Rethinking the Purity of Moral Motives in Business: Kant Against Moral Purism

Wim Dubbink¹ · Luc van Liedekerke²

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Abstract

Moral purism is a commonly held view on moral worthiness and how to identify it in concrete cases. Moral purists long for a moral world in which (business) people—at least sometimes—act morally worthy, but in concrete cases they systematically discount good deeds as grounded in self-interest. Moral purism evokes moral cynicism. Moral cynicism is a problem, both in society at large and the business world. Moral cynicism can be fought by refuting moral purism. This article takes issue with moral purism. The common strategy to tackle moral purism is to reject the exclusion thesis which states that self-interest and the ‘pure’ moral motive (and thus moral worthiness) exclude each other. We develop a different strategy. We argue that moral purists are mistaken in the way they judge moral worthiness in concrete cases. They employ the wrong *procedure* and the wrong *criteria*. We develop a proper procedure and proper criteria. We build on Kant, who we argue is unfairly regarded as the champion of moral purism. In order to see how Kant can develop a consistent (non-purist) philosophy, the exclusion thesis must be embedded in Kant’s transcendental philosophy. Properly embedded, Kant turns out to be both anti-purist and anti-cynical.

Keywords Moral cynicism · Moral purism · Morally worthy action · Out of duty action · Kant

Introduction

This aims to be a criticism of a common way of thinking about the moral quality of business people’s actions. We refer to this as “moral purism”. As a common way of thinking—i.e., a pre-theoretical cultural practice—it is not (fully) explicated discursively; in fact, it is mainly identified by its *critics* (Bowie 1999; Herman 1993). The main thrust is clear, though. The moral purist demands that ‘true’ moral actions are motivated by a pure moral motive. This is a motive not contaminated by self-interest. If pure, the action is morally worthy and deserves to be praised as such. As we see it, “moral purism” is an important breeding ground for moral cynicism about human behavior in business and in society at large. The one easily leads to the other. In fact, our primary, practical reason to challenge moral purism is

the cynicism that can emerge from it: in order to debunk the widespread cynic attitude, we criticize moral purism as a possible ground.

Moral cynicism comes in shapes and sizes. One form entirely rejects the idea that morality has meaning. The moral purist suffers from another form. He or she finds morality very important but has become disappointed with its realization in human reality. In real life, morality, as the highest of human values, is seldom to be found. People *talk* about morality all the time and try to show off with it. But when push comes to shove, mere self-interest runs the show. We refer to this form as *reluctant cynicism* and interpret it as an attitude. The purist reluctantly gone cynic has been disappointed too often. He or she looks at the world with a generalized negative view about the moral worthiness of people’s actions. According to the cynic there is a total lack of truly moral action in real life.

As moral purism is a pre-theoretical, common way of thinking, we must *reconstruct* it in order to get a hold of it, theoretically. We define it in terms of a number of characteristics. (1) In making a judgement about a moral action in daily life, the moral purist will hardly ever acknowledge that an action deserves moral praise. (2) According to the

✉ Wim Dubbink
w.dubbink@uvt.nl

¹ Department Philosophy, TSHD, Tilburg University, Dante Building, Room 253, Warandelaan 2, 5037 AB Tilburg, The Netherlands

² Faculty of Arts, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium

moral purist, an action only deserves moral praise when it is morally worthy; i.e., “moral worthiness” is the only form of moral praise that the moral purist acknowledges. (3) The moral purist adheres to the *exclusion thesis*, as we call it. According to the exclusion thesis morality and self-interest are radically opposed. Hence, according to the exclusion thesis, an action only has moral worth if morality is the *sole* motive for performing the action (see Van de Ven 2008, p. 341). The flip-side of the exclusion thesis is that the slightest addition of self-interest ruins the moral worthiness of an action (see also: Baxter 2010 who refers to this as the ‘incompatibility thesis’, p. 31). (4) The moral purist finds it important to scrutinize carefully every potential morally worthy action. In order to judge that an action is morally worthy, it is necessary to check whether an action that is claimed to be morally good cannot be discounted. A potential morally worthy action is discounted if it can be shown that the action can also be explained in terms of it being grounded in self-interest. (5) The moral purist never—or hardly ever—finds morally worthy conduct in practice. The scrutinizing process always reveals self-interest looming in the background, or so the purist insists. Does a business person clean up his or her supply chain in terms of possible human rights violations? He or she must be afraid of the public relations backlash! Does a business person switch to green energy? It must somehow be cost-effective for him or her!

A commonly tried route to criticize moral purism is to challenge the exclusion thesis. The idea that self-interest and (true) morality are radically opposed is shown to be mistaken. The business ethicist Bowie develops this line of thought, as do many other modern Kantians. Among Kantians, this problem is taken up in the discussion on the possibility of ‘overdetermination’. We define this broadly as the view that an action can be motivated by the moral motive while (somehow) self-interest also has some positive or neutral role to play in bringing about the action (Baron 1995, p. 146 ff.; Bowie 1999, pp. 128–142; Guyer 2000; Henson 1979; Herman 1993; Thiel 2013; for a critical perspective see Wood 1999, pp. 33–35).

Considered as a strategy to challenge moral purism and cynicism, overdetermination has a serious drawback. The purist gone cynic will have a hard time accepting the idea, since the impossibility of overdetermination belongs to the *core* of the purist view. From a narrower Kantian perspective, the strategy also seems to be problematic. Kant clearly embraces the exclusion thesis:

The exact opposite of the principle of morality is [what results] when the principle of one’s own happiness is made the determining basis of the will. (Kant 1788, AA 5, p. 35).

In this paper we ask whether there is an alternative strategy to criticize moral purism; a strategy that follows the purist with respect to the exclusion thesis while at the same time allowing for moral praise of actions as morally worthy that can also be explained as self-interested. We think such an alternative strategy can be developed. We argue that the moral purist is systematically mistaken in his or her *judgement* on concrete cases, both in terms of the *procedure* of how to make judgement and in the *criteria* that he or she applies in evaluating concrete cases. Thus, we demonstrate that the reason why the moral purist never detects morally worthy conduct is a result of the faulty way purists *think a concrete judgement on worthiness has to be made*, both in terms of procedure and criteria.

We embed our thinking in Kantian philosophy; in fact, to a large extent we merely spell out Kant’s philosophy. The turn to Kant may seem odd since he is often portrayed as the archetypical moral purist (see Bowie 1999; Griffin 1998; Thiel 2013). Yet, while Kant does indeed embrace the exclusion thesis, he also vehemently rejects both moral purism and moral cynicism. Demonstrating how Kant can combine both the exclusion thesis and a radical criticism of moral purism requires some understanding of his complex ‘critical’ thinking, in particular the often reviled ‘two-worlds’ distinction. We think the journey is worthwhile, also for non-Kantians in general and non-Kantian business ethicists in particular. It opens a highly original way to challenge both the cultural practice called moral purism and the cynical attitude that may ensue from it.

