On the Idea of a Critique of Pure Practical Reason in Kant, Lacan, and Deleuze

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Psychoanalytic reflections on Kant’s account of the moral law tend to oscillate between two opposed hypotheses. On the one hand, Kantian ethics is said to be symptomatic of something—either obsessional neurosis or a perversion such as moral masochism—which psychoanalysis seeks to cure or mitigate. On the other hand, it is argued by some Lacanians that the stance of the Kantian moral agent who succeeds in sacrificing all pathological objects of inclination coincides with the ideal of separation at which the analytic cure itself aims. On this second view, Lacan’s question, “Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you?” is itself an imperative “not [to] give way on one’s desire.” The point of the comparison is that the Lacanian distinction between desire in its pure form and the demand which the subject directs toward imaginary objects is supposed to coincide with the Kantian distinction between an autonomous and a heteronomous will. Like Kant, psychoanalysis would direct the subject away from a eudaimonistic ethic to an ethic that is “beyond the pleasure principle.” The problem with this second interpretation arises when the much-touted secret complicity between Kant and Sade is factored in. Lacan argues that from a strictly formal point of view, Sade’s maxim to exercise “the right to enjoy any other person whatsoever as the instrument of our pleasure” is just as universalizable as any of the maxims that Kant takes to accord with the categorical imperative (S VII, 79). To accept this view is to face a choice: either to embrace an ethic that can manifest itself equally well through Kantian or Sadean maxims, or to go back to the initial interpretation of Kantian ethics according to which this ethic represents something to be worked through in analysis. Bataille sought a third solution, namely, to adopt a Sadean ethic thoroughly opposed to the Kantian. But Lacan suggests that Sade’s disavowal of Kant—that is, his disavowal of the fact that diabolical evil is just another form of fidelity to the law—is no less naive than Kant’s disavowal of Sade, an insight which, had he accepted it, would surely have distressed Bataille. Unlike Bataille, Lacan claims that if we are to sustain our status as desiring subjects, we must keep our distance from the Kantian-Sadean Thing, the too-intimate Good-Evil around which desire circulates (S VII, 73). In espousing this position, he seems to keep to the first interpretation of Kant, that is, the one according to which the Kantian experience of morality attests to a form of
suffering that psychoanalysis promises to alleviate. But if this is so, what are we to make of the imperative not to give way on one's desire? Were it a question of not giving way on one's *demand*, we could read Lacan as saying that psychoanalysis frees us from the superegoic pangs of conscience by saying that it is acceptable to follow one's inclinations, to pursue not the Good but those pathological "goods" that bring us pleasure. However, Lacan explicitly argues that such a position—that of a eudaimonistic ethics based exclusively on the pleasure principle or "the service of goods"—is untenable (S VII, 303). Not to give way on one's desire is precisely to give way on one's demands. Thus, we find ourselves back with an ethic that seems close to that of Kant, whence the oscillation that I spoke of at the beginning. In what follows, I want to ask whether this oscillation is unavoidable, first by elaborating on the psychoanalytic critique of Kantian ethics, and then by considering Deleuze's attempt to radicalize it.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, it might seem as if Kant's principal mistake was to regard the sense of duty as an a priori fact of reason rather than as the a posteriori precipitate of the Oedipus complex. But Kant himself was perfectly willing to concede that we first become aware of the categorical imperative through education. Only if the content of this law turned out to be empirical would its a priori character be vitiated. Of course, the psychoanalyst might respond that the categorical imperative is in fact merely an internalized version of the father's "No," from which it would follow that although the categorical imperative appears to command autonomy it remains a fundamentally heteronomous appeal. But such an analysis would already belong to the critical arsenal in terms of which Kant would have us distinguish between the moral law itself and its false impostors. Put otherwise, one cannot call attention to the fundamentally heteronomous character of the superego without implicitly making reference to the ideal of genuine autonomy—which is to say that if there were such a thing as the categorical imperative, it would carry within itself the basis for a critique of the pathological content of superegoic ethics.

