On Unitarian Universalist Moral Duties:
Looking Forward with Cicero and Kant

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I. Why Moral *Duties*? Aren't We Done With That Conversation?

For the purposes of this paper, I will rely on the following definition of moral duty (or obligation): an action which is required (imperative) and which is guided by certain moral rules and principles. In every day language, we capture the concept of duty or obligation when we say things like, "I should [or 'ought'] to do this because it's the right thing to do," or "I want to do right by so and so." These ordinary expressions reflect the view that awareness of the rightness of an action may be enough to provide the impetus to carry through that action—namely, that "in acting from a motive attached to a moral principle,"—in acting on what we take to be the right thing to do—"the moral rightness of the action gives the agent reason for action" [Herman, 30].

Admittedly, the word alone—duty—is likely to cause unpleasant shivers to course down the spines of most Unitarian Universalists. It brings to mind something we have to do, something we'd rather not do, something we're made to do, probably at the expense of some activity we would actually enjoy. But, if we push past the unpleasant shiver, we recognize that duty, or obligation, is tied to the moral structure which governs our lives and which we try to impart to our children both at home and in the religious education classes offered in our congregations. For example, we do more than *suggest* to our children that they *try* not to lie. We do more than explain that we *value* honesty. We do more than *recommend* that they *avoid* lying. Rather, we say that they *should* be honest. We say that they *ought* not to lie. We say that we expect them to be truthful because it's the right thing to do. We explain that they have an obligation (a duty) not to lie (save for rare exceptions where minor distortions of the truth will help preserve other people's self-respect). So here we have an example of a duty—the duty not to lie.

Moreover, we associate the concept of duty with a "good" life. My father, a Unitarian Universalist, considered he had had a "good" life, in part because he had fulfilled his self-chosen moral duty to his family. In the last few months of his life (he died of cancer) he was comforted by the knowledge that, for nearly four decades, he had invested the majority of his time and effort fulfilling what he believed was his moral obligation—that is to say, the support and care of his three children and the setting aside of enough money to support my mother comfortably once he was no longer able to earn a paycheck. If pressed on the matter, he would have argued that he had only done the "right" thing. Having done the "right" thing helped him secure a sense of self-respect.

To deny that moral duty is part of a "good" life is tantamount to claiming that a good life is compatible with lying or breaking promises or promoting one's narrow self-interest at the expense of others. If we have adverse reactions to the concept of duty, it's probably because, while we understand, intellectually, that duty and pleasure do not necessarily conflict, we also understand that duty (to qualify as such) means that if duty and pleasure cannot both be satisfied by the same action, pleasure must yield to duty. At times, duty requires some kind of self-overcoming—a decision to set aside one's

immediate desire or inclinations when those are at odds with duty's demand that we do the "right" thing. But again, to go back to my father, his belief that he had had a "good" life was tied to his success at a kind of self-overcoming. He had decided to give up of some of the time he might have spent on leisure activities like hiking and travel, and spend it instead on advancing in his profession so that he might improve his family's standard of living. Self-overcoming—in other words, sometimes choosing to do what is "right" instead of what is "pleasurable" (what philosophers call "expedient" or "instrumental") leads to a sense of self-respect and of having led a "good" life.

I contend, however, that while a progressive-liberal view of obligation or duty is embedded in the typical Unitarian Universalist approach to life, most of us lack a well-developed philosophical (and theological) account of what our obligations are, why we have them, and how to choose between them in cases of conflict. In other words, we have some sense of our moral obligations but lack thoroughness and clarity about how to identify our duties. The goal of this paper is to explore and evaluate two procedures that I will argue can assist those who, for moral reasons, desire greater thoroughness and clarity.

To this end, I begin by speaking in broad terms about the concept of duty. I then focus on what I categorize as "Unitarian Universalist" moral obligations. I reflect on our religious education programs and show how they reveal the duties to which we commit ourselves and wish to pass on to our children. I examine how these duties emerge from several assumptions Unitarian Universalists make about what it means to be a human being (which could be further characterized as a theological anthropology). Looking to the past, I explore two approaches undergirded by many of the same anthropological assumptions that today's Unitarian Universalists take to be self-evident—namely, that of the pre-Christian philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE) (I rely on his text *On Duties*) and that of the European-Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804 CE) (I rely on his text *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Moral*s).

I turn to the works of Cicero and Kant as resources for exploring the question of duty not only because both ground their work on duty on anthropological assumptions, but also because both thinkers fit the category (developed by Stanley Cavell) of "moral perfectionist." They qualify as "moral perfectionists" because they believe that the ancient questions make all the difference in the world—namely, the questions: "Am I living as I am supposed to live?" "Is my life something more than vanity, or worse, mere conformity?" "Am I making the best effort I can to reach [in Cavellian language] my unattained but attainable self?" [Putnam, 59]. Cicero and Kant are "moral perfectionists" "because they describe the commitment we ought to have in ways that seem impossibly demanding; but [they] are also [realists], because they realize that it is only by keeping an 'impossible' demand in view that we can strive for our 'unattained but attainable self" [Putnam, 60].