The structure of the paper is as follows: In “[The exclusion thesis](#)” section we explain the “exclusion thesis” which belongs to the core of moral purism. We also show why Kant adheres to this thesis. In “[Kant’s worries about moral purism](#)” section we discuss Kant’s worry about moral purism. In “[Pinpointing moral purism using Kantian concepts](#)” section we explore core Kantian concepts and ideas and articulate moral purism using Kantian terms. In “[Kant’s transcendental idealism](#)” section we introduce Kantian transcendental idealism, including the ‘two-worlds’ distinction. In “[Kantian based criticism of moral purism’s method of judging in concrete cases](#)”, “[Kantian based criticism of the moral purist’s criteria](#)”, and “[Empirical criteria to identify conduct performed out of duty](#)” sections we criticize purism as a way of thinking about how to make a judgement in a concrete case. In “[Two cases and two narratives](#)” section we return to the issue of making judgements about concrete cases. We show how Kant’s insights on the *method* of judging and the *criteria* we ought to be using, can be employed in evaluating whether morally worthy conduct is present in (business) reality.

This paper is limited in many ways. First, we limit ourselves to cases in which the moral worth of the actions of *people* and family businesses is assessed. Whether *corporate*

actions can have moral worth and whether people acting as *representatives* for organizations can perform morally worthy actions, is not discussed in this paper. That limits the paper but we believe the remaining scope is still important. Cynicism has to be pushed back. It is good to begin with cynicism as it applies to (business) people.

This paper is also limited in that it offers no analysis in terms of moral psychology why reluctant cynicism is bad. The general claim is that if person A (i.e., the general public) is constantly cynical about the moral stance of person B (i.e., business people), there is a fair chance that the moral fiber of person B eventually weakens. In defense of the claim we fall back on others (Bowie 1999; Leisinger 2008; see also Mustain 2011; Vice 2011).

Third, this paper provides no empirical evidence of the reality of reluctant cynicism. We think that empirical research has evidently demonstrated that the reluctant cynic attitude is widespread, both in society at large (Abraham 2000; Kanter and Mirvis 1989), and in relation to organizations and business in particular (Andersson 1996; Chylinski and Chu 2010; Helm et al. 2015; Kothandaraman and Agnihotri 2012; Odou and de Pechpeyrou 2011; see also: Bowie 2017a, p. 7; Bowie 2017b, p. 7; Connors et al. 2015, p. 1; May Yee and Chee Fei 2014, p. 76; Trevino and Nelson 2007, pp. 3–6; Van Buren III 2008; Wicks et al. 2010, pp. 3, 38).

What is more, this paper does not demonstrate the reality of moral purism or the empirical relation between moral purism and cynicism. Our focus is on reflection and analysis of moral purism as a theoretical stance. Concerning its reality, we again resort to others. For example, Bowie (1999, p. 128; see also p. 136) is quite clear about the reality of moral purism and the relation with cynicism.

In fact there is considerable evidence that both management scholars and other people speak like (purists) when evaluating corporate conduct. In other words, if people think that business is doing good deeds for the money, many people react cynically and discount the good deeds.

As regards the relation between moral purism and reluctant cynicism it is important to emphasize that we interpret moral purism as a *possible* ground; not its only ground. Some may think that it is odd that we do not come up with a specific theorist who identifies as moral purist. Yet, moral purism is a pre-theoretical cultural pattern, i.e., a common way of thinking among the general public. There are no theorists that defend it explicitly. Paradoxically, the closest we can come to a theoretical exposition is by looking at the views of Kant by non-Kantian critics who—we think mistakenly—accuse Kant of being a moral purist. (see Herman 1993; Griffin 1998; Thiel 2013).

This brings us to the fourth way in which this paper is limited. Naturally, in trying to explicate a pre-theoretical, common way of thinking we will come across blank spots. We decided to fill in these spots by presupposing *that moral purists think as non-Kantian Kant critics think Kant thinks*. This decision can be justified by the following considerations. Bowie (1999, pp. 128, 136) states that moral purists think as ‘the most pure Kantians’. Next, Kant does indeed share important intuitions and thoughts with purists; most notably he clearly adheres to the exclusion thesis.¹ Moreover, Kant is often portrayed as the archetype purist by non-Kantians Kant critics (see Thiel 2013). To use this criticism as explicating purism seems a good way to get hold of it. We agree that some purists may base their thinking on a different foundation. In so far as that is true, our criticism only applies to a subset of moral purists. Furthermore, by depicting purists as non-Kantian Kant critics think Kant thinks, we create meaning for the paper, even for those who evaluate our attempt to bring moral purism from the pre-theoretical to the theoretical, as completely failed. The paper can also be looked upon as a (relatively) new way to understand how we must think of issues like moral worth, self-interest and out of duty conduct from a Kantian perspective. Our approach is definitely new for non-Kantian Kant critics but it is also different from other Kantians in business ethics like Bowie (1999, 2017a) and Thiel (2013) as we explain Kant within the context of his transcendental idealism.

The Exclusion Thesis

Human beings can evaluate *human beings* (i.e., capacities or character) or the *actions* of human beings (even if praise given to an action may indirectly also fall to the person who performed the action). If anything characterizes moral purism, it is the *exclusion thesis*. This thesis relates to moral action. Hence, in this paper we also focus on the evaluation of *actions*. We leave aside the direct evaluation of person (i.e., character), even if the evaluation of action *indirectly* leads to an evaluation of persons.

The exclusion thesis tells us when an action is morally worthy and we thus have reason to praise it. An action is morally worthy if done out of a true moral motive; i.e.,

¹ We think our quotes from Kant provide sufficient proof but we realize that we take a stance in the intra-Kantian discussion on overdetermination. We side with the minority who rejects this possibility. We wrote a separate paper on this discussion, explaining our views. Basically, our argument is that overdetermination is impossible because in Kant’s thinking an out of duty action is one in which the agent as a free being, overcomes his or her own nature. There cannot be overdetermination because the structure of an out of duty action is that morality (freedom) *overcomes* self-interest (nature).

purely for the sake of morality. According to the exclusion thesis, the tiniest drop of self-interest destroys the true moral motive.

It is important to list the presuppositions of the exclusion thesis. The exclusion thesis presupposes that human beings must have two radically different grounds of action: self-interest and morality. If these grounds were not radically different, there was neither reason nor possibility to make them radically exclusive. What is more, it must be possible for *both* to have a hold on human beings. If human beings would not be able to act self-interested, there was no reason for cynicism. If morality was *impossible*, there also was no reason to be cynical.

Adherents of the exclusion thesis see self-interest all around, so it seems save to say that for them, self-interest is the natural motivation of human beings. Adherents of the exclusion thesis think of a true moral action as *pure* moral action. This purity is not coincidental to the true moral action. In a pure moral action self-interest is actively resisted or driven out. Because of that struggling process the moral action *becomes* pure. Adherents of the exclusion thesis think of a pure moral action as a morally *worthy* action. The worthiness of the action is closely related to the idea of a struggle against self-interest. Exactly *because* of the struggle, the action is morally worthy!

The exclusion thesis has a bad press (see Baxter 2010). The standard way to challenge moral purism is to refute the exclusion thesis. In this section we attempt to *defend* the exclusion thesis. Our defense starts with a few general remarks. It is important to realize that in our (Western) culture, we distinguish between two fundamentally different moral reasons for praising human conduct. Human beings can praise the *struggle* to become good/virtuous or, conversely, the capacity to be good/virtuous *without the need for a struggle*. The egoistic boy is praised when he is suddenly able to share his treats with another child. The business person who is always focused on profit is praised when he or she suddenly gives a big donation to a charity for homeless people. Both are praised for acting *out* of character. Yet we also praise a sympathetic person who enjoys doing good for being able to harmonize his or her own interest with the demands of morality. This person is praised for acting *in* character. The exclusion thesis focusses on the *struggle* i.e., out of character action. Praising “struggling” is as such not strange. In the non-moral context we do it all the time: we praise the athlete, the cancer survivor or the business person for his or her struggle. If anything is odd about it in the moral domain, it is to hold that the struggle and nothing but the struggle, is worth praising. This excludes doing good without the need for a struggle (i.e., in character good action). Our second remark is that within our (Western) culture, it is as such not strange to praise purity. We do it in other contexts also. For example: true love is considered

pure love; if I truly love you I love you *for your sake* and not my own. Again vindicating purity is only odd if it becomes the *sole* criterion of *any* kind of praise.

