In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant says, “[A]ll the actions of a human being are determined in accord with the order of nature,” adding that “if we could investigate all the appearances . . . there would be no human action we could not predict with certainty” (A549/B577). He gives a striking example to illustrate this general point.

Let us take a voluntary action, for example, a malicious lie . . . . First of all, we endeavor to discover the motives to which it has been due, and then, secondly, we proceed to determine how far the action . . . can be imputed to the offender. As regards the first question, we trace the empirical character of the action to its sources, finding these in defective education, bad company, in part also in the viciousness of a natural disposition insensitive to shame . . . We proceed in this enquiry just as we should in ascertaining for a given natural effect the series of its determining causes. But although we believe the action is thus determined, we nonetheless blame the agent.

In the *Groundwork*, he reiterates this: “[E]verything which takes place [is] determined without exception in accordance with laws of nature” (4:455). And in the *Critique of Practical*
Reason, he insists that if we knew the relevant preconditions, “we could calculate a human being’s conduct for the future with as much certainty as a lunar or solar eclipse” (5: 99). 3

it would have important implications for the extent to which Kant allows reductionism with respect to mental events. For my purposes, I focus on showing that Kant has a causal account of mental events. Whether this is in principle reducible to a physical account is also beyond the scope of this paper.

3 Despite these apparently clear statements, some have recently claimed that “there is no Kantian basis for maintaining causal determinism in the psychological realm” (Westphal 1995: 362; cf. Gouax 1972):

Kant himself held it to be one of the cardinal achievements of the Critical philosophy, forever to foreclose on both materialist and ‘spiritualist’ explanations of the mind... . Those are the only two kinds of causal explanations countenanced in the Modern period. To foreclose on such explanations in psychology is (for ... Kant) to foreclose on the scientific status of psychology. [Westphal 1995: 358]

There are two sorts of critique generally raised against the notion of a Kantian account of causal laws governing mental states. The first and most radical claim, articulated here by Westphal, is that for Kant there simply are no causal laws governing human psychology, a claim contradicted in the passage quoted in footnote 2. The second claim, which is often connected (e.g., by Westphal) with the first, is that psychology can never rise to the level of a science.

In general, there are also two lines of argument to establish each of these claims. The first argument is based on the requirements for human freedom. Briefly, the argument is that because of Kant’s emphasis on human freedom, he cannot allow for a science that explains human actions in terms of causal laws. While we must give these remarks [in MFNS] their due, they should not be allowed to obscure Kant’s basic position that the phenomena of empirical psychology are strictly bound by the law of cause just as are the phenomena of physics. [Hatfield 1992:217]

The empirical doctrine of the soul must always remain even further removed than chemistry from the rank of what may be called a natural science proper ... . It can ... never become anything more than a historical (and as such, as much as possible) systematic natural doctrine of the internal sense, i.e., a natural description of the soul, but not a science of the soul, nor even a psychological experimental doctrine. This is the reason why ... the general name of natural science ... belongs to the doctrine of body alone. [4:471; cf. 28:679]

Many (e.g. Gouax 1972) have taken this passage to imply that Kant opposes any kind of serious empirical study of the causal principles underlying mental life, and some have gone as far as to use this to argue against causal necessity in human actions.

However, Kant’s argument against psychology as a science employs very specific objections to psychology as a science, and Kant allows that psychology can be a “historical systematic natural doctrine of the inner sense” (4:471) and even a “natural science ... improperly so called, ... [which] would treat its object ... according to laws of experience” (4:468). As Hatfield (1990, 1992), Sturm (2001), and others argue, Kant objects to applying to psychology a very particular conception of science, as a study “whose certainty is apodictic,” which must thus consist in “a priori principles” (4:468) and in particular in the application of “mathematics” to its subject matter (4:470). Hatfield rightly points out,

While we must give these remarks [in MFNS] their due, they should not be allowed to obscure Kant’s basic position that the phenomena of empirical psychology are strictly bound by the law of cause just as are the phenomena of physics. [Hatfield 1992:217]

Neither Kant’s concern with freedom nor his prohibition of a “science” of psychology show that human beings are not governed by causal laws, nor even that we cannot discern (some of) those causal laws.

4 This defense of freedom might not be fully satisfying, but it is Kantian. For fuller defenses of the view, cf. Wood 1984, Allison 1989, Frierion 2003, and Watkins 2005. Watkins in particular (cf. pp. 329-39, 408-19) offers a detailed defense of this account of freedom. For the purposes of this paper, I simply take this general account of Kant’s theory of freedom for granted, with the little support I have already offered here. I generally agree with the interpretation of Kant’s account of freedom offered in Wood 1984 and Watkins 2005. One important issue on which Wood and I disagree is that I see Kant as claiming...
Kant’s theory of freedom has important implications for his empirical psychology. In a lecture on metaphysics, Kant says,

Freedom cannot be proven psychologically, but rather morally ... . If I wanted to prove freedom psychologically, then I would have to consider a human being ... as a natural being, and as such he is not free. [28:773; cf. 28:682, A535/B563]

Kant makes room for human freedom transcendentally, not psychologically, and thus his psychological account of human action is left thoroughly deterministic, in the sense that actions follow from prior states in accordance with natural laws. But while Kant’s theory of freedom has received a great deal of attention from contemporary philosophers, his empirical psychology has not been studied in much detail. There is still a need for a clear explanation of how Kant thinks human action can be explained from an empirical perspective.

In this paper, I lay out Kant’s determinist account of human action, as found in his empirical psychology. The direct benefit of this description will be to clear up confusion about the relationship between empirical and practical accounts of human action by bringing to light the nature of Kant’s empirical description of human action. This paper will also be crucial for developing more historically accurate and philosophically sophisticated Kantian accounts of the emotions, moral education, cultural and historical influences on human behavior, and the role of psychology and anthropology in Kant’s moral theory.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In section 1, I point out several ways in which recent commentators on Kant have mistakenly ascribed freedom a role within Kant’s empirical psychology. In section 2, I discuss Kant’s faculty psychology, which lays the groundwork for the rest of my discussion. In section 3, I point out the importance of natural predispositions for Kant’s account. Finally, in sections 4 and 5, I apply the framework of faculties and predispositions to the lower and higher faculties of desire to show how Kant’s psychology explains actions in general.

1. Contemporary discussions of Kant’s psychology

The need for an explanation of Kant’s empirical psychology is particularly important today because many discussions of Kant’s psychology focus on Kant’s account of moral choice from a practical perspective, and this gives the sense that Kant’s empirical account of action depends on what Simon Blackburn calls a “Kantian Captain,” “free of his or her natural and acquired dispositions” (Blackburn 1998: 252). When Andrews Reath, for example, discusses Kant’s “theory of motivation” (Reath 1989: 287), he starts his account with a treatment of respect for the moral law, rather than a detailed discussion of how non-moral motives function. The result is that presuppositions of Kant’s moral theory unduly influence Reath’s psychology, so that he insists on finding freedom within a Kantian account of motivation. Thus he objects that “if the moral law determines choice by exerting a force that is stronger than the alternatives, moral conduct will result from the balance of whatever psychological forces are acting on the will ... . It is not clear that this model leaves room for any real notion of will or choice” (Reath 1989: 290-...
As evidence for this alternative Kantian picture, Baron appeals to an important passage in the second *Critique* in which Kant argues for freedom on the grounds that one is always conscious of an obligation that ought to—and therefore can—be obeyed (Baron 1995: 189). Baron is correct, of course, that for Kant human beings are free and therefore incentives can move us only if we let them. But this account of agency is an account of transcendental freedom, an account that, for Kant at least, is consistent with the familiar empiricist picture of agency. There is nothing wrong, of course, with focusing on agency from the standpoint of freedom. Kant insists that this is the proper standpoint for moral philosophy. But Baron claims that Kant’s theory of agency from this practical perspective precludes him from having a motive-based psychology in any respect. By implying that there is a conflict between the freedom necessary for moral agency and empiricist accounts of motivation, Baron, like Reath and

As we will see, there are important differences between Kant’s empirical psychology and standard empiricist accounts, and some of these differences make Kant’s empirical psychology particularly well suited to fit with his transcendentals accounts of freedom, but Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* provides a framework for reconciling transcendental freedom with any empirical description of human actions. For further discussion of this claim, see Frierson (“Kant’s Empirical Markers for Moral Responsibility”).

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6 Admittedly, he hedges his claim here by simply saying that “it is not clear how” these could be compatible. Moreover, it is not wholly clear whether Reath thinks that his account of respect is psychological-phenomenological or practical-noumenal. His reference to the “experience” of oneself in the feeling of respect (289) suggest that he has an empirical account in mind, as does his suggestion that he seeks a “theory of motivation that provides the common ground between” “moral motives and sensible motives” (286-7, n7). But even if Reath is describing motivation from a practical perspective, he fails to acknowledge and even seems to reject (290-1) the compatibility of this practical picture of motivation with a more determinist empirical one. The failure to keep this distinction clearly in mind also forces Reath into unnecessary difficulties when trying to reconcile his account with passages where Kant seems to suggest a more empiricist role for respect for the moral law (as a “feeling that then neutralizes opposing non-moral motives”). Reath is left with the impression that Kant “was not completely clear about the distinctive force of his own account of motivation” (289n). In fact, however, we might better say that Kant recognized that his distinctive account of motivation from a practical perspective still leaves room for a quite different account from an empirical perspective. (Unfortunately, as I note in my discussion of feeling in section 2, Kant did have some lack of clarity with respect to the role of respect, even in his psychological account, but this is not due to the confusion that Reath ascribes to him.)
But difficulty does not imply that such observations are impossible, and even relevant observations are difficult (28:679, cf. 25:438). Kant psychology is difficult. Kant points out that experiments in psychology are for such prediction) " (120). Wood and Jacobs are certainly correct that empirical psychology is difficult. Kant goes on to say that the claims of the Critical writings “express only metaphysical propositions, and do not indicate anything about any possible program of empirical research into human actions" (Wood 2003: 44). Wood rightly points out that Kant recognizes important challenges to the task of describing human behavior, including self-deception, the difficulty of self-observation, and intrinsic limits to any purely empirical discipline (cf. Wood 1999: 197-201; Wood 2003: 48-50), but he wrongly infers from this that self-knowledge, and empirical knowledge of human nature more generally, is impossible (Wood 2003: 50). What is worse, Wood seems to think that the impossibility of empirical investiga-4tion of human beings is necessary in order to preserve a commitment to noumenal freedom: “Kant’s conjectures about noumenal freedom are possible only because we can never have satisfactory empirical knowledge of the mind” (50, emphasis added).

Both Kant’s commentators and his critics often underestimate the importance of transcendental idealism for opening up the possibility of a causal account of human action.11

10 The consequence, for Wood as for others, is that Kant’s “empirical anthropology always proceeds on the fundamental presupposition that human beings are free” (44). While this claim is true strictly speaking, it is deeply misleading. Kant proceeds on the understanding that humans are free in the sense that he presents his determinist empirical account of human action with a pragmatic purpose in mind. That is, Kant thinks that understanding the causes of various human behaviors can be put to use to help people improve their faculties, both for prudential and for moral purposes. (For more detail, cf. e.g. Frierson 2003: 48-67, Louden 2000: 68-74). This does not imply that the account of human nature is any less causalist determinist, though it does raise some important problems for how to understand the relationship between freedom and empirical influences (cf. Frierson 2003).

