Keeping the Shutters Closed: The Moral Value of Reserve

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If all men were good, there would be no need for any of us to be reserved; but since they are not, we have to keep the shutters closed.¹

The above quote, which is from Immanuel Kant’s Lectures on Ethics, suggests that we have reason to hide certain aspects of ourselves — specifically, our flaws and failings — from the eyes of others. In other words: we ought not be in public what we are in private. In this paper, I will argue that Kant is essentially right about this claim. The reasons he gives for it are insightful; however, they are also unsatisfying. His arguments are underdeveloped, they employ mostly pragmatic considerations, and they rely on some controversial assumptions about human nature. My aim in this paper is to provide a more robust Kantian-inspired argument for the claim that we have moral reason to be reserved about our flaws. I will argue that when we collaborate with others to keep the shutters closed on our individual and collective flaws, we make possible a better form of moral community than we could otherwise have.

It is perhaps surprising that Kant of all people would have suggested that we cover up our flaws when we present ourselves to the world. After all, Kant was about as opposed to deliberate deception as any philosopher has ever been, and it’s not obvious how a moral requirement to hide our flaws could be squared with the moral requirement to be truthful. The very idea that there could be anything like a Kantian duty to put forward a public face that is not representative of our actual attitudes may seem implausible.

For Kant, the need to be reserved is partly a concession to the human condition. Kant spends quite a lot of time in both the Lectures on Ethics and the Doctrine of Virtue outlining the ways in which human beings are flawed. We are prone, he thinks, to a wide array of vices and wayward feelings and inclinations. Given what human beings are like, candor about our flaws is, at minimum, imprudent. On his view, we

¹. “Ethical Duties Towards Others: Truthfulness”, in Lectures on Ethics, trans. Louis Infield (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1965), 224. My reasons for using this version of the Lectures on Ethics have more to do with rhetoric than scholarship, but regardless, I think that the particular translation in use makes little difference, given my goals in this paper.
simply cannot trust others not to view or use our weaknesses in ways that will be to our disadvantage. But as we shall see, there is more to the Kantian story about reserve than considerations of self-interest. My goal is to show that a general strategy of complete public transparency about ourselves is not just imprudent but detrimental to the aims of morality itself. Appropriate reserve about our shortcomings, I will argue, aids in the difficult task of building and maintaining moral community among morally frail and flawed human beings.

I begin in Part I with an examination of what Kant says about reserve, focusing on what he takes to be the dangers of revealing our flaws. I distinguish four separate argument strands that appear in Kant’s writings, all of which have some intuitive plausibility but none of which is fully satisfactory.

In Part II, I use these strands to construct a framework for my own account of how the practice of being reserved about our flaws can have a distinctively moral value. I argue that we have moral reason to join with others in creating a moral version of what sociologist Erving Goffman called a “front region” of behavior. This moral front region is a cooperative normative space in which we present ourselves as morally better than we in fact are and in which we help others in their efforts to do the same. The practice of appropriate reserve about our flaws plays an essential role in helping us create and sustain this front region and the vision of ourselves and others that it represents.

Participating in the moral front region, I suggest, contributes to the fulfillment of two central Kantian imperfect duties: the duty to improve my own moral character and the duty of beneficence. Putting on a moral front enables me to express a commitment to morality in the face of my own failings. It shows that I take my own moral self-perfection seriously as an end, and it aids me in the pursuit of that end. Moreover, when I help others sustain their moral fronts I fulfill a duty of beneficence insofar as I support them in their own projects of moral self-improvement. In Kantian terms, we might describe the moral front region as a collaborative effort to instantiate the kingdom of ends in a world of imperfect human beings.

In Part III, I address three objections to my argument: 1) that maintaining a moral front involves impermissible deception; 2) that moral fronts actually undermine self-improvement by making self-knowledge more difficult; and 3) that the moral front region precludes morally valuable forms of intimacy in relationships, including the kind of moral friendship Kant himself prizes so highly.

I should note from the start that I am not claiming to be putting forward any kind of definitive Kantian position about the moral value of reserve. Indeed, I am not sure it is even possible to reconstruct a full account of Kant’s views on the topic, given that what we have consists mostly of a few scattered remarks that he made across several different contexts. Rather, my goal in the paper is to expand on what I take to be Kant’s highly interesting insights about the way reserve functions in social life and its importance for maintaining moral relationships in a community. It is a project very much in the spirit of Kant’s ethics, but it will not necessarily adhere to the letter of the texts.

PART I: KANT ON THE NEED FOR RESERVE

No man in his true senses, therefore, is candid.³

Given how much Kant obviously values honesty and forthrightness, it is striking how forcefully he also criticizes the practice of absolute candor, as the above quote indicates. In the Lectures on Ethics, Kant defines ‘reserve’ as being “restrained in expressing one’s mind” and suggests that


³. Lectures on Ethics, 224.
it is a characteristic we should cultivate. Reserve does not equate to silence; rather, it is a judicious discretion about the things that come out of our mouths:

Yet there is such a thing as prudent reserve, which requires not silence but careful deliberation; a man who is wisely reserved weighs his words carefully and speaks his mind about everything excepting only those things in regard to which he deems it wise to be reserved.\(^4\)

It is important to note that prudent reserve, as Kant understands it, does not include telling falsehoods. Kant is, of course, widely known and nearly as widely disparaged for his insistence that there is a perfect duty not to lie, even to murderers at the door. In fact, his actual views on truth-telling are far more sophisticated and subtle than his critics usually grant.\(^4\) I will say more about this in Part III, but for now, let us just note that whatever Kant’s considered view about the duty to make our statements truthful, he does not believe that this duty amounts to a general obligation to acquaint the world with the entire contents of our minds. When we present ourselves as saying what is true, we must actually be doing so, but it doesn’t follow that we must always reveal everything that we are thinking. Indeed, as Kant recognizes, it is often best that we do not, for what we are thinking is not always fit to be said.

Some of the reasons we have for being reserved about our thoughts are straightforwardly based in the duties of respect that we owe to other people. We have a duty to others not to be contemptuous of them or to ridicule them or their errors.\(^7\) Insofar as duties of respect are strict duties, they are duties of performance; the duty is to avoid showing or expressing contempt or ridicule. Kant notes that we cannot always help “inwardly looking down on some in comparison with others”.\(^9\) When this is the case, the requirement is to keep that contempt from being visible to others so far as possible. If I find myself thinking contemptuous thoughts about someone, duty commands me to bite my tongue. Thus, reserve about our thoughts and feelings is sometimes straightforwardly demanded by what we owe others as a matter of respect for them as fellow rational agents.

But Kant’s remarks about reserve and its importance go well beyond the injunction to keep our contemptuous thoughts to ourselves. He appears to endorse a more general and far-reaching form of reserve, one that encompasses not just our thoughts but our flaws, failings, and defects. In the Lectures on Ethics, he says, “Man is reserved in order to conceal faults and shortcomings which he has; he pretends in order to make others attribute to him merits and virtues which he has not.”\(^9\) We might see this as simply a report on what human beings do as a matter of natural tendency. Yet several sentences later, Kant endorses this tendency as fortunate: “Our proclivity to reserve and concealment is due to the will of Providence that the defects of which we are full should not be too obvious.”\(^10\)

Claiming that our natural tendency toward reserve is providential is not, of course, enough to establish it as morally important. Possibly Kant is saying nothing more than that the proclivity to reserve is

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4. Lectures on Ethics, 225. Kant’s definition of ‘reserve’ here is narrower than how I will use the term, and also, I think, narrower than how he uses it elsewhere. I will also use ‘reserve’ and ‘reticence’ interchangeably.

5. Lectures on Ethics, 225.


8. Doctrine of Virtue, 463.


10. Lectures on Ethics, 224.
fortunate because it tends to be in our self-interest. But a careful investigation of his discussion of reserve points to something more significant about how reserve functions in moral life. There are, I suggest, four distinct strands of argument in Kant’s scattered remarks about reserve, each of which brings to light something morally important that is threatened or endangered when we allow our moral flaws to be out in the open. Separately, none of the argument strands provides convincing support for his claim, but taken together, they offer a framework on which to build a stronger moral argument in support of reserve.

Danger #1: The risk to dignity
I will begin with the danger that appears to be foremost in Kant’s mind when he talks about a lack of reserve, which is that it poses a threat to how we perceive the dignity of humanity itself. The idea behind this argument is that there are aspects of our natural human state which are simply unfit for exposure:

... we have certain natural frailties which ought to be concealed for the sake of decency, lest humanity be outraged. Even to our best friend we must not reveal ourselves, in our natural state as we know it ourselves. To do so would be loathsome.11

Kant doesn’t tell us exactly which frailties would outrage humanity or what parts of our natural state would be loathsome, although we can probably make some guesses. He later remarks that “many of our propensities and peculiarities are objectionable to others, and if they became patent we should be foolish and hateful in their eyes”.12 Such passages reveal the extent to which Kant’s rather dark outlook on human nature influences his views about the conduct of human relationships — our “unsociable sociability”, as he calls it.13 Indeed, Kant’s remarks about reserve are probably in part a practical response to what he takes to be more or less inescapable facts about what human beings are like and how we interact with each other. We have a variety of natural tendencies to which others are, as a matter of empirical fact, likely to react with disgust and revulsion. Since we have reason not to want others to react to us this way, we thus have reason to keep those aspects of ourselves under wraps.

