Principled and Unprincipled Maxims
by David Forman, Las Vegas, Nevada

Abstract: Kant frequently speaks as if all voluntary actions arise from our maxims as the subjective principles of our practical reason. But, as Michael Albrecht has pointed out, Kant also occasionally speaks as if it is only the rare person of “character” who acts according to principles or maxims. I argue that Kant’s seemingly contradictory claims on this front result from the fact that there are two fundamentally different ways that maxims of action can figure in the deliberation of the agent: an agent can act on a maxim either because it promises agreeable results or because he deems it to be an intrinsically correct principle of action. Kant describes a maxim of the latter sort as “firm” and as indicative of “character” in the honorific sense. If the agent’s commitment to his maxim is instead conditional on its agreeable results, we can say he does not act “on principle” and in that sense does not act on maxims at all: rather than aiming at a set of results because the action that produces them conforms to his maxim, he acts according to his maxim because doing so promises (and only as long as it promises) the results he desires. Such an agent thus lacks the principled maxims of a person of character since his maxims are always for sale to the highest bidder. Kant allows that an evil person can approximate the ideal of a principled indifference to results, but claims that only morally good action can be wholly principled. This is also why maxims of action in conformity with duty can be acquired gradually through habituation whereas an authentically moral maxim must instead arise from a “revolution” in thought.

Keywords: Kant, maxims, habit, character, virtue, inner freedom, Baumgarten, Wolff

I.
Kant tells us that whereas an imperative is a principle of the will telling us how we ought to act, a maxim is a principle “according to which the subject acts” (nach welchem das Subject handelt)
Many commentators take this to mean that maxims are something like intentions, so that if we want to speak of actions rather than mere bits of behavior, we had better be able to characterize the action as proceeding from a maxim of the will. But Michael Albrecht has argued that this account of maxims is completely mistaken. On Albrecht’s view, the kind of picture sketched above results from an overreliance on Kant’s canonical ethical works as well as a neglect of the historical context in which Kant’s own innovations are situated: Kant’s ethics of maxims cannot be properly understood unless one understands its debt to the French tradition represented by Rousseau. Of particular relevance is Rousseau’s use of the term ‘maxime’ to mean a relatively stable rule that one adopts for one’s own conduct (p. 134). This tradition suggests to Albrecht that we should not understand maxims as something that everyone acts on just by virtue of being a minimally rational agent or having a will. Acting on maxims is rare.

---

1 I have generally relied on the translations in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (where available), but I have also sometimes altered these without comment.

2 Roger Sullivan expresses this view succinctly: “Maxims simply articulate an agent’s intentions or disposition (*Gesinnung*), that is, the rules a person adopts and on which a person actually acts, unless, of course, that person is acting nonrationally, say, absent mindedly or while delirious” (*Kant’s Moral Theory*. Cambridge 1989, 28). On Onora O’Neill’s influential view, maxims are not intentions as such but rather “underlying intentions” or “fundamental intentions,” that is, “principles” that always “guide and control our more specific intentions” (*Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant’s Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge 1989, 84 et passim). See Gressis, Rob: “Recent Work on Kantian Maxims I: Established Approaches”. In: *Philosophy Compass* 5(3), 2010, 216-227 at 222f. Kant himself equates maxims with “Willensmeinungen” (KpV, AA 05:66). See Timmermann, Jens: “Kant’s Puzzling Ethics of Maxims”. In: *Harvard Review of Philosophy* 8, 2000, 39-52 at 40.

3 “Kants Maximenethik und ihre Begründung”. In: *Kant-Studien* 85, 1994, 129-146.

4 Rüdiger Bubner is perhaps the first commentator to discuss the connection between Kant’s conception of maxims and the French tradition represented by Rousseau and La Rouchefoucauld (*Handlung, Sprache und Vernunft. Grundbegriffe praktischer Philosophie*. Frankfurt a. M. 1976, 197-199). Neither Bubner nor Albrecht attempt to show that this amounts to anything more than a terminological debt.
The view of maxims as a special kind of achievement, rather than a mere intention, seems to be the one Kant develops in his anthropological writings. In the canonical ethical works, Kant defines a maxim as a “subjective principle of willing” (subjective Princip des Wollens) (GMS, AA 04: 400n; cf. 420) and as a subjective practical principle (subjective praktische Grundsatz) (KpV, AA 05: 19; cf. MS, AA 06: 225). These definitions are clearly consistent with the view that a maxim is the principle of intention behind every act. But Albrecht points out (pp. 135, 132n13) that Kant claims in an early anthropological work that very few people act on principles (nach Grundsätzen verfahren) (GSE, AA 02: 227) and in the late Anthropology that acting on principles (Grundsätzen) is “something rare” (etwas Seltenes) (AA 07: 292). Albrecht also points out (p. 143) that Kant is recorded in the Bergk Menschenkunde lecture notes as making the striking claim there are people who “act according to no maxims at all and hence have no character” (nach gar keinen Maximen handeln, daher auch keinen Character haben).\(^5\) To have a character, on the other hand, is to bind oneself to definite practical principles through one’s own reason (Anth, AA 07: 292). Acquiring a character, and hence maxims, is thus not an everyday occurrence, but is rather “like a kind of rebirth, a certain solemnity of making a vow to oneself” (gleich einer Art der Wiedergeburt, eine gewisse Feierlichkeit der Angelobung, die er sich selbst thut) (AA 07: 294). For this reason, one cannot hope to become morally good gradually or in a fragmentary way, and probably few people younger than thirty could even be said to have any character and hence maxims at all (ibid.). Therefore, a proper moral education should not instill habits of action, but rather allow pupils to act on their own maxims (Päd, AA 09: 480). For if virtue were to become a mere habit, then “the subject would thereby forfeit the freedom in the adoption of his maxims that is, however, the character of an action from duty” (das Subject damit die Freiheit in Nehmung seiner Maximen einbüßen würde, welche doch der Charakter einer Handlung aus Pflicht ist) (MdS, AA 06: 409).

These and other texts suggest to Albrecht that we should understand a maxim in Kant’s practical philosophy as:

1) “a conscious decision” (p. 135)
2) a special achievement of the person of “character” (pp. 141-145)
3) a kind of self-obligation (p. 132)
4) the result of a revolution in thought and hence opposed to any sort of habituation or training (pp. 143, 135-137)
5) indicative of a freedom of thought not possessed by everyone (pp. 136-137)

On this view, the moral law tells us to act on a universalizable maxim not because we always act on some maxim or other, but rather because we should have maxims (p. 131).