For an excellent example of pragmatic advice that depends on a causal explanation of human beings, consider Kant’s recommendation to “distract oneself” in certain circumstances:

But one can also distract oneself, that is, create a diversion for one’s involuntary reproductive power of imagination, as, for example, when the clergyman has delivered his memorized sermon and wants to prevent it from echoing in his head afterwards. This is a necessary and in part artificial precautionary procedure for our mental health. Continuous reflection on one and the same object leaves behind it a reverberation, so to speak (as when one and the same piece of dance music that went on for a long time is still hummed by those returning from a festivity, or when children repeat incessantly one and the same of their kind of bon mot, especially when it has a rhythmic sound). Such a reverberation ... molest the mind, and it can only be stopped by distraction and by applying attention to other objects; for example, reading newspapers. [7: 207]

Here Kant assumes that people are free in the sense that he directs this advice to someone whom he takes to be capable of acting upon it. But the advice is based on a picture of human cognition that is determinist in the sense that it traces the causes of various changes in one’s cognitions, from the way in which continuous reflection on a single object causes “reverberation” to the ways that one can undo this reverberation by, for instance, reading newspapers.

11 Even Jeanine Grenberg, who is much more sensitive than most Kant commentators to the details of Kant’s psychology, admits that Kant’s “language
This common focus on freedom in Kant’s theory of human action results in confusion about what Kant’s empirical account of human action actually is, and this leaves room open for critics of Kant such as Blackburn to accuse Kant of having an overly simplistic psychology. Blackburn introduces his “Kantian Captain” as prelude to an account of “the fundamental mistake about deliberation” that this Captain represents (Blackburn 1998: 250, cf. pp. 243-261). Blackburn points out that Kant’s Captain is bad psychology that makes for bad ethics. But even Blackburn turns to something like a Kantian Captain when he offers his account of what it looks like to “speak… from within a moral perspective” (Blackburn 1998: 106), and he, like Kant, distinguishes this from “describing those who speak from within it” (Blackburn 1998:

of impulsion certainly does suggest that ... he is ... advocating a more mechanistic theory of action” but argues that “this is not in fact the case,” that in fact human actions “do not follow the laws of nature” (Grenberg 2001: 151, 175.

Grenberg seems to locate the freedom of action in our capacity to control the representations that give rise to desires (and thereby actions). She asks “How does an appeal to representation distinguish feeling from mere physical force? That which evokes feelings is not, strictly speaking, a force completely external to an agent, but rather any state of affairs in so far as it has been taken up by an agent’s capacity to represent it to herself” (161). Of course, this contrast between internal and external causes is one with which any empiricist would agree, and one that Kant specifically argues is not sufficient for the kind of freedom that is needed for moral responsibility (see S: 97f.). And one would not expect this merely empirical freedom to be particularly important to distinguish Kant’s accounts from his more determinist contemporaries, since Kant saw his contribution to freedom of action to lie not in a novel psychological account of empirical freedom but in a new transcendental freedom compatible with thoroughgoing natural determinism.

At times, Grenberg seems sensitive to this point. She is much clearer than other commentators about the specifically first-personal nature of freedom in Kant’s psychology, saying for example that “when [an agent] judges her feeling of pleasure to be good ... she attributes it to her own faculty of desire, not from a third person perspective, but from a first person perspective,” and she distinguishes this “practical” task from “theoretical ... knowledge of herself as object” (171). But this distinction does not sufficiently inform her overall treatment of Kant’s account of action, so she still sees a conflict between Kantian freedom and a thoroughgoing natural necessity in psychological explanations of human action.

12 These resources include Kant’s three Critiques as well as his Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View, Reflexionen, and lecture notes on anthropology and metaphysics. The lectures on metaphysics, in particular, give Kant’s most systematic treatment of empirical psychology. While there has been some question about the veracity of these lectures, they have increasingly been taken to be reliable, largely because of their overlap with each other and with Kant’s published writings. (See the introduction to the Cambridge Edition of the Lectures on Metaphysics for details about their reliability.) I generally take these lectures to be reliable, while backing up key interpretative claims with references to published works.

2. The framework for an account of action: Kant’s faculty psychology

There are two main aspects of Kant’s empirical account of human action. The first is rooted in Kant’s engagement with eighteenth-century faculty psychology. In the context of a tradition that describes the soul as involving appetitive and cognitive faculties, Kant develops an account of relation-
ships among three main faculties of the soul: desire, feeling, and cognition. This provides Kant with an opportunity to explain human action as the result of a faculty of desire and to explore the causes of various kinds of desires. Kant’s most detailed accounts of this faculty psychology are in his lectures on empirical psychology, part of his lectures on metaphysics, and in his lectures on anthropology, which grew out of these empirical-psychology lectures. The second aspect of Kant’s account of human action comes from his engagement with emerging theories in biology and natural history and involves Kant’s account of natural predispositions that underlie human actions. Looking at this second aspect is necessary in order to understand both the nature and the limits of Kant’s causal accounts. The primary sources for this aspect of Kant’s account are taken from his anthropology, including his historical essays, lectures on anthropology, and his published Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View.

Kant’s faculty psychology developed in response to three main trends in eighteenth-century philosophy: Wolff’s Leibnizian rationalism, Crusius’s Pietist response to Wolff, and British empiricism. The overall structure of Kant’s empirical psychology is largely set by Wolff, who developed a faculty psychology in order to reduce diverse faculties to “representation” as the single “essence” of the soul. Kant’s course on metaphysics was based on the textbook of the Wolffian Alexander Baumgarten, who followed Wolff in the organization of empirical psychology. Kant takes over Wolff’s and Baumgarten’s distinctions between different faculties of soul but resists their attempts to reduce these faculties to a single essence.

Instead, Kant follows Crusius in resisting this reduction, and he shifts from a two-fold distinction between cognitive and appetitive faculties to a threefold distinction between the faculties of cognition, feeling, and desire (cf. 29:877). Each of these three faculties includes several distinct basic powers, none of which is reducible to others. As Howard Caygill explains, “the continuum of representations proposed by Baumgarten is replaced by ... radical distinction[s]” (Caygill 2003: 180). For Kant, the classification of different basic powers is important because “the concept of cause lies in the concept of power” (28:564). Different powers reflect

13 The recent publications of these metaphysics lectures in English, as part of the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, will make the study of Kant’s empirical psychology much easier within the English-speaking world. I hope and expect that the forthcoming publication in the same series of Kant’s anthropological writings and lectures from his courses in anthropology will have a similar result.

14 For details on the relationship of these three strands to Kant, see Beck 1969; Hatfield 1990: 21-77; Henrich 1957/58 and 1994: 20-7, 70-2; Hilgard 1980; and Schneewind 1998. For a close study of the reception of Scottish philosophy in eighteenth century Germany, see Kuehn 1987. Other figures are relevant to Kant’s psychology, including Tetens, Eberhard, Mendelssohn, and Lossius, but a full discussion of the historical background of Kant’s psychology is beyond the scope of this essay. Baumgarten and Mendelssohn are particularly important in that both articulated three-fold divisions similar to Kant’s own (cf. Hilgard 1980).

15 This resistance to reducing all faculties to a single sort of representation is particularly important for the development of the theory of sensibility in Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason. Cf. Caygill 2003.

16 As Eric Watkins has rightly pointed out, Kant often uses the terms ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ in a way that is quite different from Hume (and other empiricists). Often for Kant, a cause just is an underlying power of a substance, and the effect of this power is a change of state of a substance (either the substance with the power or another one, or both). Thus Watkins emphasizes that “what Kant takes to be an effect, namely a continuous change from one determinate state to another, is not what Hume understands an effect to be, namely a determinate state of an object at a particular moment in time ... Nor is the cause for Kant—a phenomenal substance—identical to the cause for Hume—a determinate state at a particular moment in time” (Watkins 2005: 384). As Watkins points out, the law–likeness of changes, for Kant, is due to the fact that these changes are the effects of powers in substances that are themselves unchanging because they are due to the nature of the substance. Nonetheless, these powers give rise to different effects in different circumstances. As Watkins emphasizes,
different specific laws of causation. Within the faculty of cognition, for instance, Kant includes distinct basic powers such as the five senses, imagination, understanding, and reason, each of which is governed by its own set of causal laws.\textsuperscript{17} Because basic powers are the key to any causal explanation of phenomena, Kant claims that “all physics, of

\textit{cause} different things to happen because the circumstances of the substance can be different. [Watkins 2005: 270; cf. 267, 354, 411-12]

Given the role of “external circumstances that must obtain for this cause to be efficacious” (411), one can reasonably bring together Kant’s use of the term ‘cause’ for causal powers and our more common sense (and admittedly empiricist) notion of ‘cause’ as a preceding event. This strategy is confirmed by Kant’s occasional use of the term ‘cause’ to refer to prior states of the world rather than substances (A543/B571; cf. 28:254, 674-5; 29:895).

For any change of state of a substance, then, there is a prior state of the substance that gives rise to the succeeding state, perhaps combined with other aspects of the world in which that substance is located. This prior state (of substance and world) can rightly be considered a “cause” of the succeeding state (as Kant does with respect to mental events at 28:254, 28:674-5, and 29:895). At the same time, there is an underlying power that grounds the connection between these two states in a law-like way, and this underlying power can also be considered a “cause,” though in a different sense.

Throughout this paper, I reserve the term ‘cause’ for the preceding states of a substance that give rise to successive states. As we will see, Kant’s psychology involves cognitions giving rise to feelings which give rise to desires. I refer throughout to the cognitions, etc., as the “causes” of their successive states. In that sense, I might rightly be lumped in with “most commentators ... [who] have presupposed, whether explicitly or implicitly, that Kant adopts Hume’s model of causation, according to which one determinate event ... causes another determinate event” (Watkins 2005: 230). At the same time, the models that I develop here give a prominent role to the importance of causal powers in Kant as the underlying grounds of connections between states of a substance. Although I use the term ‘grounds’ to refer to the role of powers and ‘cause’ to refer to antecedent conditions that make those powers efficacious in a particular case, my account otherwise fits with Watkins’s overall approach to Kant on causality.

(Incidentally, the fact that Kant’s account can be translated in this way belies, to some extent, Watkins’s pessimism about the possibility of reinterpreting Kant’s theory to make it intelligible on Human terms. While a full response to Watkins on this point is beyond the scope of this paper, this footnote offers the beginnings of such a reinterpretation.)

\textsuperscript{17} Kant explains that he groups the essentially distinct powers into three classes “in order to treat empirical psychology all the more systematically” (28:262).

