“Two things fill my mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often one reflects on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.”

(Conclusion of Critique of Practical Reason, 5:162)

“Duty! Sublime and mighty name that embraces nothing charming or insinuating but requires submission, and yet does not seek to move the will by threatening anything that would arouse natural aversion or terror in the mind but only holds forth a law that of itself finds entry into the mind and yet gains reluctant reverence (though not always obedience), a law before which all inclinations are dumb, even though they secretly work against it; what origin is there worthy of you, and where is to be found the root of your noble descent which proudly rejects all kinship with the inclinations, descent from which is the indispensable condition of that worth which human beings alone can give themselves?”

(Critique of Practical Reason, 5:86)

The Moral Feeling of Respect and Subordination as Subjective Determining Ground

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Part I: Introduction

Kant asserts that an action can only have moral worth if that action was done from duty, or from respect for the moral law. The purpose of this paper will be to explicate the significance of these phrases and the possibility of duty generating enough motivational force to be able to act as the determining ground for an action. There are two types of determining ground - objective and subjective - and in order for the moral law to be the motivating ground of our action, it must act as both types. Subjective determining grounds are the motivating grounds of an action. The inquiry into the mechanism by which the moral law acts as a subjective determining ground leads to and illuminates the moral feeling. The paper contains four main sections: first, I will explicate the objective and subjective determining ground distinction. Second, I will give an account of how, specifically, the moral law acts as a subjective determining ground by examining the positive and negative aspect of the moral feeling (which are not two different feelings altogether, but rather two different ways of perceiving the same phenomenon). Third, I will draw on Kant’s earlier text, specifically his notion of subordination, to clarify how Kant imagines the subjective experience of acting from the moral law.

Before I start it is important to realize why this discussion of the moral feeling is important, and why we should care how it acts as motivating force for our actions. First of all, curiosity should motivate us to look into how Kant explains the existence of another type of desire that is not generated by our sensory interactions with the world. If we cannot come up with an adequate theory of feeling that would allow us to consider something a feeling that is not caused by our senses, then we run into a problem reading Kant, who writes fairly clearly that the moral feeling is indeed a feeling. But this discussion’s role is more important than appeasing our
curiosity; it saves Kant from the objection that his morality is divorced from the nature of the human animal, and it is entirely unviable as something that humans could actually do. How could we act if we do not act according to a feeling or desire we have? It seems all of our intentional actions need something incentivizing or motivating us to act.

Some academics criticize Kant’s theory of action for denying this premise. Chad Wellmon summarizes these criticisms well, writing, “Echoing Hegel’s famous claim that Kant’s moral philosophy is nothing but an ‘empty formalism,’ contemporary scholars have suggested that Kant ignores the ‘visceral’ elements of the human and has ‘no sympathy for man’s natural needs.’ Kant’s notion of freedom, or so it is implied, is synonymous with an individual autonomy that would transcend nature and subordinate the body to reason.”

1 Heinrich Heine, the German poet, described Kant as an almost robotic, sterile, passionless figure.2 So, perhaps it is the case that Kant really did have a bizarre notion of feeling, and when he writes, “moral feeling”, the sort of feeling Kant is talking about here does not fall into the category of this type of “feeling”. Rather, it is merely a way in which the will determines its general orientation from the moral law; the moral law is content-less and determines the morality of an action purely formally. All the moral law does is formally determine which maxims are morally admissible with sufficient force for us to act morally. Focusing solely on the objective aspect of the moral law ignores the way in which reason is subjectively determining, and hence ignores the way that it intersects with the aspects of human nature other than our rational capacity.

And if Kant is read in this manner, then it does seem to be empty formalism with no way to really motivate humans to act. But I think that this reading disregards much of what Kant

2 Ibid. 558
writes and unfairly exposes him to this criticism. Indeed, an account of Kant’s morality which focuses on the way in which it is objectively determining and omits how it is a subjectively determining ground may indeed be rightly criticized for being too detached from human existence. However, in examining the latter, it becomes clear that the moral law does not “transcend” human nature, but rather embraces it. The moral feeling is generated not only by our existence as rational beings, but also our physical nature; the moral law does not demand of us that we completely transcend our sensibility.

Finally, the purpose of this paper is to at least partially uncover and specify a method by which we can act morally. Crucially, we can never know if we are indeed acting from the moral law or rather in accordance with it. I absolutely do not mean to be understood as giving a formula for determining whether or not we are acting from the moral law (I foresee some interpreting my claim as ‘if you act this way and get this feeling then you are acting morally’). No, we cannot tell if we are acting from duty or rather in conformity with it, and Kant makes this point clear. It would be equally incorrect, however, to assert that we have no way of acting morally; if this were the case, then all morality would be practically useless. Even if we cannot tell when we are acting morally, certainly we have the capacity to, and presumably understanding what it is to act morally can aid us in actually doing so. Therefore, my discussion here is designed to lead us further down the path of comprehending the method by which we incorporate the moral law into the determination of our actions and thus cultivate morality.