This part of Kant’s story is one that contemporary readers might be inclined to dismiss as resting on outdated and perhaps puritanical views about matters like sex, bodily functions, and the like. Obviously times have changed since Kant was delivering lectures in Königsberg. We may no longer have any reason to hide the aspects of ourselves that took us to have reason to hide. Moreover, we also now know that what people find disgusting or repulsive is at least partly a matter of social and cultural circumstance.14 And of course, the mere fact that people would be revolted by my natural propensities neither justifies them in having that reaction nor generates an automatic obligation on my part to avert it.

Crucially, Kant’s concern is not so much with the mere possession of the flaws, which undoubtedly we cannot help, as it is with the public display of them. This is made evident by his memorable comparison between hiding our flaws and hiding the less savory parts of our houses from visitors:

11. Lectures on Ethics, 206.
12. Lectures on Ethics, 224.


Every house keeps its dustbin in a place of its own. We do not press our friends to come into our water-closet, although they know that we have one just like themselves. Familiarity in such things is the ruin of good taste. In the same way we make no exhibition of our defects, but try to conceal them.15

Whatever reasons we might have for keeping our water-closets and dustbins out of view of guests, it is not because they would be shocked to learn that we have them. As Kant himself acknowledges, they are likely to have such things in their own houses. Rather, Kant’s point seems to be that exposing such things to public view somehow tarnishes the image we should be presenting to the world.

But what kinds of flaws tarnish my image in such a way that I should be hiding them from the world? The fact that I have a lousy tennis serve or cannot seem to pull off a decent chocolate ganache is shortcomings in some sense, but they do not seem to be shortcomings that I have compelling reason to conceal unless it is important to me that I am seen as an excellent tennis player or accomplished pastry chef. Even when that is the case, those are contingent ends that I can take on and relinquish at will. If I have a great deal invested in my reputation as a chef, then the revelation of my chocolate failures will detract from that particular image. But this can’t be what Kant has in mind; surely humanity would not be outraged by a lumpy ganache.

If there is any Kantian sense to be made of the claim that certain failings must be concealed from public view as a matter of moral decency, then it must be the case that they are flaws that impinge on not just an image that, for contingent reasons, we wish to present, but an image that we have moral reason to present. That image, of course, is the image of a rational being with dignity, one worthy of respect in virtue of that standing. The flaws that we have moral reason to hide from public view must be the flaws that somehow detract from that standing or make it harder for others to treat us (or for us to treat ourselves) in a way that is consistent with it.

Of course, Kant’s account of dignity has the implication that there is nothing we can do that will actually diminish it in ourselves or others, at least not if we are talking about the dignity that grounds what Stephen L. Darwall has called “recognition respect”.16 No matter how badly I behave, I cannot make it the case that any rational agent loses her dignity or no longer deserves to be treated with respect. The moral failure in violations of both self-respect and respect for others lies in the mismatch between the person’s actual status and the treatment we impose on her. Degrading myself or someone else, then, consists in acting as if rationality does not have the value that it in fact has.17

In his remarks on drunkenness and gluttony, Kant suggests that eating or drinking oneself into a stupor is morally impermissible because it is effectively lowering oneself to the level of beasts for the sake of nothing more than pleasure.18 As he puts it, “[A] man who is drunk is like a mere animal, not to be treated as a human being.”19 I take it that Kant’s point is not that we are entitled to treat drunk people as animals, but rather that in that state, they leave us with no real alternative to engaging with them as if they were in fact animals. When I make myself drunk, I render it impossible for others to interact with me as a rational being and hence behave in a fully respectful way toward me. In Kant’s view, I am thus participating in a kind of public disparagement of rationality itself.

Kant frequently refers to the duties that we have toward humanity as such (as opposed to duties to particular human beings). The

15. Lectures on Ethics, 225.
17. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for reminding me of the importance of this point.
18. I am not endorsing Kant’s dismissive attitudes toward non-human animals. One could make his case about lowering ourselves without employing comparisons with other animals. Nor do I wish to commit myself to his views about drunkenness, at least not without additional qualifications.
idea that we have a duty to uphold certain standards for the sake of the moral community lurks, as we have just seen, in his claims about drunkenness and gluttony, and also in his argument against degrading punishments, which he thinks are a kind of outrage against humanity itself. The implication is that when I behave in ways incompatible with my own dignity, I do not simply express a lack of respect for myself; I diminish respect for humanity as a whole by treating rational agency as though it lacks the value that it in fact has.

The act of hiding our flaws from others differs from drunkenness in a number of obvious ways, but in Part II I will argue that at least sometimes, the act of putting one’s flaws on display disparages the value of rational agency in a way that is parallel to the way Kant thinks we disparage it when we are drunk. The effort to conceal from public view our morally unsightly feelings, inclinations, and motivations is important to preserving respect for humanity in a world where we see only very imperfect versions of it. It is a moral problem that would not exist if human nature were different (if, as Kant says in the opening quote of this paper, all men were good). But insofar as human beings are as Kant thinks we are, then perhaps his suggestion is that we need to keep the shutters closed on our flaws as a way of reminding us that we are capable of something more.

Danger #2: The risk to equality
A second risk that we run when we reveal our flaws to others is the danger of losing our standing as the moral equals of others with whom we are in relationships. Notably, many of Kant’s remarks about reserve occur in the context of discussions of friendship. Like Aristotle, Kant acknowledges the tremendous moral value of friendship in human life and worthiness of such friendship as an object of pursuit. But Kant, perhaps because of the dim view he takes of human nature, is rather pessimistic about the possibility of what he calls moral friendship obtaining in the real world. This is in part because our failings keep getting in the way. When a person exposes himself candidly to his friend, warts and all, he runs the risk of losing the other’s respect:

He would like to discuss with someone what he thinks about his associates, the government, religion, and so forth, but he cannot risk it: partly because the other person, while prudently keeping back his own judgments, might use this to harm him, and partly because, as regards disclosing his faults, the other person may conceal his own, so that he would lose something of the other’s respect by presenting himself quite candidly to him....

Friendships exemplify what Kant thinks is the constant tension between love and respect in human relationships: “[I]f the principle of love bids friends to draw closer, the principle of respect requires them to stay at a proper distance from each other.” The love we have for the other in a friendship encourages us to be candid, but the cost of candor is that it endangers the mutual respect on which such friendships must be founded.

Candor is at once necessary for the deepest kind of friendship and also a serious threat to that friendship. I will return to the issue of candor in intimate relationships in Part III. For now, let us just note that Kant is worried about the extent to which the revelation of our flaws to our friends puts us in a morally vulnerable position, particularly...

20. See, for instance, “Duties to Oneself” and “Duties towards the Body Itself” in the Lectures on Ethics, pp. 116–126 and 157–159, respectively. See also Doctrine of Virtue, 427 and 463.

21. For a thorough discussion, see Veltman (2004). See also Langton (1992) and Mahon (2006b).

22. The extent of his pessimism varies somewhat across the texts, but it is a consistent presence.

23. Doctrine of Virtue, 472.

if the exposure is not reciprocal. The unreserved person is vulnerable not just to harm caused by the other’s betrayal but also to the loss of the other’s respect. When one person is candid about his flaws while the other is not, the friendship becomes a relationship of unequal qualities. Such a relationship cannot accomplish the aims of Kantian moral friendship. Thus, complete candor threatens something that we rightly take to be valuable.  

Danger #3: The risk of corrupting others
In the Lectures on Ethics, Kant asserts that when we throw open the shutters on our flaws, we run the risk that other people will become morally worse through our actions. As he puts it, “[T]he parading of these objectionable characteristics would so familiarize men with them that they would themselves acquire them.” Obviously there is an empirical question about whether in fact people do pick up moral flaws through being exposed to them in others. Setting that issue aside for the moment, we might well wonder whether, if it’s true that people acquire our flaws this way, we are responsible for seeing that they don’t. Is there a Kantian moral duty not to be a bad influence on others? Kant does claim in the Doctrine of Virtue that we are obliged not to corrupt other people, though he says little about what that entails. I will return to this in Part II. But if Kant is right that other people can catch our flaws, then it’s not implausible to suggest that we should take pains to avoid being contagious, so to speak. In that case, we have additional moral reason to keep our flaws out of view of other people, lest we cause them to develop too.

Alternatively, we could read this remark of Kant’s as suggesting that exposing our flaws corrupts others by desensitizing them to those

Qualities as flaws. They might start to see them as acceptable characteristics and might also become less reticent about putting their own similar flaws on display. If I allow my envy of my competitor’s success and my subsequent dislike of her to become apparent, it may legitimize those envious feelings and make them seem not just natural but morally unproblematic. In this way, my revelation of my flaws would contribute to a more general lowering of communal moral standards and perhaps also to an overall lessening of respect for humanity. So though I am not directly corrupting people, I am essentially condoning their character flaws by allowing my own versions of those flaws to be out in the open and making it more acceptable for others to follow suit.