In the remainder of this section we discuss Kant’s view of the exclusion thesis. We think this supports the viability of the exclusion thesis and shows why moral purism is better not challenged by taking issue with it—at least it makes no sense for Kantians. How can the exclusion thesis make sense in Kant’s thinking? Kant thinks of self-interest as the natural motivation for human beings. As it is a natural motivation, there is—as such—nothing wrong with it but it is also not praiseworthy. For Kant, value and thus praiseworthiness is created through human freedom. Ultimately, the reason to attach value to an action lies in the fact that it is a free action (Kant 1788, AA 5, p. 80). Yet, for Kant, to be free means to be a ‘first cause’. This means to be freed from the bounds of nature, as nature is the realm of endless chains of causality. It follows that Kant must conceptualize freedom as a person *overcoming* his or her natural self (Kant 1788, AA 5, p. 29). It also follows that the moral motive and self-interest are radically opposed. To be free *is to fight against* nature. Morally worthy acts therefore must be completely without self-interest. Self-interest cannot even be present in a neutral way. In essence, the idea of a morally worthy action means *actively resisting* nature.

What is essential in all determination of the will by the moral law is that, as a free will, [all] sensible impulses [are rejected] (Kant 1788, AA 5, p. 72; see also p. 86).

Sometimes people find it odd that Kant takes such a radical stance when it comes to purity. He even dismisses as not worthy a person who helps others “out of inner pleasure in spreading joy around’ him or her” (Kant 1785, AA 4, p. 398). Yet, if we realize that we are not evaluating a *person* but an *action* this makes perfect sense. By definition, in being sympathetic, the sympathetic person is not “overcoming nature”. He or she does *not* actively *resist* his or her own nature, in being sympathetic. It thus makes sense for Kant to insist that actions of this person “have no genuine moral worth” (idem). *We cannot think the situation as a demonstration of freedom* and freedom is the only reason for calling something morally worthy.

Although both Kant and the purist adhere to the exclusion thesis, there is also a crucial difference in their views on moral praise. Moral purists (i.e., non-Kantians when they describe what they think Kant thinks) have a tendency to think that moral worthiness is the *only* form of moral praise. If an action can somehow be linked to self-interest it can no longer be acknowledged as praiseworthy *for whatever reason*. The exclusion thesis is a *conditio sine qua non* for the possibility of praise. In Kant’s ethical philosophy, moral worthiness is just one reason for praise. More specifically, it is eligible for the *highest* form of praise (Kant 1785, AA 4,

1785, p. 398 and p. 393). It is the category of ‘good beyond qualification’ (See Hill in Kant 1785/2002, p. 267). This means that for Kant self-interest and praiseworthiness are not fundamentally at odds. They are only contradictory with regard to moral worthiness (as a specific category of praise).

We think Kant’s position is stronger than the purist position. We get into trouble with strong moral intuitions if ‘overcoming oneself’ or ‘acting out of character’ are considered to be the *only* reason for praise. Creating a “seamless web” (Herman 2007) between morality and self-interest must also be seen as (somehow) morally praiseworthy. E.g., we can imagine a person who enjoys helping others because he or she rejoices at the happiness of others. In the eye of many, including Aristotelians, such a person deserves praise (of some kind). Yet, in this paper we do not develop this aspect of Kantian thought. We also ignore that purism goes against commonly held intuitions in this respect, by accepting only one form of praise. We focus on what Kant would call the ‘highest reason for praise’, which for the purist is the *only* reason for moral praise: moral worthiness. Following Kant, we will not refute the exclusion thesis as such. It makes sense to think of a morally worthy act as a pure moral action that excludes self-interest. We will have to find another way to refute moral purism.

Kant’s Worries About Moral Purism

There are good reasons why Kant is an ideal candidate for a rebuttal of moral purism. First, Kantian concepts and distinctions can very well be used to get a grip on purism. The reason is that Kant was intimately familiar with the purist way of thinking. He was brought up in a Pietist Protestant environment that was purist through and through. Even if Kant was frustrated about this aspect of his upbringing (Kühn 2003, p. 64ff), it informed his thinking. In the previous section we gave a first impression as to how Kant can be useful by demonstrating how he can make sense of the exclusion thesis.

Second, Kant understood the dangers of purism very well, especially its counter-productive nature in making morality a living reality. He thought that in its effort to preserve morality, moral purism actually destroyed it. For example, in *The critique of practical reason*, just after Kant stated that some people are sympathetic in judging the actions of others as having moral worth, he writes:

Others, on the contrary, (incline) more to thinking up charges and accusations to challenge that worth. ... one cannot always attribute to the latter the intention of trying to subtly reason virtue away entirely from all examples of human beings in order thereby to turn virtue into an empty name. Rather, it is often only a

well-meant strictness in determining genuine moral import according to an unforbearing law (Kant 1785, AA, 4, p. 154).²

What Kant suggests here is that purism is busy with an unending quest to find the (hidden) self-interested motive. He also suggests that there is something mistaken about this unending quest. As we will later see, the problem of purism is that it fails to see that you will always find self-interest-*edness* if you set out to find it. Purism overlooks that if you set out to find it, you will have no difficulty linking even the actions of moral archetypes as Nelson Mandela or Dieter Bonhoeffer to self-interestedness.³

Kant’s worry must be placed in the context of each person’s duty to advance morality and become a moral person. This duty implies the subsequent duty to establish the conditions that human beings as psychological and sensible creatures, depend on in order to be motivated to advance the moral world. A core condition—in Kant’s view—is that people experience the *reality* of morality (1788 AA 5, 151 ff.). If morality is nowhere to be seen, it becomes harder and harder for people to stay on the moral track themselves. The sacrifices that morality (sometimes) demands then will become unbearable. That is to say: Kant thinks that normal human beings (like we all are), need moral exemplars (e.g., Nelson Mandela) who demonstrate them that morality is truly part of reality. So in order to motivate ourselves, we need examples that we can think of as manifestations of the reality of morality (‘if Mandela can do this big thing, I can do this small thing too!’) A related consideration has to do with the acknowledgement by others that we are (trying to remain) on the right track. In Kant’s view human beings are social creatures. They need the acknowledgement of others. Moral purism also undermines the moral acknowledgement by others.

² Translations from the *Critique of Practical Reason* are taken from the translation by Pluhar (2002).

³ If we play the discounting game and push it to its limits, we can insist that as a religious person Bonhoeffer was merely concerned about the after-life. Playing the same game: isn’t it possible that Mandela just made a reasonable and self-interested decision that he would either die or become the first president of a new South Africa? Some people are psychologically disposed either to live as a lion or to give up on life. They have no interest in living as a mouse. If so, Mandela was just as self-interested as anybody else.