Part II: The Distinction Between Objective and Subjective Determining Grounds
To put it succinctly, objective determining grounds are those which tell us what we ought to do. Subjective determining grounds are what incentivize us do to what we do. There is always a subjective determining ground for any action we take. Likewise, that action can always be judged by the standard of reason to determine whether it was what we ought to have done.

Action from the moral law is acting with the moral law as both types of determining ground for the action. But when we speak of the moral law motivating an action, we key into the subjective aspect of how it determines our action. Kant draws this distinction and states explicitly in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that the moral law is an incentive insofar as it is a subjective determining ground:

> Thus the moral law, since it is a formal determining ground of action through practical pure reason and since it is also a material but only objective determining ground of the objects of action under the name of good and evil, is also a subjective determining ground – that is, an incentive – to this action inasmuch as it has influence on the sensibility of the subject and effects a feeling conducive to the influence of the law upon the will. (*Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:76)

Kant says here that the moral law is an incentive, but he is referencing a different aspect of it than the way in which it is a formal determining ground. The different formulations of the Categorical Imperative give good example of how it is objectively determining of the will. For example, Kant writes, “If a rational being is to think of his maxims as practical universal laws, he can think of them only as principles that contain the determining ground of the will not by their matter but only by their form.” (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:27) Essentially, when someone
universalizes their maxim, the *form* of the maxim, not its material context, is what determines the will. But it also causes a feeling of the will being influenced by the law. This feeling is the way in which it is a subjective determining ground. How it is a subjective determining ground and how we are to comprehend Kant’s subject matter must still be explicated, but Kant is clear that he believes it to be an incentive for action. Neither is this incentive somehow indirect: “What is essential to the moral worth of actions is *that the moral law determine the will immediately.*” (5:72)

The maxim is an objective determining ground only if it abides by the moral law; it is judged by reason to either be a good maxim or evil maxim, and it is not relative to the being that is debating whether or not to act on the maxim. Its morality is objectively determined, hence the name. How this maxim incentivizes the person, however, is a subjective matter. From this we see action being divided into two distinct parts: the maxim according to which the action is being executed, and the motivating cause for the creature to act according to that maxim. The objective determining grounds determines the former, and the subjective determining grounds determines the latter. It should be noted that when we act, we do so so immediately and unconsciously that we may not be aware of this duality until we reflect on it. While the two types of determining grounds seem to be determining two different things altogether, they are combined by our cognizing of an action as a singular entity. However, breaking the action into separate components allows the aligning of the different types of determining grounds with the actual human process of executing an action. These two aspects of an action are cognized as the purpose or intended consequence of an action and the motivation behind acting. Someone acts because s/he understands that action to have a purpose. The desire to achieve the goal of the action can act as the subjective motivating grounds, but this is distinct from the consideration of
what the goal is, and how that specific action could accomplish it. So the morality of an action is determined in two crucially different ways, and the two types are omnipresent in all human actions.

Kant says straightforwardly that the moral law as a subjectively determining grounds is an incentive. But this notion must be carefully nuanced as to avoid contradiction with Kant’s assertion that pure reason by itself is sufficient to determine the will. If it is the case that he also asserts that we are incentivized by the moral feeling, then Kant seems to fall into the contradiction of how pure reason can determine the will both by itself alone and with the accompaniment of the moral incentive? What sort of incentive is it? – it cannot be a reward, for then we would be acting to achieve a certain feeling for our own selves, and this seems to fall into the category of self-love. So it seems that saying that the moral law incentivizes us does not give us much we didn’t know earlier. However, this discussion opens a pathway into the infamously difficult passage “On the Incentives of Pure Practical Reason” to uncover exactly what sort of incentivizing work the moral law does. In the next section, I explain the mechanism by which reason affects our sensibility, and how it could possibly motivate us to act from duty without corrupting our motivations.

Part III: The Negative and Positive Feelings of Respect for the Moral Law

This section is designed to tease out Kant’s positive and negative aspects of the moral law. The basic idea is that both of these ways in which the moral law affects us comes from the removal of inclinations. The negative aspect of this removal is the sense in which is eliminates
motivations for acting. The positive aspect, which occurs simultaneously with this elimination, is the feeling of the advancement of reason in determining ones actions.