In my discussion of Cicero and Kant's views on duty, I focus primarily on how they develop principles which each then uses to determine the content of moral duties. Cicero recommends that we identify reasonable moral principles upon which to reflect, that we publicize for review by others (if desired), that we freely choose to adopt, and that we reassess over time. Kant recommends that, as persons, we each turn to our own inherent practical reason and rely on it to identify the unchanging, objective moral principles against which we can then test our subjective moral principles. I, in turn,

recommend that we, Unitarian Universalists, adopt an approach akin to that of Cicero or Kant so that individually, and together, we can develop a systematic and publicizable set of moral principles each of us can use to test our moral choices and determine our moral duties. My purpose is not to argue in favor of a specific set of duties *per se*, but to compare and contrast Cicero and Kant's approaches based on the premise that they have the potential to inform our moral work as we attempt to discern our obligations.

II. What Makes *Unitarian Universalist* Duties Properly *Unitarian Universalist*?

We Unitarian Universalists recognize that morality makes special demands on our lives. To demonstrate that this is the case, I offer the following illustration: on Sunday morning, September 7, 2008, the senior minister of the congregation to which I belong, Unity Temple Unitarian Universalist Congregation (UTUUC) in Oak Park, Illinois, introduced the RE teachers for the 2008-09 church year. The minister then charged the members with supporting those teachers since, he said, "it is our collective responsibility to provide our children with an ethical framework from which they can develop their own morals." The charge to the congregation contained at least six tacit assumptions (assumptions widely shared by Unitarian Universalists).

The first assumption: an ethical framework *exists*. This moral framework specifies, in part, right actions.

The second assumption implicit in the UTUUC minister's charge: we Unitarian Universalists *share* an ethical framework. Or, at the very least, that our ethical commitments have enough in common that they can be incorporated into a single religious education program (a program which would, I note, meet the approval of almost all UUs across the denomination). Hence the minister did not need to elucidate the specifics of this ethical framework; everyone was already familiar with the framework to which he referred, "an ethical framework" which members collectively agreed to impart to their children.

The third assumption: children *develop* morals; in other words, that children begin their lives either without morals or without a fully formed moral apparatus. They develop this apparatus as they mature and experience the world—an anthropological claim about human beings.

The fourth assumption: even a fully developed moral apparatus can be *shaped*—another anthropological claim.

The fifth assumption is that the developing moral apparatus of children can be impacted by what adults *teach* in pedagogical situations such as those created by religious education programs—yet another anthropological claim.

The final assumption: that adult UUs have a "collective responsibility" to provide our children with an ethical framework assumes that our children's lives are *improved* when such a framework is offered to them: again, an anthropological claim.

My illustration will, I have no doubt, remind many Unitarian Universalists of similar Sunday-morning events in their home congregations.

We, as a religious community, seek a moral framework that promotes self-respect. Hence, we necessarily take an interest in the concept of duty. We also take an interest in whether and how we should resist the temptation of pursuing perceived (or actual) goods when these are at odds with doing what is right. A conversation about any

kind of moral framework, duties included, must ground its claims in something. That something can be Scripture—a Christian might base the conversation about duties on the New Testament's two love-commands or on the Old Testament's ten commandments. That something can also be a religion's tradition—a Jew might base the conversation about duties on the 613 mitzvot and a Catholic on Church encyclicals and bulls. Most Unitarian Universalists, however, do not consider Scripture and tradition as authoritative sources for grounding claims about moral obligations. Our nonnegotiable assumptions about human beings are anthropological ones: to say that human beings have *inherent* worth simply by virtue of their human-being-ness is an anthropological claim.

I contend, then, that Unitarian Universalist duties are properly designated as such because, as a religious community, we ground duties in fundamental anthropological claim.

If I have chosen Cicero and Kant to explore the question of Unitarian Universalist duties, I have done so because, like most of today's Unitarian Universalists, they rely on anthropological claims to ground their ethics and their understanding of duties. Born over two millennia ago, and thus before Christ, Cicero continues (mostly) to appeal to a contemporary mindset prudentially concerned with well-being. Kant reprises moral themes explored by Cicero but takes a more familiar, Enlightenment approach, albeit advancing a more challenging, idealistic moral stance more concerned with right action for its own sake rather than concern about that action's potentially nefarious effect on our well-being.

III. A Few Definitions

While I have already offered a definition of duty, a few more definitions will prove helpful.

Complete (or Perfect) duty: A duty that admits of no exception [Paton, 31].

Incomplete (or Imperfect) duty: A duty that admits of some choice (i.e., the duty of developing our talents, and of helping others; these are incomplete duties because "we are to some extent entitled to decide which talents we will develop and which persons we will help") [Paton, 31].

Morality vs. justice vs. legal system—what's the difference? A story to help clarify: A father took his son to a baseball game. One of the batters hit the ball high into the air. It landed on the son, requiring a trip to the emergency room. The father sued the baseball franchise (was his decision moral?). He won a large award (by the legal system). Was justice served?

