You Owe it to Yourself\(^1\)


Introduction

David Solomon is an expert in the history of contemporary Anglophone moral philosophy. As far as I know, Solomon is the ethicist best able to explain the intellectual roots, links, and quarrels that have animated philosophers interested in whether there might be a sound, systematic account of matters of right and wrong, good and bad that could be theorized in so-called "analytic" philosophy.\(^2\)

An Awkward Situation

*Pooh-Bah:* Of course, as First Lord of the Treasury, I could propose a special vote that would cover all expenses, if it were not that, as Leader of the Opposition, it would be my duty to resist it, tooth and nail. Or, as Paymaster General, I could so cook the accounts that, as Lord High Auditor, I should never discover
the fraud. But then, as Archbishop of Titipu, it would be my
duty to denounce my dishonesty and give myself into my own
custody as first Commissioner of Police.3

Do I have any duties to myself?

The claim that I do is perfectly familiar from advertising and intimate conversation. In
these settings, claims that I owe myself things are meant to inspire me to make a better life
for myself. But moral philosophy sometimes sounds a somber note in this otherwise
uplifting chorus of voices urging me to be my own advocate. Kantians sometimes argue
that I have duties to myself, and that discharging these is (in some sense) prior to
acknowledging obligations to anyone else.

Now, it isn't obvious how I am to see myself as simultaneous debtor and creditor, as the
one who owes such-and-such and the one to whom that very thing is owed, as having a
directed duty to myself to do A, and a right against myself that I do A. Suppose I fail.
Should I forgive myself? Is it enough if I offer myself a good excuse, or should I demand
more by way of compensation in foro interno? And why think that I need to be able to
sort through those questions in order to honor my obligations to other people?

For many neo-Kantians, as for Kant, it is built into the characteristic operations of
practical reason that I hold myself accountable to moral requirements. Holding myself
accountable makes no sense unless I can fail to do what I should do. For Kant, morality's reach extends beyond the sphere of adult human beings with their wits about them because non-humans might count as practically reasoning beings capable of straying—that is, as addressees of imperatives. Not all neo-Kantians follow him in this. But however wide or narrow the relevant class of practically reasoning beings, Kantian ethics accepts the commonplace that morality enjoins conduct quite apart from personal projects, goals, inclinations, and tastes, quite apart from personal relationships, and quite apart from the vicissitudes of mood and fortune. Morality does not get its grip on me via such contingencies. It is not mediated by what happens to matter to me. Instead, morality enjoins conduct immediately. Morality is non-accidentally developed and deployed by practically reasoning beings as such.

I have no interest in questioning the thought that morality is simultaneously possible and problematic for sane adults. I have no interest in dislodging the thought that obligations are crucial to morality. My concern is with the suggestion that positing duties to oneself is a good way of capturing a practical orientation alert to the demands of morality. After all, one normally thinks of ethics as involving more than one living thing. For example, the traditional stock of moral obligations comes into play when different adults going about their own business find themselves at cross-purposes. Morality inhibits our tendency to run roughshod over each other in such circumstances. To their
credit, parties to moral interaction do not wrong each other. They abide by action-guiding
crrents recognized as such by each and every party to mutual, reciprocal ethical
congress. It is because they are of one mind about such things that it is to their credit
when they act well. It belongs to modern moral philosophy to hold that two strangers
meeting on a road who are as different as you please might show due restraint in their
dealings with each other. The possibility of moral interaction exceeds the boundaries of
customs and culture, as well as the limits of the parties' private concerns.

Providing an account of morality in these terms is not easy. My first question is how is
positing duties to oneself meant to help? My second question is does talk of duties to
oneself add to our understanding of acting well more generally? It is a strange thought after
all—the thought that I owe myself things. Why go in for it?

An Argument

Explicitly or implicitly, neo-Kantian moral philosophy rests on the thought that, above
all, I owe myself rational self-governance. It is an oddity of such views that what I owe to
myself is unlike what I normally take myself to owe to others. If I were elected, appointed,
or born to high office, if I were the sole head of a tribe or some other corporate body, then I
would be obliged to govern, and perhaps even to make law. As it happens, my station in
life is not like that. Instead, I owe payment to my creditors, support to my dependents,
service to my employer, aid to others in need, persistent unwillingness to commit acts of murder, rape, or fraud against anyone to everyone, and so on.

The thing that neo-Kantians who accept talk of obligations to oneself think that I owe to myself—governance—may involve actual episodes of practical reasoning (if the theorist suggests that "self-legislation" is the name of something that I do on specific occasions), or else practical reasoning that meets certain standards (if, for example, the theorist urges that adequate reasons for acting are reasons that will apply to any similarly situated person facing circumstances like mine, and I am obliged always to seek such a ground for my doings), or, failing these more stringent requirements, plain openness to reason. In effect, I owe myself an adequate justification for what I do, or did, or propose to do. In this sense, what I owe to myself is steady and effective exercise of my own practical reason.

David Velleman has explored this aspect of Kantian moral philosophy as thoroughly as any prominent contemporary Anglophone neo-Kantian. He writes:

The requirement to act for reasons… seems to come as close as any requirement can to having intrinsic authority, in the sense of being authoritative by virtue of what it requires. This requirement therefore comes as close as any requirement can to being inescapable…the requirement that bears this mark of morality is the requirement to act for reasons; and so we seem to have arrived at the conclusion that 'Act for
reasons' is the content of our duty.⁷

What will such a requirement amount to in practice? Is it the requirement that I never engage in idle action—that I never pick up a piece of straw and chew on it while walking, or draw designs on the margins of a handout while listening to a talk, or pet the cat on impulse? If asked why I do any of these, I might answer, in all sincerity: "No reason."