Even supposedly holy creatures are not safe from the discounting game. In many religions, holy creatures are supposed to have a pure motivation. But a purist can reduce even the purity of holy creatures’ actions to mere self-interested endeavors. For example: for Christians, Jesus Christ’s ultimate sacrifice on the cross is exemplary of a pure moral action (Kant 1793). Yet, as a purist I may argue that Jesus could have known that his reward was reunion with his Father. Hence, he was just being selfish in doing what he did.

Kant's concerns with purism are reinforced by modern insights from (social) psychology. Morality is something that needs to be learned and sustained (Kohlberg 1981; Piaget 1932). These processes require recognition of the agent as a moral agent. Praising people is important to the learning process (Colombo 2014; Haidt and Joseph 2004; Mikhail 2008; Prinz 2008; Sterelny 2010).

Pinpointing Moral Purism Using Kantian Concepts

In this section, we lay bare Kant's conceptual apparatus that will help us to describe and better understand moral purism, and ultimately, to ground its critique. The first aspect is Kant's theory of human action. According to Kant, human (rational) choice can always be reconstructed in terms of a decision-process in which the agent's will assesses a specific kind of principle or maxim (Kant 1788, AA 5, p. 19; Wood 1999, p. 51). A maxim has three components: a ground G, an act A, and a purpose P. The purpose is the objective of the action; the act is the actual behavior, visible in the external world. The ground describes the ultimate reason why the agent wills the action (Herman 1993, p. 11). Sentence i and ii give examples of how Kant uses the idea of a maxim.

- (i) out of self-interest (G), I will jump into the water and rescue the drowning man (A) as this is the only way to secure the money he owes me (P).
- (ii) out of respect for morality (G), I will jump into the water and rescue the drowning man (A) as this is the only way to save his life (P).

The distinction between the purpose and the ground may not seem crystal-clear. It may seem as if every ground can be formulated in terms of a more general (i.e., higher order) purpose.

In that case sentence i', for example, would run:

- (i') I will jump into the water and rescue the drowning man (A)
as this is the only way to secure the money he owes me (P1)
which benefits me and therefore suits my self-interest,
which is my ultimate purpose. (P2)

It is important to see the difference between ground and purpose, as in Kant's thinking moral worthiness solely depends on the *ground*. Grounds cannot be reformulated as purposes because the ground *defines* the agent; it is constitutive of the agent's identity. It clarifies the *what for*, or the agent's basic reason (Caygill 1995, pp. 217–219). By choosing a ground of action, the agent makes himself or herself into what he or she is (see Korsgaard 2009). A useful

analogy to illustrate Kant's idea of a ground is the feudal order in which a knight puts himself under the authority of a lord. The ground determines under whose authority the knight is ultimately putting himself—and thereby what he *is*: a knight or a bandit with a horse and sword. Basically, there are two mutually exclusive answers: 'I will bow for my lord—because that is the only way to *become* a knight' worthy of praise or 'I will not bow for my lord—and thus become an agent using force without legitimate authority, i.e., a bandit', focused on his or her own happiness. We deliberately choose this historical example because it illustrates well the meaning of a ground: a person can only *become* a knight by bowing for the lord. There is no knight-hood outside the blessing given by the knight's lord. The ground is *constitutive* for the agent.

Kant argues that (for a modern subject) there are only two possible grounds of action: self-interest and morality (Kant 1788, AA 5, p. 22 [theorem II]). Each ground reflects a dimension of our dual nature as natural and as moral creatures (Kant 1788, AA 5: pp. 61–62). From a moral point of view, each action can thus be reconstructed as grounded in either one of these. The line between self-interestedness and the morally pure motive is clear. Anything except the pure moral motive is self-interestedness: if a human being acts on the moral motive he or she *goes against* his or her self-interest. Self-interest is overcome. Kant states that the idea of a pure moral action can also be described as an action done 'out of duty', in the case of human beings who are also always self-interested creatures. The idea of resisting self-interest is clear in his description of such an action:

Let us then take up the concept of *duty*, which includes that of a good will, the latter however, being here under certain subjective limitations and obstacles. These, so far as hiding a good will or disguising it, rather bring it out by contrast and make it shine forth more brightly. (Kant 1785, AA 4; p. 397).

The second aspect of Kant's conceptual apparatus is the distinction between the external and the internal dimension of an action. The external dimension concerns the empirically observable aspects of behavior. The internal dimension refers to all aspects of an action not visible in time and space. The ground of an action is internal⁴ while the act must have an external dimension.

The third aspect of Kant's (1788, AA 5, p. 81) conceptual apparatus is the idea of a '*morally right action*', which must be distinguished from a '*morally worthy action*'. A morally right action is an action that conforms to the requirements of

⁴ Although not necessarily internal as 'psychological'. Within the Kantian framework it can also be internal as being thought of as part of the 'noumenal world'.

a duty, e.g., ‘shaking hands’ as a requirement of the duty of respect. When a person conforms to moral requirement, his or her actions are morally right. Kant (1797, AA 6, p. 231) emphasizes that the rightness or wrongness of the action only depends on the externally observable and verifiable act. If an action conforms to the requirement, the action is right, period. Insofar as the rightness of the action goes, the ground (G) is irrelevant. Often, people have sufficient self-interested reasons to do the morally right thing. According to Kant, there is nothing wrong with a person conforming to Right for a non-moral reason (Wood 1999, p. 27).

Earlier we introduced the concept ‘moral world’, i.e., moral market’. Now we are in a position to clarify this concept from the Kantian point of view. It is sometimes thought that Kant envisions the (best possible) moral world as one in which every person *always* acts out of duty (and thus overcomes his or her self-interest all the time). Since Kant conceptualizes human beings also as natural beings, this view cannot be right. In grasping Kant’s concept of a “moral world” we must distinguish between two dimensions of morality: morality as Right and morality as Virtue. Roughly, this is the distinction between morality as it relates to *right action* and morality as it relates to *praiseworthy action*. It is also the distinction between morality as having functional meaning (for the constitution of society) and morality as a sense-making practice (for the constitution of the person). Insofar as morality as Right is the issue, a moral world is a world in which all people always comply with morality (regardless of their reasons for doing so). Kant does not look down on a good moral world in this sense. It is important in its own right.

Yet, as this paper concerns moral worthiness, we must define the idea of moral world in terms of morality as Virtue. Moral worthiness belongs to the domain of Virtue. It seems natural to think of the best moral world, in terms of praiseworthiness, as a world in which all people have a good character, in the sense that they always do the good easily. Kant resists this natural idea. For him, human beings are finite creatures, which means that human beings will always be bound by nature and thus *struggle* to do good. This means that according to Kant, human beings are always *in the process of* become morally perfect. They will always struggle and that idea of struggling must thus be made part of the idea of the best possible moral world (Kant 1788, AA 5: p. 84). That is why—for him—the idea of acting “out of duty” is something special. In acting out of duty, human beings demonstrate their freedom while—at the same time—morality demonstrates its reality. Looking at the idea of a moral world from morality of Virtue, it is therefore better to say that a Kantian moral world is one in which three conditions hold. (1) People acknowledge the importance of acting “out of duty”; (2) people struggle to act out of duty when that is necessary while having faith that they will not always fail in

doing so; and (3) morality has reality, because people at least sometimes have to acknowledge that actions (of others) are indeed done “out of duty”. The more specific idea of a world *fully* moral, can thus be described as a world in which morality has reality in the sense that people act out of duty without exception, *when that is called for*, morally speaking. Such a world is not attainable for human beings. In relation to the subject of this article, we do not need the concept of a world fully moral; we only need the concept of a moral world; i.e., a world in which the three conditions hold. Naturally, the same holds for the idea of a moral market.⁵

This paper sets out to explicate moral purism as pre-theoretical, common way of thinking. The Kantian distinctions help to articulate it as a theoretical position. Moral purists believe that rightness and worthiness of actions are different things. Purists also embrace the exclusion thesis. It follows that, according to purism, an action must be done out of duty if it is to be morally worthy and that any sign of self-interest disqualifies the action as morally worthy. Only actions purely motivated by the ground to be moral deserve to be called morally worthy. As purism embraces the exclusion thesis, moral purists must agree with Kant that morality is a *possible* ground of action. If people cannot but must act self-interested, purism loses its meaning. As purists see self-interest as the natural motivation, they must follow Kant in accepting the possibility that people can go ‘beyond nature’. Human beings must be thought to be able to (somehow) ‘transcend nature’.