Any account of the place of maxims in Kant’s ethics will have to address the kind of view that emerges in passages like those quoted above. And the recent translation of Albrecht’s essay on maxims into English should help highlight this neglected aspect of Kant’s account of maxims. But it also gives occasion for a critical assessment of Albrecht’s overall position. When we look at the context of the key passages justifying Albrecht’s position and consider how they may fit into Kant’s overall ethical theory and moral psychology it becomes clear that there is no need to take Kant to be denying that our actions always arise from some maxim or other. But Albrecht has nevertheless identified an important feature of Kant’s account that remains obscure if we focus solely on the foundational ethical works: although all actions rest on maxims and hence principles, only some actions are performed, as we might say, “on principle”; that is, only some actions are performed out of concern for the quality of the action itself or the constitution of one’s will rather than with a view to the expected result of a proposed action. The morally good will exemplifies this ideal most completely, but Kant allows that evil action can also be performed “on principle” to some degree and hence that one can have an evil character.

---

6 Albrecht, Michael: “Kant’s Justification of the Role of Maxims in Ethics”. In: Kant’s Moral and Legal Philosophy. Edited by Karl Ameriks & Otfried Höffe. Cambridge 2009, 134-156. (I cite Albrecht’s Kant-Studien essay and not the English translation.)
II.

Whereas Albrecht sees Kant’s account of maxims as originating in Rousseau, other commentators suggest an origin in Wolff and Baumgarten. For Wolff, maxims are general rules that articulate the conception of the good that determines a rational being to act. Baumgarten equates maxims with the major premises of practical syllogisms (*maiores propositiones syllogismorum practicorum*), and Kant is recorded as concurring that a maxim is the *propositio major* of the practical syllogism (V-MP/Dohna, AA 28: 679). Since Kant based his lectures on ethics, anthropology, and metaphysics (including empirical psychology) on Baumgarten’s texts, it is natural to suppose that he would take the account of maxims he found there at least as a starting point for his own account. And the term ‘maxim’ is far from the only term in Kant’s moral psychology that is found in Baumgarten. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the core of Kant’s terminological apparatus for his moral psychology also appears in Baumgarten’s texts. Despite this, Albrecht claims that there are three (interrelated) features of

---


8 Wolff, Christian: *Vernünftige Gedancken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen zu Beföderung ihrer Glückseeligkeit*. Franckfurt/Leipzig 1736 [1720], §400; also see §180. Cited hereafter as *German Ethics*.


10 For detailed information regarding Kant’s lectures (including textbooks used), see Steve Naragon’s website *Kant in the Classroom* (URL: http://www.manchester.edu/kant).

11 Some of the relevant terms from Baumgarten’s empirical psychology that later figure in Kant’s moral psychology are (listed here with Baumgarten’s own suggested German translations): the lower and higher faculty of desire (*facultas appetitiva inferior v. superior, das untere bzw. obere Vermögen zu begehren*), choice (*arbitrium, Willkür*), incentive (*elater animi, Triebfeder*), sensuous incentive or stimulus (*stimulus, sinnliche Triebfeder*), intellectual incentive or motive (*motiva, Bewegungs-Grund*), and, of course, maxims (*maxime, gewöhnliche Gesinnungen*). See Baumgarten, A. G.: *Metaphysica*. Halle 1757, §§663-732. Kant’s engagement with and appropriation of Baumgarten’s Latin terminology is most
maxims as they figure in the empirical psychology of Wolff and Baumgarten that rule out the
possibility of anything but the most superficial influence on Kant: for Wolff and Baumgarten, (1)
we *always* act according to some maxim or other, (2) we are frequently not conscious of what
our own maxims are, and (3) our maxims are rules of action that are acquired as habits (p. 135f.).

These three features of Wolffian maxims are clearly inconsistent with the account of maxims
that Albrecht distills from Kant’s anthropological writings. But a closer look at Kant’s texts
makes it doubtful whether that account is really Kant’s. Consider the claim that for Kant we are
by definition conscious of our maxims. Kant famously says in the *Groundwork* that since we can
see actions, but not the inner principles of actions, you cannot know (even “bei der schärfsten
Selbstprüfung”) if the maxim of your duty-conforming action (*die Maxime einer sonst
pflichtmäßigen Handlung*) rests wholly on moral grounds (AA 04: 407.01-08). And while
Albrecht associates acting on maxims with the acquisition of a character, Kant himself writes
that it is difficult to know one’s own character (Refl 1518, AA 15: 873.28f.; cf. MS, AA 06:
441.02-19, 06: 392 and RGV, AA 06: 20.25-34, 06: 38). Moreover, many of Kant’s own
ingressions of maxims do not seem like the kind of principles one would or perhaps even *could*
consciously adopt by means of a revolution in thought amounting to a resolution to adhere to a

evident in his lectures and *Nachlaß*, but also comes across quite clearly in the Introduction to the
*Metaphysics of Morals* (AA 06: 211-221) (a text that seems to be closely related to his lecture notes).
certain standard of action. Consider the following examples: the maxim that most people have to preserve their life from inclination (GMS, AA 04: 397-8), the maxim of neglecting one’s natural talents (AA 04: 423-4), and the maxims of avarice (“den Zweck der Haushaltung nicht im Genuß seines Vermögens, sondern mit Entsagung auf denselben blos im Besitz desselben zu setzen”) and prodigality (“die den Gebrauch, ohne auf die Erhaltung desselben zu sehen, zum alleinigen Zweck macht”) (MS. AA 06: 404n). Perhaps the Cyrenaics could be read as advocating the conscious adoption of a maxim of prodigality (“carpe diem”), but it would be bizarre to say that we possess the vice of prodigality only if we make a solemn vow to ourselves to live by the aforementioned principle of prodigality (cf. Refl 1518, AA 15: 869.12-16).

Kant presupposes in his discussion of the vices of avarice and prodigality that we can only speak of vice where there are vicious maxims (MS, AA 06: 404.03-07; cf. 06: 432-3). And this is in keeping with Kant’s account of moral assessment. The agent always has some maxim underlying his action which either can or cannot be willed as a universal law, such that if there were no maxim to assess, there would also be nothing to condemn in the person. (And to concede that much would amount to conceding that there is no interesting sense in which actions not arising from maxims are really actions.) Thus Kant says not only that duty requires you to act on a maxim that you could will to be a universal law (GMS, AA 04: 421.06-08), a formulation that is consistent with Albrecht’s interpretation, but also that duty requires that you “act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature” (handle so,