On either interpretation, the suggestion would be that displaying my moral flaws threatens the moral community itself, whether by directly corrupting particular individuals or by contributing to an environment in which people take moral demands less seriously than they should. Of course, the plausibility of this claim rests on the assumption that the qualities in question really are flaws. Otherwise, it is an argument that can easily be turned toward pernicious ends. I will set that discussion aside for now, and will take for granted that the flaws on the table in this paper are feelings, inclinations, and motivations widely and justifiably regarded as morally problematic.

Danger #4: The risk to moral self-improvement
The fourth and final strand of argument is related to the previous one. It is the suggestion that when we keep our flaws out of public view, we do not simply avoid making ourselves and others worse; we also improve ourselves. Kant repeatedly argues in support of courteous behavior on the grounds that the effort to appear good actually changes

25. As does total reserve, of course, since Kantian moral friendship is also impossible without candor. This is an interesting and important puzzle about Kant’s account of friendship. I will say something more about it in Part III, but a full discussion is beyond the scope of the present paper.

26. Lectures on Ethics, 224.

27. Doctrine of Virtue, 394.
our character for the better. This passage from the Lectures on Ethics makes the claim explicit:

In the same way we make no exhibition of our defects, but try to conceal them. We try to conceal our mistrust by affecting a courteous demeanor and so accustom ourselves to a courtesy that at last it becomes a reality and we set a good example by it …. Accordingly the endeavour to appear good ultimately makes us really good.\(^{29}\)

The claim is, of course, reminiscent of the Aristotelian thesis that it is through practicing virtuous actions that we become virtuous. Although Kant provides little by way of argumentative support for the claim, he certainly seems to think it is true. The assertion appears again in the Anthropology, where he says of people that:

they assume the appearance of attachment, of esteem for others, of modesty, and of disinterestedness, without ever deceiving anyone, because everyone understands that nothing sincere is meant. Persons are familiar with this, and it is even a good thing that this is so in this world, for when men play these roles, virtues are gradually established, whose appearance had up until now only been affected. These virtues ultimately will become part of the actor’s disposition.\(^{30}\)

Kant may or may not be right that putting on the appearance of virtues will make those virtues part of our disposition. But even if behaving courteously has no direct effect on my own moral character, it may still have a more general kind of moral value. Consider that when we adopt the appearance of virtue, we develop a habit of behavior that reflects what is actually morally required of us. Granted, such behavior is often insincere — something that we all recognize. But that doesn’t mean that the behavior lacks moral significance. As Kant puts it in the Anthropology: “Every human virtue in circulation is small change; only a child takes it for real gold. Nevertheless, it is better to circulate pocket pieces than nothing at all.”\(^{31}\)

We might put Kant’s point this way: whenever we behave in accordance with what morality requires of us, it brings the interaction closer to a morally ideal one than would acting on our true feelings. In a striking passage from the Doctrine of Virtue, Kant describes courteous behavior as “a beautiful illusion”:

It is a duty to oneself as well as to others not to isolate oneself but to use one’s moral perfections in social intercourse … to cultivate a disposition of reciprocity — agreeableness, tolerance, mutual love and respect, and so to associate the graces with virtue. To bring this about is itself a duty of virtue. These are, indeed, only externals or by-products, which give a beautiful illusion resembling virtue that is also not deceptive, since everyone knows how it must be taken. Affability, sociability, courtesy, hospitality, and gentleness (in disagreeing without quarreling) are, indeed, only tokens, yet they promote the feeling for virtue itself by a striving to bring this illusion as near as possible to the truth. By all of these, which are merely the manners one is obliged to show in social intercourse, one binds others too; and so they still promote a virtuous disposition by at least making virtue fashionable.\(^{32}\)

The illusion is beautiful because it promotes the “feeling for virtue” and makes it “fashionable”. To put it differently: the illusion takes us a step or two closer to the kingdom of ends. In the next section, I will

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\(^{29}\) Lectures on Ethics, 225.

\(^{30}\) Anthropology, 37.

\(^{31}\) Anthropology, 39.

\(^{32}\) Doctrine of Virtue, 474. He uses the phrase ‘beautiful illusion’ in the Anthropology as well.
defend this idea of Kant’s that helping create and sustain an illusion such as this is a morally valuable undertaking.

It is evident that Kant thinks that a human society in which complete candor reigns is a troubling prospect. I have suggested that we might interpret Kant’s concern as that putting our flaws on display threatens the moral foundations of respectful human relationships, and the prospects for moral improvement in ourselves and others. The alternative, of course, is to represent ourselves in public in ways that do not necessarily reflect who and what we are. Let me now turn to defending the claim that representing ourselves this way is a morally important thing to do.

**PART II: RESERVE AND THE MORAL FRONT REGION**

*Collectively, the more civilized men are, the more they are actors.*

In this section, I will use the argument strands generated by Kant’s remarks that I presented in Part I in order to give a more sustained Kantian case for the claim that we should keep the shutters closed on our moral failings. My argument will draw on a conceptual scheme made famous by the twentieth-century sociologist Erving Goffman. Goffman characterized self-presentation in terms of what he called “fronts”. A front is a way of putting ourselves forward to an audience in a given setting. For Goffman, social behavior is akin to a kind of stage performance and fronts are the way we appear on stage:

> I have been using the term ‘performance’ to refer to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers. It will be convenient to label as “front” that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. Front,

then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance.34

In the classroom, I aim to adopt the front of a competent, knowledgeable, engaged philosophy teacher. At the neighborhood block party, I take up a different front, since the setting calls for a different form of self-presentation. The kind of commanding air I might aim to project in class would be out of place at the block party, and likewise, the chatty, lighthearted sociability called for at the block party might interfere with my professional authority in the classroom.

On Goffman’s view, fronts are a pervasive and inescapable feature of social life. Whenever we engage in social interactions of any kind, we are presenting fronts to others and they in turn are presenting fronts to us. I will use Goffman’s term ‘front region’ as a name for the shared normative space in which we deploy these fronts. In a front region, the performer and the audience collaborate to produce and maintain the fronts each person is putting forward. If cracks in a performer’s front start to show, he needs to be able to count on the audience to overlook them or work them into the narrative, behavior that Goffman refers to as the employment of tact. The absence of such cooperation can undermine the front. Successful fronts thus require the assistance of others in maintaining the self-presentation.

Goffman’s aim was to describe what fronts are and how they function, not to engage in comparative ethical analysis of various kinds of fronts or speculate about their moral importance. He treats fronts as a deeply entrenched feature of social life; indeed, they are not always deliberately chosen, or not always chosen in full. We are constantly engaged in putting on fronts of our own and playing along with the fronts of others, whether we are aware of it or not.

33. *Anthropology,* 37.

In this section, I want to take Goffman’s analysis a step further and argue that we have moral reason to cultivate a particular kind of front, which I will call a moral front.\textsuperscript{35} What exactly do I have in mind? In keeping with Goffman’s theatrical language, I suggest that a moral front is a presentation of myself as a better, less morally flawed person than I in fact am. To put it slightly differently: the self I put forward via the moral front is the self I am rationally committed to being, not necessarily the self I am. There is much more to say about how this works, but let me first note that the moral front is unlike other kinds of fronts insofar as it pervades all aspects of our lives. Some fronts, like that of being a waiter (an example that Goffman, following Sartre, frequently employs) are fronts that we shed once we leave the stage or end the performance in which we are enacting that role. On Kant’s view, morality is certainly not something that we can set aside or leave behind, even temporarily.\textsuperscript{36} Of course, we are not constantly engaged in what Goffman calls the “face-work” of a moral front.\textsuperscript{37} Many of our duties, especially perfect duties, can be carried out without interacting with people at all. I do not always have an audience. And sometimes I have an audience but the behaviors that morality requires of me are also behaviors that come naturally to me or that I have successfully incorporated into my habitual way of interacting with people.

Importantly, the fact that a behavior or reaction requires no conscious effort doesn’t mean that it isn’t part of a front. If I react with reflexive concern when a stranger walking ahead of me slips and falls on the concrete sidewalk, that reaction forms part of my front in Goffman’s sense. But when it comes to the moral front, ingrained reactions are not the aspect that matter for my present purposes. My interest here lies in what I should do when I don’t happen to care much about the stranger’s fate. The importance of the moral front shows up most clearly when we find ourselves with too much space between how we should be and how we actually are.

In the \textit{Groundwork}, Kant draws a distinction between acting in accordance with duty (e.g., charging fair prices at my shop because it’s in my self-interest) and acting from duty (charging fair prices because it is the right thing to do).\textsuperscript{38} So long as I in fact charge fair prices, I am in some sense doing what morality requires of me. Of course, in the first case, my act is not the act of someone with a fully good will. The way that Kant sets up the example, we are inclined to think of the shopkeeper as someone who acts only from self-interest and is unmoved by the thought of what morality requires. There are certainly other possibilities, including a shopkeeper for whom the motive of self-interest and the motive of duty are both present and individually sufficient.\textsuperscript{39} But let us consider for a minute the weak-willed shopkeeper, who is moved by considerations of morality, but for whom those considerations would be insufficient without self-interest pointing in the same direction. Let us further suppose that the shopkeeper knows this about herself and correctly identifies her weakness as a moral failing. For her to put on a moral front in these circumstances would be for her to present herself to her customers as someone who charges fair prices because it is the right thing to do, even though that is far from the whole picture.