Lacan pursues another line of argument. Instead of claiming that psychoanalysis reveals some supposedly hidden pathological content in the idea of the moral law, he suggests that Freud's account of the Oedipus complex explains how it is that we accede to the purity of the law, thereby learning to distinguish between (in Kantian terms) formal and material determining grounds of the will. On this view, psychoanalysis seeks to explain how it is that one becomes a subject with the capacity to bind one's will to maxims with determinate content, but this capacity remains that of pure, not empirical, practical reason. To the extent that psychoanalysis opens up the possibility for a critique of
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Kantian morality, it does so not by appealing to unconscious pathological incentives but by calling attention to a paradoxically non-pathological symptom that emerges precisely when the subject succeeds in renouncing all such incentives (whether conscious or unconscious). Freud first detected such a symptom in his analysis of the Rat Man. Like Kant, the Rat Man feels compelled always to act as if he were obeying universalizable maxims, as when he tells himself "\textit{You must pay back the 3.80 crowns to Lieutenant A.}" From a Kantian point of view, of course, the sense of being under an obligation to repay a debt is perfectly rational. But what about the Rat Man's conviction that he absolutely must count up to fifty between successive claps of thunder? (TCH, 32) He seems to treat this maxim as if it were a perfect or imperfect duty, that is, an obligation that follows directly from the categorical imperative itself. It might be argued that the Rat Man's moral reasoning is actually governed by an obscure \textit{hypothetical} imperative, for he worries that if he fails to obey his maxims, something terrible will happen to a loved one. But this seems to be a way of giving his anxiety empirical content through a kind of secondary elaboration. Kant does something similar when he supposes that something terrible will happen to us if we fail to act on universalizable maxims, namely, when God apportions happiness and misery in accordance with moral desert. Thus, it would seem that the only significant difference between Kant and the Rat Man lies in the specific duties that each purports to derive from the idea of a categorical imperative.

Kant thought that to carry out a critique of practical reason it was sufficient to show that there was such a thing as \textit{pure} practical reason.\footnote{\textsuperscript{3}} That is, he supposed that, unlike pure \textit{speculative} reason, pure \textit{practical} reason was immune to transcendental illusions. Such confidence encouraged him to think he could deduce a list of duties that were binding on all finite rational agents. Some of the duties that Kant puts forth in his \textit{Metaphysics of Morals}—such as the duty to repay the debts we have incurred—are acknowledged by a sufficiently large number of people that, provided we are "normal" enough, they can seem to us to be genuinely universal. But others—such as the duties never to masturbate or engage in homosexual acts—are sufficiently controversial as to appear (at least to many of us) no less idiosyncratic than the Rat Man's rule about never failing to count to fifty between successive claps of thunder. This observation suggests that the moral systems of Kant and the Rat Man differ only in their respective degrees of idiosyncrasy. It also suggests that any attempt to deduce specific duties from the categorical imperative will be "symptomatic" in some way. Freud claims that symptom formation in neurosis takes place not through repression per se but through the peculiar way in which the repressed returns. Analogously, we could say that moral symptom formation takes place not in the ascent from
inclination to respect for the law but in the subsequent descent from consciousness of this law—which, insofar as it is pure, is empirically empty—to the formation of maxims with determinate content. The point of the analogy is not that repression is undone in this descent, thereby enabling the inclinations to play a direct, if hidden, role in maxim formation, but rather that maxim formation allows the inclinations to reappear as repressed.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant associates the subject’s awareness of the moral law with a sense of humiliation, a negative feeling that has as its positive correlate the feeling of respect. This double feeling of humiliation and respect is said to be unique in that it is not based on the principle of self-love which governs the inclinations. On the contrary, it is occasioned by the awareness of the categorical imperative, which gives rise to the feeling of humiliation precisely insofar as it “strikes down” this principle (CPrR, 63). The fact that respect for the law is non-pathological is supposed to be a sufficient guarantee of the non-idiiosyncratic character of the subject’s sense of what is or is not a duty (CPrR, 64ff.). But what if this strange feeling of commingled humiliation and respect, despite its genuinely non-pathological character, attested to the influence of another heteronomous principle, one that was different in kind from the principle of self-love? This other principle is the one Freud identifies as the death drive, an impulse said to manifest itself in its pure state only when all pathological incentives of the will have been put aside, that is, when the death drive is no longer “bound” to Eros. This is the point that Lacan picks up on when he calls attention to the uncanny proximity between Kant and Sade. Lacan’s point is not that Kant’s system of morality is just as pathologically motivated as Sade’s, but that Sade’s is just as pure as Kant’s. Obviously, Kant would have insisted that the statement “Let us take as the universal maxim of our conduct the right to enjoy any other person whatsoever as the instrument of our pleasure” (S VII, 79) violates the categorical imperative, for no rational being could choose to live in a Sadean “kingdom of means.” But this is just to say, tautologically, that Sade is not a rational being. Put otherwise, Kant can refute Sade only by purporting subjective universality for the fact that he himself could not will to live in such a world, which is to say that his argument rests on nothing more than his own *jouissance*, that is, on the non-pathological feeling that arises when he renounces all material incentives for his will (S VII, 189).