12 Albrecht’s example, drawn from Kant’s biography, of the maxim of smoking only one pipe a day (p. 133) also doesn’t seem to fit well with the proposed account of maxims: while one can certainly consciously adopt a maxim of smoking only one pipe a day, it hardly seems to require the kind of revolution in thinking or greatness of soul that Albrecht elsewhere associates with the rare achievement of acting on a maxim. Moreover, the same biographer who says that Kant made it his maxim to smoke only one pipe a day also suggests that Kant was not conscious of his maxims when he acted on them: “These maxims gradually became so intimately intertwined with his self that even without being clearly conscious of them at the moment he would nevertheless act according to them” (Diese Maximen verflochten sich nach und nach so innig mit seinem Selbst, das, ohne ihrer eben jetzt sich deutlich bewußt zu seyn doch darnach gehandelt wurde). See Borowski, Ludwig: Ueber Immanuel Kant. Erster Band: Darstellung des Lebens und Charakters Immanuel Kant’s. Königsberg, 1804, 108f. Quoted by Kuehn, Manfred: Kant: A Biography. Cambridge, 2005, 148f.
als ob die Maxime deiner Handlung durch deinen Willen zum allgemeinen Naturgesetze werden sollte) (04: 421.18-20; emphasis added), a formulation which assumes that any action coming under the scope of moral assessment (any imputable action) occurs according to some maxim or other.\(^\text{13}\)

In addition, Kant’s so-called “Incorporation Thesis” strongly suggests that all action arises from maxims: we can say that our will is never simply determined by desires or sensible incentives (\textit{sinnliche Triebfeder}) since it is determined by an incentive “only insofar as the human being has incorporated them in his maxim” (\textit{nur sofern der Mensch sie in seine Maxime aufgenommen hat}) (RGV, AA 06: 24).\(^\text{14}\) And Kant himself confirms this point. He is recorded in lectures as equating willing with acting on maxims: “as a freely acting being, the human being actually can do nothing without the will—he always acts according to maxims, even when not universaliter” (\textit{als ein freihandeldes Wesen kann der Mensch eigentlich nichts nicht mit Willen

\(^{13}\) This point is also noted by Timmermann, Jens: “Kant’s Puzzling Ethics of Maxims”, 43.

Timmermann notes elsewhere that Kant makes no reference to maxims when he introduces the so-called formula of humanity or when he discusses the four examples of immoral actions in terms of that formula (GMS, AA 04: 429-431). (See Timmerman, Jens: \textit{Sittengesetz und Freiheit: Untersuchungen zu Immanuel Kants Theorie des freien Willens}. Berlin 2003, 175f.) After discussing the four examples, Kant says that rational nature is the limiting condition “of the freedom of action of every human being” (\textit{der Freiheit der Handlungen eines jeden Menschen}) without saying that this is equivalent to a restriction on our maxims (04: 430f.). However, if it is correct that the first formula (in terms of universal laws) presupposes that morally assessable actions arise from maxims, then that is sufficient to establish the point at issue. Moreover, as Timmermann again points out (\textit{op. cit.}, 176), when Kant restates the formula of humanity a few pages later (when trying to show the relationship between the three formulas), he does describe the restriction as a restriction on maxims: rational nature serves as the limiting condition of the private ends in every \textit{maxim} (GMS, AA 04: 436). Assuming that this statement is meant to be a complete statement of how the moral law restricts our will according to the formula of humanity, it indicates that the formula of humanity also presupposes that morally assessable actions arise from maxims. In addition, the parallel with the previously quoted statement of the formula suggests that Kant takes it that a limiting condition on “freedom of action” and a limiting condition on maxims to amount to the same thing.

thuen—immer handelt er nach Maximen wenn auch nicht universaliter) (V-MP/Dohna, AA 28: 678.25-27). And in the *Metaphysics of Morals* he simply assumes that acting on maxims is what distinguishes human action from animal behavior:

Every violation of the law can and must be explained only by the fact that it arose from a maxim of the criminal (to make the misdeed into a rule for himself); for if one were to derive the violation from a sensible impulse, then it would not have been committed by him as a free being and could not be imputed to him.

Eine jede Übertretung des Gesetzes kann und muß nicht anders als so erklärt werden, daß sie aus einer Maxime des Verbrechers (sich eine solche Unthat zur Regel zu machen) entspringe; denn wenn man sie von einem sinnlichen Antrieb ableite, so wäre sie nicht von ihm, als einem freien Wesen, begangen und könnte ihm nicht zugerechnet werden” (06: 321n).

All free action arises from maxims since there is no third alternative between acting on maxims and being determined by sensible impulse.

It should be noted, however, that Kant might seem to contradict such statements about the ubiquity of maxims in the *Religion* itself (where the Incorporation Thesis is stated) when he speaks of the lowest “grade” (Grad) of “the propensity to evil” (Hang zum Böse) as “the weakness of the human heart in complying with adopted maxims” (die Schwäche des menschlichen Herzens in Befolgung genommener Maximen) (RGV, AA 06: 29.16-18, 06: 29.24-30), lamenting that “between maxim and deed there is still a wide gap” (zwischen der Maxime und der That ist noch ein großer Zwischenraum) (06: 46.13-14). This claim seems to imply that we can be responsible for our actions even when they do not arise from any maxim. Perhaps we could make this consistent with the Incorporation Thesis by claiming that we are responsible for such evil because we retain the ability to act on maxims even when we do not act from any
maxims at all. But a closer examination shows that Kant’s own view is that our weakness in following an otherwise good maxims is explained by an underlying bad maxim in which the law is not a strong enough incentive: the “propensity to moral evil” (in all three “grades”) rests on a “deed” (That) that originates in the use of freedom “through which the supreme maxim (either in favor of or against the law) is adopted in the power of choice” (wodurch die oberste Maxime (dem Gesetze gemäß oder zuwider) in die Willkür aufgenommen) (06: 31-2). On this view, the failure to combat natural inclinations is something for which we are responsible only if its cause lies “in the first inner ground of maxims that are in agreement with the inclinations” (im ersten Grunde der Maximen, die mit den Neigungen im Einverständnisse sind) (06: 59). That is, evil always presupposes maxims that are in agreement with the inclinations and is thus never a mere failure to act on maxims. And Kant claims that if evil is the result of freedom, then the ground of a maxim in agreement with the inclinations could be nothing other than a more fundamental maxim (06: 21n). In short, if weakness in following maxims is a kind of evil, it must be rooted in an evil maxim:

The ground of evil cannot lie in any object determining the power of choice through inclination, not in any natural impulses, but only in a rule that the power of choice produces for the exercise of its freedom, i.e., in a maxim

Mithin kann in keinem die Willkür durch Neigung bestimmenden Objecte, in keinem Naturtriebe, sondern nur in einer Regel, die die Willkür sich selbst für den Gebrauch ihrer Freiheit macht, d. i. in einer Maxime, der Grund des Bösen liegen (06: 21).

Allen Wood defends such a view (Kant’s Ethical Thought. Cambridge 1999, 52), which would clearly go a long way in making plausible the view that we rarely act on maxims (even though we can define free action in terms of practical reason as the power to produce maxims).