\textit{Kant’s Empirical Account of Human Action}

bodies as well as of minds, the latter of which is called psychology, amounts to this: deriving diverse powers, which we know only through observations, as much as possible from basic powers” (28:564).\textsuperscript{18} In both physics and psychology, Kant’s goal is to reduce the variety of observable phenomena to as few basic powers as possible and to explain the laws according to which those powers operate. In psychology in particular, we are to seek “natural laws of the thinking self” based on “observations about the play of our thoughts” (A347/B405). The result is a clear and comprehensive causal account of natural phenomena, whether of bodies, in physics, or of minds, in psychology.

Finally, from British empiricism Kant adopted the practice of explaining each power in terms of laws describing regular connections between phenomena.\textsuperscript{19} Unlike many of the British empiricists, Kant does not focus on laying out causal laws and applying them to understand various mental phenomena. Kant’s focus is on the framework of basic powers that will ground those causal laws. And Kant allows a greater plurality of basic powers than most empiricists. Moreover, because these laws are rooted in basic powers, they reflect necessary connections between different phenomenal states, rather than mere regularities.\textsuperscript{20} Most importantly, Kant differs from empiricists in that he does not think that an empirical account of basic powers provides any basis for epistemology or ethics. In his \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, Kant insists that although “as far as time is concerned ..., every cognition begins with experience,” nonetheless “it does not all on that account arise from experience” (B 1-2, cf. 29:951-2). In a similar way, Kant argues that his empirical

\textsuperscript{18} I have amended the Cambridge Edition translation, translating \textit{Geist} as “mind” where they translate it as “spirit.”

\textsuperscript{19} Kant would have known of Hume’s philosophy, at least through Sulzer’s translation of Hume’s \textit{Enquiry}. For more on the connections between Kant and Hume, see especially Henrich 1957/58 and 1994, Kuehn 1987, Hatfield 1990, and Watkins 2005: 160-70, 232-7, 362-422.

account of human action does not imply that ethical norms can be derived from this account. But when Kant does describe the laws governing the basic powers, his laws are similar to those of the empiricists, including a “law of association” governing the imagination and various laws of logic and prejudice governing the understanding.  

When it comes to explaining human action, Kant focuses his account on desire: “all desires have a relation to activity and are the causality thereof” (25:1514, cf. 29:1024). Kant explains,

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

Desire plays the same role in psychology that motive forces (momentum, etc.) play in physics. Insofar as a representation is the ground of an action that brings about some state of affairs, it is a desire: “the faculty of the soul for becoming cause of the actuality of the object through the representation of the object itself = ... the faculty of desire” (29:1012; cf. 6:211, 399; 7:251). An “object” here is not necessarily a physical object but anything that can be desired, including physical objects but also states of affairs.  

The object of desire is a possible purpose for an action, and desires, for Kant, naturally give rise to actions. As Kant puts it here, a desire is defined as a representation that leads to action, that “becomes cause of the actuality of an object.” And when desire is taken in this sense, there are no actions that are not preceded by and caused by desires, and no desires that do not lead to actions (at least in the absence of external impediments).

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21 For the law of association governing the imagination, see 7:174ff. and corresponding sections in his lectures on anthropology (e.g. 25:883) and empirical psychology (e.g. 28:585, 674). Baumgarten too draws attention to laws of association governing the imagination (see Baumgarten’s Metaphysica, §561), but this law was particularly prominent among British empiricists (see e.g. Hume 1740: I.iii.vi.4, pp. 88-9 and I.iii.vii.6, p. 97: “we are not determined by reason, but by ... a principle of association”).

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

23 One caveat must be added here. For Kant, the tendency of a representation to maintain that representation itself without bringing about a change in the world does not count as a desire. This is how Kant accounts for aesthetic pleasure, where one seeks to maintain a representation but without any desire for an object of that representation, and Kant is particularly interested in these cases of “disinterested” pleasure (cf. 28:674-5). For further discussion of Kant’s account of aesthetic pleasure, see Allison 2001, Ameriks 2003, Ginsborg 1990, Guyer 1979, 1993, and Zuckert 2001.

24 This account of desires as representational provides room for semantic connections between the cognitions and desires. In general, the content of the cognition that gives rise to a desire will be closely linked to the object of desire. For example, the smell of a mango (cognition) will give rise to a desire to consume the mango. Theoretically, cognitions could give rise to desires radically different from themselves—thus a smell of a mango could give rise to a desire to play baseball—but for Kant these connections do not generally occur because of the nature of cognition, feeling, and desire. A full exploration of this issue, and the ways in which it must be modified for higher desires, is beyond the scope of the current paper.

25 Kant does allow for the possibility of a “wish [Wunsch]” (7:251), a sort of “desiring without exercising power to produce the object” (7:251), which is possible only when one lacks a “consciousness of the ability to bring about one’s object” (6:213; cf. 25:206, 577-8, 795, 1109-10). In general, a desire is a commitment to action that will be realized in the absence of external impediments or subjective incapacity. In the case of wishes, one is simply aware of the relevant incapacities at the moment of desire, and hence this commitment has no effect in action.

More generally, one might wonder at this point how Kant could account for conflicts of desire. Although a full treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper, the structure outlined here provides the resources for a fuller discussion of conflicts of desire. First, Kant claims that “in empirical psychology, wholly equal incentives cannot be thought” (28:678; cf. 25:278) because in the case of equal incentives, there would be no choice and thus no action (29:902). An actual determination of the faculty of desire involves either a choice or a wish. In the former case, an action follows, and thus choice can only come only when conflicts have already been worked out. In that sense, there is no strict
For explaining human action, then, the most important task of empirical psychology is tracing the causes of desires. Within this psychology, Kant engages in this task by connecting the faculty of desire with the other basic faculties of the soul. For Kant, this relationship is fairly straightforward:

Pleasure precedes the faculty of desire, and the cognitive faculty precedes pleasure. . . . We can desire or abhor nothing which is not based on pleasure or displeasure. For that which give me no pleasure, I also do not want. Thus pleasure or displeasure precedes desire or abhorrence. But still I must first cognize what I desire, likewise what gives me pleasure or displeasure; accordingly, both are based on the cognitive faculty. [29:877-8]

According to this structure, cognition of an object gives rise to a feeling of pleasure or pain, and that feeling gives rise (again, at least sometimes) to a desire or aversion for the object. We can trace the series of causes as follows:

Cognition → Feeling → Desire → Action

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

In general, the connections between feeling and desire, and between desire and action, are straightforward for Kant. Because desires simply are representations insofar as those representations are directed towards action, Kant’s notion of desire is more closely connected to choice and action than the customary English sense of desire, whereby one can desire something without actually pursuing it. Once one has a desire in this general sense, one is committed to action, and action follows necessarily in the absence of unforeseen hindrances. One might, for example, desire a mango and then find oneself unable to climb the tree, but one’s representation will not count as a desire unless it prompts one to action. In contrast to customary English usage, Kantian desires mark an end to deliberation, not factors taken into account in deliberation.

Similarly, the connection between feeling and desire is, for Kant, a very close one. In his empirical psychology, Kant usually emphasizes this tight connection between feeling and desire, pointing out that “the cognitive faculty is connected with the faculty of desire by the feeling of pleasure or displeasure” (29:890), or that the feeling of “satisfaction with the actuality of the object is desire” (25:577; cf. 7:230-1.

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26 For explaining human action, then, the most important task of empirical psychology is tracing the causes of desires. Within this psychology, Kant engages in this task by connecting the faculty of desire with the other basic faculties of the soul. For Kant, this relationship is fairly straightforward:

27 Kant suggests that smell and taste are paradigm cases here, and their connection is particularly important in this regard. See 8:111.
He insists,29

The faculty of desire rests on the principle: I desire nothing but what pleases, and avoid nothing but what displeases ... But representations cannot be the cause of an object where we have no pleasure or displeasure in it. This is therefore the subjective condition by which alone a representation can become the cause of an object. [29:894]

In these lectures, the cognition–feeling–desire model of motivation seems to be universal, and Kant even applies this model explicitly to the case of motivation by reason. He explains,

[F]reedom is the faculty for choosing that which is good in itself and not merely good as a means. Thus we are free when we arrange our actions entirely according to the laws of the understanding and of reason, and the more we do this, the freer we are, for even if the will is free from stimuli, it can still be not entirely free. For since we desire merely that which pleases us, pleasure is the cause of our desiring. But the cause of the pleasure is either sensibility or understanding ... Understanding and reason give laws to the will according to which it must conform if it is to be free. But we cannot be determined by mere representations of reason; it must also give us incentives. [29:899-900; cf. 19:185-6, R6866; 28:253-4]

Here Kant holds firm to his cognition–pleasure–desire model, pointing out only that there are two very different kinds of pleasure, depending upon whether those pleasures are caused by sensible or intellectual cognitions. Elsewhere

28 This close connection between feeling and desire is asymmetrical, for Kant, in that all desires are preceded by feelings, but not all feelings bring about desires (cf. 29:877-8). This fact is important for Kant’s aesthetics.

29 Cf. too 29:878: “We can desire or abhor nothing which is not based on pleasure or displeasure. For that which gives me no pleasure, I also do not want. Thus pleasure or displeasure precedes desire or abhorrence.”

Kant’s Empirical Account of Human Action

Kant makes a similar point, and he develops a vocabulary for distinguishing between the general genus of feeling that is a cause of any sort of desire and the narrower sort of feeling that is purely sensible:

The cognitive faculty is connected with the faculty of desire by the feeling of pleasure or displeasure. The author calls it pleasure <voluptas> and displeasure <taedium>. That is false, for this is true only of sensible satisfaction.

– For the understanding can frequently find dissatisfaction with that which best satisfies the senses. This should be named “the faculty of satisfaction and dissatisfaction.” (29:890, cf. 28:674-5, 29:1013)

In the context of his empirical psychology, Kant generally posits a feeling of satisfaction [Wohlgefallen] or dissatisfaction [Mißgefallen] as a cause of any desire, allowing that these feelings can be either caused by sensibility (in which case they are properly called pleasures [Lust] or displeasures [Unlust]) or by the understanding.

In the context of his moral philosophy, however, Kant sometimes suggests that no feeling of any sort precedes purely moral volitions. Some of the strongest language here is from the second Critique, where Kant says,

What is essential to any moral worth of actions is that the moral law determine the will immediately. If the determination of the will takes place conformably with the law but only by means of a feeling, of whatever kind, that has to be presupposed in order for the law to become a sufficient determining ground of the will, so that the action is not done for the sake of the law, then the action will contain legality indeed but not morality. [5:71-2; cf. 4:401n, 5:9n, 6:212, 29:1024]

One way to read this passage is as an exception to Kant’s cognition–feeling–desire model of motivation. On this reading, feelings would precede desires only for the cases of non-
moral motivation. In the case of motivation by the moral law, the relevant feelings would follow the determination of one’s faculty of desire.