A moral prohibition on idle action is, to say the least, counterintuitive. Doodling comes out paradigmatically immoral. Going to great lengths to plan and execute fraud, less obviously so. And, happily, I think it can't be that Velleman means that I am inescapably bound, qua moral agent, never to engage in idle action. If there are hands doing the devil's work then, insofar as working, these hands are not idle. And Velleman is on record chiding moral philosophy for relying upon the moral psychology of the bland, earnest agent who always is concerned with acting for the sake of something she deems worthwhile.⁸ He writes:

I can still care about doing what makes sense even if I don't care about the good. This possibility is demonstrated by my capacity to be guided by what makes sense in light of a counter-evaluative mood such as despair, since what makes sense in light of such a mood just is to do what's bad rather than what's good.⁹

To argue that I am inescapably bound to act for reasons, then, is to argue that I am
bound to act in ways that make sense. Even things that we do just because we feel like doing them are subject to reasons-for-acting review, and practically reasoning beings may have to act in ways that could make sense. It makes sense to doodle on the handout while listening to a talk. Breaking off *giving* a talk in order to squat down and doodle on the floor at the base of the podium does not make sense. There might be a story. I might have my reasons. But the episode will *attract* reasons-for-acting-seeking questions even if everyone present is too polite to ask. In this sense, it seems reasonable to think that Velleman holds that I am inescapably obliged to act in such a way that I could be asked to explain myself.

Velleman goes on to argue that, although I am inescapably obliged to act in such a way that you can ask after my reasons, I am not, myself, the source of the authority attaching to my reasons. Nothing can count as a reason for acting unless a community of practically reasoning beings recognizes the action-guiding authority of the consideration. Regard for reasons, Velleman points out, is inextricably bound up with regard for persons. Regard for persons is regard for beings who have the status of personhood, a status that belongs to members of communities of practically reasoning beings who share a framework for practical reasoning. Velleman writes: "Being an autonomous person is thus impossible without belonging to the community of those with access to the same sources of autonomy," that is, the same rational requirements governing action. And due self-regard is likewise
rooted in personhood: "the value of our individual personhood here and now is inseparable from the value of participating in personhood as a status shared with our selves at other times and with other people, whose access to the same framework of reasons is what lends those reasons authority."  

Because I owe myself reasons for acting, and because reasons for acting take their normative force from a framework for practical reasoning that I share with other like-minded persons, in acting for reasons I hold myself to community standards. Accordingly, Velleman thinks, it is by discharging my obligation to myself that I hold myself morally accountable. So he has provided an account of morality rooted in the requirement that I act for reasons, and taken it that meeting this requirement is something that I owe to myself. 

Now, I am inclined to think that the traditional prohibition on procuring the judicial condemnation of a man I know to be innocent, along with other such directed duties, yield requirements that are authoritative by virtue of what they require. They are certainly not "escapable" in the sense that their authority depends upon some interest or inclination that I just happen to have. Nor are they escapable in the sense that they are only in effect for those subject to the rule of a specific governing body—the municipality of Chicago, for example. Limited jurisdiction and dependence on contingent projects, plans, and inclinations are the two escape routes to a requirement that Velleman discusses explicitly. And Kant and
Velleman alike regard traditional prohibitions on (for instance) murder as universally obligatory.

The kind of inescapability that Velleman uses as a basis for his argument is the inescapability of acting in ways that make sense. Noticing that we can question the authority of our own inclinations, and that we can (in principle, if not always in practice) emigrate in order to escape the authority of the local governing body, Velleman writes:

Suppose, then, that we attempted to question the authority of reasons themselves, as we earlier questioned other authorities. Where we previously asked 'Why should I act on my desire?' let us now ask 'Why should I act for reasons?' Shouldn't this question open up a route of escape from all requirements?

As soon as we ask why we should act for reasons, however, we can hear something odd in our question. To ask 'why should I?' is to demand a reason; and so to ask 'Why should I act for reasons?' is to demand a reason for acting for reasons. This demand implicitly concedes the very authority that it purports to question—namely, the authority of reasons.\textsuperscript{15}

I think that this can't be the right place to lodge the argument about the inescapable authority of moral requirements.

Whatever inescapability attends the prohibition on taking murderous means to my ends,
for instance, is compatible with the recognition that my killing Frank won't count as *murder* unless I have reasons for killing someone. It isn't *murder* if I fall off a cliff trying to rescue Jane and Frank breaks my fall. In paradigmatic cases, if I *murdered* Frank, then it is pretty apparent that I took myself to stand to gain by Frank's death. Perhaps I stood to inherit a fortune from his estate. Perhaps I was robbing a convenience store, had no special bone to pick with Frank, but Frank was blocking the exit.

Velleman argued that the requirement that I act for reasons is inescapable and that *no* consideration can count as a reason for acting if it is idiosyncratic or temporary. In his view, this shows that I must take it that I assess my own actions and actions-in-prospect from a shared framework for practical reasoning and it is the supposition that I am not alone in this that lends authority to the considerations that weigh with me. But even if moral reasons meet the requirement of universally accessible common knowledge, a great many frankly immoral considerations do as well. For example: "Those who stand to gain by wrongdoing have a reason to wrong others." And, because of this: "Those intent on wrongdoing as a means to private advantage have a reason to disguise their intent and work to escape detection"—a prudential consideration that takes its force from the fact that *everyone knows* that the prospect of gain is the most common reason for wrongdoing.

In this sense, the way in which the prospect of gain underwrites misconduct is universally accessible common knowledge among practically reasoning beings.
Trying to ground morality in a distinctive requirement that I act for reasons is initially puzzling because, as Velleman knows perfectly well, there are reasons for wrongdoing. Although it is true that it must be in principle possible for other persons to see the sense in what I do if there is reason in my actions, this is nowhere near enough to establish that if I have recognizable reasons for acting, then those are reasons to act morally.