McCarty (81) makes a similar point.
III.
This leaves us in the following situation: Kant says that we always act on maxims and that this is a prerequisite for moral accountability, but also that acting on principles is rare and even (at least according to two sets of anthropology lecture notes) that some people don’t act according to any maxims at all.\(^{17}\) We can free Kant from the apparent contradiction here if we can say that Kant is simply being equivocal in his use of the term ‘maxim.’\(^{18}\) But there is more to Kant’s account than that. My suggestion in what follows is that Kant’s seemingly contradictory claims about acting according to maxims result from the fact that there are two fundamentally different ways that maxims of action can figure in the deliberation of the agent.

The people who Kant says do not act on maxims are people whose concern for the attainment of agreeable results trumps any value that they might place on the quality of their willing and hence on the principle of their willing. Such agents nevertheless act on maxims in two different senses. First, the preference they give to agreeable results (which may include an immediate, sympathetic satisfaction in the happiness of others) must itself ultimately be an expression of a supreme maxim in agreement with inclinations. Second, practical reason demands of such agents that they devise more specific maxims approving the kinds of action necessary for achieving their desired results. Such an agent might adopt the maxim of honesty because it is necessary for a good reputation, \textit{etc.} A different sort of agent could instead hold the maxim of honesty to be \textit{intrinsically} correct, that is, correct independent of its promised agreeable consequences. An agent shows that he holds his maxim to be intrinsically correct when even the threat of death does not shake his resolve to act according to his maxim (\textit{cf.} MS, AA 06: 483.16-26). We can

---

\(^{17}\) Rob Gressis calls this the “Learning Maxims Problem”. See his “Recent Work on Kantian Maxims I”, 222. Gressis makes clear that this is a problem that has not yet been adequately addressed in the literature. See his “Recent Work on Kantian Maxims II”. In: \textit{Philosophy Compass} 5(3), 2010, 228-239 at 235f.

\(^{18}\) This is, in essence, the view of Timmerman (“Kant’s Puzzling Ethics of Maxims”). See Gressis, Rob: “Recent Work on Kantian Maxims II”, 234f. McCarty appeals, along similar lines, to the fact that “maxims are hierarchically ordered” so that an agent might have no maxims in the sense required for character and yet still have maxims of ends forming the basis of practical reasoning (McCarty, 80). This means that there is a corresponding equivocation in the idea of “acting on principle” (82).
therefore say that a maxim of action deemed intrinsically correct has a “primary” place in practical deliberation. (We could also call it a “fundamental” or a “central” place.) Kant says that this kind of agent possesses “character” in an honorific sense. Those lacking character, by contrast, do not act on maxims deemed intrinsically correct, but instead tailor their maxims to achieve the consequences that they value. Such agents can certainly be honest, but we can say that their maxim of honesty has a merely “secondary” (or “derivative” or “peripheral”) place in their deliberation: honesty has value for them only insofar as it serves to promote the results they value. The primary place in the deliberative outlook of such an agent is instead occupied by the maxim expressing the value placed on agreeable results, and such a maxim relegates to a secondary place any maxim that actually recommends a certain kind of action.

It follows from the secondary place that maxims of action have in the deliberation of those lacking character that those without character have no particular allegiance to the maxims on which they do act: since they act according to whatever principles promise the results they desire, they will change their principles if the circumstances change in the relevant ways. Hence: “A person without character is never a determinate person, but is a different person on every occasion”.19 Since his principles are for sale to the highest bidder (MS, AA 06: 483.03-08), one can express the contempt in which one should hold him (cf. V-Anth/Mron AA 25: 1388.26f.) by saying, in line with ordinary speech, that he doesn’t have any principles at all: his concern for results may prompt him to adopt a general maxim of honesty (GMS, AA 04: 402.24-31), but, like the shopkeeper motivated by prudence, he nevertheless does not act from principles of honesty (aus Grundsätzen der Ehrlichkeit verfahren) (397.25-28). Significantly, Kant characterizes such

---

an agent not in terms of mere weakness, which would be an inability to act according to maxims of action that are themselves good, but rather in terms of the depravity (Bösartigkeit) of acting on evil maxims (RGV, AA 06: 30).

One way that Kant expresses the status of maxims occupying a secondary place in an agent’s deliberative outlook is to say that this willingness to abandon one’s principles shows not that one lacks principles altogether, but rather that one lacks reliable or firm principles. Thus the Menschenkunde text that records Kant as claiming that people lacking character do not act on any maxims at all goes on to define character as a “Festigkeit in Grundsätzen” (p. 347 = V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25:1169). And in the second Critique Kant makes the even stronger claim that to have a character is to have a praktische consequente Denkungsart nach unveränderlichen Maximen (KpV 05: 152.26f.). Such claims at least imply that those without character have maxims that are not firm, but rather changeable. Indeed, Kant himself is recorded as saying that those without character are not reliable since they adopt a new rule (Regel) when they see the results of their old one (V-Anth/Friedländer, AA 25:631). And we therefore find that the passage from the published Anthropology that Albrecht cites as if it claimed that acting on Grundsätze is something rare (p. 132n13) in fact claims merely that acting on feste Grundsätze is rare (AA 07: 292).

In other to understand these claims fully, it is important to see that the degree of “firmness” of principles should not be equated with a statistical likelihood that the agent will retain those principles. Maxims adopted with a view to attaining agreeable results always have a precarious status for the agent since there cannot be any “determinate principles” (bestimmte Prinzipien) for making oneself happy: any rules devised to attain happiness should be considered mere “empirical councils” (empirische Ratschläge) rather than universal, i.e., exceptionless, rules (GMS AA 04: 418). Acting contrary to the a priori moral law is without exception immoral, “but

---

20 Another typical claim in the lecture notes is that a person without character lacks “constant and fixed” maxims (“dauernde und feststehende Maximen”) (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1385). See Frierson, 627. Kant also notes regarding character: “Die feste Anhänglichkeit an Grundsätze (Maximen) und Abneigung von dem Spiel der Instincte” (Refl 1518, AA 15: 868.26ff.).

21 Compare Baumgarten’s claim that the person who always is changing his maxims is variabilis or has a veränderliches Gemüth (Metaphysica §699).
if I am unfaithful to my maxim of [honesty from] prudence this can sometimes be very advantageous to me, although it is certainly safer to abide by it” (werde ich aber meiner Maxime der Klugheit abtrünnig, so kann das mir doch manchmal sehr vorteilhaft sein, wiewohl es freilich sicherer ist, bei ihr zu bleiben) (04: 402f.). Despite this, it is wholly conceivable that an agent concerned only about agreeable results will never abandon his maxim of honesty: he will retain it for as long as he also remains either (1) sufficiently anxious about the consequences for his self-interest of abandoning his maxim, (2) temperamentally disposed to honesty out of affection for other human beings, or (3) temperamentally inflexible in his maxims.  