\textsuperscript{35} So far as I know, Goffman never spoke or wrote in terms of moral fronts. In this respect, my employment of Goffman’s framework should not be seen as an attempt to provide an accurate representation of his ideas.

\textsuperscript{36} This, of course, is part of what troubles Bernard Williams about it. See “Persons, Character, and Morality” in \textit{Moral Luck} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

\textsuperscript{37} See Goffman, “On Face-work” in \textit{Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior} (New York: Pantheon Books, 1967), 5-45. Goffman defines ‘face’ as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself ... an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (5). Face-work consists in “the actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face” (12).


\textsuperscript{39} There is an extensive literature on this example. For what I take to be a fairly decisive defense of Kant on this point, see Barbara Herman, “On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty” in \textit{The Practice of Moral Judgment} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
When I take up a moral front, I aim to project an image of myself that is in accordance with what morality directs me to be like. This may consist of doing nothing more than the particular action required in a given set of circumstances; perhaps all that is necessary is for the shopkeeper to conduct transactions fairly and without comment. But the moral front may well require a more comprehensive effort at self-presentation. Sometimes it matters that I not simply avoid performing wrong actions but also avoid making explicit my lack of the appropriate moral attitudes and commitments. It may also require me to hide morally suspect inclinations and feelings, like jealousy or spite, pretending that I do not feel them when I in fact do.

Let us return to the duty not to show contempt for a fellow rational agent. Suppose I feel contempt for someone who has not done anything to warrant this response from me. And suppose that I succeed in not treating the person in an overtly contemptuous way when I am with him, but that I make no secret of my feelings when I’m speaking to others. I might do this in a way that is aimed at drawing sympathetic responses from others so that I am not alone in my contemptuous feelings. Or I might do this for the sake of eliciting admiration for my finely honed judgments about people. In either case, while I am successfully preventing the object of my contempt from discerning it, I am not exactly keeping it concealed from view. My contempt is still out in the public space, so to speak. When Kant claims that we should keep the shutters closed on our flaws, I take him to be saying that we need to undertake a more global effort at concealing morally dubious attitudes like contempt, keeping them out of public view entirely and putting something else in their place.

In his essay on truthfulness in the Lectures on Ethics and in the Anthropology, Kant draws what seems to be an important distinction between dissimulation and simulation. Dissimulation consists in concealing something by keeping it out of view, whereas simulation requires a positive pretense, such as when we endeavor to put on an appearance that does not match reality. Kant is fairly clear in saying that dissimulation need not be deceptive, at least if we understand deception as consisting in deliberately being the author of error in another. It is a bit harder to pin down what he thinks about simulation. In the Lectures on Ethics, he seems to suggest that simulation is bound to be deceptive insofar as it involves the intention of instilling a false belief in someone else. And yet in the Anthropology, as we have seen, he argues in favor of the simulation of moral virtue, justifying it as non-deceptive on the grounds that the effort to put on the semblance of morality is transparent to others.

On my account, the moral front involves both dissimulation about our moral flaws and simulation about our moral virtues. It requires me both to conceal my flaws (at least the ones I know I have) and (where appropriate) to act as though I have thoughts and feelings that I should have, but do not. In other words: I need not only to conceal my contempt for another, but I should also put on the appearance of respecting and, indeed, even loving him. I will return to concerns about deception in Part III. For the time being, I will assume that Kant is correct that our efforts at both dissimulation about our flaws and simulation of virtue are largely transparent to other members of the moral community.

Goffman’s analysis of fronts in terms of performances presupposes the presence of an audience. Likewise, my account of the moral front presupposes the presence of other members of the moral community. When I present a moral front to others, who are also presenting moral fronts of their own, we engage with each other in a normative space.
that I will refer to as the “moral front region.” In the moral front region, we interact with each other not as we are but as we aim to be. This is what the weak-willed shopkeeper does when she acts as though her pricing structure is motivated by morality rather than self-interest. And when her customers respond to her as though she is in fact motivated by moral concerns, they are helping her sustain that front. In so doing, they take on the role of Goffman’s audience. This mutual performance, in which all parties behave as though the shopkeeper is acting from motives better than the ones she actually has, is what I am describing as the moral front region.

In such cases, the moral front region becomes a place where people collectively engage in the deliberate non-acknowledgment of what everyone already knows. The shopkeeper and her customers may all be well aware that her commitment to a fair pricing structure is fragile; likewise, it may be common knowledge that I cannot stand the person to whom I am speaking. In the moral front region, we deliberately avoid acknowledging these things that we know. Indeed, we go further than this: we act as though the shopkeeper’s pricing structure is adequately supported by her moral commitments, and as though my pretense of respect and concern for the person I hold in contempt is sincerely felt. There is thus an important sense in which participating in the moral front region is a form of collective pretending or playacting about the nature of our interactions with others. It is, however, a form of playacting that we cannot do without. Indeed, the existence of the moral front region is essential to communal moral life. We have reason to create a moral front region in cooperation with others and to sustain the behaviors that make it possible for all of us to remain there.

Kant’s moral theory highlights the gap between the ideal world in which we legislate with others as ends in ourselves and the real world in which we are imperfect beings confronting other imperfect human beings. Moral fronts help us bridge that gap. They give us a way to express commitments to moral ideals in the face of the reality of human frailty, and they make possible a kind of moral community that could not exist in their absence. To borrow a metaphor from Christine Korsgaard, the moral front region is a neighborhood in which the kingdom of ends is real.

In the Doctrine of Virtue, Kant argues that there are two ends that are also duties: my own perfection and the happiness of others. These two ends give rise to the broadly stated imperfect duties to cultivate my own natural and moral abilities and to make the ends of others my own. My suggestion is that the existence of the moral front region—and the reserve about our flaws that is necessary to sustain it—is important for the pursuit of these obligatory ends, particularly the end of moral self-improvement. Strictly speaking, the Kantian duty of moral self-improvement is an individual task. But it is a task we carry out in the company of other people and, indeed, with their help. An agent’s participation in the collaborative project of the moral front region provides a space in which agents can pursue their own moral self-improvement and help others do the same. On this view, the obligatory end of making ourselves better is something we do as part of a moral community.
Kant categorizes the duty of moral self-improvement as an imperfect ethical duty. It is an ethical duty rather than a juridical duty because it lies outside the scope of what the state can legitimately coerce. It is imperfect because it is a duty to adopt an end, rather than a duty to perform or refrain from performing a specific action. Although most imperfect duties are wide, meaning that they permit an agent to exercise latitude about whether, when, and how to fulfill them, the duty to cultivate my own moral perfection is a rather unusual case. Kant says that "this duty to oneself is a narrow and perfect one in terms of its quality; but it is wide and imperfect in terms of its degree, because of the frailty of human nature". It is a narrow duty in theory because one cannot ever permissibly decide to set aside the end of having a good will in favor of some other end. But it is a wide duty in practice because, in fact, human beings are prone to moral weakness and failure. Moreover, Kant believed that since our motives are largely opaque to us, we cannot normally know for certain that we are acting for moral reasons, particularly when morality coincides with self-interest or inclination. The best we can do is to sincerely adopt the end of moral self-improvement and direct our other actions in accordance with it.

We are, of course, not always aware of our flaws. Although he does not say so explicitly, it seems reasonable to ascribe to Kant the view that the duty of moral self-improvement includes a duty to engage in reflective self-scrutiny, with the caveat that we cannot always know our own hearts. But Kant clearly thinks that a person’s conscience, which he says “follows him like a shadow”, is capable of pointing us in the right direction. We have, on Kant’s view, a moral duty to put ourselves before our internal court of conscience and use its dictates to guide our future behavior. Of course, we may ignore the directives of conscience, and we may also have flaws to which our consciences are blind. Perhaps this is why Kant also says that it is a duty of friendship to point out each other’s flaws. I will return to this duty in Part III. For now, let us just note that for Kant, the duty of moral self-improvement requires us to engage in honest self-assessment to the extent that we can and to use that self-assessment as a way to become better.

It is worth noting that the duty of moral self-improvement cannot exactly come into conflict with other duties, like other imperfect duties can. This is because whenever I act so as to fulfill some other moral duty, there is also some sense in which I improve myself morally. There may be tasks necessary for moral self-improvement that do not fall under any other duty, but performing, say, an act of beneficence will always also fall under the duty of moral self-improvement. This makes moral self-improvement an especially central moral duty for Kant, both because of its importance and because of the structural features that make it all-encompassing in the way that other duties are not.

Importantly, Kant does not think we have a parallel duty to promote the moral perfection of other people:

So too, it is a contradiction for me to make another’s perfection my end and consider myself under an obligation to promote this. For the perfection of another man, as a person, consists just in this: that he himself is able to set his end in accordance with his own concept of duty; and it

50. Doctrine of Virtue, 446.


53. Doctrine of Virtue, 438; Lectures on Ethics, 132.

54. Doctrine of Virtue, 470. Kant also recognizes how much this practice endangers the mutual respect so necessary for friendship.
is self-contradictory to require that I do (make it my duty to do) something that only the other himself can do.\textsuperscript{55}

In this passage, the problem appears to be a conceptual one, based on Kant’s account of the duty of moral self-improvement itself. I cannot make it the case that someone else sets a particular end; hence, it cannot be my duty to ensure that others are committed to their own moral perfection.