Kant’s Transcendental Idealism

The Kantian argument against the purist’s theory of judgement is intrinsically linked with Kant’s transcendental idealism (TI). Kant’s TI is notoriously hard to explain. We introduce only two elements of Kant’s TI that are necessary in order to criticize moral purism as a theory that has a mistaken view of how moral judgments on concrete actions are to be made.

First, for Kant a core concept is ‘human reality’ as the collection of things that human beings must think of as

⁵ Sometimes the ideal of a free market is described and legitimized as a domain of action in which people purely behave non-moral and self-interested all the time; due to the institutional design of the market, this behavior results in the highest possible economic output and both the domain and all behavior within it, is thereby morally legitimized, after all. It is clear that Kant rejects this ideal of the market. It forces people to give up their own (independent) being as moral creatures. This does not mean that Kant is against the idea of a market society: the idea of the market can also—and even a lot better—be justified without having to give up the idea that at agent level, people must always be moral creatures. This is done for example in the Austrian tradition (see: Dubbink 2003).

having *meaning* for them (1787, AA 3, p. 143). Kant insists that ‘theoretical reason’ (i.e., science) overestimates its capacities if it thinks that its knowledge (of nature or the objective world) is the sole determinant of claims about what Kant calls—‘reality’. ‘Human reality’, goes beyond science (and thus beyond nature or the objective world). This statement is most pressing in relation to Kant’s view on freedom and morality (i.e., morally worthy action). These phenomena are (also) part of human reality. Yet, on Kant’s view, science can never make sense of human freedom. As a consequence, it can also not make sense of morality, as morality cannot have reality without freedom.

The reason why science fails at understanding freedom (and morality) is a basic discontinuity between science and freedom. In science, humans are simply taken to be natural phenomena. In Kant’s view, a free human action is an action in which rationality—somehow—makes it possible for human beings to transcend nature. Such an action is impossible to conceive of from the scientific point of view. As only free actions are morally worthy actions, science also cannot conceptualize or understand these. Kant is famous for saying that human freedom and thus morality (i.e., morally worthy actions) are—in a way—*mysteries* (Kant 1788, AA 5, pp. 4, 7, 43, 99). Kant has a fundamental reason to insist on this. The human capacity to understand things is limited to the objective empirical world. This is the world constituted and accessed by science. As freedom and morality cannot be grasped by science, these phenomena are fundamentally unexplainable, (given that “explaining” is what science does). The phenomena cross the outer limit of human understanding (defined as possibility to grasp through explanation).⁶

Naturally, ‘mystery from the scientific point of view’ is not Kant’s final position on morality and freedom. Human beings are at the same time forced by reason to acknowledge the reality of morality and freedom. Hence, ‘reality’ is bigger than what science can present as ‘objective knowledge’ to human beings. This means that—because of the faculty of reason—human beings have to come to grips with the strange situation that they have to acknowledge the reality of freedom and morality, without being able to understand how these phenomena are possible (i.e., explainable) from a scientific point of view.⁷ Once human beings have come

to understand the complexities of their situation—as created by the faculty of reason—human beings can make sense of reality as it is presented to them, by accepting the idea of ‘two worlds’, or at least that is what Kant argues. Human beings must conceive of freedom and morality as part of reality but grounded beyond the world of science. As part of reality, these phenomena **exist** but their existence is different from the existence of empirical things. We have then, a rough characterization of Kant’s (in)famous ‘two-worlds’ distinction (Kant 1788, AA 5, pp. 53–55, 97–98, 1787, AA 3 pp. 538–558). A remarkable consequence of accepting this distinction is that Kant looks upon the human being as a creature that takes itself to be *determined* (insofar as it is interpreted by science as a natural being) while it also takes itself to be *free* (in so far as it is considered as a moral being) (Kant 1788, AA 5, p. 99; see also McCarthy 2009).⁸

The second element we highlight is a complicating factor. Freedom and (thus) morality can only be made sense of by human beings, if they think of these phenomena as *originating* in a non-empirical, noumenal world. This seems to imply that Kant would argue that they are not part of our daily world of ‘experience’ and in that special sense not part of the world of ‘facts’. Yet, this is not what Kant holds. He (1790, AA 5, p. 457) insists that *on the basis of our experience* freedom and morality may be considered *facts*; a special kind of facts but facts nonetheless. They are special facts in two ways. They are facts that we only know *in their effects* not by their origin, which is the noumenal. E.g., we interpret freedom and morality as facts if we state that because of this or that action (effect), this person is *by his nature* immoral. Next, Kant states that insofar as freedom and morality are facts, they are ‘*foreign offering not grown on the soil of theoretical reason*’ (i.e., science); a faculty that can in every other instance claim to rule over the world of facts (Kant, 1788, AA 5, p. 121). To explain: Kant states that freedom and morality are only facts from the perspective of practical reason. In so far as they are regarded as ‘facts’ practical reason intrudes in and forces itself upon theoretical reason (i.e., science). Normally speaking this is not acceptable and unjustified (as it would represent the possibility of changing facts according to our wishes). Yet, as freedom and morality are necessary constructs of reason, theoretical

⁶ It can be argued that Kant’s concept of science is ambivalent. Is it science in the strict sense, thus in terms of its object restricted to things that have a sensory correlate (stones etc.) or is it science in a broader sense, which in terms of its object includes things whose empirical existence depends on signs that need to be interpreted (the human psyche etc.)? For our discussion this ambivalence is irrelevant as freedom and morality differ fundamentally even from ‘empirical science’ in the broader sense.

⁷ We acknowledge that from a Kantian point of view that the distinc-

Footnote 7 (continued)

tion between ‘objective empirical knowledge’ and a broader ‘reality’ is too crude.

⁸ This view must be sharply distinguished from ‘compatibilism’; the contemporary view that considers human beings as determined *and* having a free will at the same time. Compatibilism emphasizes that determinism and free will are compatible; Kant insist that the scientific interpretation of a human being is *incompatible* with the moral view which presupposes that human beings are free.

reason must yield in this very special case, even if theoretical reason may (and must) insist that they are ‘foreign offering’.

We will not here defend Kant’s two-worlds distinction, but note that moral purists must be considered similarly committed to a two-worlds distinction, if their view is to remain consistent. After all, the purist agrees with Kant that human beings are natural beings but must also be conceived of as somehow being able to act out of line with character and thus—in Kantian terms—to transcend nature. If the purist rejects the two-worlds distinction, he or she can no longer make sense of the possibility of morally worthy conduct: such conduct depends on the possibility to—somehow—think of human beings as having the possibility to go beyond self-interest and thus nature.