IV. If An Ethical Framework Exists, What Does It Look Like? Cicero's Answer

In his book *On Duties*, Cicero argues that duties have their roots in four principal virtues. These are (1) learning, (2) sociability—which may also be called justice, (3) greatness of spirit—which may also be called kindness and liberality, and (4) moderation [Cicero, Bk I:152]. He gives priority to the virtue of sociability because, unlike the other three virtues, it is primarily concerned with "the fellowship of the human race" [Cicero, Bk I:153]. For this reason, the *duties* of justice (based on the *virtue* of sociability) are to be

given precedence over other duties such as the *duties* of pursuing knowledge (based on the *virtue* of learning). Why? Because only the *duties* of justice look “to the benefit of [human] kind and a [human being] should hold nothing more sacred than that” [Cicero, Bk I:20, 155].

The basis of Cicero’s claims about duty is an *empirical* anthropology since, for him, sociability, the principal virtue and the source of the duties of justice, is an inherent and observable part of human nature. Cicero acknowledges that some thinkers believe that human beings merely band together into communities “to provide for life’s necessities just because we could not manage, without others, to provide ourselves with our natural requirements.” However, he contests this claim by inviting us to participate in a thought-experiment. He asks us to imagine a scholar who is magically provided with all her scholarly needs. Even this scholar, Cicero points out, would “flee from loneliness, seeking a companion for [her] studies” [Cicero, Bk I:158]. Cicero agrees instead with the Stoics’ view that “[human beings] are born for the sake of [human beings], so that they may be able to assist each other. Consequently, we ought in this to follow nature as our leader, to contribute to the common stock the things that benefit everyone together, and, by the exchange of dutiful services, by giving and receiving expertise and effort and means, to bind fast the fellowship of [human beings] with each other” [Cicero, Bk I:22].

To preserve and protect the inborn sociality he ascribes to men and women, Cicero argues against false promising and advocates remaining true to the spirit of one’s oath, “for on the question of keeping faith, you must always think of what you meant, not of what you said” [Cicero, Bk I:40]. Even if one has “been constrained by circumstance to promise anything to an enemy, they must keep faith even in that” [Cicero, Bk I:39]. He also writes that “certain duties must be observed even towards those at whose hands you may have received unjust treatment. There is a limit to revenge and to punishment. I am not even sure that it is not enough simply that the man who did the harm should repent of his injustice, so that he himself will do no such thing again, and others will be slower to act unjustly” [Cicero, Bk I:33].

While he wishes reason to preserve and protect the sociality natural to human beings, Cicero does not attempt to set out a complete code of moral behavior with a clearly specified action-plan for every situation in which an agent may find him or herself. His goal is to offer a practical ethics aimed at young Romans of the governing class (such as his son) who are interested in making moral progress and who are inclined to choose what is honorable (i.e., praiseworthy) rather than interested merely in what is “personally advantageous” or beneficial [Griffin, intro, xxii-xxiii].

Instead of a complete code, he outlines a few basic considerations and recommends that we develop the habit of examining each situation in light of them. He argues that “we should adopt this habit and should practice so that we can become good calculators of our duties, and can see by adding and subtracting what is the sum that remains: from this you can understand how much is owed to each person” [Cicero, Bk I:59].

To this end, he provides a *formula* akin to a “rule of thumb.” (Cicero borrows, from Roman civil law, the term *formula*, which is Latin for “rule of procedure” [Cicero, Bk III:19, n3].) To solve moral quandaries, we simply need to gather as much information as we can about the situation and then apply this simple and universal formula to help

us reach the ‘right’ decision. Cicero’s formula (or as he also calls it, the “law of human fellowship”) states: “it is contrary to nature to secure a benefit for oneself at someone else’s expense” [Griffin, intro, xxv].

Cicero divides duties into two categories:

1. Middle or shared duties (Gk: *kathekon*), meaning duties for which a *persuasive* reason can be given as to why they are duties (called “shared” duties because they count as duties both for the so-called “wise” person and for the so-called “ordinary” person).
2. Complete or “right” duties (Gk: *katorthoma*), meaning duties which are *right*. Only the wise person who fully possesses every virtue can perform a right action. An action is considered a “right” action because apart from its consequences, it is perfect and complete in itself.

Two-tiered ethics such as Cicero’s have existed throughout the history of ethics, in part because they appeal to the distinction we have, and continue to make, between average persons and persons we recognize as leading morally exemplary lives. This may explain why, even today, a two-tiered ethics continues to play a role: in contemporary American tort law, those with higher levels of education are held to a higher standard based on the premise that they possess the critical-thinking skills needed for greater moral discernment. Although we may be troubled by Cicero’s two-tiered ethics, it reflects the different expectations for the “ordinary” person and the “wise” man which is codified in our current legal system as well as embedded in popular opinion—namely, many Americans hold clergy, public officials, and lawyers, among others, to a higher standard of moral behavior than decreed of the average citizen.

Although it may be in keeping with the commonly held view that certain persons are more capable than others of making the right moral decisions, an ethics like the one enshrined in American law and Cicero’s two-tiered ethics can be criticized for its elitist and patronizing assumptions. Problematically, it divides humankind into two types of persons—one capable of nothing more than an imperfect morality—“ordinary” ethics, and the superior-other capable of perfect morality—“wise” ethics. Each of the two tiers assigns different duties to different types of persons based on their capacities for moral decision-making.