A full discussion of these passages would require a detailed treatment of the feeling of respect for the moral law, which is beyond the scope of the present essay. However, it is worth noting that there is another way to read these passages, one that is consistent with Kant’s general model of human motivation. The key to reconciling this passage with Kant’s general cognition–feeling–desire model of motivation is to focus on the claim that feeling cannot play a role as an antecedent “determining ground of the will,” and to read this restriction as one that applies not to empirical descriptions of choice but to one’s deliberative bases for choice. That is, in the case of motivation by the moral law, one does not appeal to pleasure as a determining ground of one’s choice, but simply to the law as such. In non-moral motivation, one appeals in deliberation, either directly or indirectly, to the pleasure that one takes in the object of one’s choice. In moral motivation, one makes no such appeal to pleasure. This would be compatible, of course, with saying that pleasure plays a role in a psychological account of moral choice as a connecting psychological state between cognition of the moral law and one’s desire. Here, the thought of the moral law in all its purity (hence not mixed with any considerations of pleasure) causes a pleasure that brings about the desire to act in accordance with the moral law. Kant makes a similar point elsewhere, arguing


This point is emphasized by Beck (1960: 222-3) and McCarty (1993: 425). McCarty in particular makes use of this point to defend an “affectivist” reading of respect for the moral law that is consonant with the account I defend here.

Kant’s Empirical Account of Human Action

One must never say that one places one’s end in gratification, rather that whatever immediately gratifies us is our end, because gratification is only the relation of an end to our feeling. The satisfaction in the rule-governedness of freedom is intellectual. Hence the end is not always self-seeking, if the end is not the altered condition of our own senses. [19:190-1, R6881]

In the case of respect for the moral law, no antecedent gratification determines one’s ends in action, and thus one’s action is not self-seeking, but the immediate interest taken in the moral law itself is a kind of gratification, which in turn motivates desire and thereby action.

For the purpose of this paper, I take the cognition–feeling–desire model of motivation to be Kant’s most consistent model, even for higher cognitions. Those cases in which Kant claims that intellectual feelings merely follow upon desire/choice, rather than grounding it, can be read as presenting a practical account of motivation. Even in the case of higher (intellectual) desires, one’s higher cognitions have “impelling causes” that are feelings of “satisfaction of dissatisfaction,” but these are not “pleasures” strictly speaking because they do not “depend on the manner in which we are [sensibly] affected by objects” (28:254, cf. 29:895). These feelings of satisfaction (or even pleasure) do not provide reasons (in the first-personal sense of reasons that one should consider in deliberation) for one’s actions, though they can still be present as empirical causes that connect one’s intellectual cognitions with desires. At the empirical level, then, the cognition–feeling–desire model of motivation works even for intellectual feelings, though these are feelings of satisfac-

Kant even claims that satisfaction and dissatisfaction (though not pleasure and displeasure) play a role in divine motivation (cf. 28:1061-2), and Kant directly compares God’s motivation by satisfaction to the motivation of a person to perform “a benevolent deed ... when this being from whom I receive the benevolence is happy and has no need of me” (28:1065). For more on divine motivation, cf. Kain “Kant’s Account of Divine Freedom.”
Within this picture, feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction function as transitions from cognitions to desires (and thereby to actions). Jeanine Grenberg has described the connection between these “practical pleasures” and desire in detail (Grenberg 2001: 160-3).\(^{34}\) As she explains,\(^{35}\)

> [P]ractical pleasure is itself necessarily related to and is indeed the very vehicle for the expression of the status of an agent’s faculty of desire. Technically ... there is a distinction to be made between feeling and desire: feeling, an element of the agent’s sensible nature ..., “determines” (bestimmt) the faculty of desire ... . For the purposes of describing action, there is, however, little distinction to be made between the possession of a practical pleasure and that of a desire. [Grenberg 2001: 163]

In the rest of this paper, I follow Grenberg in downplaying the distinction between pleasure and desire. Given a practical pleasure, a desire will follow simply because of the nature of practical pleasures. The challenge for giving a causal account of human action is to explain the origin of those practical pleasures/desires.

Given the close connections between feeling, desire, and action, this paper focuses on giving a causal account of human action in terms of the connections between cognitions and desires. Throughout, these connections are mediated by feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. And these desires all reflect a subjective commitment to action in a particular case. These desires lead to action except in cases of further (and not fundamentally psychological) interference, as when a sudden accident or unforeseen complication prevents one from following through on one’s volitional commitment. Thus outlining how cognitions cause desires reflects the most important psychological component of a causal account of human action. This task is complicated, however, because not all cognitions lead to desire or aversion. Even within those cognitions that do affect desire, some lead to desire and others lead to aversion. Thus Kant needs some account of why the series goes through in some cases and not others, and why it leads to the conative state that it does. In order to provide the framework for Kant’s account of how cognitions affect desires, the rest of this section lays out requisite details from Kant’s faculty psychology. In the next several sections (3 through 5), I explain the role of predispositions as causal bases of connections between specific cognitions and desires.

In his empirical psychology, Kant’s approach to both the origin of cognitions and their connection with desire involves further distinguishing between different faculties of soul. I have already noted the important distinction between the faculties of cognition, feeling, and desire, which forms the background for Kant’s overall account of human action. Cutting across this threefold distinction, however, is a further distinction—adopted from Baumgarten—between “higher” and “lower” faculties of cognition, feeling, and desire. The “lower” faculties are primarily receptive. The higher faculties are “self-active” or “spontaneous” (28:228,
In some cases, Kant associates the spontaneity of the higher faculty with that transcendental freedom that is a condition of possibility of moral responsibility. Strictly speaking, describing the higher faculty of desire as free in that sense is inconsistent with empirical psychology. Insofar as one studies human action empirically, such action is, as Kant insists in his first Critique, causally necessitated in accordance with natural laws. But Kant does hold that the presence of a higher faculty of desire is an indication of moral responsibility and hence transcendental freedom. (See Frierson, “Kant’s Empirical Markers of Moral Responsibility.”) Thus he sometimes slips into these properly transcendental discussions in lectures on empirical psychology. This effort to discuss the Critical philosophy in lectures on empirical psychology is not particularly surprising, of course. As a teacher, Kant found an opportunity within the syllabus prescribed by Baumgarten’s text for explaining some of Kant’s own more important philosophical ideas, a temptation to which he can hardly be blamed for succumbing.

A full defense of this claim requires showing in what ways the higher faculties, though spontaneous, are nonetheless susceptible to explanation in terms of empirical causes. This is the task of the rest of this paper. For a helpful account of this sort of empirical freedom, see Beck 1987: 35-6. This comparative freedom is the freedom that Kant refers to in the second Critique as the “freedom of a turnspit” (5:97). Brian Jacobs puts the point well in the context of discussions in lectures on empirical psychology. This effort to discuss the Critical philosophy in lectures on empirical psychology is not particularly surprising, of course. As a teacher, Kant found an opportunity within the syllabus prescribed by Baumgarten’s text for explaining some of Kant’s own more important philosophical ideas, a temptation to which he can hardly be blamed for succumbing.

Kant carefully distinguishes this empirical freedom from that “transcendental freedom” which is a condition of possibility of moral responsibility, and which involves “independence from everything empirical and so from nature generally” (5:97).
faculty, the distinction between the higher and lower faculties of desire is based on the distinction between the senses and the understanding: “all desires are ... [either] intellectual or sensitive” (29:894). But in the case of desire, what is relevant is not the nature of the desire itself but the cognitive state that produces the desire.⁴¹ “The representations which produce determinations [of desire] are either sensible or intellectual” (28: 674-5). Insofar as a desire is the direct result of the senses or unmediated imagination, it is part of the “lower” faculty of desire. Insofar as it proceeds from the understanding or reason, a desire falls under the “higher” faculty of desire. The key difference here is between motivation by immediate intuitions and motivation by principles or concepts. As Kant explains, every desire⁴² has an impelling cause. The impelling causes are either sensitive or intellectual. The sensitive are stimuli <stimuli> or motive causes [Bewegungssursache], impulses. The intellectual are motives [Motive] or motive grounds [Bewegungsgründe] ... . If the impelling causes are representations of satisfaction and dissatisfaction which depend on the manner in which we are [sensibly] affected by objects, then they are stimuli. But if the impelling causes are representations of satisfaction or dissatisfaction which depend on the manner in which we cognize the objects through concepts, through the understanding, then they are motives. [28:254, cf. 29:895]

The distinction between higher and lower faculties of desire is critically important for Kant’s overall account of human action because the causal mechanisms governing desire operate quite differently depending on whether they belong to the higher or lower faculty. Although both faculties are determined by “impelling causes” or “incentives” (29:895), and in both cases these impelling causes operate by means of feelings⁴³ of satisfaction and dissatisfaction, the higher faculty is determined by “motives” which proceed from the understanding, and the lower faculty is determined by “stimuli” that proceed from the senses (29:885; cf. 29:1015, 27:257). As we will see in sections 4 and 5, the difference between higher and lower faculties of desire is reflected in different predispositions that underlie Kant’s causal accounts of each faculty.

Before moving on to the next section, it is worth drawing attention to one further distinction within Kant’s account of the higher faculty of desire. “Higher” desires are caused by one or more kinds of higher cognition, but these desires need not be purely rational. Although all “higher” desires have “grounds of determination ... [that] lie . . . in the understanding,” these desires can be “either pure or affected” (29:1014-5). Kant explains this distinction as follows:

The intellectual impelling cause is either purely intellectual without qualification <simpliciter ...>, or in some respect <secundum quid>. When the impelling cause is represented by the pure understanding, it is purely intellectual, but if it rests on sensibility, and if merely the means for arriving at the end are presented by the understanding, then it is said to be in some respect. [28:589, emphasis added; contrast 25:579-80]

For a desire to be purely intellectual, it must be caused by the pure understanding, or pure reason (recall that the under-

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⁴¹ Kant makes the same claim in the context of pleasure, but there Kant is careful to insist that while there is still a lower and higher faculty of pleasure, all pleasure is sensitive in itself (hence lower).

⁴² Kant actually says “act of the faculty of choice” here, but this occurs immediately after he has explained that the faculty of choice is simply the faculty of desire insofar as it operates in a context where its activity can bring about its object (28:254).

⁴³ Although Kant says “by representations of satisfaction or dissatisfaction,” for Kant “representation” is a general term, which can refer to any kind of mental state. In the context, it is clear that he is not referring to cognitive states here, but to states of feeling.
standing in the broad sense includes reason). But a desire can be caused by higher cognition directly without being caused by pure reason when someone acts on the basis of a principle of the understanding that is directed towards fulfilling some sensible desire (or inclination). Such impure higher desires proceed from representing to oneself hypothetical imperatives as principles for action. These impure desires are still “higher” desires, however, because they are caused not solely by sensible desires but by principles or concepts of the understanding directed towards satisfying such desires.\(^4\) The pure higher faculty of desire, because it involves desires that follow from purely rational considerations, issues from the representation of categorical imperatives.\(^5\)

We can now summarize the results of this section by filling in Kant’s taxonomy of faculties of the soul:

\(^4\) One way of putting this is that higher desires are those for which Allison’s incorporation thesis holds (Allison 1990). For Kant, contra Allison, human beings can, sometimes, act purely from instinct or inclination, without incorporating such instincts or inclinations into any principle of the understanding. Kant’s language to describe such “actions” fits the lack of true agency implied by their failure to fit Allison’s account of incorporation. He refers to them as actions proceeding from “stimuli” or “impulse.” Most actions, even those that are not guided by morality, are free in the sense that they are associated with the higher faculty of desire, where one acts on principles or maxims, even if these maxims take the satisfaction of inclination as their end. But one can also “act” directly from lower desires. This may help explain both the role of affects in Kant’s philosophy and Kant’s treatment of weakness of will.

