

### A Plausible Kantian Argument Against Moralism

Being moralistic—roughly, being overly concerned with making moral judgments or being uncharitable in the judgments one makes—is generally regarded as a vice. Clarifying the concept of moralism, and capturing why it is morally objectionable, is a project that has gained increasing attention from philosophers in recent years.<sup>1</sup> It is standard to think that at least one component of moralism, though not necessarily the whole of it, is a tendency to be overly harsh or negative in one’s moral assessments of others.<sup>2</sup> An argument against this moralistic tendency can be found in Immanuel Kant’s moral philosophy. Kant’s basic idea is that passing moralistic judgments on others’ character is both a sign of fundamentally bad character in oneself and an obstacle to moral self-improvement. This line of argument can be largely separated from the more controversial elements of Kant’s moral system, to provide even non-Kantians with a plausible, but not obvious, rationale for avoiding moralistic judgments.

Casual readers of Kant’s ethics may find it to be a surprising source for an argument against moralistic judgment of others. After all, there are many ways in which Kant’s ethics is quite demanding and even harsh. It undeniably imposes strict and “unconditional” demands on every moral agent, so it may seem natural enough to suppose that when it comes to assessing others, Kant would think we ought to make special efforts to be equally strict in assigning praise, blame, and overall judgments of moral character. But Kant’s own elucidations of duties to others defeat this supposition. Not only does he defend specific duties to avoid moral nit-picking, malicious gossip, and ridicule, but he also denies that duties of beneficence and respect depend on our moral assessment of their recipients and, more generally, recommends trying to view others charitably. Kant is explicit enough in defending a strongly antimoralistic stance regarding others’ character, but it is nevertheless worth looking more

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Jane Bennett and Michael Shapiro (eds.), *The Politics of Moralizing* (New York: Routledge, 2002); and the special issue of the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (vol. 22, no. 2, 2005) on the subject of moralism.

<sup>2</sup>This is a component of moralism in Julia Driver, “Moralism,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 22 (2005): 137-51; and Robert Fullinwider, “On Moralism,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 22 (2005): 105-20.

closely at how Kant arrives at these antimoralistic duties. An examination of the details of Kant's antimoralistic position is fruitful not only for commentators already familiar with and attracted to Kant's ethics, but even for those who find Kant's overall moral philosophy implausible or uninteresting.

For Kantians, Kant's discussion of these duties helps to illuminate how a "metaphysics of morals," or set of specific moral requirements, can be derived from the Categorical Imperative, or basic principle of morality. It illustrates how Kant intends claims about human nature to play a role in such a transition from basic principles that apply to all rational beings to a set of rules for "humans as such."<sup>3</sup> It also connects the duties to avoid moralistic judgments with a more general duty to cultivate one's own good moral character, relying on positions Kant lays out in several texts, especially *The Metaphysics of Morals*, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, and the *Lectures on Ethics* transcribed by Kant's students.

For readers unconcerned with such details of Kant's ethical system, there is a simpler reason to take interest in what Kant says on this issue; namely, Kant's position provides basically compelling arguments against moralistic judgment of others, especially against negative comparison of others' character with one's own, based on the effect that moralism has on one's own prospects for moral improvement. These arguments are insightful, and can be detached from the most controversial elements of Kantian ethics to stand as plausible and instructive in their own right.

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<sup>3</sup>Kant describes this transition as his project in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, and frequently describes the duties developed in that work as duties to "humanity as such" (*Akademie* pages 6:386, 395, 451, 464, 466, 469). References to Kant's works, including *The Metaphysics of Morals*, will henceforth be given parenthetically, using the abbreviations and editions given below. Volume and page numbers refer to the standard Royal Prussian Academy Editions of Kant's work, except that references to *Critique of Pure Reason* will be given in the common A and B edition pagination.

Anth: *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

CPureR: *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965).

CPrR: *Critique of Practical Reason*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

G: *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Thomas E. Hill, Jr. and Arnulf Zweig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

LE: *Lectures on Ethics*, ed. Peter Heath and Jerome Schneewind (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

MS: *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

R: *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

### 1. A Morally Stringent, But Not Moralistic, System

Kant's ethical theory undeniably places significant demands on moral agents. Moral duties, according to Kant, are unconditional requirements of an agent's own power of practical reason, so they must be given priority over all other considerations. Giving morality its proper weight is destined always to be a struggle for us, because we humans are not purely rational, but also are subject to inclinations based on physical and psychological needs and desires, so we must regard morality as "an ever continuing striving for the better" (R 6:48).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Kant consistently maintains, only people who persist in this struggle are worthy of happiness. Not only does he equate virtue and the worthiness to be happy (CPrR 5:110, CPureR A810/B838), he also quite explicitly denies that someone lacking virtue deserves happiness (G 4:393, CPrR 5:61). This is consistent with the description of the "highest good" as happiness distributed in proportion to virtue, which Kant gives in several works (CPrR 5:110-132, R 6:5-6, CPureR A810-819/B838-847). Given that Kant thinks that each of us must embark on a project of unending struggle for virtue, and that the price of failing to do this includes being unworthy of happiness, it would be hard to deny that Kant's ethics imposes rigorous demands on every moral agent.

The picture so far lends itself naturally to an assumption that, in the interest of accurate moral accounting, we also ought to judge others' characters without leniency, and base our treatment of them on our judgment of their worthiness to be happy. These and similar elements of Kant's moral system have led some commentators to address its appearance of moralism. Arnulf Zweig notes that Kant's ethics is "a severe morality" and grants that "[t]here is Kant the moralist and Kant the antimoralist," but Zweig does not think Kant's moralism includes a demand to pass judgment on others' character.<sup>5</sup> Allen Wood says that "Kant's common reputation associates him closely with a harshly 'moralistic' attitude toward life," and explains that moralists are people who "revel in the sharp separation of good from evil."<sup>6</sup> Wood then briefly explains that Kant thinks this "sharp separation" is sometimes the appropriate way to view our own possible actions, but is not how we ought to view other people. Thomas Hill, Jr. similarly grants that "[i]t must be admitted that Kant often sounds moralistic when writing about the immorality of others," but then uses the Categorical Imperative and the duties described in

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<sup>4</sup>See also CPrR 5:122-123, MS 6:409.

