

## Robert Johnson

Original moral predisposition

### 1. *Meaning and location in Kant's works*

Kant uses the phrase “original predisposition” or “original moral predisposition” in discussions in *Religion within the boundaries of mere reason* and in *The Metaphysics of Morals*. The former concerns whether man is by nature good and only later morally corrupted (perhaps by culture as Rousseau held), or is originally corrupt and must go beyond his nature to be morally righteous, as certain religious doctrines have held. The latter concerns predispositions that are required for representing something as our duty.

Wichtige Stellen; 6:19-53, 6:399-403

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### 2. *Related keywords in Kant's work*

Erbsünde, sittliche Gessinnung, Gewissen, Good will, Menchenliebe, moral reform/revolution, Sünde, Sündenfall

### 3. *Philosophical function in Kant's philosophy*

Human beings are, for Kant, originally predisposed to good at least in this sense: Each minimally rational person possesses a will that, by virtue of being rational, legislates the moral law. This is an original predisposition to morality, inasmuch as legislating moral law would imply a predisposition to conform to those laws. Kant, however, also gave a secular interpretation of the Christian doctrine of original sin, such that, although each human agent's own rational will legislates the moral law, each also, by natural necessity, wills his own happiness. Since happiness and moral law do not always go together, any rational agent can see that there is potential conflict. So there is also an original priority of one demand over

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the other, and human rational agents privilege their happiness in cases of conflict. 6:36-38

To reverse this order of priority, a kind of moral conversion is required. 6:47

There are three elements of the original predisposition to good in human beings.

6:26-8 First, we possess a predisposition to **animality**, that is, to self-preservation, propagation of the species and sociality. Second, we also possess a predisposition to **humanity** or to "gain worth in the opinion of others" and not to allow others to be our moral superiors. And finally, we are predisposed to **personality**, or are susceptible to respect the moral law as a sufficient **incentive** to determine our wills.

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Human beings also possess an original propensity to evil. 6:29-30 The moral law is weaker in us than our desires and inclinations. Moreover, we often need **incentives** to cooperate with the moral law in order to do our duty. And, finally, we have a propensity to adopt and act on **maxims** that subordinate the moral law to non-moral incentives. Since this propensity is evil, human beings must have brought it upon themselves, and so Kant initially denies that it is a natural predisposition. 6:29 But since this is "entwined in humanity itself and, as it were, rooted in it", he proposes nevertheless to call this a natural predisposition to evil. 6:32

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Although Kant rejects sentiment-based theories of morality such as **Hume's**, he held that no rational being who lacked certain predispositions could even so much as entertain the idea of duty. These predispositions to morality are four feelings: **moral feeling**, **conscience**, **love of human beings**, and **respect**. Our awareness of these feelings does not come from observing them in ourselves or in others (indeed, Kant seemed to have thought we observed their absence, 6:407). Rather, we are aware of them only *because* we are aware of having moral obligations, and *the latter* is only possible if we have them. The first is moral feeling, or "the susceptibility to feel pleasure or displeasure" from awareness of behaving

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morally or immorally". 6:399-400 Without this, we couldn't take an interest in moral requirements. Conscience, the second, is our disposition to represent being under obligation as being our own prosecutor, judge and jury. To have a conscience is just to recognize one is bound by moral duties. 6:400-1 Regarding the "love of human beings", the third predisposition, Kant denies that we can love at will or because we ought to, since constraint is painful, and to love is to take pleasure in something, we cannot be constrained to love. 4:399, 6:449-50 However, we can be (and are) obligated to do the things that only a loving person would do (such as help them when they are in need). Doing the latter he thought would produce a "readiness of the inclination to beneficence in general". 6: 401-2 Evidently, unless we are the sorts of creatures who would develop in this way, we could not be obligated to act beneficently. Finally, since to represent something as duty is to represent it as necessary because of our respect for the law that makes it duty, we must be originally disposed to respect. 6:402-3

#### *4. Secondary literature*

1. Quinn, Phillip L. 1984 "Original Sin, Radical Evil and Moral Identity." *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*, (1984) 1, 188-202