Kant realizes that embracing a two-worlds distinction comes with a price. The two-worlds distinction poses a serious challenge when one must *integrate* the two worlds. The question is how exactly to deal with the relation between ‘nature’ and ‘foreign offering’. The problem of integration is not acute when human conduct is discussed *in general*. When speaking of human conduct in general we can simply argue that there are two ways in which we must always interpret human conduct: nature (best done by science) and morality. However, in evaluating a *concrete case* of human action as regards its worthiness, the integration problem is less tractable. In a concrete case, human beings must conceive of reality as *one* and unified. The ‘foreign offering’ must be fully integrated. But how can we integrate the scientific claim that all behavior can be reduced to self-interest and thus nature with the moralist’s claim that action must be interpreted in terms of morality and hence somehow beyond nature? For example, how should we judge the situation of a business person suddenly caring about the possibility of child labor in her supply line? It is *always* possible and—easy even—to reduce such a case to self-interest (public relations, guilt keeping the business person awake at night etc.). But it is also possible to interpret the case while emphasizing the possible moral and thus freely decided upon aspects of the case. The problem is that if we make a final judgement we need a unified account. If the business person was motivated by feelings of guilt, his or her action was ultimately self-interested. If the person acted from the moral motive his or her action was not self-interested. In the first case praise is uncalled for; in the second it is required. So, the question that an adherent of the two-worlds distinction faces, is: how to integrate the two worlds in concrete cases? What to do about the ‘foreign offering’ problem? How can we integrate nature and freedom in a unified account?

Kant realized that we cannot judge cases in which we assess *human* conduct in the same way as cases in which we judge a natural phenomenon. In the latter case we can explain a case fully in terms of nature (e.g., cases where we need to explain a ball rolling). In the human case, we

must make a judgement that has natural components but also ‘foreign offering not grown on the soil’ (of theoretical reason) (Kant 1788, AA 5, p. 121).

Throughout his work, Kant invokes the analogy with a court of law as a method of deciding on philosophical issues (see, e.g., 1787, AA 3, p. XI). In a court of law, a judge must come to a verdict but before doing so, he or she is required to listen to *two* stories that will often be hard to combine. The public prosecutor advances the world of freedom. She argues that the accused is a free and responsible creature. His or her actions cannot be reduced to nature. They belong to the accused. The accused must therefore be punished for his or her crime. By contrast, the attorney argues from the world of nature. He states that the actions of the accused were not really *his or her* actions but predetermined by natural forces (upbringing, bad friends, psychological disorders, etc.). The final judgement by the judge is actually quite complex. The judge must first listen to *both* accounts and only after that formulate a verdict. That is to say: the judge has to follow a *procedure* in coming to a judgement. What is more, his or her judgement does not relate to the empirical world; it relates to the other accounts, i.e., to other judgements. In that sense it is a *judgement of judgements*. With this final judgement the judge prioritizes one account at the expense of the other: the accused must be either guilty or not guilty (even if elements of the other account can later be brought back in; for example, a judge can take a person’s failed upbringing into account in determining the amount of punishment after he or she has made the either/or decision whether the accused is guilty).

We think that the analogy with a court of law is appropriate as well when human beings have to evaluate the possibility of moral worthiness of human conduct. Here too, human beings must follow a *procedure*: they must pass a final verdict on the basis of first listening to two incompatible accounts (i.e., prior judgements) of how to evaluate the action. Here as well, this final verdict is a judgement on judgements. The only difference is that the prosecutor and the attorney are replaced by the (social) scientist and the moralist. The (social) scientist reduces the conduct to self-interest and thus nature while the moralist interprets the conduct in terms of freedom. It is upon the judge to come to a judgement on the basis of these two incompatible accounts. In the next section we will argue that the purist goes astray in this process. The purist does not follow the right procedure: he or she gives a final judgement without first listening to *both* accounts. His or her final judgement is not a judgement on judgements. Because of this formal or methodological mistake, we should not be surprised that he or she sees very few occasions of real moral conduct in practice.

Kantian Based Criticism of Moral Purism's Method of Judging in Concrete Cases

We have stated that moral purists are mistaken in the *method* they use to make judgements on moral worth in concrete cases. In this section we substantiate this claim, using Kant's thinking. Moral purists insufficiently realize that human beings can on the one hand *always* find ways to interpret a particular human action as grounded in self-interest, while on the other, being able to interpret it as morally worthy implies recognizing it as to some extent *unexplainable*.

This is why the evaluation of cases requires following a *procedure*: if you want to pass a final judgement on a case, you must look upon it as a third judgement. This third judgement is a judgement on judgements in which you must (fairly) weigh the (comparative) validity of two initial judgements on the reality of a case. These initial judgements—or interpretations—of reality are the self-interested account and the moral account. The purist ignores this procedure. He or she creates a self-interested account and then jumps to the final judgement because he or she takes the mere *possibility* that a case *can be explained* by reducing it to self-interest as *proof* that—in the final judgement—the case must be explained by self-interest. Yet, giving a self-interested account is *always* possible. Failing to use the proper procedure is problematic on three counts: it is *unfair* in the sense that we may judge too harsh in some cases. It is *mistaken* because the purist ignores rather than weighs the moral perspective. It is *deceiving* as the suggestion is made that an empirical judgement is made while the purist's conclusions about the unforgiven human reality actually follow from a faulty process of judgement.

Think of a case in which a person is honest and that this honesty is a factor enhancing his or her business in the given case. In assessing the worthiness of the action in a case like this it is possible that—in the end—we must conclude that enhancing business—actually—was the core motive for being honest. But this is not a necessary conclusion. It is also possible that the will to be honest comes first and that the business advantage is a (welcome) by-product. On Kant's view, we must assess a case like this on the basis of having listened to *both* interpretations of reality before we pass a *final* judgement. Judging cases comes with a *procedure*. The final judgement is a judgement on judgements.

In order to grasp the Kantian position (and our criticism of purism) it is crucial to see that in Kant's thinking human beings must conceive of morality as a *mystery*, at least if they take a scientific point of view (Kant 1788, AA 5, p. 4, p. 43 and p. 99). That is to say: a moral action *defies explanation* exactly because it is a moral action. The possibility of human *explanation* is strictly speaking limited to things that can be explained in nature. Hence, if we take the moral perspective,

it is mistaken to ask: how can we *explain* the behavior of the honest business person? If the aim is to *explain* the action, we have already decided against the moral account. So, this aspect of our Kantian based criticism of moral purism can also be formulated by saying that the purist is too eager to *explain* cases. He or she does not realize that the moral interpretation of the case will and must always hit upon something that *cannot be explained*: ultimately, the will of the free agent to become a moral agent. This means that true moral accounts of cases must be non-explicatory accounts, e.g., like historical accounts that are often typified as 'thick descriptions' not as 'explanations'; i.e., as stories telling us *how things came about* without *explaining* the occurrence of all these things.⁹

Kantian Based Criticism of the Moral Purist's Criteria

From the Kantian perspective we can also criticize the *criteria* that moral purists use in evaluating a concrete case. Moral purists are too rigorous in stipulating what counts as the sole moral motive i.e., the idea of the exclusion of self-interest. This criticism can be summarized by saying that the purist confuses *metaphysics of morality* and *applied ethical theory*. They confuse form and matter. In this section we explain this criticism in detail.