The evident fact that Sade’s *jouissance* was structured in a way diametrically opposed to that of Kant suggests that it is possible to construct an antinomy of pure practical reason in which Kantian maxims would be opposed by Sadean maxims. Kant denied that there could be such an antinomy in part because he thought that human beings, though
radically evil in the sense that our maxims are always informed by the principle of self-love, are incapable of diabolical evil, that is, a principled rebellion against the moral law. But the problem goes deeper than Kant thought. For even if we concede that the feeling of humiliation before the law has as its positive flip side the feeling of respect, how can we rule out the possibility of a subject for whom respect is felt for the force that humiliates rather than for the force that elevates the will into the sublime realm of the kingdom of ends? Or, more radically, since the force of humiliation and the force of sublimation turn out to be but two aspects of one and the same law, what if one of the two could become an object of respect only insofar as the other did as well? Would it not follow that Kant could be Kant only by repressing his inner Sade, and that Sade could be Sade only by repressing his inner Kant?

Freud gave the name “Rat Man” to one of his patients because of the peculiar way in which a torture involving rats figured in his symptoms. Someone had told him of a “horrible punishment” in which rats were made to bore their way up the victim’s anus (TCH, 12). Freud claims that when the Rat Man described this torture, the expression on his face suggested that what horrified him most was not the torture itself but the fact that, although he did not know it, the idea of inflicting such a torture on someone gave him great pleasure: “his face took on a very strange, composite expression. I could only interpret it as one of horror at pleasure of his own of which he himself was unaware” (TCH, 13). Freud implies that the Rat Man is a Kantian desperately trying to repress his own Sadean impulses. But perhaps what horrifies the Rat Man most of all is the obscure awareness that his pleasure attests not merely to a sadistic inclination which respect for the moral law could combat, but to the non-pathological temptation of diabolical evil, a temptation that always necessarily accompanies respect for the law as its flip-side. On this interpretation, what the Rat Man shrinks back from is not merely the fact that part of him is like Sade and part of him is like Kant, but rather the insight that he cannot be Kant without being Sade at the same time. Support for this reading can be found in a childhood anecdote which Freud recounts:

When he was very small—it became possible to establish the date more exactly owing to its having coincided with the fatal illness of an elder sister—he had done something naughty, for which his father had given him a beating. The little boy had flown into a terrible rage and had hurled abuse at his father even while he was under his blows. But as he knew no bad language, he had called him all the names of common objects that he could think of, and had screamed: ‘You lamp! You towel! You plate!’ and so on. His father, shaken by such an outburst of elemental fury, had stopped
beating him, and had declared, 'The child will be either a great man or a great criminal!' (TCH, 46).