But Kant does not simply leave matters there. The other of the two obligatory ends, recall, is the happiness of other people. Kant notes that “the happiness of others also includes their moral well-being and we have a duty, but only a negative one, to promote this.”\textsuperscript{56} Kant does not argue for any kind of necessary connection between moral virtue and happiness, but he does think that human beings are prone to painful recriminations of conscience when we act against the dictates of the categorical imperative. He goes on to say:

\begin{quote}
To see to it that another does not undeservedly suffer this inner reproach is not my duty but his affair; but it is my duty to refrain from doing anything that, considering the nature of men, could tempt him to do something for which his conscience could afterward pain him.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

Here the duty is described strictly in negative terms. Although a person’s moral well-being is part of her happiness, I have no positive duty to promote it — only a negative duty to avoid steering her in the wrong direction.

It isn’t evident from the text whether the duty is strictly negative because Kant thinks it is impossible to promote someone’s moral well-being in any positive sense or because he thinks it would be inappropriate to do so. If improving ourselves is primarily a matter of strengthening our commitment to the end, then there are probably limits to the contributions others can make. But it may also be that having someone else’s moral improvement as one’s end lies beyond the scope of what beneficence is supposed to be.\textsuperscript{58}

Kant makes it very clear that the duty of beneficence is a duty to promote the actual (permissible) ends of other people, not the ones we would like them to have.\textsuperscript{59} It is not simply that I cannot make it the case that someone has her own perfection as one of her ends; I am also barred from promoting her perfection under the guise of beneficence unless it is one of her actual ends. (By contrast, the duty not to corrupt her applies regardless of her actual ends.) But suppose that she does have moral self-improvement as one of her actual ends and that she welcomes help with it much as she welcomes help with any other end. There seems to be no reason why I ought not do what I can to help her with that project. If, for instance, she knows that she has a tendency to be overly critical of people and she asks me to tell her when I see her engaging in such behavior, surely my doing so counts as fulfilling my duty of beneficence toward her. If becoming better is something she wants to do, then helping her become better is one way of making her ends my own.

To summarize: I have a positive duty to promote my own moral perfection, a negative duty not to corrupt others, and, I have suggested, at least a permission to engage in positive measures to promote the moral perfection of others via the duty of beneficence (so long as my intended beneficiary in fact has her own moral perfection as her end). Let me now turn to the role of the collaborative moral front region in the project of helping ourselves and others become better.

In Part I, I attributed to Kant the view that, given what human nature is like, concealing our flaws is necessary in order to help us maintain respect for ourselves and for others. Kant seemed to think that reserve about our moral flaws is important to presenting ourselves as

\textsuperscript{55} Doctrine of Virtue, 386.
\textsuperscript{56} Doctrine of Virtue, 394.
\textsuperscript{57} Doctrine of Virtue, 394.
\textsuperscript{58} I discuss this issue at length in “Minding Others’ Business” Pacific Philosophical Quarterly, 90, no. 1 (2009): 116–139.
\textsuperscript{59} Doctrine of Virtue, 454.
what in fact we are—rational agents with dignity and absolute value. In a number of places, Kant suggests that actions are degrading when they fail to acknowledge this standing that we have, or are somehow incompatible with it. We have already seen how this claim plays out in the case of drunkenness. On Kant’s view, to deliberately put oneself in a rationally compromised state, where there is no morally important end to be achieved by doing so (as there is when going under anesthesia for an operation needed to preserve my health) is a failure of self-respect. I am not acting in accordance with what in fact I am, and therefore I disparage the significance of the very source of my value. It’s true that the inclinations to which I subject my rationality are my own, but on Kant’s view, this is no less enslaving than subjecting my rational capacities to the inclinations of others.

But matters get worse. When I behave in a degrading way, I also in effect degrade other rational beings. This is because the source of my moral status—my rational agency—is the same as the source of moral status in others. In the Lectures on Ethics, Kant makes a point of saying that self-respect is prior to respect for others:

Far from ranking lowest in the scale of precedence, our duties toward ourselves are of primary importance and should have pride of place; for … it is obvious that nothing can be expected from a man who dishonours his own person. He who transgresses against himself loses his manliness and becomes incapable of doing his duties towards his fellows … It follows that the prior condition of our duty to others is our duty to ourselves; we can fulfill the former only in so far as we first fulfill the latter.60

If I do not understand or appreciate the basis of my own moral status, I will not be able to appreciate it in others, given that it rests on something we have in common.

60. Lectures on Ethics, 118.

This claim about the common source of moral value in rational agents is important to getting Kant’s categorical imperative off the ground in the first place. But it also helps make sense of his belief that my degrading behavior undermines not just respect for my own dignity, but also respect for the dignity of others by extension. The person who treats his own rationality cavalierly, subjecting it to his own inclinations and non-moral ends, is effectively refusing to acknowledge the value of rationality itself. This suggests that when I degrade myself in this way, others may have reason to complain. For what I disparage in myself is the source of their moral status as well. In failing to respect my own rationality, I show a lack of respect for the value of rationality in everyone else.

Getting drunk, obviously, is an action we can normally choose to do or not do. If Kant is right that I disparage rational agency as such when I am publicly drunk, then it might make sense to demand that I not be drunk in public and hold me responsible for it when I am. But moral flaws and failings are not quite like this. They are not something we decide to have; indeed, as we have seen, they may be things we don’t even know we have. Moreover, Kant seriously doubts whether we can get rid of them entirely.

And yet, the duty of moral self-improvement directs me to try to rid myself of my flaws to the extent that I can.61 Insofar as I have these flaws, I am not living up to what morality requires of me. Certainly others cannot always know how hard I am working to get the better of my flaws, meaning that they have reason to be cautious in their judgments about my behavior. But when I do not bother to hide my failings or offset them by visible efforts at reform, I am giving off the impression that I do not much care about the fact that these are moral flaws in me. I convey the attitude that the ideal to which I am failing to live up is not particularly important.

This is, I take it, the reason why Kant thinks the public exhibition of my moral flaws can at least sometimes appropriately inspire loathing.

61. See Baron (1995).
and outrage on the part of other people. The outrage is not necessarily directed at the flaw itself. Rather, the outrage is properly directed at my refusal to take seriously the fact that it is a flaw, and that, as a rational being, I am capable of something more. By putting my flaws as a rational being on display, I am effectively thumbing my nose at the moral value of rationality in everyone.

The effort to cover my flaws, by contrast, is a public acknowledgment that they are indeed flaws, ways in which I fall short of having a fully good will and, hence, of participating in the moral community understood as a kingdom of ends. When I put on the appearance of virtue instead, I present myself to the world as I recognize I should be. I should, of course, feel respect for those toward whom I feel only contempt. Replacing my contempt with the appearance of respect, even when it is not heartfelt, is a way of acknowledging this. My participation in the moral front region is a way of expressing my commitment to morality, even when, in reality, I am falling short of that commitment.

Creating the moral front region is a joint venture, even though we tend to think of ourselves as playing individual roles in it. Just as Goffman suggests that we rely on the tact of our audience to sustain our fronts, so Kant implies that we should help others keep the shutters closed on their flaws so far as possible. One of the duties of respect for others laid out in the Doctrine of Virtue is the duty to avoid defamation of others, which he describes as “the immediate inclination ... to bring into the open something prejudicial to respect for others”. Kant is well aware of the many ways in which human beings are tempted to destroy the reputations of others by exposing their flaws to public view. Regarding defamation, he says the following:

The intentional spreading of something that detracts from another's honor ... diminishes respect for humanity as such, so as finally to cast a shadow of worthlessness over our race itself, making misanthropy (shying away from men) or contempt the prevalent cast of mind, or to dull one's moral feeling by repeatedly exposing one to the sight of such things and accustoming one to it. It is, therefore, a duty of virtue not to take malicious pleasure in exposing the faults of others so that one will be thought as good as, or at least not worse than, other men, but rather to throw the veil of love of man over their faults, not merely by softening our judgments but also by keeping these judgments to ourselves; for examples of respect that we give others can arouse their striving to deserve it.

For my purposes, there are several interesting things to notice about Kant’s discussion of defamation.

First, although we might naturally think that the duty to avoid defaming others is a duty we owe primarily to individuals, that isn’t quite how Kant puts it in the passage quoted above. The duty he describes is a more general duty to humanity to avoid unnecessarily exposing the seamer side of human nature. This isn’t to say that we don’t have a duty of respect to individual rational agents not to expose their flaws and failings to the world; no doubt we do. But the duty, as Kant describes it, appears to be broader than that. Kant is pointing out the moral problem with social practices that, as he puts it, make misanthropy and cynicism the “prevailing cast of mind” in society. Opening the shutters on flaws—whether our own or those of other people—makes it all too easy for us to despise humanity in its frailties and weaknesses.

This takes us to the second point about defamation. For Kant, it is not enough simply to avoid exposing the flaws of others to the world.

62. Doctrine of Virtue, 466.

63. Doctrine of Virtue, 466.

64. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to focus on defamation.