Nevertheless, we can still deny that such an agent has a “firm” principle of honesty on account of that principle’s subjective normative status: a willingness to abandon that principle when it seems convenient is built into the agent’s deliberative outlook. Conversely, it is at least logically possible that an agent who holds the principle of honesty to be an intrinsically correct one could abandon that principle. But that would be a very different and more radical sort of change. For the person without character, abandoning principles is an ordinary move within the deliberative outlook he already has, a move that his deliberative outlook requires when circumstances change in the relevant ways: at the very moment that such an agent is acting according to a maxim to be honest, he is also committed to abandoning that maxim should honesty no longer promise the most agreeable results. Abandoning principles deemed intrinsically correct would, by contrast, be a change in the deliberative outlook itself. It would be either a change arising from a recognition that one’s deliberative outlook has been incoherent up to that point or else a change originating from outside practical deliberation altogether—in which case our responsibility for the change and its resultant actions would be mysterious at best.

Kant clearly thinks that any maxim standing in such a secondary place in the agent’s deliberative outlook could not possibly be an authentically moral one. If the disposition of the agent does not arise from “considered, firm, and continually purified principles, […] then it is neither armed for all situations, nor adequately secured against the changes that new temptations

---

22 Kant distinguishes “character” from “the rigid, inflexible disposition that accompanies a formed resolution” (der steife, unbiegsame Sinn bei einem gefaßten Vorsatz) (Anthropology, AA 07: 294). Compare Baumgarten’s claim that whoever has bad maxims that rarely change is pertinax or has a halsstarriges Gemüt (Metaphysica §699).
could bring about” (wenn diese nicht eine Wirkung überlegter, fester und immer mehr geläuterter Grundsätze ist, so ist sie […] weder auf alle Fälle gerüstet, noch vor der Veränderung, die neue Anlockungen bewirken können, hinreichend gesichert) (MS, AA 06: 383f.; cf. GMS, AA 04: 390.04-08, 04: 398.12-20). An authentically moral disposition must therefore arise from the recognition of the intrinsic correctness of the maxim rather any consideration of the effects of implementing the maxim:

To be truthful from duty, however, is something entirely different from being truthful from anxiety about detrimental results, since in the first case the concept of the action in itself already contains a law for me while in the second I must first look about elsewhere to see what effects on me might be combined with it.


Nevertheless, having a maxim that stands in the primary place in deliberation is not equivalent to having a moral maxim: it is at least logically possible that one could hold a non-moral maxim in a primary position within one’s deliberative outlook. Accordingly, Kant allows that there could be an “evil character” (böser Charakter), and he gives the example of Sulla (Anth, AA 07: 293). We can say that even an evil person counts as having a “character” in the honorific sense insofar as his practical deliberation is shaped by a commitment to principles deemed intrinsically correct rather than a concern for agreeable results (a concern which would make the commitment to principles always conditional).

Kant’s identification of Sulla as a man of evil character is presumably based on his reputation for military courage and selflessness of a certain sort. The mortal threats of the battlefield test

---

23 For a useful discussion of this point, see Frierson, Patrick: “Character and Evil in Kant’s Moral Anthropology”. In: Journal of the History of Philosophy 44(4), 2006, 623-634.
whether one is acting on principle or whether one instead ultimately values only agreeable results. Hence it is not surprising that in one set of lecture notes Kant explicitly equates Sulla’s having character with his courage.\(^\text{24}\) And although Sulla acted unjustly by assuming the dictatorship and consolidating his power through murderous violence, he also showed that this injustice was not rooted in a base selfishness by resigning the dictatorship and returning to private life: “Sulla hatte einen Charakter der böse war. Aber man bewundert doch die Größe seiner Maximen, als er resignierte”.\(^\text{25}\) The notes also suggest the example of Cato the Younger, who proved at least a kind of principled indifference to agreeable results by committing suicide rather living under an unjust dictatorial rule.\(^\text{26}\) Kant’s two other examples of men with evil characters, Cromwell and Augustus, are also military/political leaders.\(^\text{27}\) This is significant since the evil of these men consists in their unrestrained violence rather than in the duplicity that Kant finds in more ordinary human evil.

However, on Kant’s view, an evil character can only approximate the ideal of principled action. In the case of human beings, non-moral maxims of action are in every case ultimately directed to the agreeable states of the subject. All human evil consists in granting the satisfaction of our inclinations a greater weight in deliberation than adherence to the moral law. Therefore, a non-moral maxim could only be relatively primary or fundamental within the agent’s deliberation, at least for a human being: Kant tells us in the *Religion* that to act on non-moral

\(^{24}\) “Der Muth, welcher auf Grundsätzen beruht, wenn er auch noch so böse angewandt würde, wird doch geachtet und bewundert, z. B. Sulla” (Menschenkunde, p. 59).


\(^{26}\) V-Anth/Matuszewski, Ms. p. 371 and V-Anth/Dohna, Ms. p. 311. Also see Refl 1518, AA 15: 869.12-16.

\(^{27}\) Kant mentions Cromwell at V-Anth/Friedländer, AA 25: 823 (cf. Frierson, 625) and Augustus (alongside Sulla) in Refl 1172, AA 15: 518f.
maxims without any view to their agreeable results way would be a “diabolical” (teuflisch) kind of evil in which the only remaining incentive would be a pure, disinterested resistance to the moral law (RGV, AA 06: 36). This would not be mere “depravity” (Bösartigkeit), but rather “malice” (Bosheit): “a disposition (a subjective principle of maxims) to incorporate into one’s maxim evil qua evil for an incentive” (eine Gesinnung (subjectives Princip der Maximen), das Böse als Böses zur Triebfeder in seine Maxime aufzunehmen) (06: 37; cf. 30.09-18 but also 57.22-25). Kant remarks in the discussion of character in the Anthropology that we should not mistake the “malice” (Bosheit) of an inflexible disposition with regard to evil intentions for a truly principled kind of evil:

for then it would be diabolical. The human being, however, never sanctions the evil in himself, and there is actually no malice from principles, but only from the forsaking of them.

denn alsdann wäre sie teuflisch; der Mensch aber billigt das Böse in sich nie, und so giebt es eigentlich keine Bosheit aus Grundsätzen, sondern nur aus Verlassung derselben (Anth, AA 07: 293f.).

Human evil is always the result of the “forsaking” of principles in the sense that it can always be traced to the preference for agreeable results over a concern for the quality of willing itself. Human beings never choose a principle to act evilly as intrinsically correct. But it is central to Kant’s view that even human evil is not the result of a mere weakness of reason in comparison with sensuous incentives (e.g., RGV, AA 06: 59n) but is rather to be found “in the inmost ground of the maxims which are in agreement with the inclinations” (im inneren ersten Grunde der Maximen, die mit den Neigungen im Einverständnisse sind) (06: 59) and hence in “soul-corrupting principles” (seelenverderbende Grundsätzen) (06: 57.22-25). Evil always arises from our unprincipled maxims.
18

IV.