<sup>5</sup>Arnulf Zweig, "Reflections on the Enduring Value of Kant's Ethics," in Thomas E. Hill, Jr. (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Kant's Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), pp. 255-64, at p. 256.

<sup>6</sup>Allen Wood, *Kantian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 270.

*The Metaphysics of Morals* as evidence that Kant's ethics actually does not "urge us to treat people in accord with our opinion of their moral merit or lack thereof."<sup>7</sup> These discussions of a general requirement to refrain from passing moral judgment on others' character are all fairly brief (Hill wrote an entire article on "Kant's Anti-Moralistic Strain," but most of the article is specifically concerned with whether Kant's theory of punishment in the *Rechtslehre* is compatible with this general antimoralism).<sup>8</sup> In the case of Wood and Hill, this seems to be because they take it as obvious, and just quickly note, that the Categorical Imperative, especially in its humanity formulation, requires treating all minimally rational agents equally, as having the same worth or dignity.<sup>9</sup> Without denying any of their claims, it is nevertheless worth digging deeper into Kant's position. His derivation of specific antijudgmental, antimoralistic duties illustrates his view on the role of human psychology in generating a metaphysics of morals, and draws connections between the accounts of moral character and human nature in several of his works. Despite this useful exegetical role that Kant's antimoralistic duties can play, it is also the case that a central idea of Kant's antimoralism, namely, that moralistic judgment of others is an impediment to one's own self-improvement, can be largely detached from its Kantian framework, to serve as a plausible and instructive point even to readers who are not interested in details of Kant scholarship or are skeptical of his overall approach to ethics.

But it is worth beginning with the obvious—the ways in which Kant makes clear in *The Metaphysics of Morals* that one's basic duties to others do not depend on the moral state of the others' wills. Kant says that each of us has a duty to adopt an end of promoting others' happiness, and this duty is not conditional on first judging them to be worthy of happiness (6: 385-388). He calls the duty to promote others' happiness a "duty of love" (MS 6:401-402, 450-458), but he specifies that this does not mean it is a duty to have a feeling of love, because that would make it impossible for the duty to extend to all people. One's particular feelings are not directly under one's control, so one cannot have a duty to feel love for a given individual (MS 6:401), and anyway "our species is not particularly lovable" (MS 6:402). Instead, our duty is one of "practical love" or performing acts of beneficence, and it "is a duty of all human beings toward one another, whether or not one finds them worthy of

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<sup>7</sup>Thomas E. Hill, Jr., *Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant's Moral Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 177.

<sup>8</sup>Hill makes the general antimoralistic points in *ibid.*, pp. 177-80, then attempts to reconcile them with Kant's retributivist theory of punishment (pp. 180-95).

<sup>9</sup>Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 138-39; Hill, *Dignity and Practical Reason*, pp. 177-78.

love” (MS 6:450).<sup>10</sup> Besides duties of love or beneficence, Kant’s other basic category of duty to others consists of duties of respect. The respect that is required, like the love that is morally required, is not a feeling, but instead a kind of action. We cannot always have an active feeling of respect for everyone, since “At times one cannot, it is true, help inwardly looking down on some in comparison to others” (MS 6:463). Nevertheless, we are required to show respect as “the maxim of limiting our self-esteem by the dignity of humanity in another person, and so as respect in the practical sense” (MS 6:449). Kant repeatedly says that each of us is “bound to respect every other” and is “under obligation to acknowledge, in a practical way, the dignity of humanity in every other human being” (MS 6:462). Kant clarifies that a “vicious man” is no exception, but must be shown respect “even though by his deeds he makes himself unworthy of it” (MS 6:463). So our duties to treat others with respect, like our duties to promote their happiness, should not be based on our assessment of their characters.

There is one obvious reason why Kant maintains this, namely, that we simply are not in an epistemological position to make such assessments. Kant consistently maintains that we can never be certain of our judgments that a person’s character is good (G 4:407, R 6:47-48, 71) or evil (R 6:20), even when that person is oneself. We can only observe actions, not motives, so character can only be inferred. Kant does, of course, suppose that there can be such a thing as a good will or its opposite, and knowledge of the overall moral condition of our wills is possible for God, who “penetrates to the intelligible ground of the heart” (R 6:48). But it is not possible for us, so when it comes to our duties to others, Kant does not demand that we base our treatment on (impossible) assessments of their character.<sup>11</sup>

But Kant’s opposition to moralism consists of more than just denying that duties of beneficence and respect depend on the moral state of their recipients, and depends on more than our inability to discern others’ mo-

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<sup>10</sup>See also MS 6:402.

<sup>11</sup>This is not to deny that Kant thinks the moral permissibility of others’ *actions* can be discerned, and should substantially affect how we interact with them. Kant is quite confident that when it comes to actions, ordinary human reason “knows very well how to distinguish what is good from what is evil, consistent or inconsistent with duty, in all cases that present themselves” (G 4:404). So we should not help others attain immoral ends, nor tempt them to immorality (MS 6:388, 487-488, 394). More obviously, Kant maintains that the point of a state and a legal system is to protect individuals from being harmed by some identifiable types of wrong actions (MS 6:211-372). But he makes clear that the obligations and violations that are subject to external enforcement are all cases of “the external and indeed practical relation of one person to another, insofar as their actions, as deeds, can have (direct or indirect) influence on each other,” not of trying to ascertain motives or maxims (MS 6:229-231).

tives and character. He also embraces and defends the idea that we actively ought to resist the temptations to be overly judgmental, to find fault in others, and to express negative opinions of them or spread malicious gossip (MS 6:463-468). Not only should we avoid publicly defaming others (“even if what is said is true”), we also should resist the urge toward “spying on the morals of others” and should “throw the veil of benevolence over their faults” (MS 6:466). And although “the duties to one’s fellow human beings arising from the respect due to them are expressed only negatively” through prohibiting lack of respect (MS 6:465), these negative duties include not only prohibitions of disrespectful actions, but also requirements to try to avoid falling into habits or attitudes that will lead to disrespectful actions. So we ought to avoid the tendency to “take scandal at what is merely unconventional ... but otherwise good in itself” (MS 6:464), the inclination “to be always on top,” which is Kant’s definition of arrogance (MS 6:465), and the “immediate inclination, with no particular aim in view, to bring into the open something prejudicial to respect for others” or drag others down (MS 6:466). Kant even goes so far as to say that we ought to tolerate others’ illusions of their own virtue, in contrast to the quite intolerant attitude one must take toward one’s own complacent illusions (“the veil by which self-love conceals our moral defects must be torn away”; Anth 7:153). This contrast between the proper attitudes toward one’s own versus other people’s delusions of virtue nicely captures the difference between the strict and unyielding demands that Kant’s ethics places on an agent herself, and the equally strict demand that she must avoid moralistic judgment of others.<sup>12</sup>

Our poor epistemological position regarding others’ character is not enough to explain Kant’s zeal in opposing moralism, or the level of detail in his catalogue of antimoralistic duties. Further examination shows how the structure of his ethical system and his basic account of human moral psychology contribute significantly to his antimoralistic position.