Velleman can reply that purported reasons for immoral conduct will show themselves to be inadequate upon further reflection. That's fine, but the problem with his account seems much worse than any that can be got around by saying more about reasons and persons. Consider: Velleman accepts the philosophical commonplace that intentional actions, as such, are subject to reasons-for-acting-seeking review. In this sense, positing a distinctive obligation—an isolable practical requirement with inescapable universal authority—that I act in such a way that I can be asked my reasons for so acting is rather like positing a special, distinctive nutritional requirement that I eat things that are edible. We might posit such a requirement on the grounds that we cannot so much as begin to consider the finer points of my diet unless and until I stand prepared to eat edible things. One wants to say: but how does it count as eating if the stuff you are ingesting orally isn't even a candidate for being edible! Far from providing a special, extra nutritional requirement, the demand that I stand prepared to eat
things that are, for my kind, edible is the demand that I eat stuff that counts as food. And this is the same as pointing out that I need to eat now and then. Swallowing stones or arsenic or paper clips is not, in the relevant sense, eating.

Just as I can always be asked to provide reasons for my intentional actions, I can only do what it is in my power to do. No one will argue that I owe it to myself only to do what it is in my power to do, even though "Act in such a way as only to do what it is in your power to do" looks to be universally inescapable simply by virtue of what it says in roughly the way that "Act in such a way that you can be asked to provide reasons for your actions" does. That it is in my power to act, that you can ask after my reasons for acting—these things are already built into the part of the command that says: Act. You have, in effect, ordered me to act in such a way that I can rightly be said to have acted afterward. I take it that this cannot give the content of a duty. A duty is the kind of practical consideration that can operate as a principle of action. As Douglas Lavin once put it, "an agent is subject to a principle only if there is some kind of action such that if the agent did it she would thereby violate the principle."¹⁷ Are there any kinds of action I can do on purpose such that I cannot be asked why I did a thing of that kind? Velleman's argument suggests that he agrees with Elizabeth Anscombe. The answer is: No. Accordingly, there is no basis for a duty here.

In short, it's not just that one needs more detail about what makes some practical
consideration reason enough for action before one knows what to make of Velleman's account of the ground of morality. One needs some explanation about why it makes sense to posit an obligation to act for reasons. I mean, given that wrongdoing has its reasons too, how is this not just a lopsided wheel spinning idly in an account of moral conduct?

Velleman notes in passing, "Defenders of Kant's moral theory often seem embarrassed by his account of having obligations to oneself, which is said to be odd or even incoherent." Velleman finds the notion unproblematic. But the attempt to explain the authority of morality in a candidate inescapable and universal duty that I have to myself seems to have led to trying to ground morality in something that is true of all of my intentional actions—namely, that they are subject to reason-for-acting-seeking review.

Unlike Velleman, Kant thought that there was something puzzling about the claim that I owe things to myself. It is worth a look at why he thought this, and a suggestion about how he worked to solve the puzzle.

Kant

Velleman's neo-Kantianism turns on explicit rejection of Kant's thought that I am the source of all of my obligations. This thought gives rise to Kant's puzzle about how I can have obligations to myself. In the Tugendlehre, Kant rehearses two complaints against the
idea:

If the I that imposes obligation is taken in the same sense as the I that is put under obligation, a duty to oneself is a self-contradictory concept. For the concept of duty contains the concept of being passively constrained (I am bound). But if the duty is a duty to myself, I think of myself as binding and so as actively constraining (I, the same subject, am imposing obligation). And the proposition that asserts a duty to myself (I ought to bind myself) would involve being bound to bind myself (a passive obligation that was still, in the same sense, an active obligation), and hence a contradiction. One can also bring this contradiction to light by pointing out that the one imposing an obligation (auctor obligationis) could always release the one put under obligation (subiectum obligationis) from an obligation (terminus obligationis), so that (if both are one and the same subject) he would not be bound at all to a duty he lays upon himself.

This involves a contradiction.¹⁹

Kant also thought that if I have no duties to myself, then I have no duties at all: "For I can recognize that I am under obligation to others only insofar as I at the same time put myself under obligation, since the law by virtue of which I regard myself as being under obligation proceeds in every case from my own practical reason; and in being constrained by my own
reason, I am also the one constraining myself.\textsuperscript{20} That is why the claim that I have duties to myself gives rise to an antinomy for Kant.

The short form of Kant's solution to the antinomy in the Tugendlehre is straightforward: what generates the apparent contradiction is that I am to be at one and the same instant legislator and subject to legislation, active and passive, source imposing the obligation and person thereby bound, hence, capable of obliging and releasing myself at will. If it is so much as conceivable that I have obligations to myself, then I must be viewing myself in two different ways—\textit{qua} rational organism (insofar as subject to law), and \textit{qua} being endowed with noumenal freedom (as legislator). In short, Kant's solution to the antinomy turns on exactly the points that Velleman rejects: the claim that I am the source of the authority of the reasons that guide my action and the claim that my authority stems from noumenal freedom.

It is not easy to understand noumenal freedom. This is in part because noumenal freedom itself cannot be a content for thought. And some ways of getting around this point seem not to do the trick here. For example, it is true that I deliberate about \textit{what to do}, but not about \textit{whether to do something of my own free will}. If I'm wondering what to do, then I'm wondering what to do under my own steam. On the face of it, this may dissolve the active-passive problem. As implicitly acknowledged source of my own actions (otherwise, apparent episodes of practical deliberation can't be practical reasoning at all), I \textit{govern}
myself, and since the actions thereby governed are, of course, mine, in governing myself I am also the one governed. It is not clear how the "two aspects of a single subject" thought dissolves the problem of being in a position to oblige and release myself willy-nilly, however. Kant's suggestion is that in obliging myself, I both show due respect to, and place myself at the service of, the humanity in my own person. The humanity in my own person is not fickle. I am its bearer, its advocate, and its steward. I owe it my concern. It is at once me, and more than I am.