Another way to see how this distinction between principled and unprincipled maxims figures in Kant’s practical philosophy is to consider the third feature of Wolffian maxims that Albrecht identifies. Baumgarten glosses maxims as ‘gewöhnliche Gesinnungen’ and as rules of action “die man sich angewöhnt hat”. Albrecht claims that this equation makes a Wolffian origin for Kant’s account of maxims impossible since Kant makes an explicit distinction between action based on habit (Gewohnheit) and action from maxims. Albrecht quotes Kant as telling us in the Metaphysics of Morals that “moral maxims […] cannot be based on habit” (sittliche Maximen nicht … auf Gewohnheit gegründet werden können) since this amounts to the subject relinquishing “the freedom in the adoption of his maxims” (die Freiheit in Nehmung seiner Maximen) (pp. 136-7; MS, AA 06: 409). However, a closer examination of this passage reveals that Kant is not denying a habitual origin to all maxims, but rather telling us something about what it would mean for a maxim to be principled, that is for a maxim to have a primary place in one’s deliberative outlook, the place characteristic of moral maxims.

Kant defines habit (Angewohnheit) in this context as a “uniformity become necessity through frequently repeated action” (durch öfters wiederholte Handlung zur Nothwendigkeit gewordene Gleichförmigkeit). But Baumgarten does not define ‘maxime’ in terms of ‘consuetudo’ or related terms that might suggest an origin in repeated action. Baumgarten connects the concept of a maxim with that of habit only in the German glosses (which were added only in later editions). His intent in doing so may have been merely to capture the fact that maxims, as major propositions of practical syllogisms (see p. 4, above), have a certain longevity since they are formed with a view to more than one application. This is in line with Bubner’s suggestion that the concept of a maxim in the Wolffian tradition should be linked with Aristotelian concept of a practical hexis or habitus. Hence we do not need to take Baumgarten to be making a

---

28 Metaphysica §699, Ethica Philosophica §246.

29 See Bubner, Rüdiger: Handlung, Sprache und Vernunft, 199-200; “Another Look at Maxims.” In: Kant’s Legacy: Essays in Honor of Lewis White Beck. Edited by Predrag Cicovacki. Rochester 2001, 245-259 at 246f. Boethius seems to have brought the term ‘maxim’ into the Aristotelian tradition by coining the term ‘maxima propositio’ as a translation for the term ‘axioma’ as it appears in Aristotle’s Topics. See
substantially different point than Kant himself does when he refers to virtue as itself a kind of “aptitude” (Fertigkeit) or “habitus” (MS, AA 06: 407). In short, we do not need to read the passage from the *Metaphysics of Morals* as a repudiation of the Wolffian conception of maxims since the idea that maxims are acquired through “frequently repeated action” is not a central part of that conception.

More important, however, is that the ellipses in Albrecht’s quotation from the *Metaphysics of Morals* obscure the fact that Kant is almost explicitly claiming there that many maxims are based on habit and hence have an origin in “frequently repeated action”: Kant claims that “moral maxims, unlike technical ones, cannot be based on habit” (*sittliche Maximen nicht so wie technische auf Gewohnheit gegründet werden können*). Underlying this claim seems to be the following thought: the frequent repetition of good actions (e.g., honest dealing) can help the agent establish a maxim of actions *in conformity* with duty (e.g., a maxim to act honestly), but it cannot result in a maxim to do one’s duty *from* duty. A maxim of actions in conformity with duty acquired in this way would always be a merely “technical maxim” devised with a view attaining desired results. Understanding virtue as product of habituation thus makes virtue seem too easy: once we have established a disposition to act in conformity with the law, it would seem that virtue could then “settle down in peace and quiet with its maxims adopted once and for all” (*mit ihren einmal für allemal genommenen Maximen sich in Ruhe und Stillstand setzen*) (06: 409). However, not only are such maxims too precarious to count as morally good (on account of their


30 Kant frequently refers to virtue as a “Fertigkeit” and also speaks of a “habituellen moralischen Interesse” (KU, 05: 354.26) and of a duty to make a cheerful state of mind “habituell” (MS, 06: 485.04-08; *cf.* Anth, 07: 235.21-25).

31 *Cf.* McCarty, 67n8.

32 This definition of technical maxims is implied by Kant’s definition of technical imperatives, which make an action necessary “indirectly, through the representation of some end that can be attained by the action” (*mittelbar, durch die Vorstellung eines Zwecks, der durch die Handlung erreicht werden könne*) (AA 06: 222). In the *Groundwork*, Kant favors the more Germanic term “imperatives of skill” (*Imperativen der Geschicklichkeit*) (AA 04: 415).
having a secondary place in deliberation), but, in addition, even an authentically moral maxim is one that establishes merely an endless progress toward the moral ideal. Hence virtue cannot be defined as “eine lange, durch Übung erworbene Gewohnheit moralisch-guter Handlungen” (MS, AA 06: 383f.).

This brings us to the second important claim regarding habit from the Metaphysics of Morals passage: that “even if the practice of virtue were to become a habit, the subject would thereby forfeit the freedom in adopting maxims that distinguishes an action done from duty” (selbst wenn ihre Ausübung zur Gewohnheit würde, das Subject damit die Freiheit in Nehmung seiner Maximen einbüßen würde, welche doch der Charakter einer Handlung aus Pflicht ist). On Albrecht’s reading, Kant’s view here is that adopting maxims is characterized by a kind of freedom that is absent in the case of actions based on habit, with the implication maxims could not arise from habit. (And the additional implication of that view seems to be that moral maxims are, in fact, the only maxims that can be adopted.) But the passage is more naturally read as claiming that habit is incompatible only with the unique way that authentically moral maxims (as opposed to technical or pragmatic maxims) would have to be adopted. And we have already identified the relevant feature of moral maxims that makes them unique in this regard: they occupy a primary place in practical deliberation and hence are adopted not with a view to attaining desired results but rather on account of an immediate interest in the action itself. (We will see below why we might want to say that the adoption of such a principled maxim might be characterized by a kind of freedom lacking in other cases.)

Albrecht is clearly correct to this extent: Kant rejects an Aristotelian account of how virtue can be acquired: for Aristotle, a virtuous disposition (hexis/habitus) is also a habit (ethos/consuetudo) acquired through repeated action.\(^{33}\) In contrast with such an account, Kant holds that an authentically moral maxim is one that requires a “revolution” or “rebirth” in thought and hence that cannot be acquired through practice or habituation (RGV, AA 06: 47).\(^{34}\)

---

\(^{33}\) For a recent interpretation that makes the contrast with Kant’s account of virtue seem particularly stark, see Moss, Jessica: “‘Virtue Makes the Goal Right’: Virtue and Phronesis in Aristotle’s Ethics.” In: Phronesis 56(3), 2011, 204-261.