## 2. Deeper Reasons for Kant’s Opposition to Moralism

Kant’s ethical system is based on a fundamental moral principle, the Categorical Imperative, which applies necessarily to all rational beings, but which must be applied to human circumstances to derive more specific duties for us.<sup>13</sup> Thomas Hill, Jr. has suggested that since the Categorical

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<sup>12</sup>I thank a referee for *Social Theory and Practice* for pointing out this passage, and noting that even the demand to avoid moralistic judgment of others is quite strict.

<sup>13</sup>Although there are several formulations of the Categorical Imperative, Kant claims the different versions of the Categorical Imperative are “at bottom, only so many ways of formulating the same law” (G 4:436). I am putting aside questions about the plausibility of this claim, as not relevant to this discussion.

Imperative, in its “humanity as an end in itself” formulation, demands that “every rational person with a will” must be treated as an end in herself, it supports an antimoralistic or antijudgmental strand in Kant’s thought.<sup>14</sup> Allen Wood similarly says, “human dignity, properly understood, rules out the very idea of any comparison or competition regarding self-worth,” and that rather than compare worth we must “attribute absolute worth to every rational being.”<sup>15</sup> It is natural enough to think that if the basic principle of morality demands equal moral status for all minimally rational beings, then any and all of the specific duties derived from that principle must embody an antimoralistic egalitarianism toward all humans, regardless of our suspicions about their moral character. However, there are reasons not to rest easy with this as the end of the story regarding why Kant is so opposed to moralistic judgment of others. For one thing, there have been some doubts raised by commentators in recent years about whether Kant really means the humanity formulation to say that every minimally rational being with a will is an end in herself—instead, perhaps only people who are committed to morality or have a good will are really ends in themselves.<sup>16</sup> Even if one rejects this non-traditional reading of the humanity formulation, it is still worth looking more closely at the different features of Kant’s ethical system that drive him toward a strongly antimoralistic stance, because this provides a richer picture of his ethics and because one can find in his thinking a plausible argument for avoiding the common human tendency to pass harsh moral judgment on others.

To begin understanding the justification for Kant’s antimoralistic duties, or any Kantian duties, it is necessary to look at the overall structure of Kant’s ethical system. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* is so named because in that work, Kant takes himself to be identifying and justifying the “supreme principle of morality” (G 4:392) in order to lay a solid foundation for a more complete and specific system of moral duties, which Kant calls a “metaphysics of morals” (G 4:391-392). The later work, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, is Kant’s attempt to develop this more complete system, by applying the Categorical Imperative to “the particular nature of human beings” in order to “see what can be inferred” about our particular duties to one another (MS 6:217). There is an important difference in the scope of application of the Categorical Imperative and the scope of a “metaphysics of morals,” or a more specific sys-

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<sup>14</sup>Hill, *Dignity and Practical Reason*, p. 178. See also Wood, *Kant’s Ethical Thought*, pp. 138-39.

<sup>15</sup>Wood, *Kant’s Ethical Thought*, p. 138. See also Wood, *Kantian Ethics*, pp. 270-71.

<sup>16</sup>See Richard Dean, *The Value of Humanity in Kant’s Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006); and Richard Dean, “The Formula of Humanity as an End in Itself,” in Hill, Jr. (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Kant’s Ethics*, pp. 83-101.

tem of moral rules. The Categorical Imperative is meant to govern the actions of any rational being, and Kant thinks that there may well be other species of rational beings besides humans (Anth 7:392). The same basic moral principle applies to all rational beings, but the exact duties that follow from the Categorical Imperative are different, depending on the features of the beings to whose actions the principle is being applied. Humans, for example, can physically damage one another fairly easily, are prone to elevate their own worth compared to others', and can experience intoxication by consuming various substances. Another type of rational being might not share these traits, or other features that affect our human duties, so a system of duties for another species might not be identical to the duties that apply to humans. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant takes "principles of obligation for human beings as such toward one another" to be the substance of the metaphysics of morals.<sup>17</sup> This fits with his description of duties to others as "Duties to Others Merely as Human Beings,"<sup>18</sup> and with his statement that after a metaphysics of morals is complete, the work that is left to be done is just "applying it" to individual humans of different degrees of "moral purity or depravity," different levels of social sophistication and education, or similar "differences in rank, age, sex, health, prosperity, and so forth" (MS 6:468-469). The basic approach Kant takes in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, then, is to begin from the Categorical Imperative and derive duties that humans have toward other humans "as such," leaving aside differential treatment based on specific characteristics of individuals.

Kant follows through on this proposal to put aside individual idiosyncrasies, including different degrees of commitment to morality, and to focus instead on "humans as such" in developing his metaphysics of morals. In the conclusion of his discussion of duties of love for others, Kant emphasizes that the vices of some individual humans do not show that the whole species of humanity is "detestable" (MS 6:461). Because of this kind of consideration, we "must regard human beings as in a rightful condition" as far as their moral character goes, so we must leave it to a judicial system to punish wrong actions, rather than succumbing to the temptation to seek revenge based on others' moral character (MS 6:460). The idea of leaving aside individuals' character carries over into Kant's discussion in the next section of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, of duties to respect others. Kant says that human beings are elevated "above all other beings in the world that are not human beings" and so "respect must be shown to every other human being" (MS 6:462). Even though

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<sup>17</sup>This is consistent with the view proposed by Mary Gregor that Kant's metaphysics of morals is meant basically to establish "a system of the duties which all men have merely insofar as they are men." Mary Gregor, *Laws of Freedom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), p. 17.