65. Undoubtedly there are also limits on this duty; if the failing is one that could endanger others, I may have a duty of beneficence to reveal the failing so as to avert the possibility of harm.
We are also supposed to “throw the veil of love” over those flaws, in the hope that the other will be able to live up to the moral standards we both in fact endorse.\(^{66}\) This demands not just that we keep our negative judgments about others to ourselves, but that we also engage in something more like simulation on their behalf. For instance, the injunction to throw the veil of love over another’s flaws might require that we seek out more charitable explanations for his behavior than we might otherwise be disposed to do. My immediate inclination might be to think and talk of the person who cut me off in traffic this morning as a selfish jerk, and perhaps he is. But, then, perhaps he was rushing to a loved one’s hospital bedside or was distracted by serious financial worries. I probably cannot know which of these things is true, but I take it that Kant’s point is that in the absence of that knowledge, I have reason to ascribe one of the latter motivations to him instead of the former. Doing so better expresses my respect for the dignity of humanity and the capacity of each individual to act on the basis of moral considerations. It may also, as Kant points out, encourage others to live up to the image of them that we put forward.

Third, while the obligation to avoid defamation is correctly described as a duty of respect, Kant categorizes defamation as a vice.\(^{67}\) This suggests that the underlying moral problem with defamation cannot be reduced to the avoidance of particular actions. The vice of defamation is more like an outlook on the world and the human beings who live in it. He describes defamation as “the immediate inclination, with no particular aim in view, to bring into the open something prejudicial to respect for others”.\(^{68}\) The desire to make others look bad (and perhaps make ourselves look better by comparison) seems like the kind of moral failing that we should endeavor to conceal as part of the moral front. We should not be looking for ways to make others look bad, prepared to pounce on every bit of malicious gossip that crosses our paths. One can refrain from saying something defamatory while still seeming to endorse the sentiment behind it. But it is that sentiment that worries Kant most, interfering as it does with what is already the rather difficult task of respecting humanity in ourselves and others. This is why we need to create a cooperative moral front of mutual respect: so as to combat the cynicism and scorn about our fellow human beings to which we might otherwise tend.

So in defaming someone, we are contributing to a general debasement both of the individual rational agent being defamed and of humanity as such. We give off the impression that human beings are proper objects of scorn, rather than beings with dignity. Defamation and similar practices make it harder for us all to respect and love others as we should.\(^{69}\) Throwing the veil of love over the flaws of others, by contrast, makes it easier. We have a duty not to act in such a way that will diminish respect for rationality. We also have a duty of love to help others live up to their moral commitments. In the moral front region, where we resist defamation and practice charity, we preserve the respect we owe to each other and we cultivate the love that enables us to treat others as ends in the fullest sense.

Although Kant describes the duty to avoid defamation as a duty directed toward others and to humanity as such, it can also explain, at least in part, why we have a moral duty to conceal our own flaws.\(^{70}\) After all, the reasons that we have not to defame others are also reasons not to defame ourselves. There is some sense in which being reserved about my failings is a way of throwing the veil of love over myself. In so doing, I help preserve that general respect for humanity that Kant thinks is so important. Moreover, as I have suggested already, concealing my own flaws enables me to express a commitment to the task of moral self-improvement and, by extension, to the project of bringing about the kingdom of ends.

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66. For more on this kind of hope, see Adrienne Martin, “Gratitude, Disappointment, and Normative Hope” (unpublished paper).
68. Doctrine of Virtue, 466.
69. There are also, on Kant’s view, vices of hatred, which he describes as being opposed to the love of other rational beings. (See Doctrine of Virtue, 458–461.)
70. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for helping me see this.
As we saw in Part I, Kant takes courteous behavior seriously because he thinks that courteous behavior reflects attitudes that a person with a fully good will would have. Although he describes these practices as “tokens” and “merely” manners, he takes them to play an important role in shaping our moral attitudes and practices. We put forward good behavior as a way of acknowledging what we are supposed to be doing and feeling. Moreover, in presenting ourselves this way, we bind others to respond in kind. So when two people who happen to loathe each other nevertheless behave courteously to each other, they create an illusion. It is an illusion, however, that brings them nearer to what they must both recognize, on pain of irrationality, as moral truth. Their behavior does not represent what they actually feel, but it does represent what they both, if they have good wills, know that they are rationally required to endorse. Putting on a moral front makes the illusion possible and thereby brings us closer to its realization.

Kant is sensitive to the moral effects of appearances, as we see in his remarks on beneficence:

A rich man … should hardly even regard beneficence as a meritorious duty on his part, even though he also puts others under obligation by it. The satisfaction he derives from his beneficence, which costs him no sacrifice, is a way of reveling in moral feelings. He must also carefully avoid any appearance of intending to bind the other by it; for if he showed that he wanted to put the other under an obligation (which always humbles the other in his own eyes), it would not be a true benefit that he rendered him. Instead he must show that he is himself put under obligation by the other’s acceptance or honored by it, hence that the duty is merely something that he owes, unless (as is better) he can practice his beneficence in complete secrecy.71

This is a striking passage, and not simply because Kant asserts that beneficence on the part of the rich is barely beneficence at all. What is especially interesting for my purposes is the moral significance Kant attaches to how the act of beneficence appears to the beneficiary. Beneficence is best conducted in such a way that it does not appear like beneficence, since actual acts of beneficence run the risk of destabilizing moral relationships by creating inequalities of moral merit. Benefactors must therefore present a front of not actually conferring a benefit, or of conferring a lesser, more trivial benefit. This, of course, is the sort of thing that tactful people do all the time when they provide help to others in situations where reciprocity is difficult or whether other circumstances make it more likely that the beneficence will undermine the beneficiary’s self-respect. Kant’s suggestion, I take it, is that we should shape the outward appearance of our actions to match our moral goals, even when it is not an accurate representation of how things actually stand. This is simulation, not simply dissimulation. But by engaging in it, we bring our imperfect world closer to what morality directs that it should be.

Consider as an analogy the norms of good sportsmanship. Highly competitive sports have the potential to be a breeding ground for all the vices that Kant warns us against. Indeed, the sheer physicality of American football makes it a sport in which it can be difficult to sustain the attitude that the members of the other team are ends rather than objects. And yet (perhaps because of this), football is also governed by quite strict rules about how players may engage with members of the other team. Face masking and clipping, both of which carry a taint of unsportsmanlike or dishonorable play, generate especially heavy penalties. Moreover, nearly all competitive sports come with the expectation that players and coaches will adhere to norms of sportsmanship like shaking the hands of the members of the opposing team after the game or applauding when an injured player from the other team is helped off the field.72 The result is that regardless of how much op-

71. Doctrine of Virtue, 453.
72. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for help with this example.
posing team members dislike each other or how tempted they are to use the physical engagement of the sport as a way of acting on any grudges, the front of sportsmanship demanded by the norms of the game has the effect of civilizing the encounter.

Certainly not every competitive sporting event is characterized by actual sportsmanship, but the norms and rules established in most of them demand that players present a front of being good sports at all times. Putting on the front does not necessarily transform a person into a good sport, but, to use Kant’s terms, it creates an illusion of a moral community within the game that players are presumed to endorse and to which they are required to adhere. In this way, the norms serve as a kind of moral insurance plan for players who are in fact committed to being good sports. The norms (whether backed up by the punitive force of penalties or just by the expectations built into the conduct of play) force them to behave as they believe they should behave, even when their emotions and inclinations pull them in the opposite direction. It creates the athletic equivalent of Kant’s beautiful moral illusion.

As we have seen, Kant drew a distinction between actions that are merely in accordance with morality and actions that are fully expressive of a commitment to it. It is, of course, possible to act in accordance with morality for non-moral reasons. The moral front region can be a place where people act morally for self-interested reasons, and it can serve as a cover enabling insincerity and hypocrisy. And yet, there is also a sense in which the moral front region, by mimicking what genuine morality itself would be like, is nevertheless an improvement on a world in which we do not bother to put on the trappings of morality in the first place. It brings us closer to the kingdom of ends than we would otherwise be. The effort to produce the appearance of that ideal moral community is, I have suggested, part of the commitment to the ideal itself.73 Participating in the moral front region shows that I take myself seriously as a moral agent and also that I take seriously my responsibility to become a better one.

The moral front region constructs barriers against the kinds of behaviors that Kant took to be outside of the scope of the law but nevertheless destructive of human moral community — contempt, ridicule, non-beneficence, and the like. Insofar as we adopt moral fronts, it is more difficult to act viciously, even when our inclinations direct us that way. Just as the law constrains our behavior in the realm of juridical duty, so the norms in the moral front region constrain our behavior in the realm of ethical duty. It is a form of self-imposed constraint that has the effect of liberating us from our less-than-fully-rational selves. When I am courteous to someone I dislike and he is courteous to me in return, it is easier for both of us to treat each other as ends. It is harder for me to hold him in contempt when he avoids doing anything that would give me cause; and it is more appealing for me to make his ends my own when his behavior reflects a similar consideration of my ends. I am thus supported by the moral fronts of others in my efforts to cultivate the love of humanity necessary for moral community and avoid the misanthropy that Kant worries would destroy it. And in helping them preserve their moral fronts, I do the same for them. In this way, the moral front region, as I have described it, functions as a kind of collaborative public commitment to our moral aspirations for humanity and helps sustain us in our attempts to live them out so far as we can.