\(^{34}\) Kant might seem to contradict this point when he claims that virtue requires an “ethical ascetics” (ethische ascetik) that consists in the “cultivation of virtue” (Cultur der Tugend) (MS, AA 06: 484f.; cf.
And Kant makes the same point about the acquisition of character more generally (Anth, AA 07: 294f.). This leaves room for us to say that Kant’s most general conception of maxims is largely Wolffian in origin and conception even though his account of a moral maxim emphasizes the fact that its acquisition cannot be gradual and that its adoption can be characterized in terms of a kind of freedom absent when we adopt maxims with a view to attaining desired results.\(^{35}\)

The meaning of Kant’s own version of this distinction between habitual and non-habitual maxims is far from clear, but must be understood in its larger context: a discussion of the distinction between the doctrine of right and the doctrine of virtue. Kant defines the “universal principle of right” (allgemeines Princip des Rechts) in terms of the coexistence of one’s maxim with everyone else’s freedom (MS, AA 06: 230).\(^{36}\) But right requires only that “my external action” (meine äußere Handlung) not infringe on the rightful freedom of others (06: 231). Right considers whether my actions respect the external freedom of others, but not why I do so or not.

\(^{35}\) But even here Kant’s view needn’t be seen as wholly opposed to Wolff, who also seems to use ‘habit’ in a pejorative sense when he says that the person who acts based on his natural inclinations “does what he is habituated to do” but nevertheless acts from maxims: “der Mensch, der seinen natürlichen Neigungen folget, oder nach dem gehet, was er gewohnet ist, hat jederzeit gewisse Maximen, darnach er sich in Beurtheilung des Guten und Bösen richtet […]” (German Ethics §400). And Albrecht himself notes that Wolff distinguishes the proper conscience consisting in distinct representations from mere habit (p. 137n, referring to German Ethics §116-118).

\(^{36}\) This formulation of the universal principle of right provides additional evidence that Kant assumes that actions always arise from some maxim or other. The same could be said of the “transcendental formula of public right” (die transscendentale Formel des öffentlichen Rechts), which reads: “All actions relating to the rights of others are wrong if their maxim is incompatible with publicity” (Alle auf das Recht anderer Menschen bezogene Handlungen, deren Maxime sich nicht mit der Publicität verträgt, sind Unrecht) (ZeF, 08: 381).
In particular, right does not consider whether I respect the freedom of others from prudence or for the sake of my obligation to do so.

In these terms, Kant’s claim about habit is that we can acquire legally correct maxims through repeated actions insofar as they are merely technical maxims: in the doctrine of right, we “can begin with the end and seek out the maxim of action in conformity with duty” (06: 382; cf. McCarty, 78f.). For example, if we have no immediate interest in honesty, we can still acquire the maxim to act honestly as long as we recognize the long-term advantage such a maxim would bring us and then train ourselves to act according to the maxim despite its obvious short-term disadvantages. An authentically moral maxim of honesty cannot be acquired in this way precisely because it signifies an interest in honesty itself rather than in the consequences of honest behavior. One either values honesty for its own sake or one does not. To habituate oneself to value honesty presupposes that a concern other than honesty itself motivates the habituation.37

Kant makes a closely related claim in the Lectures on Pedagogy: “Maxims must originate from the human being himself” (Maximen müssen aus dem Menschen selbst entstehen) since instilling habits through a disciplinary system of rewards and punishments does not lead to a moral disposition (Päd, AA 09: 480f.). Albrecht claims (p. 136n35) that the view espoused in these lectures is that only some people have maxims, whereas others act on mere habits. But Kant’s overall point here (in concert with the Metaphysics of Morals passage) is tightly focused on the claim that children should learn to act not merely in conformity with duty, but from duty:

37 As we have seen, the context of the Metaphysics of Morals passage makes clear that virtue is nevertheless always merely in progress. Someone who values honesty for its own sake must continue to strive to overcome sensible obstacles to the full implementation of his maxim: virtue “must be cultivated, exercised, by attempts at combating the inner enemy within the human being (asceticism); for one cannot straightaway do all that one wills to do without having first tried out and exercised one’s powers” (müsse durch Versuche der Bekämpfung des inneren Feindes im Menschen (ascetisch) cultivirt, geübt werden; denn man kann nicht Alles sofort, was man will, wenn man nicht vorher seine Kräfte versucht und geübt hat) (MS, AA 06: 477). On this account, the progress toward virtue is not a progress from having an interest merely in the results of honesty to having an interest in honesty itself, but rather the progress that allows one’s willing to be honest solely for honesty’s sake to being able to put into practice. See note 34, above.
“One must see to it that the pupil acts from his own maxims, not from habit, that he not only does the good, but that he does it because it is good” (Man muß dahin sehen, daß der Zögling aus eignen Maximen, nicht aus Gewohnheit gut handle, daß er nicht blos das Gute thue, sondern es darum thue, weil es gut ist) (AA 09: 475; emphasis added). These claims do not imply that a badly raised child would lack maxims altogether. In fact, they even seem to imply that the alternative to the child learning to act from his own maxim of truthfulness is that he would learn to internalize a maxim of truthfulness that is essentially someone else’s (his teachers’) and thus that he would learn to develop a maxim of truthfulness not because he thinks truthfulness is good, but rather because truthfulness is what other people think is good. More precisely, he would think truthfulness is good only because others think it is good; he would think of truthfulness as good either because of a simple conformism or as a means to the approval of other people. By contrast: “He must at all times comprehend the ground of the action and its derivation from the concepts of duty” (Er muß jederzeit den Grund und die Ableitung der Handlung von den Begriffen der Pflicht einsehen) (09: 475). Hence: “The child should learn to act from maxims whose fairness he himself understands” (Nach Maximen soll das Kind handeln lernen, deren Billigkeit es selbst einsieht) (09: 480). That is, a proper moral disposition requires that the pupil learn to think for himself, that he not to be a mere imitator but rather develop a character, which “consists in originality in the way of thinking” (besteht in der Originalität der Denkungsart) (Anth, AA 07: 293). As Kant notes in his Nachlaß: “Character proceeds according to one’s own principles, not instinct or imitation” (Der Character verfehrt nach selbsteignen Grundsätzen, nicht Instinkten oder Nachahmung) (Refl 1517, AA 15:867.12f.; emphasis corresponds to Kant’s later addition to the note); the person of character thus must “have his own will that is not imitated from or led by others”. 38