In addition, Cicero’s ethics is tied to the probabilistic philosophy of the skeptics of the New Academy. Cicero chose the Latin word *probabile* (“persuasive”) to translate the Greek word for “reasonable” (justified) because it suggests the skeptical Academy’s view that what is *probabile* can serve as a basis for action. In this school of thought, *probabil*-ism (from Latin *probare*, to test, approve) is the doctrine that in the absence of certainty, *probabil*-ity is the best criterion for reaching a decision. This practical doctrine is intended to assist those who are skeptical about the possibility of objective knowledge: it presupposes that although such knowledge is impossible, a person may rely on strong beliefs in practical judgments concerning ordinary matters. The probabilism of Cicero’s “ordinary” ethics is based on the assumption that nothing can be pronounced absolutely right. However, it also assumes that some actions seem more persuasively right to us than other actions; thus we are to be guided by what is persuasively *most* right. The greater the number of opinions we can collect, the greater the probability that the majority opinion is correct in its judgment of what constitutes “right” duty.

Here, I want to call attention to Cicero's use of a simple formula, or rule of procedure, to identify one's moral duties and to the public and probabilistic approach on which he relies to determine what constitutes "right" action—or at least, what is most likely to constitute "right" action based on majority opinion. He advocates using a "public" rule of procedure that meets our reason's exacting standards and encourages us to evaluate our options in any given situation over and against "public" moral principles—he personally advocates the law of human fellowship.

Indeed, Unitarian Universalists rely on a similar approach in selecting the UUA's seven principles and in selecting their congregation's covenants. The seven principles, as well as the congregation's covenants, are subjected to democratic assessment and open debate (a "public" test of reason) before being accepted by the movement (in the case of the seven principles) and by a congregation (in the case of a covenant). Like Cicero, we incorporate probabilism into our process of developing a public consensus on movement-wide and congregation-wide principles. By and large, we also accept that most of us best fit his category of "ordinary" person. As a result, we bind ourselves to those duties for which a persuasive reason can be given as to why they are duties. Even if we did not participate in the democratic process from which the seven principles and our congregation's covenant arose, we are invited to examine these closely and after a freely conducted evaluation, to decide, for ourselves, whether they match what we believe constitutes "right" obligations.

Because Unitarian Universalists already rely on a democratic process as a religious community, by extension, many of us, I believe, would be comfortable with a Ciceronian approach to identifying personal moral duties. We could, as he recommends, develop a set of formulas or principles to help us determine what counts, for us, as "right" action and moral obligations. These formulas or principles, tested against the prevalent opinion of fellow Unitarian Universalists, would help confirm or contradict our own assessment. We would remain free to make adjustments based on this information. No doubt, such a probabilistic approach to determining a systematic and coherent set of duties has much to recommend it.

Nonetheless, I want to sound a note of alarm. Although a Ciceronian, probabilistic approach lies at the core of Unitarian Universalism's institutional process for identifying movement- and congregation-wide moral principles, during the two-hundred-year history of Unitarianism, Universalism, and Unitarian Universalism, majority opinion, more often than not, merely reflected the majority opinion of liberal Americans. Thus, for much of our history, we accorded less than equal status to women, African-Americans, economically disadvantaged peoples, and other groups. Unitarians and Universalists have a checkered record on the practice of slavery in the U.S. For these reasons, we should pause and reflect before we give our unqualified support to a probabilistic approach to identifying "right" duty. Cicero himself found justification for tyrannicide and defended the murder of Caesar "by men who had been his friends" [Griffin, intro, xxvi]. He also held that the moral norms consistent with the philosophical concept of a "good" man are equivalent to the traditional Roman aristocratic code of behavior [Griffin, intro, xxvii]. And, although he advocated justice even toward the lowest of the low, going so far as to instruct his upper-class readers to treat slaves "as if they were employees" by requiring their labor but granting them "just treatment," he did not call into question the practice of slavery [Cicero, Bk I:41].

The solution may lie in the use of practical reason. Cicero avers that reason must serve as the ultimate arbiter of what counts as a duty. In the following passage, as in several other passages, he appeals to reason and to reason's priority over what he considers thoughtless impulses to act: "Much more, however, we ought to strive to ensure that the movement of our spirit does not abandon nature.… The spirit can be moved in two ways: by thought or by impulse. Thought is for the most part occupied with seeking what is true, while impulse drives one to act. We must therefore take care to exercise our thought on the best possible subjects, and to render our impulses obedient to reason" [Cicero, Bk I:131-2].

Cicero's insistence that reason be given priority over impulse or feeling when making moral decisions is echoed by Immanuel Kant some 1800 years later. Cicero's use of a simple and universal formula to assess what is required of us in any given situation is also an important component of Kant's moral philosophy. However, not until Kant was reason fully explored as the vehicle to establish our duties. Kant relies on practical (moral) reason alone to establish the universal formulas (three in his case) on which we, human beings, should rely to assess our intentions in acting (rather than to assess the situation as with Cicero). Reason, available to all human beings, thus, for Kant, serves as the ultimate arbiter and, unlike Cicero's probabilistic approach is (*ideally*) not influenced by historical shifts in society's majority opinion and values. Indeed, the moral principles Kant develops on the basis of practical reason alone (rather through a process of public evaluation and dialogue) reject unequal status, slavery, and tyrannicide. Kant rejects a double-tiered ethic like Cicero's and argues that every human being is capable of adhering to the complete or "right" duties. As such, we are to choose the "right" action regardless of its possible consequences whether good or ill.