As said, Kant agrees with the moral purists that the idea of a morally worthy action radically opposes the idea of it being motivated by self-interest. Yet, what he means by that is something totally different from what moral purist means by this. For Kant the radical opposition follows from our *reasoning* about the *concept* of morality. According to Kant, the concept 'out of duty conduct' is a (pure) idea of reason (1787).

An 'idea of reason' is a concept that we come to understand entirely through the power of reasoning. Earlier, we used the concept of "infinity" to explain it; other examples are 'kosmos', and 'justice'. These concepts always have a *formal meaning* and a material meaning or *representation*.¹⁰ The formal meaning refers to what we mean to say with these concepts; the representation refers to how we can get hold of the concept in daily, empirical life.

Kant (1787, AA, 3, pp. 595–599) explains the (need for the) double meaning of these concepts by pointing at the limited nature of human understanding. Pure concepts have

⁹ E.g., history books can give a meaningful account of Napoleon's rise to power without being able to *explain* this rise in terms of causal relations. The account is a 'thick description'.

¹⁰ Speaking strictly Kantian, it is not a *representation* but a *presentation* as the noumenal has no presentation that can be represented. We leave aside this complication.

their base in reason itself. This implies that ultimately these concepts exist discursively. As such, these concepts have no immanent empirical correlate (in the way that the empirical concept ‘lion’ does have such a correlate.) Yet, due to the limits of their faculty of understanding, human beings can only make (practical) sense of these ideas by making a representation of them. Such a representation will always hold empirical elements. For example, the abstract idea ‘infinity’ is given meaning by picturing a process of adding ever more units to a given set. By the same token, the abstract idea ‘justice’ can be given meaning through the concrete image of a cake being divided equally among a group of people. Kant emphasizes that there is always a *tension* between the formal meaning of an idea and its representation. Still, human beings need both. The tension is not a problem as long as the two meanings are not confused. The concept of acting ‘out of duty’ is an idea of reason. This means that human beings can only use this concept as a criterion in concrete cases if it is interpreted as a representation, which must include empirical elements.

At this point we can return to purist’ thinking. Moral purists confuse the formal meaning and the representation. They see no need to transpose the formal meaning into a representation, holding empirical elements. As a consequence, the criterion becomes impossible to meet in empirical life. Hence, they conclude that there never is morally worthy conduct in practice. They fail to see that the real problem is their misuse of a merely formal concept as an empirical criterion.

There are sections in Kant’s work that critics often highlight to demonstrate the purported idiocy of his thinking. An example is the section in which Kant (1785, AA 4, p. 398) argues that a person “strong in soul and more angered at fate than faint-hearted or cast down, longs for death and still preserves life without loving it”, is acting morally worthy. Critics state that saying things like this is absurd (e.g., Schiller’s famous riddle, see Baxter 2010, p. 30). Kant can respond by saying that when he says these things he is not doing normative ethics, let alone applied ethics. As always in his books he is busy with the *metaphysics* of morality. So in a way, these critics make exactly the same mistake as the purists: they confuse the *formal* meaning of terms with their *representation*.

Empirical Criteria to Identify Conduct Performed Out of Duty

If we want to fight purism and the cynicism that accompanies it, we must go beyond mere criticism of moral purism. We must at least determine reasonable criteria that can be used to identify an “out of duty” action in empirical reality. We need criteria for the representation. Kant did not provide

a clear overview of these criteria. In this section, we develop these criteria using Kant’s thinking.

A first criterion of the representation that relates to out of duty conduct is the presence of empirical signs that demonstrate self-discipline. If going ‘beyond nature’ is to be worthy, it cannot be based on an arbitrary force. It must be the result of discipline. If the person is to be called worthy on account of it, it must be self-discipline. Hence, there must be signs of the agent pulling himself or herself together. In empirical reality this can be signified by the agent doing something with great reluctance. More specifically, there must be signs of the agent acting against what others know that his or her natural interests are. For example, we may know that a woman loves an evening at home near the fireplace and yet she gets up late in the evening to walk the dog while it is cold and rainy outside.

Yet, clear signs of self-disciplined conduct do not suffice. Most cases of self-discipline are not cases of *moral* self-discipline. Oftentimes, an agent is controlling and pushing away certain natural desires because of other natural desires that he or she finds more valuable. For instance, the woman may walk the dog because she dislikes having to listen to a whining dog all night more than she dislikes walking the dog just before going to bed. Similarly, a business person who loves his or her family but still goes to work on Sunday because a contract needs to be closed, exercises self-discipline. If the business person is driven by self-interest (e.g., the prospect of a bonus) this self-discipline does not qualify as *moral* self-discipline. Given the radical nature of the idea of purity, self-discipline can only count as moral self-discipline if the agent—mysteriously—goes against *all* of his or her natural desires. So a second criterion is that there must be suffering *tout court* (Kant 1788, AA 5, pp. 83–84; see also 1785, AA 4, p. 397; 1788, AA 5, pp. 73, 156) as only suffering *tout court* goes against all inclinations.

In terms of criteria relevant for the representation, this means that there must be signs that the agent is making a sacrifice. An agent makes a sacrifice when his or her acceptance of certain disadvantages cannot be (easily) explained in terms of his or her other interests. There is *suffering without explanation*, at least in terms of how we know this agent normally thinks and acts. A classic case in which a moral account like that can be construed is the miser Scrooge. In ‘A Christmas Carol’, Scrooge disciplines himself to become a better person. In doing so, he goes fully against his natural character (i.e., being a miser). It should be noted that in Kant’s way of thinking, ‘sacrifice’ should not be equated with externally visible sacrifice. Self-discipline can be represented as a struggle between the natural self and the (transcendental) moral self. Hence, the sacrifice is a process that we must conceptualize as internal to a person. Externally visible sacrifices may be the effect of—and thus signify—this struggle between nature and freedom but they just as

well may not. Scrooge's neighbors may not have seen any sign of external sacrifice but they knew who he was, and on that basis they can infer that he must have felt the (internal) pain that necessarily comes with overcoming oneself.

While it is true that a conscious self-disciplinary moral action comes with pain (because of the sacrifice made), it must not be reduced to that. These actions also and necessarily come with a sense of pride, as the agent realizes what he or she was able to do. Acting out of duty implies a recognition of one's own worthiness (as a free human being). This recognition unleashes a feeling of great pleasure. We can thus add as a third criterion: the agent demonstrates a sense of pride and joy on account of his or her accomplishment. If our final (i.e., third) judgement on Scrooge's transformation into a moral agent is his will to become a morally better person (and not e.g., fear of the after-life), then we have reason to think of his transformation as morally worthy. That realization should make him proud and fill him with joy. We are not saying that being boastful or conceited about one's moral accomplishments is a good thing. We are merely saying that people should not reject their own sense of being a moral agent by rejecting the possibility that they are in fact, moral creatures who can be motivated by morality. It is important to make this qualification because a strange effect of having to live in a cynical world is that people internalize the cynicism and start interpreting their own life in terms of self-interest only, out of fear that moral purists will call them hypocrites. This effect has been noted in the business world, in the relation between companies and NGO's (Bakker 2011, pp. 103–110).

To conclude, the three criteria of the representation that we have identified for an out of character morally worthy action are the presence of self-discipline, sacrifice, and moral pride (for being a moral creature). If clear signs are present that these criteria are met in practice, we have reason to build a moral account of a situation. This does not mean that all cases in which we can build such an account are cases in which there is morally worthy conduct. The moral account must be assessed alongside the account in terms of self-interest in an overall, third judgment.