\(^5\) This discussion differs from Kant’s distinction between higher and lower faculties in the Critique of Practical Reason. There Kant discusses the distinction in the context of arguing against heteronomous ethical theories, and he downplays the difference between pure and affected higher desires. In the account in the second Critique, he argues against those who describe the higher faculty of desire as one within which intellectual cognitions cause pleasure and thereby move the will. By contrast, he insists upon a higher faculty of desire as the ability for “pure reason ... to determine the will without some feeling being presupposed” (5:24). Here Kant is not necessarily departing from his empirical model within which feelings connect cognitions and desires; he can be read as simply arguing that from a practical perspective, one must not require feelings as “determining grounds” of one’s choice to obey the moral law.

For Kant, this taxonomy is the first step in giving causal laws for mental phenomena because each distinct mental power will be governed by its own causal laws (28:564), and human actions will be the result of the operation of the faculty of desire, which operation depends on prior operations of cognition and feeling. Thus a complete empirical account of human action\(^6\) depends upon explaining the causes of each kind of cognitive state\(^7\) as well as the grounds for connecting those cognitive states to the states of feeling and desire to which they give rise.

\(^6\) By “complete empirical account of human action,” I mean only an account that is as complete as any empirical account can be. Cf. footnote 5 on the limits of empirical explanation in general.

\(^7\) In “Kant’s Empirical Account of Human Cognition,” I discuss Kant’s causal account of the origin of cognitions. For the purposes of this paper, I take these cognitions as given and explain their connections to human action (via feeling and desire).
3. Human predispositions and the grounds of empirical causal connections

So far, we have seen that Kant develops his empirical account of action in the context of a faculty psychology. Kant traces the sources of particular desires to their connection with other mental states. But Kant also offers a more general account of the bases for these connections. Human beings desire some things rather than others, and this is not simply because we cognize some things rather than others. We have cognitions that do not give rise to feelings, and feelings that do not give rise to desires. To flesh out his naturalistic explanation of human action, Kant explains why some cognitions but not others give rise to desires.

Kant deals with this problem in a way that is determinist in the sense that every connection between a cognition and a desire is a causal connection in accordance with a natural law. At the same time, Kant’s account is not reductive, in that he sides with Crusius against Wolff in arguing that the variety of human mental states cannot be reduced to a single kind of power governed by a single kind of law. While Kant continues to insist that reducing powers to as few as possible is a regulative ideal (cf. 28:210, 564; 29:773-822; A648-9/B676-7), he also insists upon a kind of scientific modesty when it comes to causal explanations of phenomena. In a revealing comparison of Descartes and Newton, Kant distinguishes between two modes of study in the physical sciences in a way that points out the danger of allowing the demand for simplicity to govern scientific explanation:

There are ... two physical modes of explanation: (1) mechanical philosophy, which explains all phenomena from the shape and the general motive power of bodies ...

(2) The dynamical mode of explanation, when certain basic powers are assumed from which the phenomena are derived. This was first discovered by Newton and is more satisfactory and complete than the former. Thus to explain something mechanically means to explain something according to the laws of motion, dynamically, from the powers of bodies. With either explanation one never comes to an end. The correct mode of explanation is dynamical physics, which includes both in itself. That is the mode of explanation of the present time. The first is the mode of explanation of Descartes, the second that of the chemists. [29:935-6; cf. A649-50/B677-8]

Descartes errs, according to Kant, because he overemphasizes the reduction of phenomenal explanation to a single power (the “general motive power”). By contrast, Newton and the chemists rightly postulate additional basic powers when these are necessary to explain diverse phenomena. What is more, Kant highlights here that both kinds of explanation take for granted certain causal powers, and these are left unexplained. Kant’s psychology follows the example of the chemists—and Crusius rather than strictly mechanist physics. His focus is on not overly reducing powers to a single basic one. As he says, “there must be several [basic powers] because we cannot reduce everything to one” (29:773-822).

As noted above, feelings that do not give rise to desire or aversion are particularly important for Kant’s aesthetics.


This modesty is epistemic. Kant elsewhere argues that as a metaphysical matter, “it is evident that there is only one basic power in the soul ... But this is a wholly other question: whether we are capable of deriving all the actions of the soul, and its various powers and faculties, from one basic power. This we are in no way in the position to do” (28:262; cf. 29:773-822). Although Kant does not emphasize this point in other lectures, there is nothing in his later claims that precludes the possibility of all human powers in fact being reducible to a single one. But when it comes to empirical psychology, we are not justified in trying to effect this reduction. For more on the important difference between limits on human explanation and limits on metaphysical possibility, see Ameriks 2003, Watkins 2005:264-5.
In his biology, especially in the Critique of Teleological Judgment, Kant explains at least certain basic powers—those most relevant to biology and psychology—in terms of the fundamental notion of a “natural predisposition” (Naturanlage). Kant does not give many causal accounts of the origins of these predispositions, and in that sense they are basic powers that can be classified but not (easily) reduced to any more basic level of explanation in terms of efficient causes. As he explains in his “Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History,” “we must begin with something that human reason cannot derive from prior natural causes—that is, with the existence of human beings,” including all of their natural predispositions (8:110).

A natural predisposition “indicate[s] what can be made of a man” by nature, as opposed to “what man is prepared to make of himself” (7:285). The concept is closely related, for Kant, to the notion of a “germ” (Keime). For more on Kant’s account of Anlagen, as well as the relationship between Anlagen and Keime, see Munzel 1999 and Sloan 2002.

Kant does argue that these predispositions can be explained by reference to final causes, that is, in terms of the ends that they promote. As a “heuristic principle for researching the particular laws of nature” (5:411), one can add to the principle of efficient causation a “principle of final causes” (5:387) “in order to supplement the inadequacy of [explanation in terms of efficient causes] in the empirical search for particular laws of nature” (5:383). According to this heuristic principle, “nothing in [an organized product of nature] is in vain, purposeless, or to be ascribed to a blind mechanism of nature” (5:376). By relegating these teleological-biological explanations to the status of a heuristic, a “maxim of the reflecting power of judgment” (5:398) that “is merely subjectively valid” (5:390), Kant is free to explain natural predispositions in terms of purposive structures without compromising his overall commitment to the fundamental principle that every event in the world in fact has efficient causes.

Thus throughout his anthropology and empirical psychology, Kant offers various teleological explanations of human predispositions. With respect to the natural capacity for dreaming, for example, Kant says that “dreaming seems to be essential: unless dreams always kept the vital force active during sleep, it would go out” (7:175). With respect to that “illusion” by which someone “who is naturally lazy” mistakes “objects of imagination as real ends,” Kant avers that this is a means for “Nature ... to make us more active and prevent us from losing the feeling of life” (7:274; cf. Wood 1999:207, 215-25). These teleological explanations of various natural endowments are not strictly a part of Kant’s empirically determinist account of human action. Rather, they reflect a different kind of explanation, one for which the Critique of Judgment makes room.

This dependence on unexplained natural predispositions or basic powers puts Kant in good company with other naturalist explanations of human beings. Hume, for example, argues,

“When we see, that we have arrived at the utmost extent of human reason, we sit down contented .... But if this impossibility of explaining ultimate principles should be esteemed a defect in the science of man, I will venture to affirm, that ‘tis a defect common to it with all the sciences .... [Hume 1740: Introduction ¶9, p. xviii].

If Kant’s dependence on stipulated principles of human action without further explanation rules him out of the ranks of determinist empirical psychologists, then Hume must also be ruled out of those ranks. Unlike Hume, Kant is willing to make use of the notions of predisposition and power to explain the regularities of human behavior, but his willingness to leave this aspect of his account without a further

With respect to biological (and psychological) predispositions, Kant develops distinctive reasons for questioning the attempt to reduce all explanations to simple mechanistic ones. Kant’s modification of his mechanistic ambitions with respect to human psychology is incorporated into a general realization of the importance of non-reductive explanations of “organized beings,” including humans as well as birds (2:434) and even grass (5:400). Kant’s position here is consistent with popular strategies of seventeenth and eighteenth century mechanists for dealing with the generation of living beings. Importantly for the purposes of this paper, Kant’s biological limitations on mechanical explanation do not involve calling into question a fundamental commitment to explanation in terms of efficient causes, even if such explanations will not always be available in particular cases. As Kant insists, “the principle that everything that we assume to belong to nature (phaenomenon) and to be a product of it must also be able to be conceived as connected with it in accordance with mechanical laws nonetheless remains in force” (5:422). In scientific inquiry, we have an “obligation to give a mechanical explanation of all products and events in nature, even the most purposive, as far as our capacity to do so” allows (5:415; cf. 5:411). For a detailed examination of Kant’s biology that is broadly consonant with my account here, cf. Sloan 2002. For an important discussion of different senses of “mechanism” at play in these passages (and in Kant’s Critique of Judgment more generally), cf. Ginsborg 2001:238-43.

causal explanation reflects a limit that he and Hume share in common.

Once he allows for the use of predispositions in explaining the development and behavior of living things, Kant draws on predispositions to provide the background against which to give his causal account of human action. Predispositions fill in the explanation for why certain cognitions lead to desires, others to aversions, and others to no appetitive response at all. Thus to explain why the smell of a particular food gives rise to a desire for it whereas other smells do not give rise to any desire (8:111), or why certain kinds of social interactions are pleasant and others are not, Kant appeals to basic predispositions in human nature. A full Kantian account of human action, then, must classify and give law-like form to the predispositions that underlie connections between various faculties of the soul.

4. Human predispositions in Kant’s theory of action: the lower faculty of desire

Kant describes basic predispositions in different ways for each different faculty of the soul. For the purpose of explaining human action, the most important distinction is between the predispositions related to higher and lower faculties of desire, since these predispositions are most directly involved in action. In the rest of this section, I make use of Kant’s biology and anthropology to give a fuller account of the causes of action in the case of the lower faculty. In the next section, I discuss the causes of action for the higher faculty. Kant does not distinguish between predispositions relevant to feeling and those relevant to desire (except in the case of temperament, on which I do not focus here). Following Kant, I simplify the role of predisposition by describing the way predispositions function to govern the connection between cognitions and practical feelings/desires. I thus bracket any role for predisposition in the connections between feeling and desire.\(^57\)

For Kant, predispositions are not simply additional efficient causes. Rather, Kant seeks to rigorously explain in the “dynamical mode” of Newton, classifying and characterizing the bases for basic powers of the soul. In this context, the role of predispositions will not be strictly causal in the way that antecedent states are. That is, one does not simply add a predisposition to a cognition in order to cause a desire, such that

\[
\text{Cognition} + \text{predisposition} \rightarrow \text{Desire}
\]

Rather, predispositions for Kant play something like the role that gravity plays in Newton’s account, where it is not the case that

\[
\text{Earth’s mass} + \text{Gravity} \rightarrow \text{falling of apple}
\]

That is, gravity is not just another cause, like the mass of the earth. Instead, gravity is what explains why the mass of the earth causes the apple fall.\(^58\) I capture this different kind of explanation with a vertical arrow (\(\uparrow\)). Thus for Newton,

\[
\text{Earth’s mass} \rightarrow \text{falling of apple} \quad \uparrow \\
\text{Gravity}
\]

\(^{57}\) Cf. footnote 61 for an account of how filling in this detail might go.