V. If An Ethical Framework Exists, What Does It Look Like? Kant's Answer

With Christianity's ascent in the Western world, conceptions of moral duty grounded in reason like Cicero's yielded to ones grounded in Scripture (even philosophically inclined theologians like Thomas Aquinas were compelled to attempt to reconcile Scripture to reason). During the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, thinkers like Kant revolted against the dominant Christian tradition and labored to emancipate moral philosophy from the authority of Scripture. Kant sought to base moral claims exclusively on a *philosophical* anthropology.

Like Cicero, Kant defends the need for a philosophical approach to duty. Although he sympathizes with the desire to rely on inherited wisdom and one's conscience in making moral judgments, he nonetheless argues that "even wisdom…does require science as well…in order to win acceptance and durability for its own prescriptions" [Kant, Sec. 22, p. 73]. He describes duty as a kind of reverence, an awareness of a value so much above other values, that it demolishes self-love [Kant, n16, p. 69]. He also cautions against what he calls humankind's natural dialectic—the "disposition to quibble with these strict laws of duty, to throw doubt on their validity or at least on their purity and strictness, and to make them, where possible, more adapted to our wishes and inclinations; that is, to pervert their very foundations and destroy their whole dignity" [Kant, Sec. 23, p. 73]. To counter our natural dialectic, Kant argues, we

must rely on moral philosophy, the rational science best suited to assist us in making judgments consistent with the demands of duty.

Unlike Cicero, Kant advocates a single-tier ethics based on the premise that any human being can (and should) aspire to be a Ciceronian "wise" person who can (and should) act virtuously at all times without concern for consequences. A perfectly moral being does not require moral constraints to act morally—she does not do her duty out of prudential or self-serving reasons, she does her duty for duty's sake alone.

Kant is more interested in the motives that give rise to our actions than in the actions themselves. Why? Because an action motivated by the best of intentions may, in spite of those good intentions, turn out to be harmful. Nonetheless, even when an action has a bad outcome, what counts, for Kant, is that the motive for that action was moral. He develops technical terminology to refer to the inner, personal, and thus subjective principles that guide our actions—he calls them *maxims*. This helps him make an important distinction between (1) *maxims*, which are internal to us and thus subjective, and (2) *principles,* which are external to us and thus objective.

Kant argues that we human beings possess the unique faculty of *practical* reason (which he distinguishes from *theoretical* reason whose function is to seek knowledge). Because we possess practical reason, we can, in our (philosophically speaking) freedom, not only reach a judgment about what we "ought" to do, but we are also capable (philosophically speaking) of doing what we judge we "ought" to do. Freedom, for Kant, is required for us to have the possibility of making moral decisions. Without freedom, we have no ability to choose, and without the ability to choose, our maxims or intentions could neither count as moral or immoral. Thus, freedom is the condition for the possibility of moral judgments.

The relationship between freedom and duty adumbrated by Kant reverberates even today. Like Kant, the contemporary Christian theologian Dwight Hopkins describes freedom of choice as the condition for the possibility of moral deliberation:

> Each of us is capable of discerning differences and weighing alternatives *to reason through* and implement options based on one's best judgment at a given time and circumstance. Choice, too, implies intentionality on a person's part wherein the self does not merely or automatically suffer the whims and arbitrariness of mindless group rambling or herd mentality. A human being deliberates on and adopts a conscious intent. Consequently and concomitantly, an individual shoulders responsibility for unique thoughts and decisions. Each is responsible for her or his own actions in a given situation [Hopkins, 110-11].

Without denying that Kant's philosophical system is daunting, his moral doctrine can briefly be summarized as follows: "He holds that a man is morally good, not so far as he acts from passion or self-interest, but so far as he acts on an impersonal principle valid for others as well as for himself. This is the essence of morality" [Paton, 31].

How is one to identify the impersonal and fundamental principle(s) valid for others as well as oneself? The short answer is through practical reason. Only practical reason, that inherent faculty, succeeds in making an unconditional claim on us. The

content of reason's unconditional claim is to be determined without regard to the empirical nature of things and without regard for consequences.

For Kant, decisions about what we should do (even if we don't actually do it) are based on practical reason alone because only reason has the ability to develop principles in a logical and well-organized manner. Logical and well-organized principles enable us to assess in a reliable way whether our moral maxims or intentions are indeed moral. Reason, when it is functioning properly, demands and generates principles that it can understand and approve. Insofar as we seek to think rationally about the world and to act rationally in the world, we can identify rational principles and grasp how they are necessary for any other rational person [Paton, 14]. Principles derived from reason are principles that human beings can share and discuss with others—hence, they can be placed under public purview and assessment—a possible (although not necessary) step in confirming their rigor. Dwight Hopkins reaches a similar conclusion:

> With intentional choice come responsibility and accountability for the sublime and for the atrocious. Personal initiative dictates submission of choice to public scrutiny, ridicule, and further reformulation of deliberate decision making [Hopkins, 111].