<sup>18</sup>Section heading, MS 6:448.

some individual wrongdoer may “make himself unworthy” of respectful treatment, one cannot withdraw such treatment because doing so dishonors “humanity itself” and will “make a spectator blush with shame at belonging to the species that can be treated that way” (MS 6:463). When dealing with individual humans who act wrongly, we ought to remember that even a vicious human can improve, and that ignoring this “is not consistent with the idea of a human being, who as such (as a moral being) can never lose entirely his predisposition to the good” (MS 6:464). Scandalous gossip is contrary to duties of respect because it will “cast a shadow of worthlessness over our race itself” (MS 6:466).

So, one reason the duties enumerated in *The Metaphysics of Morals* do not demand differential treatment for individuals based on their moral character is that the duties are all designed to apply to humans as such, leaving aside individual differences, including differences in moral commitment. Kant leaves aside more specific questions about how to deal with the vicious, just as he leaves aside other questions about how to deal with particular individuals’ traits (MS 6:468-469). Although this leaves open the possibility that casuistry may require differential treatment based on individuals’ degrees of moral development,<sup>19</sup> the basic duties to humans as such do not include this type of differential treatment.

But this structural rationale for avoiding moralistic treatment of specific individuals is still not a complete account of Kant’s antimoralistic views. There is another aspect of Kant’s moral thought that provides additional insight into and justification of his general antimoralistic stance and his specific duties opposed to moralism. This aspect is his basic account of human moral psychology, especially of the fundamental difference between good and bad moral character. An examination of his account of character shows that passing moralistic judgments is a sign of the most fundamental type of character flaw in Kantian ethics, namely, the flaw of placing higher priority on one’s own inclinations than on moral requirements. Even worse, moralism also blocks one’s own moral progress toward good character.

To see why this is so, a closer look at Kant’s account of human nature is needed, beginning with the tendencies toward what Kant calls “self-love” and “self-conceit.” Kant maintains that the predisposition to self-love is a basic part of human nature (R 6:26-27). Self-love, for Kant, is not a feeling of affection for oneself, but rather is a kind of regard for one’s self-interest, or for “all the inclinations together (which can be brought into a tolerable system and the satisfaction of which is then

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<sup>19</sup>There seems to be no other conceptual space for Kant to include ideas about fostering the moral development of children, let alone wrongdoers. See Kant’s addendum to *The Metaphysics of Morals* (MS 6:477-485).

called one's own happiness)" (CPrR 5:73). Kant thinks there is nothing intrinsically wrong with self-love, as long as this tendency is kept within the limits of morality, and one in fact has a duty to meet at least one's own "true needs" (MS 6:432, 452). Self-love becomes immoral only when one places such a high priority on one's own inclinations that one treats satisfying them as one's most basic and overriding principle. This state, in which "self-love makes itself lawgiving and the unconditional practical principle," is what Kant calls "self-conceit" (CPrR 5:74). Although the Categorical Imperative is not opposed to self-love, but "only restricts it, as natural and active in us even prior to the moral law, to the condition of agreement with this law," the Categorical Imperative "strikes down self-conceit altogether, since all claims to esteem for oneself that precede accord with the moral law are null and quite unwarranted" (CPrR 5:73). So, self-love is no cause for blame and no sign of bad moral character, unless it is elevated above moral concerns, to the status of an unconditional principle of action.

But the blameless propensity to self-love does not easily recognize limits, according to Kant, because it is not part of human nature to recognize any absolute standard for how well off one is. Instead of being content with some moderate amount of satisfaction of one's own inclinations, "only in comparison with others does one judge oneself to be happy or unhappy" (R 6:27). Kant echoes this thought in the later *Metaphysics of Morals*, saying "the standard we use to see how well off we are is not the intrinsic worth of our own well-being but how it compares to that of others" (MS 6:458-459). Kant emphasizes this human predisposition toward comparison in many texts, including *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, where he describes our "mania for honor" or the desire that others hold us in high regard (Anth 7:272), and "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose," in which he describes the "unsocial sociability" of humans and their need to compete for status among their fellows. From this need to compare, there develops "the inclination to gain worth in the opinion of others" and a "constant anxiety that others might be striving for ascendancy," and from this anxiety there arises "gradually an unjust desire to acquire superiority for oneself over others" (R 6:27). So although the desire for one's own happiness is blameless, it is from its root bound up with tendencies to compare oneself to others and to elevate the principle of seeking one's own happiness beyond its rightful limits.

By exerting pressure on each of us to inflate the importance of the satisfaction of our own inclinations above all other priorities, the drive to compare oneself to others and to try to exceed them (in one's own assessment, if not in reality) puts an inextirpable pressure on individuals to seek to expand their own "blameless" self-love into self-conceit, the

morally culpable prioritizing of self-interest above morality. Thus the urge to compare oneself to others leads to fundamentally bad moral character. Moral character is, on Kant's account, a matter of one's most basic priorities or principles. We all are disposed to pursue our own inclinations, and even to elevate their importance to the status of an overriding principle. But each of us also has a "moral predisposition" to accept and act on moral principles, and "if no other incentive were at work against it, he would also incorporate it into his supreme maxim as sufficient determination of his power of choice, that is, he would be morally good" (R 6:36). Each of us is free to choose whether to give priority to moral requirements or to satisfying inclinations, and moral character is a matter of this choice. So the difference "between whether the human is good or evil" depends on the order of "subordination" of the principles of self-interest and morality, or "which of the two he makes the condition of the other" (R 6:36).<sup>20</sup> Self-love is no cause for blame when constrained by morality, but, "when adopted as the principle of all our maxims, is precisely the source of all evil" (R 6:45). Since the tendency to compare oneself to others leads us to elevate our own happiness over other priorities, it leads to self-conceit, or fundamentally bad moral character.

In the remainder of this section, I will explain Kant's view that moralism, as one form of comparing oneself to others instead of to an objective standard (in this case, the moral law), is like other forms of comparison in that it is opposed to good moral character. Moralism, in the form of fault-finding, malicious gossip, and harsh judgments of character, is a way of diminishing others' status in comparison to one's own, with regard to moral standing. This "moral self-conceit," which "lays claim to more perfections than are due to it" (LE 27:357), shows that an individual's need to compare herself to others has exceeded its proper bounds. So these types of moralistic behavior are signs of a fundamentally bad character. But, even beyond being an indication of bad character, passing moralistic judgments on others also impedes the power of moral principles to motivate an individual, and so impedes her moral improvement. Moralism has this effect because the excessively moralistic person dulls her own receptivity to the feeling of *Achtung*, or respect for moral law, which is morality's representative in the realm of feeling. To see how this is so, it is necessary to look more closely at this feeling of *Achtung*.