In what sense am I my humanity? In what sense is my humanity more than I am? And why is legislation the preferred metaphor for practical reason? We need an answer to these questions before we know what to make of Kant's solution to the antinomy he finds at the heart of his account of obligation.

I will not attempt a reading of Kant's account of law beyond mentioning that Kant thought that everything in nature operates in accordance with laws, and that laws are universal in the sense applicable without exception to everything in their domain. Neither will I attempt a full-blown interpretation of Kant's account of practical reason. Instead, I will give a nonstandard reading of one bit of Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, the bit that is most obviously relevant to the suggestion that the practical reason I bear is my will, and is also more than my will.

Having, he thinks, established that it belongs to ordinary moral thinking that the good
will is the only thing that is always and everywhere good, and that the good will acts not just in accordance with duty, but from duty, the problem is to explain acting from duty—that is acting from, and in accordance with, a very special kind of reason for acting. This kind of reason enjoins conduct *directly* and *immediately*, rather than by way of any interest or inclination that a practically reasoning being might have. Because the law that governs the operations of the good will has to apply to every practically reasoning being for whom ethical conduct is at once possible (such that the being is capable of having a good will) and problematic (such that the being is capable of immoral action), it cannot take its force from *anything* about an individual practically reasoning being that isn't common to all such beings. It turns out that the list of merely contingent facts about an individual practically reasoning being is long. Obviously, my plans, projects, tastes, hobbies, personal relationships, profession, citizenship, sex, gender, political views, and religious affiliation are among the things that I do not share with all other practically reasoning beings. For Kant, even the fact that I am a *human being* rather than a practically reasoning bird or sea mammal or Martian is a mere contingency. If there is a law that governs the operation of practically reasoning beings for whom ethical conduct is at once possible and problematic, then that law *cannot* enjoin action by way of any of these contingencies. For such a law to get a grip in the way Kant thinks that it must, it must get its grip *without* appeal to things that belong to me, but not to you, and not to any practically reasoning dolphins that may
inhabit the waters off our shores.

Suppose, then, the will stripped bare of every contingent interest, inclination, habit, incentive, plan, purpose, project, etc. Suppose, that is, factoring out *absolutely everything* that serves to distinguish your practical orientation from mine, ours from the Martians', the Martians' from the parrots', the parrots' from the nonhuman primates', the nonhuman primates' from the dolphins', etc. Suppose the bare finite, dependent locus of practical reason.

Far from being a special status conferred upon practically reasoning members of communities sharing substantive reasons for acting, the naked will is more like the lowest common denominator across finite, dependent rational beings—the will unallied with any of the things that make one practically reasoning being's field of practical engagement different from another's. In acting solely from and for the sake of duty, the good will acts from *this* source, from itself as such, and not for the sake of any of the aspects of its life that distinguish *its* life from the lives of other practically reasoning beings. And this provides a kind of framework for understanding the universality that is supposed to be captured in the universal law formulation of the categorical imperative. Since we have factored out everything *but* a will devoid of contingent incentives, *anything* it wills it wills without reference to, or stake in, anything that distinguishes it from any other finite, dependent locus of practical reason. Accordingly, every finite dependent locus of practical reason that acts
from and for the sake of a reason that enjoins action *immediately* and *directly* acts from 
*exactly* the same source as any other. There is *nothing else left* for any such locus of 
practical reason to act from, under the suppositions.

On this way of trying to cope with Kant, my *humanity* consists in the possibility that I 
might act from this source, a source shared by any and every finite, dependent locus of 
practical reason as such. In this sense, then, I am my humanity (insofar as ethical conduct is 
possible and problematic for me). Humanity is my nature.

Unsurprisingly, Kant takes it that no individual practically reasoning being can ever be 
certain (in its own case, or about any other such being) that it has acted, will act, or is acting, 
strictly from and for the sake of duty. Bare willing is not part of *any* finite dependent 
rational being's experience of itself. And the possibility of acting strictly from and for the 
sake of duty depends upon the possibility that I am free, a thing that *frames* practical 
reasoning, but can't be a content of practical reasoning, or of experience, or of thought. In 
this sense, my humanity is other than myself as I know and experience myself.

Duties to myself are duties to myself qua bearer of humanity. There is no danger that I 
will oblige and release myself willy-nilly. Rather, every time I acknowledge any duty, I 
recognize a reason for acting that enjoins conduct directly and immediately and will do the 
same for any finite, dependent, free locus of practical reason.

My humanity is not a thing that can release me from the need to respect *it*. To think
otherwise will be rather like entertaining the possibility that the English language could
release me from the need to obey the constraints of idiomatic usage and grammar in
speaking English. I am a native speaker of English. I think, read, dream, write, and
converse in English. In this sense, English belongs to me—is mine, is in me, qua native
speaker. But in using English, I am constrained by the requirements of the very language
that informs thought, writing, and speaking for me. In this sense, I am governed by own
mother tongue. I could learn another language, and stop using English. But I can't remain a
language user without using some language or other. Abstract humanity is rather like an
abstract capacity for language-use in this sense. And self-legislation becomes rather like
abiding by the constraints of some natural language or other in speaking, thinking, writing,
conversing, or otherwise engaging in linguistically competent activity.

That's all well and good for linguistic capacity, I might think, but why go in for even
taking myself to be morally accountable?