---

38 Kant continues: “Thus, what he decides he must decide from his own deliberation rather than from fashionable life rules” (Zum Character überhaupt wird […] erfordert, daß der einen eignen Willen habe, der nicht nachgeahmt oder von anderen gelenkt wird. Daher muß er aus eigener Überlegung beschließen, was er beschließt nicht aus modischen Lebensregeln) (Refl 1517 AA 15: 865.16-19; also see Refl 1518, AA 15: 868.19f.). Similarly: “Er muß einen eigenen Willen haben, d.h. er muß sich nicht von andern leiten lassen” (V-Anth/Reichel, Ms. p. 123; retrieved from URL: http://web.uni-marburg.de/kant/webseite1/gt_ho304.htm). And: “Wer aber eigenen Willen haben will muß auch eigene
To act according to “one’s own principles” would mean, for example, to be honest not because of a fear of social sanctions or because of a desire to curry favor from others, but rather because one recognizes the correctness of honesty apart from any such calculations. This might seem like an overly narrow definition of a principled practical disposition since there are many ways an agent could show a preference for agreeable results over principles without the mediation of other people. But, on Kant’s view, the calculations of prudence are essentially the calculations of how to influence other human beings. Forming one’s maxims with a view to one’s public reputation thus represents the main threat to principled action. Consequently, to think for oneself (to have one’s own will, one’s own maxims) rather than merely following the example of others is the primary prerequisite for principled action: only a maxim that is not adopted with a view to other people’s expectations could have the primary place in deliberation that would make it a “firm” principle in the relevant sense.

Ueberlegungen haben und sich nicht kümmern was andre von ihm urtheilen” (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1386).

Frierson offers a different interpretation of what it means to have “one’s own will” and “one’s own maxims” that considers the sense of “one’s own” to contrast with what comes from nature (Frierson, 633f.).

Kant associates the aim of influencing people with “technically practical reason, i.e., the maxim of prudence” (technisch-praktische Vernunft, d. i. die Klugheitsmaxime) (Anth, AA 07: 271.15-18) and defines “worldly prudence” (Weltklugheit) as “skill in influencing others so as to use them for our purposes” (die Geschicklichkeit eines Menschen, auf andere Einfluß zu haben, um sie zu seinen Absichten zu gebrauchen) (GMS, AA 04: 416n). “Hence prudence is nothing but a skill in making use of freely acting beings for given ends” (Die Klugheit ist daher nichts anders, als eine Geschicklichkeit, sich freihandelnder Wesen zu gegebenen Zwecken zu bedienen) (V-Th/Pölitz, AA 28: 1057.01-04).

Hence Kant equates having firm maxims with having a will of one’s own: “Zum Character gehört […] daß der Mensch einen eigenen Willen habe […]: dieser besteht aus feststehenden dauernden Maximen” (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1386). The man of character differs from the imitator “because he does not take part in evil one it has become public custom (fashion)” (weil er das Böse, was einmal zum öffentlichen Gebrauch (zur Mode) geworden, nicht mitmacht) (Anth, AA 07: 293).
On this view, when pupils are trained to act truthfully without acting on maxims that are truly “their own,” truthfulness is not really their own end, but rather a manner of acting that serves their further prudential ends. Such children would learn to have, in the terms introduced in the *Religion*, virtue in the merely legal sense or *virtus phaenomenon*: such virtue, indeed, “has the steadfast maxim of lawful actions” (*beharrliche Maxime gesetzmäßiger Handlungen*), a maxim which Kant says (contrary to Albrecht’s thesis) a person can acquire through “a long habituation (in the observance of the law)” (*eine lange Gewohnheit in Beobachtung des Gesetzes*) bringing about “gradual reformation of conduct and fortification of his maxims” (*allmäßliche Reformen seines Verhaltens und Befestigung seiner Maximen*) (AA 06: 47.01-12; emphasis altered).

Kant does not say in the *Lectures on Pedagogy* that improperly raised children would have a maxim to be truthful from prudence, but that is what Kant’s overall theory implies and how Kant’s discussion of *virtus phaenomenon* should be read. In fact, the maxim of truthfulness from prudence is one of Kant’s examples in the *Groundwork* of a maxim that has no moral worth. And in the *Groundwork*, as was the case in the *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Kant identifies this maxim with a habit of good behavior: when considering what is most prudent, one must consider “whether it is not more prudent to proceed according to a general maxim and to make it a habit to promise nothing except with the intention to honor it” (*ob es nicht klüglicher gehandelt sei, hiebei nach einer allgemeinen Maxime zu verfahren und es sich zur Gewohnheit zu machen, nichts zu versprechen als in der Absicht es zu halten*) (AA 04: 402).

This distinction between unprincipled maxims that can be formed by habituation and principled maxims arising from character, maxims that are therefore truly *one’s own* maxims, is an important one for understanding Kant’s account of virtue. Kant sometimes sets apart this kind

42 This is the gist of the subsequent discussion at 9: 480f. Also see MS, AA 06: 381.04-09 and Anth, AA 07: 292.03-05.

of principled action by speaking of the “inner freedom” of the person whose satisfaction is not dependent on agreeable results, results which are never wholly under our control and are usually at least partly under the control of other people. And this is how we should understand Kant’s claim that maxims arising from habituation are always contrary to the freedom associated with the adoption of a moral maxim. Maxims that have a primary place in deliberation are adopted in a spirit of freedom that is unconcerned with the results of action and, in particular, that is unconcerned with the opinion of others. A person of evil character can approximate this ideal of independence from other people without approximating the ideal of morality.

If Kant sometimes seems to imply that only some people act on principles or maxims, we should take him to mean that while all actions arise from maxims, only some actions arise from an interest taken in action or willing itself rather an in the effect of the action. Kant captures this ambiguity in the idea of acting from principles when he writes regarding people who violate duties to themselves:

They adopt principles that are directly contrary to his character as a moral being (in terms of its very form), that is, to inner freedom, the innate dignity of a human being, which is tantamount to saying that they make it one’s basic principle to have no basic principle and hence no character, that is, to throw oneself away and make oneself an object of contempt.

Diese nehmen sich Grundsätze, welche ihrem Charakter als moralischer Wesen, d. i. der inneren Freiheit, der angeborenen Würde des Menschen, geradezu (schon der Form nach) widersprechen, welches so viel sagt: sie machen sich es zum Grundsatz, keinen Grundsatz und so auch keinen Charakter zu haben, d. i. sich wegzuwürf en und sich zum Gegenstande der Verachtung zu machen.  

[MS AA 06: 420].

---

44 I offer an account this kind of freedom that emphasizes its social dimension in “Kant on Moral Freedom and Moral Slavery”. In: Kantian Review (forthcoming).
Albrecht is correct to call our attention to the sense in which such a person acts on no principle and hence has no character. But his analysis obscures the fact that Kant’s view is that such a person has made it his principle (maxim) to have no principle.\(^{45}\)

\(^{45}\) I would like to thank Rob Gressis, whose questions about some of my related work prompted me to write this paper, and especially Timothy Rosenkoetter, whose extensive comments on an earlier draft helped me to clarify several points.