I have argued that when I do not participate in the moral front region, I am failing to live up to my responsibilities in an important communal undertaking: namely, to bring about the kingdom of ends on earth, so far as it is within my power to do so. We have an obligation to create and sustain a moral community in which it is possible for all of us to cultivate a good will and, with luck, live happily as well. My claim is that moral fronts are a necessary part of this effort, and reserve about our flaws is an essential part of the moral front.

The moral front region represents a vision of moral community in which everyone engages with each other as ends. The ideal Kantian moral community is characterized by full respect for oneself and

others, by honesty and trust, by universal benevolence and widespread practical sympathy, by the cultivation of talents, and by expressions of gratitude for favors given without expectation of return. Of course, this is not the community in which we actually live, but it is the one for which anyone with a good will must necessarily be striving. Moral fronts enable us to behave as though we are already there.

PART III: OBJECTIONS

The exchange of our sentiments is the principal factor in social intercourse, and truth must be the guiding principle herein.\(^74\)

Perhaps the most obvious objection to the idea of a moral front region is that the entire practice of cultivating moral fronts is deceptive. If I dislike someone, putting on a performance in which I act as if I do is at minimum misleading and at worst manipulative. Indeed, if I am very good at pretending to like people that I don’t, my audience will leave with an impression I both know to be false and also have deliberately created. How could intentionally misrepresenting the facts as we know them to be possibly count as morally permissible on Kant’s view?

As I have already noted, Kant’s views on lying are far more subtle than his critics give him credit for. For one thing, the moral reasons not to lie arise from several different duties, not all of which are applicable in every case. Of course, deliberately deceiving someone is, according to Kant, nearly always a violation of a duty of respect to her.\(^75\) When I lie to someone, I limit her ability to use her rational powers to make a decision. Instead, I manipulate her access to information for my own purposes and thus treat her as an object — as a mere means rather than as an end. But this is not the only moral reason we have not to lie, and indeed, in the infamous passage where Kant insists we cannot lie even to a murderer at the door, it is not the primary reason that Kant offers. Kant thinks that lying is a violation both of self-respect and also of a duty that we owe to all mankind. Lying, he thinks, debases reason itself and undermines social trust. It strikes at the foundation of society, and this is what makes it especially pernicious.

As Kant recognized, false statements are not always lies. Consider the convention of replying “Fine” to another’s “How are you?”. I am not lying if I say I am fine when I am suffering from shingles or facing foreclosure. This is because a casual “How are you?” is not normally a request for information about one’s status. No one expects a truthful response to that question, and hence, I am not violating any duties to others or undermining social trust if I say I am fine when I am not.

Likewise, it seems clear that Kant does not consider reserve about one’s flaws to be deliberate deception, primarily because he thinks that what we are hiding is something that others already know about. It is common knowledge that, as he puts it, every house has a dustbin and a water-closet. Our friends have them and know that we do as well. In keeping them closed off from view, we are not deceiving anyone about their existence. Because no one reasonably takes me to be without flaw, I am not deceiving anyone when I present myself that way.

And yet, this is also not entirely satisfactory. No doubt Kant is right when he says that we all know that everyone is flawed in some general sense. But still, his analogy with dustbins and water-closets is missing something important: Dustbins and water-closets do not vary much from house to house. If you know that someone has one, you know more or less what you would find there if you were to look. But, of course, this is not the case with moral flaws. It is one thing to know that your next-door neighbor has some flaws; it is another thing to know that his flaws include a desire to spy inappropriately on neighbors or set things on fire.\(^76\) A person who cannot count on

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75. Kant grants some exceptions, such as when my enemy “takes me by the throat and asks where I keep my money”. I do not violate any right of his if I lie to him in response (*Lectures on Ethics*, 227).
76. As a referee has pointed out to me, these are almost certainly not the kind of flaws that Kant had in mind when he suggested that we be reserved about our failings. Still, flaws of this sort are likely to be the kind of flaws that people think it would be wrong to hide. So it matters that Kant be able to agree.
himself to defy his immoral inclinations and act in accordance with duty may need to reveal his flaws so as to allow others to protect themselves adequately.

I do not think it is hard to adjust the account I am defending to suggest that we are morally required to reveal the particular nature of our flaws to others when we have reason to think that keeping them hidden violates some other duty, whether to ourselves or to others.

The duty to hide one's flaws is clearly an imperfect duty, and probably a fairly wide one. The suggestion that reserve is morally important does not mean that there are never moral reasons to breach it. Some flaws are too serious to remain under wraps; sometimes moral progress can be made only by bringing flaws into the open. I cannot repent or ask forgiveness for a wrong committed unless I acknowledge the wrong, and others may properly demand openness from me where the good of a particular relationship or the community itself depends on it. Candor about one's own flaws can also be a useful social tool for restoring someone's self-respect when it has been compromised.

So Kant's view is that hiding our flaws from people is not ordinarily deceptive, on the grounds that they already know we have them. Where the flaw needs to be brought to light in order to fulfill other kinds of moral obligations, reserve should give way, and Kant's account can handle this without too much difficulty. If the point of reserve is to show one's commitment to the aims of morality, it stands to reason that in cases where those aims are undermined by reserve, it is out of place.

Of course, there may still be people who employ moral fronts to bad ends by putting on the appearance of morality as an effort to deliberately deceive people about their aims. Such people take advantage of the charitable light in which the moral front region casts their behavior to manipulate others, meaning that the existence of the moral front facilitates their evil projects. In the moral front region, we give the benefit of the doubt to people and assume that they are honest—something that con artists exploit to their advantage. But this does not undermine my claim that the moral front region is necessary for us to express our shared moral commitments; it only shows that the region may be misused.

Moral self-knowledge, which seeks to penetrate into the depths (the abyss) of one's heart that are quite difficult to fathom, is the beginning of all human wisdom.

Let me now turn to a second objection, which rests on concerns about whether moral fronts block important forms of self-knowledge. Findings from social psychology give us reason to think that when it comes to moral self-assessment, most people already tend toward self-serving bias. We tend to believe ourselves to be morally better than others without any evidence for thinking so. Although we are fairly accurate judges of the moral characters of others, we give ourselves more moral credit than we deserve. If this is the case, then the effort to conceal our flaws might exacerbate this problem and make it even harder to acquire the kind of self-awareness that seems so important to improving ourselves. How can we work on our flaws if we don’t recognize that we have them and if other people decline to point them out to us?

77. I am grateful to Tamra Frei for reminding me of this point.
78. I argue for this further in an unpublished paper, “Self-Deprecation.”

79. Doctrine of Virtue, 441.
for the sake of sustaining the moral front region? Moreover, there is reason to suppose that the less competent we are, the less likely we are to realize it—a phenomenon called the Dunning-Kruger effect.\(^8\) The effect is more pronounced in areas where we don’t have obvious sources of corrective information, as we might in areas where it is easy to compare our performance to that of others. But in the moral realm, there are fewer such checks on our self-assessments, particularly if others are helping us maintain our moral fronts by throwing the veil of love over our flaws, as Kant suggests we do. If the moral front region makes it easier for us to maintain the illusion that we are more generous, selfless, or loving than we are, then it’s hard to see how it could actually promote the duty of moral self-improvement. If anything, it would seem to make it more difficult to fulfill.

This is, I think, a potentially serious worry, even with the caveat that the relevant empirical data is limited. I said in Part II that a plausible account of the duty of moral self-improvement will include elements of reflective internal scrutiny in an effort to gain important self-knowledge. To the extent that the collaborative moral front makes it harder to obtain that self-knowledge, it poses a problem. Much of the human heart is, according to Kant, opaque—even to its owner. If the moral front region makes our hearts even more opaque, then it may very well undermine moral self-improvement, rather than enhance it.

Insofar as the point of the moral front region is to bring us closer to the kingdom of ends, then it should rule out practices of mutually sustained self-deception that interfere with that goal. It is worth noting that there is also empirical data supporting the idea that participating in a moral front region might actually make us better. Some studies suggest that we are inspired to become better by the presence of other good people around us—an effect that Jonathan Haidt, following Thomas Jefferson, has termed “elevation.”\(^8\) According to Haidt, people experience a distinctive emotional response when in the presence of moral exemplars, a response that motivates people to become better themselves. It is possible that the moral front region might have the same effect, although, of course, one cannot draw that conclusion from the existing empirical data.

On my account, the moral front region is a place in which we are behaving in accordance with what morality commands, regardless of whether our hearts are in it. And this, surely, is better than a state of affairs in which we do not behave in accordance with morality at all. To draw an analogy: A chronic liar who starts telling the truth more often is improved in some respect, regardless of her reasons and regardless of whether or not she ever admits to being a chronic liar. So there is some sense in which even the most self-deceived person is improved by participating in the moral front region if doing so ensures that more of her actions are in accordance with morality than they would otherwise be. The ‘if’ is an important one, and I don’t mean to dismiss the importance of the criticism. It matters whether the moral front region permits appropriate transparency or whether it fosters self-serving bias. But even if it does foster self-serving bias, it is not obvious that we are morally worse off for that. The moral front region demands that I not simply do what morality requires but also put forward the appearance that I am doing it in the right spirit. If my participation in the moral front region is sincere, then it is hard to see how it could be taking me entirely in the wrong direction.