It is an analytic truth that all rational creatures have the capacity to reason, and it is in virtue of this capacity that we are able to experience the moral feeling. From this capacity comes the ability to represent to ourselves the moral law and consequently know what we ought to do. How are we to do what we know we ought to do? The answer is simultaneously simple and complex: we must be incentivized in such as way as to maintain our motivation from duty, namely, by the incentive of the moral disposition. Kant notes the difficulty in answering this question and provides a limit to our hopes: “For, how a law can be of itself and immediately a determining ground of the will (though this is what is essential in all morality) is for human reason an insoluble problem and identical with that of how a free will is possible.” (Critique of Practical Reason 5: 72) Here Kant does not mean to say that all discussion of how humans can act from moral duty is useless because it is an insoluble problem; indeed, he continues in the rest of the chapter “On the Incentives of Pure Practical Reason” to give an account of how we can act from pure practical reason, so he cannot mean this. Rather, the capacity we do have is “identical” to the capacity to act free of determination. Any discussion of the moral feeling, therefore, should be careful to avoid falling into the insoluble question of how this capacity is possible in the first place. He continues, “What we shall have to show, therefore, is not the ground from which the moral law in itself supplies an incentive but rather what it effects in the mind insofar as it is an incentive.” (Critique of Practical Reason 5: 72)

The most easily detectable sort of incentives there are seem to be the sensible ones (e.g. I am hungry, and if I eat I will be sated, so my incentive is to eat. This incentive is also an inclination to eat, but they should not be conflated as the same concept). The task is to
conceptualize an incentive which is not at the same time an inclination. Kant writes, “Sensible feeling, that is, the feeling which underlies our inclinations, is indeed the condition of that feeling we call respect, but the cause determining it lies in practical reason; and so this feeling, on account of its origin, cannot be called pathologically effected but must be called practically effected.” (5:76) From this we can understand the feeling to have not arisen pathologically but from consideration of the moral law. The puzzling part of this quote is Kant’s distinction between sensible feeling underlying inclination versus sensible feeling being the condition of respect. Kant continues, respect

is effected as follows: the representation of the moral law deprives self-love of its influence and self-conceit of its illusion, and thereby the hindrance to pure practical reason is lessened and the representation of the superiority of its objective law to the impulses of sensibility is produced and hence, by removal of the counterweight, the relative weightiness of the law (with regard to a will affected by impulses) in the judgment of reason. (Critique of Practical Reason 5:76)

The moral law determines the will objectively “in the judgment of reason” – as being a standard of judgment by which one can determine whether or not maxims are universilizable and in accordance with the categorical imperative. The moral law also determines the will subjectively: By representing the moral law to ourselves, our actions become less determined by the influence of self-love and less deluded by self-conceit. Kant understands self-love to be “the self-regard for love of oneself” and self-conceit to be “a predominant benevolence toward oneself or that of
satisfaction with oneself.” (5:73) Our faculty of desire – our pathologically determinable self – attempts to govern our actions. In each case, self-love and self-conceit prioritize “oneself” over all others. Specifically this aspect of them violates Kant’s universality principle. The idea is that in considering the moral law, therefore, one realizes the immoral influences and illusions of self-love and self-conceit and deprives them of this power and restricts them to be in agreement with the moral law.

The subjective determining grounds of self-love and self-conceit arise from inclination and are thus contrary to the subjective determining ground which comes from the moral law alone. Reducing those influence makes room, as it were, for the representation of the objective moral law, which subsequently is able to have a greater role in the determination of actions. Kant talks about weightiness, which I take to be a metaphor for the burden which accompanies having more inclinations. If one has thirty inclinations to satisfy, and one’s happiness is based on the satisfaction of those inclinations, that person will have a much harder time achieving happiness than the person with only two inclinations (this example is merely to serve the point of demonstrating the notion of reducing the “weight” of inclination on the will. Inclinations are not so easily and numerically measured like this). At the extreme, with no inclinations, humans would act from duty always. The representation of the moral law, actually reduces the burden of the sensible impulses. This notion helps us make sense of the difference between “underlying” and “being the condition of”. (This resolution is crucial, as reading Kant as saying that sensible feelings somehow underlie the feeling of respect would contradict everything up to this point, as well as Kant’s own writing when he writes, “Respect for the moral law is a feeling that is produced by an intellectual ground.” (Critique of Practical Reason 5:73) ) The former applies to sensible feelings as they constitute inclinations by being the conditions which shape the
incentive. The latter, quite differently, applies to the sensible feelings which are required for the
negation of inclinations. If for every inclination there is a sensible feeling underlying it, and
respect comes from the negation of that inclination, then respect is condition upon sensible
feeling inasmuch as there would be no inclination to negate were there no sensible feeling
underlying the inclination.