For Kant, it is cosmically impossible that there might exist any practically reasoning
being that did not have in it a tendency to develop and deploy exactly the same sorts of
moral thoughts as I do and from exactly the same source—the very practical reason that it
and I alike must bear in order to be so much as capable of acting upon rudimentary
instrumental thoughts about how to get what we happen to want. Every actual or possible
practically reasoning being, on this view, is as such bound by considerations of duty, and in
exactly the same way, and from exactly the same source. That source is the free, finite, dependent locus of practical reason *as such*, something that we cannot experience, cannot observe, cannot ever be certain has informed any given act that we ourselves perform, and cannot track with certainty in the doings of others. And in *this*, my Kantian humanity is utterly unlike my own, or anyone else's, facility with any language.

As near as I can tell, Kant thought that he needed all of this (and more besides) in order to ground morality. Grounding morality is very difficult. If Kant's system works, then he has done it. But the cost of accepting Kant's solution to the philosophical problem is high. I once knew a man who was good at calculating how to get what he wanted, could make conversation, acted on the basis of maxims—that is, calculative representations of his actions-in-prospect—and gave every indication of being *incapable* of holding himself morally accountable (although many of his stratagems depended upon his understanding that his fellows were susceptible to moral practical considerations). True, the man was criminally insane. True, we can't *know* that our impressions of such a man's will are veridical, if will is what Kant claims it is. Still, Kant seems to be arguing that some kinds of sociopaths *cannot* exist. And this is, as Michael Thompson puts it, metaphysically alarming.22

What's gone wrong here?

One possible culprit is the thought that morality must arise from my duties to myself.
Somehow, morality must take hold of me \textit{qua} isolated agent capable of deliberating about what to do and potentially alert to what immorality might do for me. Kant's system may not provide a way of talking me out of wronging others, but it at least tries to show that in wronging others I also violate myself \textit{qua} being capable of so much as considering taking immoral means to my ends. But requiring the will \textit{to set} the conditions for sound willing is disconcertingly like requiring a legislator to pass a law that enjoins law-abidingness. In this sense, Velleman's tendency to liken it to a rational requirement that I meet such requirements as are constitutive of reason isn't wrong. As near as I can tell, what makes Kant's efforts in this direction less perplexing than Velleman's is Kant's account of the will—finite, dependent practical reason—as constitutively determined by a self-imposed duty to act from, and for the sake of, duty and my will as a particular bearer of this will. The will sets standards that my will must obey.

I take it that Velleman is right to be concerned about taking Kant's account on board. But Velleman tries to translate Kant's thought about the will into thought about a community of practically reasoning beings sharing a framework for practical reason. The effort looks to fall prey to objections about the substance of common knowledge in communities of practically reasoning beings (since everyone knows there are reasons for wrongdoing) and to objections about the content of the alleged duty to oneself (since "Act is such a way that you can be asked why you did what you did" looks to be a longwinded way
of saying "Act"). I take it that we have yet to be given compelling reasons to think that a practical orientation alert to the demands of morality finds secure grounding in thought about what we might owe to ourselves.

This brings me to my second question: whether there are independent grounds for thinking that I have duties to myself in the first place.

Possible Sources of the Intuition

I mentioned at the outset that "You owe it to yourself" is a familiar form of words, and that those of us who have been inspired to take a holiday or leave a partner in response to advertisements or advice from friends may think, "They're right—I deserve better than this." A great many people who have no interest in the producing a less demanding version of Kantian moral philosophy are perfectly happy to posit duties to themselves. In closing, I want to speculate about the source of the intuition that I have duties to myself.

I think that practical isolation of some sort may be the secret of the intuition's force. The most important form of isolation, the one that seems to me to underlie advice from friends, is the sense that what I do is, to some extent, up to me and that, given this, I am to some extent responsible for how things go for me. This point works in tandem with the truism that I can deliberate about what to do, but not about whether to do it under my own steam, even when I am trying to figure out how to get someone else to do something. What
I decide, what weighs with me and how, what I do—these things are, to some extent, mine
even when I have very little control over the options available to me, and even though it is
not in my power to ensure that things will go well for me, no matter what I do. Call this
"Step One."

Step Two. This step has two cases, in the first, other people are concerned about me; in
the second, I am on my own. In the first case, those who are concerned about me may have
thoughts about what I should do in order either to improve my circumstances or to maintain
and build upon those things in my life that are going pretty well. In the second case, I may
take it upon myself to have an imagination for what I might do in order to make my life
better (e.g., make some friends), or maintain and build upon the things that are in good
order in my world (e.g., look after my health)—that is, I may think that there are things that
I should do on my own behalf. People who know me can have thoughts about what I
should do. I can have thoughts about what I should do. The question becomes: "What is
the status of this should?"

Notice that the arena of concern in both cases is the sphere of self-interest, even though
my intimates can have personal stakes in what I do and what comes of it, such that what's in
my self-interest is also in theirs. I strongly suspect that, at the point one feels compelled to
posit duties to oneself, it isn't credible to think that the action in question is one that I owe to
anyone else. Otherwise, we would be discussing what I owe to somebody else—my
children, say, or my parents, or God, or my employer—and, if we agree about the duty, the question becomes one about whether I was going to discharge my duty to so-and-so, and, if so, how I am going to do that.

I confess that I don't quite know how we get from Step II to positing duties to oneself, unless it's via some thought that action must be taken in this matter, that I am the best, perhaps even the only individual, in a position to do what's necessary, and that if no one is obliged to do something about the situation, then nothing will be done. I don't know whether this thought suffers more from its tendency to overestimate the pull of duty, or from its tendency to underestimate the pull of self-interest. It seems to me to suffer from both. I don't know how best to characterize the fear in the thought either.

In the case where we are inclined to posit these duties for others, it might be the fear that comes of our impotence to get other people to take action on their own behalf. Noticing that it is up to each of us what to do is not always a liberating and joyful experience.