Kant's main use of *Achtung* is to describe a particular moral feeling of deep "respect" for the overwhelming power of moral law.<sup>21</sup> The feeling of *Achtung* arises from each agent's recognition of the unconditional nature

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<sup>20</sup>See also R 6:44, 51.

<sup>21</sup>At least two other German words in Kant's texts are sometimes translated as "respect." One is *Respekt* and the other is *Verehrung*.

of morality's commands. Because they are unconditional, moral principles have the normative power to outweigh all contrary inclinations. So moral law "infringes without end upon self-conceit, which prescribes as laws the subjective conditions of self-love" (CPrR 5:74). Because it defeats the tendency to regard our own inclinations as supremely important, the recognition of morality's overriding force produces a feeling that is, on the one hand, "merely negative," because "what in our own judgment infringes upon our self-conceit humiliates" (CPrR 5:74), and the moral law may well produce a "feeling of displeasure" insofar as it produces a "lowering of the pretensions to self-esteem" (CPrR 5:78-79). But the feeling of *Achtung* has a positive aspect as well. Kant says, "On the other hand, however, since this constraint is exercised only by the lawgiving of his own reason, it also contains something elevating" (CPrR 5:80-81). In fact, this awesome power of morality is so elevating that "once one has laid self-conceit aside and allowed practical influence to that [*Achtung*], one can in turn never get enough of contemplating the majesty of the law" (CPrR 5:78). *Achtung* is uplifting, insofar as it is "an elevation of the moral" (CPrR 5:79) and through it "the soul believes itself elevated above itself and its frail nature" (CPrR 5:77). So the feeling of *Achtung* for moral law has both a negative aspect, insofar as it destroys pretensions to the supreme importance of one's own desires and goals, and a positive aspect, insofar as it directs one's attention upward, away from one's own self-love and toward a transcendent (but self-legislated) moral principle.

*Achtung* plays an indispensable role in moral motivation, on Kant's picture. Because we are subject to inclinations and feelings, we must have a feeling available to counteract our tendency to self-conceit, and to motivate us to act on moral principles. If we were beings like God, acting only on pure reason, then we would act on moral principles without the need for any corresponding feeling. Kant says, "if I were solely a member of the world of understanding, all my actions would conform perfectly to the principle of the autonomy of a pure will" (G 4:453). But since self-conceit provides a constant obstacle to moral motivation, we must have a "predisposition" to a moral feeling that counteracts self-conceit and supports moral action, if "good character" is to be possible for us (R 6:27). We still must choose our priorities, and our moral character depends on whether "the free power of choice incorporates moral feeling into its maxim," but as creatures subject to influences of sense, we need to have a moral feeling (*Achtung*) available if we are to have any option besides acting on our strongest inclinations (R 6:27). This central role of feeling does not undermine the "moral worth" of our actions, because *Achtung* is unlike other feelings, which are all contingent and present themselves "as an object of the will prior to the moral law" (CPrR 5:74). In contrast, *Achtung* is the only feeling whose cause "lies in pure practical reason," being produced

by moral law itself when a finite rational being recognizes the “relative weightiness” of the moral law, or its power to outweigh inclination (CPrR 5:75-76). Choosing to attend to the feeling of *Achtung*, and to act on it, is the only way to escape the pull of self-conceit, and is the basis of overall good moral character for beings like us, who are subject to inclinations.

Given that the source of *Achtung* is the Categorical Imperative itself, and its power to overbalance inclinations, it is perhaps surprising that Kant maintains that humans can arouse this same feeling of *Achtung*. But Kant does repeatedly say this, and explains that the feature of a person that inspires *Achtung* is her commitment to the Categorical Imperative’s moral demands.<sup>22</sup> In a famous passage from the *Critique of Practical Reason* (5:77-78), Kant says that “before a humble common man in whom I perceive uprightness of character in a higher degree than I am aware of in myself, my spirit bows,” because “*Achtung* is a tribute that we cannot refuse to pay to merit.” The source of *Achtung* for persons is the same as *Achtung* for moral law, namely, the power of morality to outweigh all of a person’s contrary inclinations. The humble but virtuous man is an example that “holds before me a law that strikes down my self-conceit when I compare it with my conduct, and I see observance of the law and its practicability proved before me in fact” (CPrR 5:77). Of course, we can never be sure that a person held up as a good example truly has a good will, since we can never observe character directly, but this does not disprove the value of moral examples. Even though “in human beings, all good is defective,” and so the moral exemplar may conceal some “impurity,” the real purpose of the example is to direct our attention toward the moral law within us (CPrR 5:77). Even the example of Jesus as an “ideal of moral perfection” (R 6:61) really serves only to direct our attention to an idea of possible moral perfection that “is present as model already in our own reason” (R 6:62). So, *Achtung* for people who provide good moral examples has the same source and serves the same purposes as *Achtung* for moral law itself, namely, the purposes of reminding us of the unconditional force of morality’s demands, showing us that our own interests are not all that matters, and elevating us by demonstrating the possibility of acting morally despite contrary inclinations.

So good examples have a role in moral life and moral education, but their use arouses inherent opposition from human nature, namely, from self-conceit itself. Because examples of virtue are humbling, both in raising the possibility that others have superior moral character and in directing our attention away from our own interests, we have some natural tendency to reject them. This is one source of overly moralistic fault-finding. We “give way” to a feeling of *Achtung* “only reluctantly with

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<sup>22</sup>Besides the passages cited here, see also MS 6:464, G 4:435, 440.

regard to a human being. We try to discover something that could lighten the burden of it for us, some fault in him to compensate us for the humiliation that comes to us through such an example” (CPrR 5:77). Although Kant maintains that examples should play a role in moral training and education,<sup>23</sup> he also thinks that presenting someone as a role model is prone to arouse envy and “hate” (MS 6:480, LE 27:349). Kant maintains that the emphasis in displaying good examples should be on providing a reminder of the moral law and “proof that it is possible to act in conformity with duty” rather than as a standard for comparison (MS 6:480).