\(^{58}\) For Newton’s use of gravity in explanation, see especially his *Principia* (e.g. Definitions III-V). For a detailed discussion of the role of powers in Kant’s causal accounts, both in general and in the specific case of gravity, cf. Watkins 2005. This paper was largely prepared prior to my engagement with Watkins’s work, but his explanation of the importance of powers in Kant’s metaphysics of causation supports the important role that I give to powers in general and predispositions in particular in this paper. As noted above (footnote 16), my terminology here differs from that of Watkins, but our points are generally consonant with each other.
For Kant, this is the kind of explanation that will be needed for why certain cognitions lead to desires and others do not, and predispositions will play a crucial role in these explanations.

Before explaining the lower faculty of desire in some detail, it is important to note that for Kant, relatively few human actions are motivated directly by the lower faculty of desire. Actions motivated by the lower faculty of desire are those for which there is no conscious deliberation. Such actions include reflexive and instinctual responses, as well as actions done merely from habit. Although this is a relatively small sphere of actions, however, they play several important roles in Kant’s overall psychology. First, they provide a helpful model for looking at the higher faculty. Second, as we will see in the next section, the lower faculty is often indirectly involved in actions motivated by the higher faculty of desire. Finally, there are important cases, including at least Kant’s accounts of affects and habit, and arguably his account of weakness of will, where the lower faculty plays a dominant role in motivation.

With respect to the lower faculty of desire, Kant explains the role of natural predispositions in connecting cognitions and desires in terms of instincts, propensities, and inclinations. The role of instincts in explaining human action is the most straightforward, so I will start with it. In his Anthropology, Kant explains, “The inner necessitation of the faculty of desire to take possession of [an] object before one is familiar with it is instinct” (7:365; cf. 8:111f.; 25:796, 1109, 1111-4, 1334, 1339, 1514, 1518). In his lectures on anthropology, Kant claims that “instincts are the first impulses according to which a human being acts” (25:1518; cf. 8:111f., 25:1109).

Kant is careful to distinguish instincts from acquired bases of desire, and generally warns against “multiplying instincts among human beings” in our explanations of human behavior. Nonetheless, he gives ample examples of instincts throughout his lectures and published writings, including the sexual instinct (7:179; 8:112; 25:797, 1334, 1339), the parental instinct to provide for young (7:265; 25:797, 1113, 1518), the “sucking instinct” of infants (25:1339, 1514, 1518), instincts for various foods (8:111), the “natural instinct to test [one’s] powers” (7:263), and natural sympathy (25:1518), which Kant treats as an instinct.

The clearest example of the way in which instincts function in causal explanations of human behavior is from Kant’s short essay “Conjectural Beginning of Human History,” where Kant discusses the role of instinct in determining which foods the earliest human beings would have eaten. He says,

Initially, the newcomer must have been guided solely by instinct, that voice of God that all animals obey. It permitted him to use some things as food and forbade him to use others. – It is unnecessary, however, to assume for this purpose a particular long-lost instinct. It could simply have been the sense of smell and its affinity with the organ of taste, along with the well-known sympathy between the latter and the digestive organs – in other words an ability ... to sense in advance whether a given food is suitable for consumption or not. [8:111]

In one respect, Kant’s treatment of instinct here is atypical, in that he provides some explanation of the causes of the particular connections between sensing a particular food and desiring it, through the relationship between smell, taste, and digestion. With respect to other instincts, Kant more often makes appeal to “particular instincts” without further explanation. But in other respects, his account here is typical. A human being has a sensory—here olfactory—
cognition of a particular food, and this cognition gives rise to a desire because of an instinct for that particular food. Similarly, Kant explains in the case of the sexual instinct that “as soon as one comes into society, one’s instinct will quickly find an object” (25:1518). In both cases, the appeal to instinct explains why the mere sensible cognition—of food or another person—becomes a desire of a particular kind. Thus one can expand Kant’s account of action from section 1 as follows, at least for some cases:

Sensory cognition → Feeling/Desire
↑
Instinct

For example,

Sweet smell of a ripe mango → Desire for that mango
↑
Instinct for sweet foods

In cases where instinct explains the connection between cognition and desire, the task of explanation is sufficiently complete when one classifies the different instincts and describes the laws of their operation. In the context of an account of human instincts, one can causally explain any desire by appealing to the instinct as a natural predisposition (here the instinct for sweet foods) and the activating cause of that instinct (here the sweet smell of a ripe mango).

While Kant thinks that instincts explain some human actions, he does not explain most actions in terms of instinct. Even most desires associated with the lower faculty of desire are not explained by reference to instincts, but by reference to inclinations. Unlike instincts, which are relatively few in number, the types of inclination are too many and too varied to give even a partial list. Inclinations cover a wide range of human desires, from inclinations for smoking and drinking (6:29; 25:1112, 1339, 1517), to love as an inclination (4:400; cf. 27:676), to inclinations for honor, money, and power (7:271). When explaining actions in terms of inclinations, Kant’s model is similar to that for instincts. Like instincts, an inclination is a “ground of desire” (25:1114; cf. 25:1514) or a “subjective necessity of desiring” (25:1519). Thus for the case of an inclination to “strong drink” (25:1339), for example, we get:

Sensory cognition → Feeling/Desire
↑
Inclination (for strong drink)

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

Kant’s explanation of the causal origin of inclinations is fairly straightforward: we acquire inclinations by past experience, which develops a habitual desire, or more properly a “habitual ground [Grund] of desires” (25:1114 my emphasis; cf. 25:1514). In some cases this relevant past cause of the inclination need only be a single instance of experiencing the relevant object of desire (6:29). At other times, developing an inclination depends on “frequent repetition” (25:1514) of experiencing the object of inclination. Thus a more complete account of inclination-based desires (taking drink as an example again) is as follows:

Sensory cognition → Feeling/Desire
↑
Past experience with strong drink → Inclination (for strong drink)

And now, of course, there is another causal connection—between past experiences of an object and the inclination for
that object—that needs to be explained. To explain that connection, Kant appeals to a different kind of natural predisposition, a “propensity” (Hang). As Kant explains, “Propensity ... is the inner possibility of an inclination, i.e. the natural predisposition to the inclination” (25:1111-2). A propensity is a “subjective possibility of generating a certain desire” (7:265; cf. 25:1517), which “can be found even when there is not yet the actual desire” (25:1339). For example, Kant claims that “northern peoples have a propensity to strong drink” (25:1339), and in the Religion, he clarifies what this means (changing the relevant people-group):

Propensity is actually only the predisposition to desire an enjoyment which, when the subject has experienced it, arouses inclination to it. Thus all savages have a propensity for intoxicants; for although many of them have no acquaintance at all with intoxication, and hence absolutely no desire for the things that produce it, let them try these things but once, and there is aroused in them an almost inextinguishable desire for them. [6:29]

Inclinations are not themselves predispositions; rather, they are the result of experiences of objects for which someone has a propensity. A “northern person” or “savage” who experiences strong drink will develop a habit of desiring such drink; such a habit is an inclination.

In explaining a particular human action, then, one can appeal to instincts or inclinations to explain why a particular cognition gives rise to a desire, whereas another does not. For the lower faculty of desire, there are two different models for the causal origin of a desire:

(1) Sensory cognition \(\rightarrow\) Feeling/Desire\(^{61}\)
- (smell of mango) \(\rightarrow\) (desire to eat mango)

\[\uparrow\]
- Instinct* (for sweets)

(2) Sensory cognition \(\rightarrow\) Feeling/Desire
- (sight or smell of strong drink) \(\rightarrow\) (desire to consume drink)

Past experience (with strong drink) \(\rightarrow\) Inclination (for strong drink)

\[\uparrow\]
- Propensity* (for strong drink)

Again, the form of this causal account is that sensory cognitions provide the immediate natural cause of the relevant desires, and instinct or inclination provides the ground or explanation of why that cause functions in the way that it does.

\(^{60}\) There need not be a conflict between northern peoples and savages, if Kant has in mind the Laplanders of northern Scandinavia, who were considered “savage” in the eighteenth century. In fact, however, Kant periodically changes the relevant people-group in discussing this example. His overall view seems best captured by his claim that “Human beings across the whole world have a propensity to drink [alcohol]” (25:1112), as an example of which he sometimes uses “northern peoples” (25:1339), sometimes “the wildest peoples” (25:1112), sometimes “nations that have wine” (25:1518), and even (with respect to intoxicants more generally) the “people in Kamtschatka, [who] have a certain cabbage, which when they eat it, works in them a kind of madness, for which they love to have it” (25:1518). The point of these examples is not to pick out any particular group, but to show that this propensity is universal. Thus the passage in the Religion, often taken as an offensive way of distinguishing “savages” from Europeans, probably reflects the fact that the propensity to drink was undeniable in the case of Europeans, but some might claim that this propensity itself is acquired, against which Kant cites the case of savage, or “raw” (rohe), people.

\(^{61}\) We can make the pictures a bit more complicated by inserting the distinction between feeling and desire. Then the account for instinct will look as follows (and the account for inclination will be altered in just the same way):

Sensory cognition \(\rightarrow\) Anticipatory Pleasure \(\rightarrow\) Desire

\[\uparrow\]
- Instinct* Nature of pleasure

The notion of “anticipatory pleasure” refers to the pleasure that causally effects the desire, in contrast to any expected future pleasure or past pleasures that may have cultivated one’s inclinations. For more on the nature of anticipatory pleasure, see Morrison 2004 and Zuckert 2001. Because the nature of pleasure will always explain the connection between anticipatory pleasure and desire, I have simplified the diagrams in my discussion by conflating pleasure and desire.
Instinct and propensity are marked with an asterisk (*) to indicate that these are natural predispositions for which Kant does not give any further causal explanation.63

One could add one further complication to this picture, given Kant’s contention that the imagination is a part of the lower faculty of cognition and his accounts of the way that imaginative cognitions relate to each other. In his “Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History,” Kant describes a scene where “a fruit which, because it looked similar to other available fruits which he had previously tasted, encouraged him to make the experiment” of eating it (8:111). In this essay, Kant emphasizes the cooperation between imagination and reason in the extension of one’s natural instincts and inclinations. However, one can also conceive of an extension that is purely due to imagination, whereby one sees—but does not smell—a mango, but the sight of the mango quickly generates the cognition of its smell via the principle of association that characterizes the imagination (cf. 7:176; 25:883; 28:585, 674). This new cognition could then generate a desire just as in the model described above. Here one would not have a sensory cognition of the sweet smell of a mango, but the imaginative cognition of that sweet smell would play the same role in the causal account.