In the case where I self-reflectively move to expand the sphere of my duties to cover self-interest, it could be that I am trying to learn to be my own advocate, or I could be experiencing a kind of shapeless regret.

My speculation will involve three scenarios. What all of them share is the supposition that the agent who is supposed to posit duties to herself or himself is, in crucial respects,
alone, and is also alert to the demands of duty more generally. The first scenario features a dutiful person surrounded by friends who want only the best for her. The second features a dutiful person who has broken ties with a tight-knit community and now must keep track of himself in ways that family and neighbors kept track of each other back home. The third features a dutiful person experiencing remorse over indefinitely many things he did not do. They are scenarios of mounting, increasing isolation in the face of an understanding that, after all, at the end of the day, sane adults are responsible for themselves.

Scenario I: Friendly Ambitions

Friendly advice couched in terms of obligations to myself normally involves situations in which the good up for discussion is only practicable for me. It might be that no one else can do the thing I am told I must do: I am the only one who can implement my new exercise regime, for example. Or, although the vicissitudes of fortune might always alter my circumstances, the only legitimate source of relief for me rests in what I can do for myself. No one else owes me what my friends think I deserve. In telling me that I deserve better and owe to myself to change, my friends are trying to convince me to demand more from life than I have.

Scenario II: Culture Shock
Suppose, in the second scenario, someone who has left home to seek a better life. In the old town, definite ties of kinship and community tended to support the daily reproduction of material and social life through networks of obligation, attachment, and expectation. Now, surrounded by strangers, the person whose daily life used to be shaped and structured by what he owed to others, and whose material and social needs were met by what they owed to him, retains a sense of duty while losing the whole field of specific obligations that shaped his old life. No one here owes him food or shelter. No one owes him, specifically, anything that is not subject to the terms of some new undertaking—a lease, say, or a job contract. His needs are, if anything, more acute than they were back home. He decides that he must owe to himself the things that were formerly provisions of community.

Scenario III: Reflective Regret

Suppose now, a solitary episode of reflection. I can ask myself questions like these:

- Do I have good enough reasons to do what I want to do?
- Have I done enough?
- Should I have done something other than what I did?
- Am I misguided in the things that I have taken to be choice-worthy?
- Do the many things that I work for and care about fit together and is the result a life that I take to be worth living?
All of these questions involve aspects of my life that may be invisible to other people in socio-economic circumstances like mine. Provided that I am fairly steady, reasonably reliable, and not much inclined to outbursts, fragmentation in my larger practical orientation may never show itself to others. No one else may notice that I am brought up short when trying to determine which of several things that matter to me should take precedence here and now, for example. By the same token, provided that the things that I appear to value are things that it makes sense to value, my doubts about how I live may attract no notice at all.

Should I have acted differently? Notice that if I could have done even one thing other than what I did, then *indefinitely many other options* also were there for me. Who can compass the vastness of what I might have done?

As to whether I have *reasons enough* to do what I do, and whether I *do enough*, given the reasons that I have—it is not at all clear what kind of calculation of sufficiency and inadequacy is involved here. How much reason is reason enough? And, even given sufficient reasons for action (whatever those might be), who is to say that I have done enough in the service of things that I care about where "enough" is meant to capture more than what's needed to attain my specific goals?

In short, when I engage in this kind of thought, I rapidly find myself considering things that *never happened*, things that I never started or never tried or never considered.
Suppose I conclude that I have squandered my days with many things. When I reflect upon what I ought to have thought and did not think, what I ought to have said and did not say, and what I ought to have done but did not do, I will likely see that I have wasted many opportunities to make a better life for myself. Perhaps I am the only human being who can experience disappointment in the face of my imagined omissions. Much of what I have failed to do or say or think was of no concern to anyone else, after all.

If only I hadn’t let myself get so caught up in details! —This are not the kind of regret that fastens on a specific event or circumstance or type of action. Any particular occasion I seize upon in memory—a moment when I might have left petty concerns to the side for the sake of something more important—will slip into indefinitely many other moments when I could equally well have changed course.

In what sense might reflection on such topics seem to suggest that I owe things to myself?

There are, I suspect, three crucial points at issue here. First, ex hypothesi, my failures to live up to whatever standards are at issue in finding myself disappointing have not involved wrongdoing anyone else. I did not owe anyone else the things that I might have thought or said or done for my own sake. Second, no one else owed me whatever I think I might have got, if only I had thought or said or done different things. Third, because my flirtation with despair involves my representation of myself as a good person, it will feel
as though there must have been a duty here and someone must have failed to discharge that duty. But there is only one person involved in my meditation, so any practical failure should have been prevented by the only person who could have acted differently—the single agent at issue here, the one who is reflecting upon her own life, me. And surely someone must set things right again, insofar as this is possible. (I am the only one who can repair those damages that are reparable; I am the only one who can see to it that I lead a finer life in future.) Under the circumstances, it is natural to think that I have shirked my duty to myself.

At this point, notice, friends' and advertisers' invitations to seek better things for myself intersect with the mood of moral philosophy in urging me to develop my capacities for rational self-governance more fully—all in the name of duty.

But what, exactly, is it that I am supposed to have done differently?

It is one thing if the problem is that I have been attempting to habituate myself to some specific regime of self-control. I should have gone to the gym last week. I should not have had cake last night. Regimes of this kind are built of scheduling. If I intend to keep to a schedule, and I don't, then I have failed to do what I intended to do. Since I haven't changed my mind about the schedule, and since my failure to follow the schedule had nothing to do with some sort of emergency that rightly disrupts schedules indefinitely, I should get back on schedule. In this sort of situation, normally, the
schedule involves my free time—that is, portions of days or weeks when I am not obliged to be at work, say, or looking after children. We do not need to postulate duties to make sense of my finding ways of spending my free time that are beneficial to me. The theater of concern, here, is the theater of self-interest. Kant, at least, thought that human beings were strongly inclined to pursue self-interest and private advantage. That was part of the reason he thought that linking our obvious skill in doing things on our own account to holding ourselves accountable to moral precepts was a good strategy for grounding morality.