Unlike Cicero, Kant's reason-derived, universal principle does not require the *imprimatur* of the greatest number of supporting opinions to attest to its validity. For Kant, this principle, also called the law of duty, is both self-chosen and self-"enforced" by our practical reason. The external, objective law of duty constitutes a categorical imperative because our reason accepts its imperatives and agrees that we should obey it categorically—in other words, without exception. If a duty is imperative, it is imperative because it is valid morally—in other words, it is valid at all times for all persons [Paton, vi]. To qualify as a categorical imperative, or as an objective law of morality, the maxim "you will not lie" must hold not just for me but also for everyone; otherwise, it fails to rise above the level of suggestion or recommendation or preference. While the application of the categorical imperative is more difficult than Kant anticipated, it nonetheless establishes an important distinction between actions motivated by duty (by what is right) and those that are merely prudential and impulsive (a distinction also noted by Cicero).

At first glance, Kant's categorical imperative appears rather vague but it is only intended to provide us with the minimum that can be said about duty. Throughout the *Groundwork*, Kant focuses only on the most general types of duty. Kant argues that the categorical imperative can be made more explicit if expressed in the form of three formulas, each of which states a different, but complementary aspect of what the categorical imperative enjoins us to do. These formulas serve as tests to check the morality of our maxims. Like Cicero, then, Kant also relies on formulas—just as one might use a formula to solve a math problem, one can use a formulation of the categorical imperative to solve a moral problem.

Used together (although the way in which Kant intended them to be used has and continues to be debated), the three formulas determine whether a maxim invokes a duty that I should ("ought" to) choose to follow in *every* instance (a categorical

imperative) or whether my maxim merely serves to advance some personal purpose or desire (what Kant calls a hypothetical imperative).

Kant's three formulas of the categorical imperative are as follows:

1. *Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.*
   If we wish to test the maxim tied to our choice of a given action we must ask whether, if universally adopted, this maxim would result in a harmony of purposes between ourselves and all other human beings. Only if this is the case can we say it is "fit to be willed as a universal moral law" [Paton, 31].

2. *Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.*
   Because all actions must have an end (a goal) as well as a principle, and because all persons are ends in themselves (human beings have an unconditioned and absolute value), it is wrong to use others simply as means to an end (whose value is, compared to human beings, only relative).

3. *Act as if you were through your maxims a law-making member of a kingdom of ends.*
   Since we are ends in ourselves, only we can be authors of the laws to which we freely bind ourselves—this is what gives us our supreme, intrinsic worth—what is considered our inherent "dignity." So far as all persons are subject to universal laws which they themselves make, they constitute a kingdom—that is, a State or commonwealth [Paton, 35-36].

Contemporary scholars sometimes recommend adding a fourth formula to Kant's original three:

4. *Act in a the way you would choose after setting aside your own biography and imagining the viewpoints of other persons*
   This advocates that we step behind the so-called veil of ignorance, an approach developed by the Kantian political philosopher John Rawls in his revolutionary work *A Theory of Justice*. Stepping behind the veil entails trying to imagine what decisions we might make if we ignored empirical facts about ourselves and instead adopted the perspective of persons of different ages, genders, socioeconomic classes, biographies, colors, sexual orientations, etc.

Kant asserts that the first formula, the Formula of Universal Law, is the strictest test to apply to a maxim because it is the one primarily concerned with the motive of moral action [Paton, 36], while "the purpose of the others is to bring the Idea of duty closer" to the imagination. Through the strict application of these formulas to a set of "real-life" examples, Kant concludes "we have a perfect duty *not* to use ourselves or

others *merely* as a means to the satisfaction of our inclinations. We have an imperfect, but *positive*, duty to further the ends of nature in ourselves and in others—that is, to seek our own perfection and the happiness of others" [Paton, 34].

Like Cicero, Kant does not attempt to set out a complete code of moral behavior with a detailed action plan for every situation in which the agent may find him or herself. According to the Kantian scholar Allen Wood,

> Kant rejects the idea that moral conclusions about what we should do can ever be rigorously deduced from the principle of morality together with some set of factual propositions. Moral rules or duties are rather to be viewed as interpretations of the fundamental principle of morality or the principle of right under the general conditions of human life and perhaps also more specific empirical circumstances. Kant also holds that moral choices involve the application of judgment to the application of moral rules and principles. Both in theoretical and practical matters, concepts, rules or discursive principles never determine everything all the way down to the particular instance [KrV A132-136/B171-175].

Some critics of Kant object to his argument that the proper motive for duty is duty itself, rather than a feeling like love. Indeed, they wonder whether it isn't preferable to carry out moral obligations motivated by love rather than by duty alone. While Kant acknowledges that Scripture commands us to love our neighbor and even our enemy, he also notes that the feeling of love cannot be commanded (no feeling can: imagine someone demanding that you feel happy, right now. Or sad, right now. Or giddy, right now). Only *actions* can be commanded. This prompts Kant to write, "love out of inclination cannot be commanded; but kindness done from duty…can be an object of command"; in other words, *acts* of kindness can be commanded but not *feelings* of love [Kant, Sec. 13, p. 67].