This account is remarkable for a number of reasons. First, because it suggests that in his early childhood the Rat Man was confronted with an apparent either/or—a great man or a great criminal—that he secretly knows to be a both/and (one cannot be Kant without being Sade and vice versa). Second, because of the related ambiguity as to whether we are witnessing a good father beating a naughty child, a bad father beating a good child, an already-great-man-great-criminal-father beating a not-yet-great-man-great-criminal-child, etc. Third, and especially, because of the truly fantastic speech act with which Freud credits the child: "You lamp! You towel! You plate!" The idea that the child could know what cursing was without knowing any bad words seems improbable, and it ignores the question of what he might have meant (whether consciously or unconsciously) in calling his father these things. One possibility is suggested by an insult that Murellus hurls at the Roman citizens in Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*: "You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things!" (I, I, 35). In comparing the Romans to inanimate objects, Murellus accuses them not only of stupidity, but of an even greater stupidity—"you worse than senseless things"—of which mere things are incapable, namely, moral stupidity: "O you hard hearts, you cruel men of Rome" (I, I, 36). Similarly, in calling his father Lamp, Towel, and (worse than) Plate, the Rat Man—or, rather, the child destined to become neither a great man nor a great criminal but the Rat Man—seems to have accused his father of moral stupidity. The adult neither remembers the event (it was recounted to him by his mother) nor is consciously aware of the fact that he would very much like to shove a rat up his father's ass. Unable to confront the pleasure from which he continues to recoil in horror, the Rat Man remains caught within the double bind or antinomy of his father's either/or.

The idea that there is an antinomical relationship between Kantian and Sadean moral principles suggests that Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* and Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom* both represent "dogmatic" moral theories, and that the conflict between them necessitates a critique of pure practical reason. It is precisely such a critique that Lacan attempts to carry out in his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis. Following Lévi-Strauss, Lacan takes the prohibition of incest to represent the primordial "You must!" the acknowledgment of which first introduces the subject into what analytic philosophers like to call "the space of (moral) reasons." But for Lacan, the lost maternal object which the subject must abandon only exists as lost. Like the Kantian "transcendental object = X," the lost object—*das Ding*, or the Thing—is different in kind from any
empirical object that might appear within phenomenal, or imaginary, reality. It belongs to the order of the real, conceived not as a transcendental noumenal realm from which we are barred by our lack of intellectual intuition but as an impossible object that only "exists" as a function of the law that prohibits access to it. By obviating the need for a distinction between appearances and things in themselves, Lacan is able to restrict the law to its immanent employment, the idea of the good functioning as a kind of focus imaginarius. Kant sought to determine this imaginary point of reference by transporting the subject into a kingdom of ends, and Sade did something analogous by describing his inverted ideal of a kingdom of means. But both solutions turn out to be "false" in that they presuppose the existence of some transcendent object of a law-abiding will. Lacan resolves the antinomy of pure practical reason not by dissipating Kant and Sade's shared dialectical illusion but by simply calling attention to it. In this way he allows for a critical response to the categorical imperative, one that enables the subject to take on moral responsibilities by paradoxically refusing the commandment to love thy neighbour as oneself (S VII, 194). Herein lies the oscillation of which I spoke at the beginning of this paper.

Anti-Oedipus is usually read as repudiating the Lacanian theory of desire, but it is better read as radicalizing it. In "How Do We Recognize Structuralism?" Deleuze had already claimed that in contrast to the unified and unifying Kantian subject, the Lacanian subject is essentially "nomadic." In Anti-Oedipus he and Guattari praise Lacan for calling attention to the differential character of the unconscious and for resisting the normalizing tendencies of Oedipalization: "he does not enclose the unconscious in an Oedipal structure. He shows on the contrary that Oedipus is imaginary, nothing but an image, a myth." Lacan is criticized on one ground only, namely, for putting forth a "structural" rather than a "machinic" account of desire, that is, for taking desire to manifest itself at the symbolic level of a "logical combinatory" rather than at the real level of "desiring-production" (AO, 53, 97, 109). Despite this criticism, Deleuze and Guattari credit Lacan with restoring desire to its strictly immanent employment. Like them, he recognized in desire "the set of passive syntheses that engineer partial objects, flows, and bodies, and that function as units of production" (AO, 26). Unfortunately, a number of Lacan's followers re-imposed a "transcendent" use on the syntheses of the unconscious by construing desire as lack (AO, 109). The aim of Anti-Oedipus is to complete the Copernican turn that Lacan made when he recognized that desire produces its own lost object. In carrying out their transcendentnal critique of the unconscious, Deleuze and Guattari seek to dispel a number of "paralogisms of the unconscious," thereby "restoring the syntheses of the unconscious to their immanent use" (AO, 177, 112).
In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze carried out a similar operation with respect to thought. There it was a question of freeing the three time-constituting syntheses of Habitus, Mnemosyne, and the Eternal Return from the transcendent employments to which Kant's critique of speculative reason had delivered them. In the practical register of *Anti-Oedipus*, the syntheses of Habitus, Mnemosyne, and the Eternal Return manifest themselves, respectively, as (1) the "connective syntheses of production," through which linear sequences of the form "and then" are constituted, (2) the "disjunctive syntheses of recording," which have the form of "either ... or ... or," and (3) the "conjunctive syntheses of consumption," which take the form of a concluding "so it's ..." (*AO*, 12, 16).