Two Cases and Two Narratives

In this section we investigate how the criteria we developed in the "Empirical criteria to identify conduct performed out of duty" section may work out in practice referring to two cases in business ethics. Please note that in this section, we are not trying to come up with a final judgement on a case. As argued in "Kantian based criticism of moral purism's *method* of judging in concrete cases" section, in order to make a final judgement on a case, a *procedure* must be followed. The final judgement is a third judgement, based

on weighing two initial judgements, one building the self-interested account; the other building a moral story. There are many Kantian based reasons why we are not prone in making a final judgement, including the requirement to have more information. The limited goal of this section is merely to build the (initial) moral story, using the criteria we developed. It goes without saying that a self-interested account can also be constructed in both cases. In order to give a final judgement, it even *must be* constructed.

The first case is Marriott's welfare-to-work program Pathways to Independence. It is a program in which welfare beneficiaries are retrained to become workers for the Marriott group. The program received numerous awards and recognitions. It was also used by Norman Bowie (1999) as an excellent example of moral acting by a CEO of a large family owned company. The Wall street Journal reported about the challenges posed by the program:

Marriott nurtures workers with all kinds of problems: A woman severely beaten by her boyfriend, a man who did time for manslaughter, a woman in an incestuous relationship with her brother, an addict who relapsed, people evicted from their homes or homeless shelters. Its employees drive welfare trainees to work, arrange their day care, negotiate with their landlords, bicker with their caseworkers, buy them clothes, visit them at home, coach them in everything from banking skills to self-respect – and promise those who stick it out full-time jobs, at Marriott or elsewhere. Even then, the trainees often show up late, work slowly, fight with co-workers and go AWOL, for reasons as simple as a torn stocking. "It's enough to drive you nuts," says Kenneth Tully, a trainer. (Wall Street Journal, October 30th, 1996)

It is clear from this account that the company goes out of its way to reach a goal with considerable societal benefit. The CEO, J.W. Marriott Jr recognized the challenges put forward by the program and the fact that it pushed the company out of its comfort zone.

Looking at this case from the perspective of building the moral story, there are clear indications that our first two criteria (self-discipline and sacrifice) are fulfilled. Yet at the same time the CEO insists that the program makes bottom line sense 'If it didn't we wouldn't do it' he insists (Bowie 1999, p. 139). We think the moral account of this case is weakened because of this circumstance. There are problems with the third criterion. Marriot Jr. is not proud to be a moral agent. He emphasizes that the program was 'dictated by self-interest' (Bowie 1999, p. 139). According to the third criterion, moral agents should rejoice about morality. They should not let the fear of being described as a 'do-gooder' or a 'hypocrite' by cynics make them retreat into a description of themselves that makes self-love the only determining

force. As said, this is not a final judgement on the case. It is just the initial moral account, but given our criteria, we think that the chances to build a strong moral account in this case are lower than Bowie thinks they are. The reason is that Bowie does not take the third criterion into account. Yet, if moral cynicism is the concern, it is very important that moral agents do not go along with the cynic's game.

A second example involves a Canadian food company Aliments Ouimet-Cordon Bleu, Inc. and its CEO J.-Robert Ouimet. In many contributions Robert Ouimet testified about his long standing effort to retain 'humanity' in his work-force approach. He would for instance insist that managers meet the people they wanted to hire in the family context before taking a final decision. A meeting outside the professional sphere forced his managers to meet the person himself or herself, not just the employee. Importantly, he would demand the same if people had to be *fired*. It is uncomfortable to see the human being behind the employee in this case but Ouimet deemed it necessary to take the *uneasy* road in order to remain a human company. Further, in one of his interviews, Ouimet admitted how he sometimes struggled to retain a respectful attitude towards his employees in other ways as well:

Numerous times I've blown a gasket at someone in a meeting, and I know I've crossed a line. So I step out, calm down, then go back in and apologize. (Preville 1999, p. 61)

These are clear examples of an attitude of self-constraint and sacrifice that demand moral praise. When looking at the third criterion (moral pride), we think this case is stronger than the previous one. In his 'golden book' and many other contributions Ouimet talks about the *pride* he takes in the human face of his organization. He categorically refuses to see his attempts to create a moral firm as managerial tricks introduced only as tools in order to increase productivity (Preville 1999, p. 61;¹¹; Ouimet 2005; Ouimet and Semen 2010); thus exposing himself to the purist charge of being a moral hypocrite. The urge to testify about the need to bring a human face to capitalism has in fact characterized the life of this CEO until his death.

Again, we are not making a final judgement. We are just showing how the criteria work out if one aims at creating the moral account, necessary before making a final judgement. Again, before the final judgement is made, we can and must also look at the case from the perspective of self-interest. Naturally, a case can be built here as well. Ouimet himself even explains in his 'golden book' that all his managerial

value changes make sense from a bottom line perspective. He points out that the company never had a strike in 75 years; that its profit index has risen from 100 in 1990 to 260 in 2002 and that profits after taxes were higher than for any of his competitors (Ouimet 2005, p. 29).

Conclusion

Cynicism about morality in business ought to be a moral concern because it is detrimental to the advancement of morality in the market. Moral purism is an important source of moral cynicism. Its relentless discounting quest for purity leads people to conclude that there is no morally worthy conduct in business. All seemingly moral actions happen to be self-interested and thus impure and not 'truly moral'. We developed a criticism of moral purism as a theory of how to *judge* moral worthiness in concrete cases. This criticism can be summarized in two propositions:

1. Moral purism is only fair to its own radical view of purity if it acknowledges that a case must always be judged in terms of two accounts before a third and final judgement can be made: the natural account which reduces conduct to nature (and thus self-interest) and the moral account that interprets conduct in the world of freedom. The third judgement is a judgement on judgements. Moral purists stand in danger of ignoring the moral account. They take the *possibility* of a natural explanation as *proof* of its validity. As a result, morality is unduly *reasoned away* in the purist judgement.
2. Moral purism must distinguish between the idea of 'pure' or 'out of duty' conduct and its representation. Without this distinction, purists will always see 'impure' conduct as they compare an empirical something to a mere idea.

Kantian thinking helped us to build this criticism of the (implicit) theory of judgement that the purist uses. It laid out the need for a procedure that must be followed in making judgements on cases. It also helped us to develop a set of criteria that a person can use to construe a representation alongside the mere idea. These criteria are self-discipline, sacrifice, and moral pride. On the basis of these criteria a fair moral story can be built about moral worthiness in reality. We illustrated our criteria on the basis of two business ethics cases.

In many discussions on moral purism, Kant is presented as the paradigmatic moral purist. This is understandable because Kant's adherence to the exclusion thesis can easily be mistaken for moral purism, given one neglects Kant's transcendental idealism as context. But Kant was particularly critical of moral purism. In fact, Kant's thinking offers

¹¹ Reconciliation of profits and human well-being: <https://www.stthomas.edu/media/catholicstudies/center/ryan/conferences/2003-bilbao/Ouimet.pdf>.

a unique opportunity for a radical criticism of moral purism. Kant's philosophy can also be used to demonstrate to purists how they can—consistently—hold on to the exclusion thesis, while distancing themselves from both moral purism and the cynicism it entails.

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Conflict of interest Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest

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