The philosopher and Kantian expert Barbara Herman agrees that when others help us, we prefer that they act out of love for us rather than out of a sense of duty. However, she agrees with Kant that "it is also rational to prefer that they be morally prepared to help as well, so that in the absence or distraction or exhaustion of such feelings they will still be there for me" [Herman, 36].

Cicero also expresses the same kind of worry as Kant—namely that fellow-feeling may fail to motivate us to do our duty: "On the subject of the goodwill that each person has towards us, the first consideration of duty is that we should grant the most to the one who is most fond of us; but we should judge goodwill not as adolescents do, by the strength of its burning passion, but rather by its firmness and constancy" [Cicero, Bk I:47]. Elaborating further, Cicero writes: "For many men do many things out of a certain rashness, failing to use their judgment, or maybe inspired by a frenzied or sudden impulse of the spirit towards everyone, like a gust of wind. Such favours should not be considered as important as those that are conferred through judgment…" [Cicero, Bk I:49].

Not only does relying on reason alone to identify the objective, universal formulas of the categorical imperative buttress those formulas against the undermining effects of our natural dialectic and of society's accepted norms, but Kant also solves the problems

related to the kind of probabilism, or consensus-based procedure, Cicero advocates when choosing formulas. For Kant, because reason has inhered in persons since the beginning of our species, and will continue to inhere in persons until the end of our species, it is capable of identifying the same moral formulas, whether yesterday, today, or tomorrow. And because of reason's consistent operation, moral formulas retain their form whenever and as long as reason remains true to its own conclusions—that is to say, as long as the agent successfully resists his or her natural dialectic, and remains unswayed by the assault of the current (but perhaps erroneous) majority opinion of society. Universal, moral principles—to qualify as such—remain ever accessible to us through our practical reason. The moral law has not, does not, will not change—if history demonstrates anything, it demonstrates the corrosive power of the natural dialectic, the seductiveness of feelings, and the ability of common opinion to distort reason's conclusions.

VI. Discussion

Unitarian Universalists often claim that what binds us together are common values. And yet, when challenged to explain why their moral views are preferable to those of others, they often begin to qualify their answers. They understand that not all cultures share the same ideas about what constitutes a moral framework and they grow uncomfortable when they are asked to defend their moral commitments or asked why they deem their moral code superior (superior by implication since otherwise, why would they have chosen it?). Having rejected sacred texts as authoritative sources of moral norms, we no longer ground our moral claims in them. As a result, we find it difficult to justify why we have chosen one set of moral commitments over another when speaking to someone who doesn't already subscribe to our point of view.

Unitarian Universalists recognize that morality makes special demands on us. Unless we adopt a skeptical or contrarian stance, this is not a controversial observation. If we seek an ethics that promotes self-respect, then we take an interest in the concept of duty. We also take an interest in whether and how we are to resist the temptation to pursue perceived (or actual) goods when these are at odds with doing what is right.

Embedded in the moral framework which undergirds the day-to-day decisions that we make lie certain views, commonly held among us, about duty or obligation. By and large, we resist the language of duty or obligation *per se*, because we tend to think of duty or obligation as something demanded of us and imposed upon us by other people or by external circumstances. However, I have focused, in this paper, on another kind of obligation—the kind we freely choose for ourselves with respect to other persons. For example, when we use phrases like, "I ought to do such and such because it's the *right* thing to do," or "I want to do *right* by so and so," we acknowledge that we have chosen and imposed certain duties on ourselves. Moreover, the moral lessons we impart to our children as well as the moral lessons we incorporate into our congregations' youth religious education programs reflect the self-chosen duties to which many of us subscribe both individually and as members of the Unitarian Universalist religious community.

Unitarian Universalists, in unguarded moments for which they should be lauded, describe what they expect of themselves and what they expect of their children in terms

reminiscent of Kant and Cicero. False promising and lying are not suggestions, but assume the weight of law, legislated and imposed not by some outside power but by the self, for the self, upon the self. Recognition of the moral law brings, along with it, motivation: "the really important point is that the moral law is not valid merely because it interests us. On the contrary, it interests us because we recognize it to be valid" [Paton, 49]. In terms drawn straight from Kantian philosophy, Unitarian Universalists affirm the inherent worth of every person. We *affirm* this inherent worth. We do much more than "tend to lean" toward the inherent worth of every person. We do much more than "propose" the inherent worth of every person. We do much more than "suggest" or "recommend" this worth. We affirm it as self-evident. And yet, when asked to defend it, we recognize it as an anthropological claim.