Deleuze and Guattari credit Kant with the discovery that desire is productive rather than privative, but they criticize him for reverting to the Platonic conception of desire as lack by reducing the object produced by desire to the status of a mere "psychic reality" (*AO*, 25; see CPrR 8n.). They maintain that desire is productive not merely of representations but of the real itself (*AO*, 26). Desire is no longer a faculty belonging to a unified and unifying subject but a function of a differential manifold. Deleuze and Guattari characterize this manifold as a field of desiring machines each of which produces a flow that is siphoned off by another (*AO*, 1ff.). These linkages comprise the connective syntheses of the unconscious which collectively produce the so-called "body without organs," a virtual object that exists "alongside" the series of connective syntheses (*AO*, 326). At the first level of synthesis, the body without organs stands opposed to its desiring-machines, repelling them in the manner of a "paranoiac machine" (*AO*, 9). This can be thought of as the practical analogue of what Deleuze called in *Difference and Repetition* the "pure present," for the paranoiac machine immediately erases whatever appears on its surface so that something new can appear. Corresponding to the constitution of a "pure past" are the disjunctive syntheses by which whatever is produced through the connective syntheses is recorded on the surface of the body without organs. Thus, the body without organs also functions as a gigantic memory or "miraculating machine," attracting rather than repelling the desiring-machines that constitute or populate it (*AO*, 11). Finally, the conjunctive syntheses give rise to the "celibate machine," which, as the practical equivalent of the "pure future," unites the repulsive tendency of the paranoiac machine and the attractive tendency of the miraculating machine. The celibate machine is the locus of *jouissance* and affirmation (*AO*, 18, 84).

In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze characterized the intensive magnitudes which the celibate machine produces and consumes as "differentials" whose reciprocal determination gave rise to manifest qualities. *Anti-Oedipus* suggests that the entire field of intensities is produced
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through desiring-production, the body without organs being its "degree zero" locus (AO, 20).

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the desiring subject appears at the level of the third (conjunctive) synthesis, but only as "a mere residuum alongside the desiring-machines"—a kind of surplus value that "confuses" itself with the celibate machine (AO, 17). This misrecognition can be likened to the one that Lacan describes in his account of the mirror stage. The child's triumphal "So it's me" is to be understood not as the self-recognition of a unitary subject but as a surface effect of desiring-production itself (AO, 20). Both Lacan and Deleuze treat the subject (as Sartre did in The Transcendence of the Ego) as the precipitate of a network of fundamentally passive syntheses rather than as the instigator of active syntheses governed from the first by a principle of "common sense." Kant saw that the subject's pretension to intuit itself as a simple substance was a transcendental illusion, but he failed to recognize that his own conception of the "original unity of apperception" was no less of an illusion. Oedipalization is the process whereby this illusion is generated. More precisely, Oedipalization can be understood as the process by which the three syntheses take on a transcendent as opposed to an immanent use. The connective synthesis of desiring-production, originally geared to "partial" and "non-specific" objects, is oriented toward parental figures and a system of conjugal rules. Desire is repressed, but in such a way as to give rise to the illusion that what had been desired all along is what is now explicitly prohibited by the conjugal rules themselves: "Incest is only the retroactive effect of the repressing representation on the repressed representative: ... it projects onto the representative, categories, rendered discernible, that it has itself established" (AO, 165). It is precisely through this "paralogism of extrapolation" that desire comes to appear as lack (AO, 73, 110). In a similar way, the disjunctive synthesis, which had been inclusive ("either ... or ... or") now becomes exclusive ("either/or") as the subject is forced to think of differences in terms of rigid oppositions (AO, 76). Here desire can only choose between subjecting itself to a transcendent law that directs it toward the symbolic order and retreating to an undifferentiated imaginary space—the choice between "normality" and "neurosis." In either case, its "real" nature as desiring-production is dissimulated. Deleuze and Guattari call this the "paralogism of the double bind" (AO, 80). Finally, the conjunctive synthesis, whose immanent use had been "nomadic and polyvocal," becomes "segregative and biunivocal" (AO, 110–11). This occurs when the third synthesis is subjected to a transcendent signifier which, as Lacan would say, "represents" the subject in the symbolic order. Segregation involves the demarcation of a previously mobile field of intensities into series of determinable objects. Biunivocalization occurs when the mobile
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and immanent conjunctive synthesis “so it’s ...” gives rise to the determinate and transcendent “so that is what this meant” (AO, 101). This corresponds to what Deleuze refers to in Difference and Repetition as “the form of recognition”; Deleuze and Guattari call it “the paralogism of application” (AO, 111). The problem with an Oedipalizing psychoanalysis—that is, one that succumbs to the dialectical illusion of transcendent uses of the syntheses of desire—is that instead of enabling subjects to free themselves from these paralogisms, it reinforces them by tying desiring-production to the capitalist machine. Deleuze and Guattari see Lacan as having tried to expose the paralogisms of Oedipus, but again “certain disciples of Lacan” have put forth “oedipalizing interpretations of Lacanism” which suggest that everyone—schizophrenics included—should be made to act like a neurotic subject caught within the Oedipal triad (AO, 53, 73).

