how different the Moorean or Platonist orientation-to-the-Good is from the heteronomies of determination by desire or subservience to God. What is most objectionable, from Kant’s point of view, in being determined by desire is that our desires are arbitrary, contingent. They result from the accidents of our physical constitution and our sensuous nature. Similarly, to obey God’s commands just because he is powerful is to be motivated by fear, which is one motive of a sensuously affected nature. But if there is a Good, it is not arbitrary in the way our desires are. Nor is the agent who loves and seeks the Good motivated by fear. The Platonist or Moorean agent can be thoroughly “autonomous” in the sense that she recognizes the moral law—which is “Seek the Good”—and obeys it for its own sake. She needs no incentive, negative or positive, based in empirical desire. She doesn’t invent the content of the law, but her reason and nothing else recognizes the law and provides the incentive. In that crucial sense, she gives herself the law. Paul Guyer writes, “Kant’s idea that human morality is human autonomy, the governance of our freedom by a supreme principle of morality that we generate out of our own reason, is a welcome liberation from the idea that we can govern our behavior only by fear of punishment or hope of reward from a human or superhuman lawgiver.” But this suggests a false dichotomy. Generating the content of the law out of our own reason is not a necessary precondition of nondetermination by sensuous motives. Kant himself implicitly recognizes that a Platonist or Moorean view is not heteronomous in the most objectionable way, when he concedes that of the theories he rejects as heteronomous, ontological perfectionism is the best. The gravamen of his complaint against such a theory is that we cannot give it an adequate content. If this is a problem, it does not seem to be a problem about heteronomy.

But what Kant might say further, and what Rawls definitely does say, is that a Platonist or Moorean theory is heteronomous because its “principles obtain in virtue of relations among objects the nature of which is not affected or determined by the conception of the person.” Now, it is true that the fundamental principles of a Moorean theory do not depend on any “conception of the person.” But it is a consequence

mark. I am sympathetic to this suggestion, which entails that agency is valuable in itself (in a sense). Even so, this is not a Kantian suggestion, since it makes the value of agency depend precisely on its orientation to an independent Good.

61. Guyer, p. 4.
of my argument that we cannot generate the moral law out of a conception of the person alone. The person needs standards external to herself if her choosing is to be valuable—indeed, if she is to do anything properly called “choosing” at all. The upshot is that the only appealing conception of the person—as an agent who chooses—itself excludes the possibility of generating the moral law out of the conception of the person alone.64

Let me conclude by commenting on an argument against perfectionism advanced by Allen Wood. Wood begins by saying that when an agent judges an action to be good or obligatory, then she must at least be exhibiting respect for her own rational capacity to make this judgment, and if she regards herself as bound, she must be presupposing the authority over herself of her rational capacity.65 So far I agree, although as we shall see, I interpret these claims somewhat differently from Wood. Wood continues: “If my recognition of an obligation is supposed to be based on something over and above the dignity of my legislating reason (such as the value of objective perfection or divine goodness), then a further ground would be needed to explain why my will values that object. If that ground is distinct from my respect for rational nature as self-determining, it thereby renders my acceptance of the obligation conditional on some other volition of mine, and the categorical nature of the obligation has been forfeited.”66 I have two objections to this. First, the categorical nature of the obligation is undermined only if the “other volition” is empirical and contingent (as the choice of the word “volition” suggests). But the motivation to promote the Good is no more empirical or contingent than is Kantian respect for the law or Kantian valuing of rational nature itself. It is equally mysterious, perhaps, but Kant famously insists on the mysteriousness of moral motivation.67 The second objection goes deeper. Wood is right that we respect and defer to the self-governing aspect of reason. But reason’s concern with the Good is not something “over and above” or “distinct from” that self-governing aspect. What we respect in our reason is precisely that it is a faculty of self-governance in the light of the Good. Nothing less could give it any claim to special value or authority.

64. Once again, I should make room for the Aristotelian. I doubt that an Aristotelian essence counts as a “conception of the person” in Rawls’s sense. But the Aristotelian might nonetheless claim to ground morality in a conception of the person in a different sense.
65. Wood, p. 162.
66. Ibid., pp. 162–63.