If we can unburden our heart to another, we achieve complete communion.\(^8\)

A final objection to the idea that we should endeavor to cultivate and inhabit moral fronts is that doing so interferes with morally valuable

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83. Lectures on Ethics, 205.
human relationships. As I said in Part I, much of Kant’s discussion of reserve occurs in the context of friendship. Kant recognizes the importance of relationships in which complete candor is possible; indeed, he clearly thinks they are ideal in many ways. And yet, he is unconvinced that they are possible, arguing that reserve about our flaws is necessary even among those we love best.

In his writings, Goffman contrasts front regions with back regions, or what he often calls “backstage”. When we are backstage, different norms prevail than the ones in the front region. Goffman describes this through the example of waiters in a restaurant who behave very differently in the kitchen than they do in the dining room with the patrons. Back-region behavior tends to be less formal, less inhibited, and far more candid than front-region behavior. As he puts it:

   Backstage conduct is one which allows minor acts which might easily be taken as symbolic of intimacy and disrespect for others present and for the region, while front region conduct is one which disallows such potentially offensive behavior.84

In some circumstances, back regions provide a place in which people can relax or let off steam in ways that might not be possible in the front region. The back region might even provide an important source of emotional strength in stressful circumstances. (Thus, it may be easier for the waiters to sustain their polite behavior in the dining room if they can behave differently in the kitchen.) Indeed, perhaps the front region is psychologically possible only if there is a back region as well. Regardless, it does seem as though the intimate relationships that Kant correctly values are most readily developed in back regions. Because of this, we might wonder whether occupying the moral front region prevents us from developing such relationships. This is the worry Maria von Herbert expresses in one of her letters to Kant; she suggests that the front she maintained about her own past is incompatible with the kind of relationship she seeks.85

Kant is well aware of the value of having a friend in whom one can confide one’s innermost thoughts without reserve, even as he is skeptical of the likelihood of such a friendship.86

Man is a being meant for society and in cultivating the social state he feels strongly the need to reveal himself to others .... But on the other hand, hemmed in and cautioned by fear of the misuse others may make of his disclosing his thoughts, he finds himself constrained to lock up in himself a good part of his judgments. He would like to discuss with someone what he thinks about his associates, the government, religion, and so forth, but he cannot risk it: partly because the other person, while prudently keeping back his own judgments, might use this to harm him, and partly because, as regards disclosing his faults, the other person may conceal his own, so that he would lose something of the other’s respect by presenting himself quite candidly to him .... If he finds someone intelligent … with whom he need not be anxious about this danger but can reveal himself with complete confidence, he can then air his views. He is not completely alone with his thoughts, as in a prison, but enjoys a freedom he

85. In her 1791 letter, it seems clear that von Herbert does not regard what she was hiding as a moral flaw. Kant apparently sees it differently. If we presume that von Herbert’s predicament resulted from her revelation of her sexual past, we can see that the disagreement between von Herbert and Kant about whether it should be revealed likely turns on the kind of claim that von Herbert’s beloved had on her disclosure about such things. Von Herbert wanted to reveal it out of love; one suspects that Kant would think that this is the kind of thing a man has a right to know about a woman. It is hard to drum up much sympathy for Kant’s position in this particular case, which is why I will not try. Von Herbert’s problem, however, remains. Are such revelations necessary for intimacy? See Langton (1992) for an extended discussion.

86. For an interesting contrast between Kant and Aristotle on friendship, see Veltman (2004).
cannot have with the masses, among whom he must shut himself up in himself.87

What would this friendship, unattainable as Kant thinks it probably is, be like? Kant notes two features: First, we must be confident that our friend will not misuse our confidences in order to harm us. But this is not enough; what is also needed is mutual candor. If I reveal my thoughts (which here we must take to include thoughts that would cast us in a negative light) without my friend revealing hers, I set myself up to lose my friend’s respect. This, we presume, is what happened to Maria von Herbert.

Let me suggest that the problem is not so much that my friend would lose respect for me or even betray me if she knew all my innermost secrets. Rather, the problem is that our relationship is no longer premised on moral equality — something that, as we have seen, troubles Kant. To put it in Goffman’s terms: I present myself to her as I am in the back region, but she presents herself to me in the front region. I allow her into my messy kitchen, but she keeps me in the equivalent of her formal living room. We are not occupying the same normative space. I make myself vulnerable to her in a way similar to that in which the beneficiary is vulnerable to the benefactor. The benefactor is in a position of power; it is up to her to rearrange the normative space that she occupies with her beneficiary so that they can meet there as equals. Likewise, my candor in the face of my friend’s silence makes me vulnerable, not simply to her misuse (which I may have no reason to expect) but to an inequality in our shared normative space. It is this that needs to be rectified, either by reserve on my part or by reciprocal candor on hers.

For these reasons, I think it is plausible to take the view that intimate relationships are possible only when the participants occupy the same regions. And yet, this hardly alleviates the problem, for it might prove to be the case that genuine intimacy is possible only in the back regions, where we can be our usual, morally frail selves and still be loved. If that is the case, then moral fronts might interfere with achieving such intimate relationships.

Like Aristotle, Kant thinks that one of the primary benefits of friendship is a kind of support in the project of moral self-improvement. As I mentioned in Part II, he claims that it is a duty of friendship to point out our friend’s flaws to him, although he also recognizes the potentially destructive effects of such a practice:

From a moral point of view it is, of course, a duty for one of the friends to point out the other’s faults to him; this is in the other’s best interests and is therefore a duty of love. But the latter sees in this a lack of the respect he expected from his friend and thinks that he has either already lost or is in constant danger of losing something of his friend’s respect, since he is observed and secretly criticized by him.88

Intimacy is risky precisely because moral fronts are so difficult to maintain in the face of it. The more intimate a friendship, the more likely it is that our friend will become aware of all our moral faults. This familiarity is what makes the friend such a valuable aid in the project of self-improvement, but, as Kant notes, it also makes us vulnerable.

There is some sense in which reserve about one’s flaws is less necessary in intimate relationships than in more distant ones, but not because the moral commitments motivating the reserve are less important. Reserve is less necessary because the flaws are already out in the open. After all, our moral faults are most visible to our intimate friends. This is the sense in which intimacy takes us into a back region. But the back region is still one in which the commitment to the project of moral self-improvement has a central role. Indeed, the role might be even more important in intimate relationships than in more distant ones, just because it is our intimate friends who have the most to gain

87. Doctrine of Virtue, 471–472.
88. Doctrine of Virtue, 470.
or lose by our commitment to the project. My friend has a better sense of my flaws than does a stranger, but she also has more invested in my efforts to overcome those flaws. This is both because she loves me and wants my happiness and also because the success of our friendship depends on my being committed to overcoming them, since she needs to be able to trust me. Kant is right that my friend’s ability to observe my flaws makes me vulnerable to her loss of respect. On the account I have been giving, though, I am vulnerable to it only if I disregard the aspect of my own worth that serves as the basis for her respect. That is to say, the more I show myself committed to becoming better, the more reason she has to respect and trust me. Not caring about my flaws is tantamount to not caring about morality. Thus, in an intimate relationship, the effort to conceal my flaws is important not because it will succeed in keeping the loved one from seeing them, but because of what it expresses about my underlying commitments.

Kant recognizes that intimacy is both morally important and morally risky. Moral fronts protect us against some of those risks without, I think, depriving us of anything in friendship that is morally important. Indeed, insofar as the moral front provides evidence of our moral commitments, it can enhance intimate relationships. If my friend is committed to moral norms exemplified in the front region, I can have confidence that she will never exploit her knowledge of my flaws or the revelations characteristic of the back region. I can let down my guard in her presence secure in the knowledge that my dignity is in safe hands with her. Friendship, as Kant understood it, is not precluded by moral fronts. Indeed, moral fronts might enhance friendships insofar as they affirm each person’s commitment to her own self-improvement and that of her friend.

CONCLUSION
I have argued that cultivating a moral front in which we keep the shutters closed on our moral flaws is important because it expresses a public commitment to our own self-improvement. This kind of commitment matters because it demonstrates our belief in the dignity of humanity. By joining with others to create a moral front region, we make possible the kind of engagement that is characteristic of the kingdom of ends. Shouldering my part of the presentation is therefore something that I owe not just to myself but to the moral community as a whole. The front region is an illusion, but, as Kant says, it is a beautiful one, and it expresses optimism about the possibility of moral progress that we all have Kantian reason to endorse.89

89. Some of the early philosophical seeds of this paper were planted in Chapter Four of my book, On Manners (New York: Routledge, 2012). Also, previous versions of this paper were read to audiences at the North American Kant Society Eastern Study Group and to participants in a workshop at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am grateful to the following people for help in thinking through various ideas in this paper: Sharon Anderson-Gold, Bernie Boxill, Jan Boxill, Sam Bruton, Andrew Cohen, Richard Dean, Jeff Downard, Kyla Ebels-Duggan, Carl Ficarrotta, Tamra Frei, Tom Hill, Robin Hill, Sara Holtman, Robert Johnson, Sean Mckeever, Japa Pallikkathayil, Cindy Stark, and Jon Tresan. I am especially grateful to two anonymous reviewers for Philosophers’ Imprint for their detailed comments. They improved the paper immensely.