So, Kant thinks there are two basic kinds of possible reactions to good moral examples. One can react positively, being uplifted and inspired, or one can react negatively to a threat to one’s self-conceit, feeling resentment, envy, and hate. The second type of reaction leads to moralistic fault-finding, and is both a sign of poor character and an obstacle to the potential use of good examples as an aid to moral self-improvement. Kant says that if we observe real life “arguments about the moral worth of this or that action by which the moral character of some person is to be made out,” we will find that “in these appraisals, one can often see revealed the character of the person himself who judges” (CPrR 5:153). The self-conceited individual tries to argue away “all virtue from human beings in order to make it an empty name,” while those who give a proper weight to morality wish to preserve the force of good examples, and so “where there is a presumption of uprightness they would like to remove even the least spot from the determining ground” (CPrR 5:154). *Lectures on Ethics* paints much the same picture. When one sees that someone else has “greater worth,” this can either lead one to improve oneself, or else to “try to diminish them,” but “since the latter comes easiest, men will sooner diminish the others’ perfections than enhance their own” (LE 27:436-437). Since “the measuring rod furnished by other people is highly contingent,” most people are likely to find imagined flaws in a good moral example, leading to “moral egoism,” or thinking too highly of their own moral state (LE 27:359). Finding fault with apparent good examples stems from self-conceit and the urge to be superior to others, and this moralistic reaction, in turn, diminishes the feeling of *Achtung* produced by the exemplar, so that the example will not shake the observer’s prioritizing of her own satisfaction. An opportunity to make the force of moral requirements vivid, and to overcome self-conceit, is lost. Kant puts the point neatly in *Lectures on Ethics* (27:294):

So we must not seek out the flaws and weaknesses in the life of a Socrates, for example, since it helps us not at all, and is actually harmful to us. For if we have examples of moral imperfection before us, we can flatter ourselves at our own moral imperfection. This

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<sup>23</sup>CPrR 5:153-155, 158-160, MS 6:480.

desire to hunt for faults betrays something ill-mannered and envious in seeing the morality that shines in others, when we do not possess it ourselves.

Similarly, in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (6:466), when Kant says that malicious gossip about others' bad deeds or poor character "diminishes our [*Achtung*] for humanity as such, so as to finally cast a shadow over our race itself ... or to dull one's moral feeling," he means the "moral feeling" to be *Achtung* itself, rather than some type of sympathy or benevolent feeling. By undermining our predisposition to feel *Achtung* for positive moral examples, then, moralistic fault-finding and envy promote a complacent lack of moral improvement.

Besides the tendency to find faults in good moral examples, another moralistic tendency also both displays poor character and prevents improvement. This is the tendency, when comparing oneself to others, to seek out others whose behavior provides standards that are too easy to meet. "Even among those with whom they wish to compare themselves, they always choose the worst and not the best, for there they are most able to shine forth" (LE 27:436). Looking for bad examples is a moralistic flaw in the same family as nitpicking good examples—both are cases of trying to make oneself seem better in comparison to others. Both are cases that lead Kant to warn that "moral self-esteem, which is founded on the worth of humanity, must never be based on comparison with others, but only on comparison with the moral law itself" (LE 27:349).

Furthermore, moralism is especially tempting because it provides a counterfeit of the genuinely moral feeling of *Achtung*. *Achtung*, in its positive aspect, is a feeling of elevation above one's own worse nature. It directs someone to an "inner freedom to release himself from the impetuous importunity of inclinations" (CPrR 5:161) and can "fill the mind with an ever increasing awe and reverence" (CPrR 5:162). But the positive feeling comes only through struggle, through overcoming one's natural tendency toward excessive self-love. And this struggle often requires giving up some ends that one otherwise might value greatly. Moralism is an easier alternative. It allows one to feel a kind of elevation, but only an often unjustified feeling of elevation above others, instead of a genuine elevation above one's own worse nature. Instead of comparing oneself to the demands of morality, one can instead measure oneself by the often less demanding standard of others' behavior. This more easily obtained feeling of false moral superiority is a counterfeit of genuine moral feeling.

### 3. A Plausible Argument?

Some of Kant's positions on particular moral issues strike many readers as repugnant, and some aspects of his moral theory strike many readers

as implausible. And I do not doubt that some of the more controversial aspects of Kant's moral theory, such as his accounts of moral character, the noumenal realm, and the unconditional force of moral principles, played a role in shaping his antimoralistic views. But the overall form and basic elements of Kant's argument against moralism can be separated from the most problematic elements of his moral theory, and the resulting antimoralistic argument is plausible in its own right, without being obvious. The reasons Kant gives for avoiding harsh moral judgment of others are insightful, distinctive, believable, and largely consistent with current views in social psychology.

To start with the most basic background point, it seems that the tendency toward finding moral faults in others is fairly widespread, and generally regarded as objectionable. Sayings like "Why do you see the speck in your brother's eye, yet pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ... First take the plank out of your own eye" (Matthew 7, 3-5) simultaneously recognize the phenomenon and caution against it.<sup>24</sup> Kant's position that humans tend to compare themselves to others, and to skew their judgments in their own favor, is not only believable, but almost cliché. But is this commonplace claim correct? Contemporary social psychology gives us some reason to think so.<sup>25</sup> The "better than average effect," or tendency of individuals to rate themselves as above average in many respects, some moral (for example, "dependability") and some not (for example, "intelligence"), is supported by several studies.<sup>26</sup> Another idea with substantial support is the "self-serving bias" in attribution. Subjects tend to attribute their own negative behavior to their situation and their positive behavior to personal attributes and abilities, while following the reverse pattern for others' behavior.<sup>27</sup> Although many studies do not deal directly with moral compari-

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<sup>24</sup>Jonathan Haidt lists other sayings with the same point, from Buddha, and from Japanese and Nigerian proverbs. Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), pp 59, 63.

<sup>25</sup>It is worth noting that Benjamin Lovett cites several studies in social psychology as evidence that moralism can be effective in changing others' behavior. Benjamin Lovett, "A Defense of Prudential Moralism," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 22 (2005): 161-70. This is compatible with my reading of Kant's position, which is not about the effectiveness of moralism, but about its sources and its effects on the moralistic person herself.