Now, people with time on their hands and deep attachments to using their free time well do all kinds of things to keep to schedules. If they are likewise deeply attached to pretending that they are required to do whatever it is that they have decided to do with themselves, then they may well use talk of owing themselves healthy food and time at the gym as at once a crutch and a blunt instrument. The crutch gives people who are afraid of seeming selfish permission to follow the schedule. The blunt instrument can be used in attacking oneself inwardly when one fails to keep to the schedule. This technique for self-control may be psychologically efficacious. So might a self-talk strategy built out of frank concern with health or one that was all made of considerations of pleasure. Different temperaments move in different ways. And, of course, people can band together for the sake of making better use of their spare time and undertake joint fitness
projects so that they owe it to each other to exercise together. There are many ways to keep to a schedule. The fact that elevating intention to the status of duty is useful for some people does not mean that this self-management technique illuminates anything of philosophical interest. Duty-talk, like pleasure-talk and self-interest talk, is a way that people can hold themselves in check and keep themselves in a world. Vivid fantasy may also do the trick.

If much of my time, my income, and my assets are mine to do with as I please, there is no obvious place for talk of duty to get any traction (except in the sense that I am in an excellent position to find ways of being of use to someone else, and this is somehow not even occurring to me). Philosophically, if not psychologically, it seems to be enough to deploy the machinery of intention and planning to understand how things are, what is going wrong, and what kinds of things might improve my situation. If I am horrified at the thought that I am the chief beneficiary of my own efforts to improve my life, then this is a psychological fact about me, one that I might try to explore with a trained professional, using some of my discretionary income in my free time.

But what of my more amorphous concern about what might be and what might have been, if only I had thought or said or behaved differently?

Ethically significant omissions are not just any old things that I didn't think or say or do. They are not even just any old things that could have made some difference to others,
had I behaved differently. Ethically significant omissions fasten onto specific kinds of acts that were called for in specific kinds of circumstances, sometimes on the part of specifically positioned individuals. The shapeless and pervasive sense that things might have gone otherwise for me if I had behaved differently rests in a truism without enough content to ground a specific conclusion about what I ought to have done or what I ought to have avoided doing. At root, it expresses no more than the fact that I am partly responsible for how things go with me and that, in some matters, I am the only one who can have an impact on how things go with me. This isn't a description of a sphere of obligation. It is the kind of thing that has to be in place before anything as definite as a sphere of obligation can emerge.

In short, where the shapeless 'might have been' is concerned, there is no specific act that I ought to have performed, there are no specific words that I ought to have spoken, and there is no specific thought that I ought to have entertained; in short, there is no content to this duty. Like Velleman's duty to act for reasons, my meditations on what might have been yield no more than an undirected exhortation to pay more or different attention to my own life—a thing that is too indeterminate to guide action.

Concluding Remark

Where does it come from, then, this thought that there is a gap in our understanding of
moral conduct that it can be filled if I owe myself things?

It is, I suspect, difficult for some basically good, reasonably materially secure adults who are, for whatever reason, alone and at liberty to tend to the business of prudence unless they can see prudence as somehow necessary to something other than plain self-interest. Humans are naturally social beings. It is built into the sentimental education of many of us to see ourselves knit into a social world by, among other things, duties. If there are things that we can do on our own account that will provide us with better lives, and if it feels as though the kind of ‘ought’ that attends such things is of a piece with the kind of ‘ought’ that attends morality, we will be strongly tempted to extend our willingness to abide by moral constraint to the theater of self-interest.

I have no quarrel with people doing what they need to do in order to look after themselves, particularly in settings where no one else owes them any help. But I do not think that positing duties to ourselves helps us to account for either prudence or morality.
Notes

1 I have given parts of this essay as talks at Columbia University and the University of Sydney, and had the tremendous benefit of audience discussion at both places.

2 Leonard Linsky, the philosopher who invented the title "philosophy of language" to name what he was working on in his doctoral dissertation at the University of California at Berkeley in the late 1940s, and canonized the field by collecting its seminal essays in the 1952 anthology, *Semantics and the Philosophy of Language* (University of Illinois Press, 1952), once remarked in conversation that he thought that ethics should have become more interesting because it swerved in 1975 when John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* made a decisive break from analytic philosophy. I explained that I regarded the change as a fall from discipline rather than a liberation from stultifying constraint.


5 This sketch of morality sets up at least four requirements for philosophical work on the topic:

1. There is the need to account for the identical practical precepts in the hearts and minds of the strangers.
2. There is the need to ensure that the strangers act from and for the sake of those very practical considerations.
3. There is the need to account for the normative authority of the moral precepts they share.
4. There is the need to say how and why a party to the exchange sides with morality, having crossed paths with a stranger who stands prepared to act well.

6 Tim Scanlon, however, suggests that what we owe each other is very like what other theorists claim that I owe to myself. By Scanlon's lights, if I understand him, what I owe anyone is, *in the first instance*, an *explanation* showing that my conduct is or was reasonable on grounds that I expect others to accept (where my expectation is based in my thought, hope, or conviction that the grounds do not admit of reasonable rejection). See T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1998).

7 J. David Velleman, "A Brief Introduction to Kantian Ethics," in *Self to Self: Selected
By Velleman's lights:

1. All practically reasoning beings as such recognize that they can be asked to provide reasons for their actions and no practical consideration can count as a reason unless it is universally shared common knowledge among members of the community of persons.