From this claim, duties arise. Moral philosophies like Kant's and Cicero's offer a procedure to ascertain those duties. Kant proposes that we ascertain our duties by refracting our maxims through the three formulas of the categorical imperative (which he also calls the "moral law"). As for Cicero, he proposes that we examine each situation in light of a formula (or what he also calls "law of human fellowship"); in his case, the formula is: it is contrary to nature to secure a benefit for oneself at someone else's expense. Both Kant and Cicero advance a concept of duty that can be determined using formulas that are (deceptively) simple, universal, and objective. Both insist that duty requires sacrifice and commitment. Kant, as described by the philosopher Thomas Nagel, is "explicitly and consciously driven by the demand for an ethical system whose motivational grip is not dependent on desires which must simply be taken for granted.…From Kant's efforts one sees what a struggle is required…to put ethical principles themselves at the absolute source of our moral conduct" [Nagel, 11]. The same can be said of Cicero. While moral perfectionists like Cicero and Kant may make us uncomfortable with their impossible demands, they also inspire us and recall us to our higher selves.

When ascertaining our moral obligations at the congregational level as well as the movement level, Unitarian Universalists rely on a procedure that mirrors that of Cicero's. That is to say, we choose principles through a democratic process that includes public debate and a vote. Our open procedure of evaluation and open invitation to all members to participate is, like the Ciceronian probabilistic approach, based on the notion that the more persons agree on a principle, the more likely it is to be a "right" principle. Skeptical about whether, epistemologically speaking, we can ever "know" with absolute certainty what constitutes "right" duty, we rely on publicizing candidate principles followed by a period of dialogue and assessment before reaching an official, but still nonbinding, decision. Those who join the movement and congregations after the vote are invited to study the seven principles and asked to repeat the covenant in unison with other members during Sunday services. Nonetheless, they remain autonomous in the sense that they are free to choose which, if any, of the UUA or covenantal principles to which they may, freely, bind themselves. Cicero's procedure for choosing a formula or moral principle to ascertain "shared" duties replicates the democratic process already at work in the lives of Unitarian Universalists, but develops it at the level of the individual person. For those already familiar with such a procedure at the movement and congregational levels, adapting Cicero's procedure to identify their

personal obligation to other persons (and perhaps by extension, even animals and the planet) seems straightforward.

However, prophetic voices among us may fail to persuade the majority of the rightness of their position. A democratic process may, as it has in the past, merely lead to some of the more notable moral lapses evident in the history of Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists. At various times, our religious communities have failed to denounce slavery, the inequality of women, discrimination against GLBT people, economic disparities, etc. Such lapses, in hindsight, shock us. However, when slavery, the unequal status of women, etc., constituted the status quo of the times, we found ourselves unable to critique standard practices and failed to question the accepted moral framework. Historian David Robinson, addressing our role in abolitionism, wrote about the different strands of antislavery evident among Unitarian ministers: “the immediate abolitionists…and the gradualists, disturbed by slavery but distanced for a number of reasons from abolitionist politics. Another more cautious and conservative group also existed among the Unitarians who opposed slavery but were even more reluctant to make the political commitment to stop it. These divisions within the denomination reflected its history and social position. As a denomination of the more prosperous, the Unitarians had much interest in social order and stability” [Robinson, 84].

If we adopt a democratic process akin to Cicero’s probabilistic approach, how do we avoid choosing principles other than those that mirror the liberal, middle-class values prevalent among us? Like our Unitarian ancestors, we remain interested in social order and stability. In order to make room for a prophetic impulse, our chosen principles must remain the subject of public discussion at the congregational and the movement level so that we might, inasmuch as possible, continue to call into question what we perhaps too easily, but incorrectly, accept as “right” duties.

Many Unitarian Universalists will reject a Kantian approach because, as postmoderns, we are keenly aware of differences between persons and cultures; hence, we resist Kant’s assumption that reason operates in the same way in all individuals across all cultures—an assumption that must hold fast if reason is to produce, as he insists, a single, universal, objective, categorical imperative. We may also resist his demand that practical reason can operate as a separate faculty, immune from desires and inclinations. In his defense, his is a philosophical anthropology, not an empirical one—his starting place is not the human being located in a community, family, and personal history. This enables him to invite us into a kind of thought-experiment about what human beings could aspire to be, morally speaking, if they could extirpate themselves from the competing and conflicting demands of ordinary existence. Much remains to be learned from Kant’s demanding views on duty, especially his challenge that we do our duty only for duty’s sake, his challenge to strive to live a wise person’s ethics, his challenge to be perfect in doing the ‘right’ thing regardless of the benefits or costs.

Some will also accuse Kant of having been unduly optimistic about our ability to free our practical reason from the influences of our natural dialectic, our biography, and our society. In fact, Kant had enormous clarity about the difficulties posed by the demand of that we do our duty motivated by duty alone—this clarity led him to recommend that we participate in religious communities that could support and comfort

us when we failed (inevitably) to do our duty and could encourage us to remain committed to doing better. Kant challenges us to aspire always to do what is right, while he remains aware of how difficult this demand actually is.

Both Cicero and Kant can help us move forward with the moral work of ascertaining our moral duties. However, as long as we Unitarian Universalists eschew the language of obligation, we will, as a religious movement, also eschew honest, open, and engaged conversation about what is required of us. As long as this remains the state of affairs, our moral frameworks will remain mired in implied but inchoate assumptions. And as long as this remains the state of affairs, our congregations will necessarily fall short in performing one of their important functions—that of sustaining us in our efforts to do what is morally right.

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