<sup>26</sup>For example, Mark D. Alicke, M.L. Klotz, et al., "Personal Contact, Individuation, and the Better-Than-Average Effect," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 68 (1995): 804-25. But the phenomenon seems not to be as common in some cultures. See Hazel R. Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, "Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation," *Psychological Review* 98 (1991): 224-53.

<sup>27</sup>A competing theory is that observers always tend to attribute other people's actions (positive or negative) more to circumstances, and attribute their own actions (positive or negative) to their own attributes. This theory, the "actor-observer" bias, has been influential for decades. However, a recent meta-analysis of 173 studies reveals little support for the actor-observer bias, and more support for the self-serving bias. Bertram Malle, "The

sons, there is evidence that moral assessment is especially central to most people's self-image, and that people are especially prone to err in the direction of favorable self-assessment in the moral realm.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, Kant's antimoralistic position consists of more than just noting that we are prone to make harsher moral judgments of others than of ourselves. Kant's main practical requirement regarding moralism is that we must avoid trying to tarnish or drag down apparent examples of good moral character, and should instead treat them as inspirational evidence that goodness is possible. Toward this end, the main strategy Kant recommends is to avoid explicitly comparing ourselves to these exemplars, since comparison would elicit resentment and hatred of their apparent superiority. Instead, we should emphasize their positive achievements and character in order to show that good character is possible even for (imperfect) human beings. This strategy is plausible enough in its own right, though not intuitively uncontroversial. But what is more striking is its compatibility with views developed in social psychology in recent years, particularly with discussions of "upward comparison" in social comparison theory. Of course, psychology as an academic discipline mainly aims at documenting and explaining behavior, and is less concerned than Kant is with providing normative guidance. But the overall account of social comparison, especially upward comparison, that has evolved provides remarkably strong support for a Kantian argument against moralism. The point is not that Kant somehow anticipated contemporary social comparison theory. Instead, I take it that Kant accurately observed some human psychological tendencies, and incorporated these observations into his antimoralistic position, and that psychology seems so far to confirm Kant's observations.

Modern social comparison theory is generally taken to have begun with Leon Festinger's account of individuals comparing themselves with others for the sake of accurate self-assessment.<sup>29</sup> But the emphasis on accurate assessment was displaced in the 1980s and 1990s by an emphasis on how "downward comparison" with people in worse positions, or of lower ability, could provide "self-enhancement" or improvement in self-image or subjective well-being.<sup>30</sup> While the idea that downward comparison bolsters self-esteem has not been rejected, it came to be regarded as an oversimplification as social comparison theory became more sophisti-

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Actor-Observer Asymmetry in Attribution," *Psychological Bulletin* 132 (2006): 895-919.

<sup>28</sup>See, e.g., Scott Allison, David Messick, and George Goethals, "On Being Better But Not Smarter Than Others: The Muhammad Ali Effect," *Social Cognition* 7 (1989): 275-95.

<sup>29</sup>Leon Festinger, "A Theory of Social Comparison Processes," *Human Relations* 7 (1954): 117-40.

<sup>30</sup>The most influential work on this was Thomas Wills, "Downward Comparison Principles in Social Psychology," *Psychological Bulletin* 90 (1981): 245-71.

cated.<sup>31</sup> Social comparison theory now includes more work on upward comparison, comparing oneself to people one perceives as being better off or having greater abilities; it is standardly thought that both upward and downward comparison can have either negative or positive effects on the person performing the comparison. The work on upward comparison and its effects is the most directly relevant to Kant's antimoralistic position.

Kant maintains that our tendency toward moralistic comparison makes our reactions to examples of good character potentially morally risky. One common reaction to a good example is to feel resentment, envy, and hate, and to try to find faults that drag down the exemplar. This reaction arises from comparing oneself to the exemplar and feeling inferior. So Kant recommends avoiding comparison, and instead advises using the good person as an example that shows that morality is possible, even for imperfect beings like us. In a sense, this approach to good examples emphasizes their similarity to the observer rather than their difference, since it shows that the observer can emulate the exemplar in moral character. Accounts of upward comparison from social psychology provide strong background support for Kant's position here. Upward comparisons in general can elicit either negative reactions such as depression, resentment, and envy, or positive reactions like optimism, admiration, and inspiration. Benoit Monin specifically describes the negative reactions to upward comparison in the moral realm, saying that comparing oneself to positive moral examples can cause feelings of moral inferiority that lead one to resent and dislike the good example, and to question her motives in an attempt at "denying virtue."<sup>32</sup> So far, social comparison theory supports Kant's worries about dangers of comparing oneself to good moral examples.

The standard accounts of the factors that lead to negative versus positive reactions in upward comparison go further in supporting Kant's position. One characterization of the key factor is to say that "contrastive reactions" emphasize the difference between oneself and the target of upward comparison, which leads to negative emotions, while "assimilative reactions" emphasize one's similarity to the target of upward comparison, which makes self-improvement and emulation of the target seem possible.<sup>33</sup> Another description of the key factor in positive reactions is

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<sup>31</sup>See Jerry Suls and Ladd Wheeler, "A Selective History of Classic and Neo-Social Comparison Theory," in Suls and Wheeler (eds.), *Handbook of Social Comparison: Theory and Research* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000), pp. 3-19; and Jerry Suls, Rene Martin, and Ladd Wheeler, "Why, With Whom, and Toward What End," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 11 (2002): 159-63.

<sup>32</sup>Benoit Monin, "Holier Than Me? Threatening Social Comparison in the Moral Domain," *Revue Internationale de Psychologie Sociale* 20 (2007): 53-68.

<sup>33</sup>Richard H. Smith, "Assimilative and Contrastive Emotional Reactions to Upward and Downward Social Comparisons," in Suls and Wheeler (eds.), *Handbook of Social Comparison*, pp. 173-200.

how much control one has over possible improvement.<sup>34</sup> The picture here is that the more one contrasts oneself with a superior target, the more negative one's reactions are likely to be, but the more one sees the target as an example of what is possible for oneself, the more positive the reaction will be. The overall account that social psychology provides of positive and negative reactions to upward comparison is mainly descriptive, so it does not by itself give normative guidance. But if one adds a normative premise, that one ought to seek to improve oneself, then they do lead to a recommendation that one should try to avoid comparing oneself with superior others, and should instead use them as examples of what is possible for oneself. And this is just the recommendation that Kant does give, specifically regarding good moral examples and moral self-improvement. Kant says one should avoid comparing oneself with good moral examples, thereby also avoiding the moral nitpicking that will arise as an envious reaction to such comparison, and that instead one should treat apparent moral exemplars as illustrations of the virtue that is achievable for oneself.