2. In acting well, persons act from and for the sake of such reasons.

3. The normative authority of the reasons from and for the sake of which they act comes from the recognition of those reasons by the larger community of persons who are persons because they are members of that community.

4. The individual sides with morality first because the demand that he or she act for reasons is inescapable and second because personhood requires acting for reasons that are universally shared common knowledge among members of the community of practically reasoning beings.

Velleman likens the normative authority of moral precepts to the authority of arithmetical precepts [J. David Velleman, "A Brief Introduction to Kantian Ethics," pp. 25-27].

Is a shared framework for practical reasoning like a body of custom that informs conscience? If so, then some people—fellow members of my community—will share my framework for practical reason. Other people will not. Complaining about Hume on this account, Michael Thompson writes:

Hume no doubt thought that it was enough that our relation to outsiders is governed by benevolence or natural sympathy. It simply did not occur to him, as a naive eighteenth-century writer, that apart from justice one might, out of natural sympathy, kill one person to remedy the plight of several others, or for any number of other beautiful purposes. A theory like Hume's can of course explain why you would not kill Sylvia even in order to save five others, where you and Sylvia are bearers of a single…practice; it need only be that the practice constitutes a directed duty not to kill and a claim not to be killed among its bearers. But he forgot that you might kill several recalcitrant practice-outsiders in order, from the deepest sympathy, to introduce your more exalted system of
practices to their numerous backward compatriots [Michael Thompson, "What is it to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle about Justice," pp. 375-376].

But suppose that any such community, independently and for reasons of its own, accepts a practical precept forbidding the killing of other reasonable beings. This will make for more peaceable relations between communities and, if I plan to go abroad, and know that those people will not kill practically reasoning foreigners, I will have one less thing to worry about in planning my trip, and, provided that they know that I won't kill strangers, the locals I meet can rest assured that they will not face homicidal intent on my part. As Thompson argues, this coincidence in practical precepts does not suffice to bring my people into moral relations with theirs: "A manifold of 'persons' must together come under a genuinely common, and not merely similar or parallel, form of deonticity [Michael Thompson, "What is it to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle about Justice," p. 372]." By hypothesis, the fact that separate communities have come to settle on provisions forbidding the killing of practically reasoning outsiders is an accident. Morality is not supposed to be, in this sense, an accident. It is supposed to be non-accidentally developed and non-accidentally deployed by persons in their dealings one with another, and Velleman stresses this very aspect of morality. He insists that it is only as a practically reasoning person among other persons whose reasons for acting are the same as mine that I engage in moral conduct, and it cannot be the case that it is left to each of us to conjure up the force of moral reasons all on her own. We are not the source of the authority attaching to the reasons that we share. Velleman writes:

Why can't reasons owe their authority to us? The answer is that endowing reasons with authority would entail making their validity common knowledge among all reasoners. And if we could promote reasons to the status of common knowledge among all reasoners, then we should equally be able to demote them from that status—in which case, the status wouldn't amount to rational authority. The point of a reason's being common knowledge among all reasoners...is that there is then no way of evading it, no matter how we shift our point-of-view. No amount of rethinking will make such a reason irrelevant, because its validity as a reason is evident from every perspective. But if we could decide what is to be common knowledge among all thinkers, then a reason's being common knowledge would not entail its being inescapable, since we could also decide that it wasn't to be common knowledge, after all. Our power to construct a universally accessible framework of reasons would therefore undermine the whole point of having one [J. David Velleman, "A Brief Introduction to Kantian Ethics," pp. 32-33].
And now a question arises: if we are after the inescapability and universality of morality, if our thought is that morality catches up and rightly constrains every person who has her wits about her, just in virtue of the fact that she has her wits about her, why the stress on community? Why mention a community at all?

If I understand him, the mention of community is an allusion to Kant's suggestion that practically reasoning beings as such are fellow legislators in a Kingdom of Ends. The Kingdom of Ends has no special geo-political coordinates. It is anywhere and everywhere there are practically reasoning beings. But Velleman rejects Kant's insistence that such beings give themselves the law that they obey. If we give ourselves a law, what's to prevent us from repealing it? Instead, Velleman gives us a picture of ourselves as fellow autonomous subjects in a community where reason rules.

13 Of course, even people with good intentions lose track and engage in unethical conduct now and then. Velleman points out that the reasonable response to my own failure to live up to my own standards in practice will likely occasion remorse or regret, and that these can spur self-improvement programs on my part. See, J. David Velleman, "A Brief Introduction to Kantian Ethics," pp. 38-40.


16 Does this mean that an agent can provide reasons for everything she does when the question is "Why are you A-ing?" and she is A-ing intentionally? Not necessarily:
   —"Why are you drawing those lines?"
   —"No reason. I'm just doodling."

There is no mystery in the exchange. But it belongs to the context in which the question arises that drawing lines is the kind of thing that one can mean to do, and therefore that one could have a reason to do it. As Elizabeth Anscombe put it:

   Now of course a possible answer to the question 'Why?' is one like 'I just thought I would' or 'It was an impulse' or 'For no particular reason' or 'It was an idle action— I was just doodling.' I do not call an answer of this sort a rejection of the question. The question is not refused application because it says that there is no reason, any more than the question how much money I have in my pocket is refused application by the answer 'None' [G. E. M. Anscombe, Intention, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA,2000), §17, p. 25].

21 That is why, in the sphere of practical reason—reason in action—he held that counsels of prudence and technical precepts were not, on the face of it, laws since, although these guide the actions of practically reasoning beings, not all practically reasoning beings pursue identical purposes. See Immanuel Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, Abschnitt II, Ak. IV. 412-420.