5. Human predispositions in Kant’s theory of action: the higher faculty of desire

For Kant, the lower faculty of desire is relatively unimportant when it comes to explaining human action. Although his account of it is valuable because the lower faculty of desire plays an indirect role in many actions motivated by the higher faculty of desire, and it has particular relevance for Kant’s accounts of affects and for actions done from habit, Kant also maintains that humans, unlike animals, have a higher faculty of desire. As Patrick Kain explains,

Kant repeatedly emphasizes [that], in contrast to other animals, we human beings think that we can reflect on, judge, and act contrary to these [immediate] desires and inclinations, and wish for better ones (25:208-10, 411, 474) ... . Kant conceives of this as a special kind of causal power. [Kain 2003:235]

Kant insists that most human action—except for that done from habit, reflex, or mere instinct—is the result of some level of deliberation. Thus most human action proceeds not from instinct or inclination directly, but from the higher faculty of desire.

When turning to the higher faculty of desire, the underlying explanation for the connection between cognitions and desires is character. As Kant explains in an early anthropology lecture, “Characters are nothing other than that which is peculiar to the higher capacities ... . The constitution of these higher powers make up the character ... . We have to know all the purposes to which the acts of the person are directed, if we want to determine his character” (25:227). Kant uses the term ‘character’ in several senses throughout his writings, and it is important to keep those distinct here. In the broadest sense, the character of a thing is the “law of its causality, without which it would not be a cause at all,” such that “every effective cause must have a character” (A539/B567; cf. 25:634).64 In this sense, gravity reflects the “character” of matter, and one’s instincts are part of the “character” of one’s faculty of desire. In a quite different sense, Kant uses ‘character’, in the context of one’s “intellig-
ble character,” to refer to the free ground—“which is not itself appearance”—of one’s appearances in the world (A539/B567). Character in this sense has no role to play in empirical explanations of action. One cannot, in particular, empirically explain actions that flow from the higher faculties of cognition in terms of intelligible character.

The sort of character that plays an important role in Kant’s empirical theory of the higher faculty of desire is distinct from intelligible character and more specific than the character of an efficient cause in general. Kant refers to this sense of character in his anthropology as “character simply [Character schlechthin],” and defines it as “that property of the will by which the subject has tied himself to certain practical principles” (7:292) or “a certain subjective rule of the higher faculty of desire” (25:438). This more specific sense of character plays, for the higher faculty of desire, the role that instincts and inclinations play for the lower. In the rest of this paper, I use character in the narrower sense of Character schlechthin.

Just as instincts and inclinations ground a consistent connection between the lower faculty of desire and sensuous cognitions, so character grounds a similar connection with respect to the higher faculty of desire.

Character is a certain subjective rule of the higher faculty of desire .... Accordingly, character makes up what is characteristic of the highest faculty of desire. Each will ... has its subjective laws, which constitute ... its character. [cf. Kuehn 2001:147]

Kant makes the nature of this connection clearer elsewhere, explaining that “the essential characteristic of character ... belongs to the firmness of the principles” (25:1175; cf. 25:630, 651-52, 1384). A person whose actions are explained by reference to their “character” is someone whose faculty of desire is determined by principles flowing from the higher cognitive faculties. The relevant principles here need not be specifically moral; any principles can be practical in that they guide action. As Kant makes clear in his Anthropology, acting on the basis of firm principles, regardless of the content of those principles, determines whether or not someone has character:

Simply to have a character relates to that property of the will by which the subject has tied himself to certain practical principles .... Although these principles may sometimes indeed be false or defective, nevertheless the formal element of will as such, which is determined to act according to firm principles (not shifting hither and yon like a swarm of gnats), has something precious and admirable to it, which is also something rare. [7:292; cf. 25:651-52]

A person who acts from any stable set of principles has character.65 Kant can thus explain the difference between sensuous people and those with character as follows: “the man of principles, from whom we know for sure what to expect, not from his instinct, for example, but from his will, has character” (7:285, cf. 25:1514). Those who act from instinct or inclination and those who act from character are both predictable—we “know what to expect”—but for different reasons. Instincts and inclinations ground a regular connection between lower cognitive states and desires. Character grounds a regular connection between higher cognitive states—principles—and desires.66

The picture here looks like this:

\[
\text{Cognition} \rightarrow \text{Pleasure/Desire} \\
\uparrow \\
\text{Character}
\]

65 For more on the nature of character, and especially how one’s character can be evil and still admirable, see Frierson 2006.
66 With respect to irregular connections that are still grounded in principles, though not consistent ones, see my discussion of “bad character,” at the end of the present section.
Thus, for example, one may have a commitment to the principle “early to bed, early to rise.” In such a case, one’s actions might be explained as follows:

“Early to bed…” \(\rightarrow\) Desire to go to bed

\[\uparrow\]

Fixed commitment to “Early to bed, early to rise”

Of course, this example is too simple in several respects. For one thing, the cognition of the principle “Early to bed, early to rise” is not in itself sufficient to generate the desire to go to bed, since one must also have some awareness of the fact that it is early evening—time for bed—rather than early morning—time to rise. One’s perception of one’s situation—the sky is growing darker, the clock says 9 PM, etc.—brings to mind the relevant principle and one’s character ensures that the principle will be efficacious in generating its corresponding action. Of course, something similar is involved even in lower desires, where one must, for example, see the mango as something within reach in order for one’s cognition of it to give rise to a desire rather than a mere wish.

More important than the awareness of situational features, however, the principle “Early to bed, early to rise” is a principle that derives its force from its connection with other desires. As a pragmatic principle—one conducive to happiness—it is tied to certain inclinations and instincts that a person has. In that sense, although it is a properly intellectual (rather than sensible) cause of desire, this principle functions as a motive for action that is only “intellectual ... in some respect <secundum quid>” because “it rests on sensibility, and ... merely the means for arriving at the end are presented by the understanding” (28:589). This connection to sensibility suggests that many intellectual motives will also require underlying or coinciding sensible inclinations. That is, the efficacy of some principles in giving rise to desires will depend upon one’s sensible inclinations. In the cases of technical (rather than pragmatic) principles, the connection is particularly clear. The principle “Eat food slowly to savor its flavor” functions as a motivating principle only in conjunction with a (lower) desire to consume some flavorful food. Here what would otherwise be a desire for a food caused by instinct, and therefore due to the lower faculty of desire, becomes a higher desire by providing motivational efficacy to a rational principle for action. The principle on its own would not motivate any desire (or action) at all, because it posits merely the means for satisfying a lower desire more effectively. In conjunction with that lower desire, however, the principle controls the ultimate nature of a person’s action. In this case, for example, the person will eat slowly, based on the principle, rather than rapaciously, as mere instinct would have prompted.

In the case of other higher desires, the connection between the principle and the relevant inclinations or instincts will be more complicated. “Early to bed, early to rise,” as a pragmatic principle aiming to increase happiness, depends on the connection between going to bed early and the satisfaction of certain lower desires, but the connection will be much less direct than in the case of more narrowly technical principles. Here the lower desires that underlie the efficacy of this principle need not immediately coincide with the principle, but they underlie it in that without a certain structure of lower desires, one would not see this principle as increasing happiness and hence it would not be motivationally effective.

Finally, in the case of moral principles, there will be no dependence upon lower desires at all. Thus a motivationally effective moral principle will be “purely intellectual without

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67 Unlike the case of lower desires, where the “principle” of one’s action is something of which one is not conscious, a mere disposition to act in a particular way, higher desires involve circumstances actually prompting cognition of a relevant principle.
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qualification” because it is an “impelling cause” that “is represented by the pure understanding” (28:589). Even in this case, of course, there will be situational prompts that affect the specific actions to which one is directed by moral principles, but one does not need particular sensuous desires to make moral principles motivationally effective.

Even with a fully worked out account of the situational prompts in conjunction with which principles cause desires, however, Kant’s account of the higher faculty is still incomplete because the origin of character itself is unexplained. Unlike instincts, which are natural predispositions and thus do not need to be explained, “character comes not from nature, but rather must be acquired” (25:1172; cf. 7:294). In this respect, character is like inclination, and like inclination, character depends on both a prior propensity—a “propensity to character” (25:1172)—and on various influences that cultivate this propensity into character itself. But whereas Kant gives a fairly straightforward account of the origin of inclinations, he gives no equally simple account of the origin of character. This might lead one to think that there is some room for transcendental freedom in this account of higher desire. Kant even makes some claims that seem to suggest that character, unlike inclination, cannot be explained naturalistically. He says, for instance that “having character simply characterizes man as a rational being, one endowed with freedom” and that character “shows what man is prepared to make of himself” as opposed to “what can be made of a man” (7:285). In fact, however, while character is associated with freedom, it can nonetheless be explained in terms of prior efficient causes. In the rest of this section, I take up the issue of the causal origins of character.

In some respects, this causal explanation will be similar to that of inclinations, although Kant’s account of the origin of character is much more complex than the account of inclination. For inclinations, Kant’s causal story is quite straightforward: given the propensity to desire a particular kind of object, one need only experience the object (sometimes multiple times) to develop the inclination. For character, the account is not nearly as simple, but this should come as no surprise. Character explains the connections between highly developed cognitive states and their corresponding desires, and the capacity for character is one of the features that distinguish human beings from animals. Thus it is natural that its causal origin is considerably more complicated than that of inclinations. But this added complexity does not imply that its origin is not causal.

We have already seen that the character, like inclinations, is acquired on the basis of a natural propensity (25:651, 823, 1172, and 1176). Just as someone with a propensity to strong drink may never have an inclination to such drink, someone with the propensity to character may never develop a character. But the very need to posit a propensity to character shows that Kant’s account of the origin of character fits within a broader biological account of human behavior in terms of natural predispositions. In that sense, the basis of character is no less natural than the basis of inclination.

Kant’s account of the factors that contribute to the development of character further emphasizes the role of empirical causes. Kant suggests that some human beings are better prepared for character than others by virtue of other natural predispositions, such as temperament (7:285, 290; 25:1388). Kant says, “not every temperament is inclined to adopt a character, e.g. the melancholy one adopts a character first, in his Anthropology, rather than the intelligible character that Kant uses to make room for freedom in his first Critique.
the sanguine one not so easily” (25:1388), and of one with a phlegmatic temperament, Kant claims, “without being brilliant, he will still proceed from principles [and hence from character] and not from instinct” (7:290). Kant’s discussion of temperaments is “psychological” and empirical, and temperaments can even “be influenced ... by the physical condition of a person” (7:286).70

Kant discusses further aids to the cultivation of character that are not natural endowments but are nonetheless empirical causes. Among these, education is the most important.71 “The acquisition of good character with people happens through education” (25:1172). And even when Kant is most insistent that “the act of establishing character is absolute unity of the inner principle of our conduct” and thus “a kind of rebirth,” he points out that “education, examples, and instruction ... produce this firmness in our principles” (7:294-5, emphasis added). The “transformation” (7:294) whereby one’s character is established is sown by a “weariness” brought on by repeated disappointment in pursuing objects of instinct, but this transformation is finally “produced” (bewirkt) by education (7:294; cf. 25:1173n1, where Kant adds “moral discourses” to education as means for cultivating character).