But Kant's antimoralistic position depends on more than background claims about comparison in general—it also posits a unique moral feeling that can aid in inspiring us, if we can just avoid negative reactions to moral exemplars. That feeling is *Achtung*, the feeling of awe or reverence for the power of morality. Even sympathetic readers, who accept Kant's antimoralistic argument insofar as it is consistent with the contemporary social psychology findings described above, may balk at the idea of a unique and powerful feeling that arises from seeing examples of morality. But in fact, there do seem to be reasons to believe that morality, in the form of good moral examples, can produce a positive feeling of being uplifted or elevated. The warm feeling of “choking up” over some example of a person following morality's commands at some risk or cost to herself is familiar, as Kant observed. And such examples seem to transcend, or elevate us above, our ordinary nexus of comparing ourselves to others. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt has investigated these feelings, and identified a positive moral emotion that he calls “elevation.”<sup>35</sup> Haidt asked subjects to describe their feelings in a variety of circumstances, including a time when they saw “a manifestation of humanity's

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<sup>34</sup>Brenda Major, Maria Testa, and Wayne Bylsma, “Responses to Upward and Downward Social Comparisons: The Impact of Esteem-Relevance and Perceived Control,” in Jerry Suls and Thomas A. Wills (eds.), *Social Comparison: Contemporary Theory and Research* (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991), pp. 237-60.

<sup>35</sup>Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, pp. 181-211; Jonathan Haidt, “Elevation and the Positive Psychology of Morality,” in C.L.M. Keyes and Jonathan Haidt (eds.), *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2003), pp. 275-89; Jonathan Haidt, “The Moral Emotions,” in R.J. Davidson, K.R. Scherer, and H.H. Goldsmith (eds.), *Handbook of Affective Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2003), pp. 852-70.

'higher' or 'better' nature,"<sup>36</sup> and after viewing "video clips from documentaries about heroes and altruists."<sup>37</sup> The reactions to such situations included both physical reactions, of "warm or pleasant feelings in the chest" and feelings of being inspired to perform positive actions such as "conscious desires to help others or become a better person oneself."<sup>38</sup> Haidt also reports that this feeling of elevation "opens people up to new possibilities for action and thought, making them more receptive to the lessons of an exemplar."<sup>39</sup> More generally, Haidt regards this feeling of elevation as a reflection of an often-ignored "third dimension" of human relations, besides the two seemingly universal dimensions of "hierarchy" (or social status) and "solidarity" (or degrees of closeness or distance in relationship).<sup>40</sup> The resemblance of this feeling of elevation to Kantian *Achtung* is obvious. Both feelings break one out of the nexus of comparing oneself to others in order to assess status. Both direct one's attention away from one's own self-interest, toward other people and moral requirements. So there is not only some "common sense" support for the existence of a feeling like *Achtung*, but also some empirical evidence.

The feeling of elevation that Haidt describes does not conform perfectly to Kant's concept of *Achtung*. Haidt has found that despite the fact that subjects report an increased desire to act morally, elevation does not seem to lead to an increased tendency toward helpful actions such as signing up for volunteer work. He postulates that the feeling of elevation may actually increase "calm feelings" related to "love, trust, and openness," instead of active moral assistance.<sup>41</sup> An alternative hypothesis, which Haidt does not discuss, is that elevation may function more like Kantian *Achtung*, working mainly to counteract the tendency to assign priority to one's own desires. If elevation has this function, then its most measurable effects may be to decrease actions that harm or fail to respect others, rather than leading to exceptionally charitable actions.

At any rate, the existence of a moral feeling that breaks one out of the usual habits of comparing and assessing status, and of focusing attention on one's own desires, offers some empirical support to the already plausible Kantian argument against the moral nitpicking of apparent examples of good moral behavior. Such moralistic fault-finding, which stems from envy and a desire to protect one's own self-image, blocks an important avenue to moral self-improvement, namely, the recognition of moral exemplars as a source of inspiration.

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<sup>36</sup>Unpublished study, mentioned in Haidt, "The Moral Emotions," p. 864.

<sup>37</sup>Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, p. 196.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Haidt, "The Moral Emotions," p. 864.

<sup>40</sup>Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, pp. 181-87; Haidt, "Elevation."

<sup>41</sup>Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, pp. 196 and 198, respectively.

Kant's additional claim that people tend to compare themselves to individuals of apparently poor moral character, in order to maintain a feeling of superiority and contentment with their own character, is quite plausible in its own right, and receives moderate support from social psychology. The claim is highly compatible with Thomas Wills's original version of downward comparison theory, which emphasized that people engage in downward comparison in order to enhance their own self-image and subjective well-being.<sup>42</sup> But more recent social comparison theory emphasizes that downward comparison (like upward comparison) can have either positive or negative subjective effects. No empirical studies so far seem to have examined the effects of specifically moral downward comparison on self-satisfaction, or on a failure to seek improvement. But Benoit Monin takes it as obvious that downward comparison in the moral realm "should only reassure judges in their conviction that they are good people,"<sup>43</sup> and this claim does seem intuitive. In social comparison theory in general (not specifically regarding moral comparison), downward comparison is thought to produce feelings such as pride, self-satisfaction, fear (of becoming like the worse-off person), or pity, none of which seem likely to motivate self-improvement.

All in all, then, Kant seems to provide an argument against moralism that is amenable both to common sense and to current empirical evidence. One ought to refrain from moralistic judgments and fault-finding because they inhibit one's own moral improvement. Focusing on other people who are obviously morally flawed will make one complacent and content with one's own character, according to Kant, and this claim is intuitively compelling and at least consistent with the evidence available so far from social comparison theory. And when focusing on people who apparently have good moral character, one should avoid directly comparing oneself to them and trying to attribute flaws and questionable motives to them, and instead should use them as positive examples of what is possible. This position is strongly supported by current ideas about upward social comparison. In sum, one ought not to focus on others' real or imagined moral failings, but on one's own moral improvement, which includes trying to treat others decently regardless of suspicions about their moral character.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Wills, "Downward Comparison Principles."

<sup>43</sup>Monin, "Holier Than Me?"

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