Earlier I suggested that the psychoanalytic critique of Kant does not undercut the distinction between pure and empirical practical reason but that it seeks to identify the antinomy to which pure practical reason succumbs at the moment when it renounces all pathological incentives of the will. Deleuze and Guattari do something similar, conceiving of Oedipus as the imaginary support of the transcendent exercises of the will. This suggests that the schizo represents a solution to the antinomy represented by Kant and Sade. However, the antinomy revealed in Anti-Oedipus concerns not the relationship between obsessional neurosis and perversion—that is, the difference between a Kantian desperately trying to repress a Sadean unconscious and a Sadean disavowing a Kantian unconscious—but between a “normal” Kantian subject and a “neurotic” Kantian subject. In Coldness and Cruelty, Deleuze asks:

Is there no other solution besides the functional disturbance of neurosis and the spiritual outlet of sublimation? Could there not be a third alternative which would be related not to the functional independence of the ego and the superego, but to the structural split between them? And is not this the very alternative indicated by Freud under the name of perversion?

In the face of this antinomy—the two horns of the Oedipal dilemma—the schizo finds a way out precisely through perversion. Whence the fact that for Deleuze—as for Blanchot and Bataille, but not for Lacan—Sade represents not one of the dead ends but rather a way out. Following Blanchot, Deleuze reads Sade as forging an alliance between the father and the daughter against the mother, and Masoch as staging an alliance between the son and a disavowed mother against the father, two different strategies for freeing desire from the Oedipal triangle (CAC, 60ff.).
Sade subverts the law through irony, Masoch through humour, etc. (CAC, 86–8). Deleuze credits Bataille with identifying an authentic Sadean ethic, and for bringing out “Sade’s hatred of tyranny” (CAC, 17, 87). The question that would need to be posed is whether Deleuze’s Sadean schizo remains Kant’s inseparable twin when all is said and done. This is connected with another question that I can only touch on here, namely, whether it is possible to break decisively with Kantian morality once and for all, or whether the critique of pure practical reason must remain caught in its oscillation. What Lacan seems to be saying to Deleuze is that there is no purely immanent exercise of desire, not because there really is a transcendent object but because the production of the “lost” object prevents desire from closing on itself. Not to give way on one’s desire means both to resist the obsessional neurosis of Oedipus and to keep one’s distance from the Thing. The point, in other words, is not to be either like Kant or like Sade, but to be more than a lamp, a towel, or a plate.

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Notes


4. Here it would be necessary to elaborate on Kant’s distinction between perfect and imperfect duties, and on the different ways in which we can tell if a maxim violates one or the other.


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