Kant’s accounts of character are often accompanied by specific pedagogical recommendations. He suggests that because “imitation ... greatly hinders character, in education one must never refer one’s children to the neighbor’s children, ... but rather build their character directly, [using]

principles of good and bad to inspire righteousness and nobility” (25:635; cf. 7:325; 5:154; 25:599, 722ff., 1386). Particular details about the kind of education someone receives can influence whether that education leads to true character or mere imitation. And in the Critique of Practical Reason, Kant even discusses the way one can cultivate not just character, but good character, in “a ten-year-old boy.” One can bring this boy to “admiration, and even the endeavor to resemble” a virtuous person (5:156, cf. 8:286). The key to this education, for Kant, is to focus on the purity of the moral law. And Kant’s discussion of education here shows that his repeated arguments against heteronomy in moral theory have an important pedagogical purpose. As he explains, “every admixture of incentives taken from one’s own happiness is a hindrance to providing the moral law with influence on the human heart” (5:156). Kant’s claim here might seem to be an indictment of appealing to empirical causes in explaining moral action. But his point is really that certain kinds of empirical causes—instructions that appeal to happiness—are ineffective.72 The empirical influence that can give the moral law influence over a person’s heart is “a story” (5:155) within which the moral law is described in its purity. Likewise in the Metaphysics of Morals, Kant gives a “fragment of a moral catechism” as an example of how to teach virtue to children, and even offers an outline of “the experimental (technical) means for cultivating virtue” (6:479f.). Character in general, and good character in particular, cannot be cultivated in the

70 Insofar as temperament plays a role in the formation of character, then, this formation is at least significantly influenced by natural causes. In fact, temperament could be included in an account of the lower faculty of desire as well. Kant conceives of temperament as a natural predisposition that has a wide influence on the faculty of desire, especially with respect to the ways that human beings affect one another (7:286).

71 Munzel 1999 examines the role of pedagogy in the cultivation of character in detail. See especially chapter 5.
same simple ways that inclinations can be cultivated. Kant’s focus on the details of good character education shows how challenging such education is. But this attention to education in the development of character makes sense only because character is something “produced” by the right kind of education.\(^7\)

Education is the most important influence on character, but Kant also mentions other empirical influences. Politeness plays an important role in the cultivation of character by combating passions and promoting self-control.\(^7\) In his writings on history and politics, Kant gives further explanations for how natural inclinations can give rise to various social institutions—including stable and just political regimes, peace, and even progress in the arts and sciences—that may have beneficial effects on character (8:375). Thus “experience and history” provide reasons that “we should not despair about our species’ progress toward the better” (7:329). The increasing presence of stable political structures and advancing culture, like the presence of stable norms of polite society, can help the cultivation of constancy in principled action. These external influences, like the more direct influences of education, help to “produce” character.\(^7\)

Kant’s emphasis on the role of reason, and even an “Idea of reason,” should not distract from what is actually going on here. One person is able, through conversation, to cause another to have a new higher cognition, an Idea of reason, and this higher cognition in turn causes a new determination of the faculty of desire, according to which the person acts morally. This is, for Kant, an example of how “a person may be compelled to duty by others” (27:521).

\(^7\) Elsewhere Kant points out that even in adults, one can directly influence whether another acts on the basis of the moral law. As he explains,

This happens when the other ... confronts the subject with ... the moral law by which he ought to act. If this confrontation makes an impression on the agent, he determines his will by an Idea of reason, creates through his reason that conception of his duty which already lay previously within him, and is only quickened by the other, and determines himself accordingly to the moral law. [27:521]

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

- a) Not to speak an untruth intentionally ...
- b) not to dissemble ...
- c) not to break one’s legitimate promise ...
- d) not to join the company of evil-minded people ...
- e) not to pay attention to slander ...

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

It is important to note, however, that these are not simply maxims for self-improvement but maxims based on causal laws governing the formation of character (compare the example of distraction in footnote 10). Some of the maxims conducive to character actually embody what character is (cf. Frierson 2006). Thus refraining from untruths and dissembling is crucial to actually being consistent to who one is, to one’s principles. To have character just is, in part, to follow these rules. But the rules also depend on certain regular connections of causes and effects. Thus one should not join bad company or pay attention to slander because bad company and slander can causally interfere with one’s development of character. And even speaking untruth is an activity that can have a negative effect on one’s development of character.

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

Higher cognitions $\rightarrow$ Pleasure/Desire

↑

Education and moral instruction;
Stable, peaceful, polite society; $\rightarrow$ Character

↑

Propensity*  
(& Temperament*)

The account in the case of higher desires is considerably more complicated than in the case of lower desires (whether those lower desires are explained by inclinations or instincts), but a more complex causal account is still a causal account. Because all actions are caused by either higher or lower desires, Kant has provided, at least in outline, a causal account of the connections between cognition and desire for all human actions.  

Before concluding Kant’s discussion of human action, it is worth noting at least one further complication to Kant’s empirical account of character. I have already noted (at the beginning of this section) that actions are motivated directly by the lower faculty of desire only rarely. Unfortunately, it is also rare that actions are motivated by character in Kant’s strictest sense, a truly fixed adherence to consistent principles. Kant raises the standard for character in this strict sense very high, in part because he seeks to inspire in his students (and readers) a striving for constancy of character. But Kant also recognizes that character in this strict sense “is fixed very late” or “comes at a ripe old age” (25:654, 1385; cf. 7: 294). Partly for this reason, Kant suggests that even those who do not act consistently on the basis of principles have a kind of “bad character” (schlechte Character; 25:650, 1172) or “flawed character” (25:1172), and he allows the use of the term “character” to refer any “constitution of these higher powers” (25:227). This character is not a character in the strictest sense because it does not involve acting consistently on principles of the understanding. Still, it is a state of character in that it provides a basis for explaining the connection between principles and desires in particular cases, and it even may explain why one’s character is not as constant as strict character requires. As Kant explains, “There may be something springing from natural instincts that corrupts the character, and there character finds merely that many hindrances arise” (25:1172). This flawed or bad character plays an explanatory role in causal accounts, but these accounts are not as stable as in the case of character in the strict sense.

In the case of bad character, one might rightly say that the inclinations and instincts play a stronger explanatory role than character in human behavior, since the strength of the inclinations and instincts determines which principles one acts upon. Thus Kant sometimes even says, “If we use the understanding for nothing except discovering [what will bring about] the satisfaction of sensible desires, then that is not yet a rational desire, but if reason establishes the purpose of the desire, then it is a rational desire” (25: 579). In that sense, actions that follow from inconstant principles lie because these causes can be put to pragmatic purpose.

These rules for the cultivation of character suggest that there is the possibility of a causal loop in the cultivation of character. Insofar as one begins to develop a character, one can more easily act on the basis of principles. And some principles are conducive to further cultivation of character, so acting on the basis of those will contribute (causally) to a deeper cultivation of character. A causal loop is possible here because small improvements build on each other to produce a character in a full sense. (Admittedly, there is some tension here between this circle, which suggests a gradual development, and Kant’s appeal to the importance of an “explosion” (7:295) that suddenly gives rise to character, but a full exploration of problems arising within Kant’s account of the development of character is beyond the scope of this paper.)

76 For this causal account to be complete, Kant needs to explain the origins of various higher and lower cognitions. Cf. Frierson, “Kant’s Empirical Account of Cognition.”
on the border between the higher and lower faculties of desire. Insofar as one’s understanding plays a role in motivation, the desire is a higher (and hence rational) desire and it is grounded in one’s character (in a loose sense), but insofar as the understanding does not play a governing role in motivation, the desire is like lower desires, where inclination and instinct (rather than character in the strict sense) determine one’s actions. Even in these cases, however, actions are directly motivated by the higher faculty of desire—by principles—even though these principles are themselves grounded in lower desires. The best synthesis of Kant’s views here would allow for an ideal sort of character that requires absolute fixity of principle, while also making use of the concept of character in a looser sense to explain action governed by principles, even when those principles are not fixed.

6. Conclusion

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

One could add more detail to this account. I have not, for instance, shown how some of the familiar terms of Kantian psychology—such as interests, maxims, or the will—fit into the account I have presented here. There is considerably more that could be said about the specific laws governing instincts, inclinations, and particular features of character. One might explore what preconditions are necessary to develop each particular inclination that one finds in human beings, what limits there are to the scope of principles that can form the basis of character, or what causes various mental illnesses. One could expand Kant’s detailed pedagogical insights into a fuller account of the ways in which both cognitive and character development take place in human beings. One might compare Kant’s accounts of inclination, instinct, character, feeling, and desire with recent psychological and philosophical work on the emotions. Kant’s account of feeling in particular was not analyzed in detail, and there are subtleties in that account that I have not discussed.

Finally, it would be well worth applying the psychology laid out here specifically to the context of actions motivated by “respect for the moral law.” Respect functions as the intellectual (higher) feeling that causes one to act morally, and it is caused in turn by a cognition of the moral law itself. But there are notorious difficulties with making sense of this account, and the psychology that I have presented provides a framework within which to make sense of respect. In the

77 There is yet a further complication to this picture, Kant’s discussion of passions. Like bad character, passions involve a faculty of desire governed by inclination. In the case of passions, however, one is governed by a single inclination, with the consequence that one acts fixedly according to principles that are themselves constant. While my account of Kant’s empirical psychology provides valuable resources for a full discussion of passions (and the related issue of affects), this discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

78 Cf. footnote 5.

79 For some recent discussions of Kant’s account of respect, cf. Allison
context of discussing moral action in particular, there may seem to be specific obstacles to giving a complete causal account, and some specific discussion of Kant’s causal accounts of moral action would be valuable further fruit of this study of his psychology.

My goal in this paper, however, was simply to lay out Kant’s overall empirical psychology. I argued that this psychology is thoroughly determinist, at least as much as any other causal accounts in biology. In his empirical psychology, Kant’s account of human beings is precisely the opposite of the popular interpretation of Kant that Blackburn captures well with his account of a “Kantian Captain” who is “immune in all important respects from the gifts or burdens of our internal animal natures, or of our temperaments as they are formed by contingent nature, socialization, and external surrounds[,] ... free of his or her natural and acquired dispositions” (Blackburn 1998: 248, 252). I have given at least some sense of how Kant’s empirical psychology describes those features in our animal natures that, combined with socialization and external surrounds of particular kinds, give rise to the natural and acquired dispositions that explain human action. This empirical dimension of Kant’s account of human action provides a needed and under-appreciated complement to accounts of human action from the standpoint of practical reasoning, accounts which properly emphasize human freedom. By adding this dimension, important interpretive problems in Kant can be discussed in more psychologically astute ways, and Kant’s philosophy as a whole cannot be as easily dismissed on the grounds of its supposed psychological naiveté.80

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Kay’s Empirical Account of Human Action


----- “Kant’s Empirical Account of Human Cognition” (unpublished manuscript).


Patrick R. Frierson


------. “Kant on the Moral Status of Persons” (unpublished manuscript).

------. “Kant’s Account of Divine Freedom” (unpublished manuscript).