From this discussion we can draw out the two aspects of the moral feeling that occur
when the inclination is restricted by the consideration of the moral law: the negative aspect and
the positive aspect. “The negative effect on feeling (by the infringement upon the inclinations
that takes place),” Kant writes, “is itself feeling.” (Critique of Practical Reason 5:73) This
negation of inclination is a sort of pain: the cognition of pure practical reason relates to the
feeling of pleasure or displeasure by denying the satisfaction of the inclinations. Kant calls the
negative effect upon feeling “disagreeableness, humiliation, and intellectual contempt.” (5:75)
He is not speaking about these feelings as bad, however, as they advance the extent to which the
moral law determines action.

In the same moment that one experiences pain by restricting the influence of inclination,
the moral law is an object of our respect. In that it functions to weaken self-conceit. The moral
law, Kant writes, is “the ground of a positive feeling that is not of empirical origin and is
cognized a priori.” (5:73) The notion of this positive feeling is more elusive than that of the
negative notion, and the extent to which it is an actual “feeling” is what had lead to the confusion
over whether or not Kant is indeed talking about something that fits our normal conception of a
feeling. He writes,
But in relation to its positive ground, the law, it is at the same time called respect for the law; there is indeed no feeling for this law, but inasmuch as it moves resistance out of the way, in the judgment of reason this removal of a hindrance is esteemed equivalent to a positive furthering of its causality. Because of this, this feeling can now also be called a feeling of respect for the moral law, while on both grounds together it can be called a moral feeling. (5:75)

He seems to be wavering himself, saying both that “there is no feeling for this law” and that “this feeling can now be also called a feeling of respect for the moral law.” To reconcile this confusion, we must realize that by the first phrase Kant means that there is no feeling for the cognition of the law: The moral law, as we represent it in our minds, is a mere idea. There is no feeling for cognizing this law, just as there is no feeling for thinking any other mere idea. However, “in the judgment of reason,” or when we cognize the moral law and then judge our maxims by it, we remove the burdens and reduce the “weightiness” of inclination which interfere with our capacity to act morally. In this removal, since if we were to have no inclinations at all, all of our actions would be in accordance with the moral law, we further the causality of the moral law in our actions in general. *This furthering, this elimination of the weight of inclination* is what constitutes the positive aspect of the moral feeling. Kant does indeed mean to call this a “feeling”, albeit in a non-pathological and perhaps abnormal sense of the word, as it acts as the subjective determining grounds to incentivize us to follow the moral law. The feeling is the subjective effect of having the moral law act as one’s subjective determining grounds.

There is a possible misstep in the interpretation of this moral feeling – to understand the feeling of respect for the law as the reward for acting morally: in other words, the desire to act
morally is subjectively determined by one’s desire to experience the moral feeling. If this were the case, then my interpretation would conflict with the obligation to act from duty, or from respect for the law, rather than in conformity with it (in the former case the action is done for the sake of the law). In the case of this feeling incentivizing morality, one would not be acting from duty, but rather from the desire to experience the moral feeling. First, the moral feeling is not this type of feeling. I imagine the person raising this objection conceives of the feeling as almost being orgasmic or like eating a big chocolate cake. It is not this, but rather the removal of the desire for sensible rewards that motivates. The incentive in the case of chocolate cake is that I would no longer desire to eat the cake. By representing the moral law in my mind, I realize that the moral law determines my maxim to steal a chocolate cake whenever I am craving is evil. I work to remove this inclination from my motivating grounds, and in doing so, I free myself from its grasp. While this is clearly a negative sort of feeling, the furthering of the moral law in determining my will gives me freedom from the relentlessness of my chocolate addiction and permits me to use my rational capacity without this interference. Second and relatedly, there is a subtle but crucial difference to note in how the moral feeling is produced that distinguishes it from other feelings: one must act from the consideration of the moral law and from reason alone, not from the desire for the moral feeling. Rather than the feeling being the incentive to morality in the sense that the feeling produces the drive to act morally, “it is morality itself subjectively considered as an incentive inasmuch as pure practical reason, by rejecting all the claims of self-love in opposition with its own, supplies authority to the law, which now alone has influence.” (5:76) When Kant says “authority” here, I understand him to mean power over the legislation of the will. So, we remove from our motivations the inclinations which are in opposition with the moral law by considering the moral law itself to be an incentive. There is no
antecedent feeling that drives the subject to act morally - “this is impossible, since all feeling is sensible whereas the incentive of the moral disposition must be free from any sensible condition” (5:75). The production of the feeling therefore comes from reason alone – from the consideration of the moral law. This also helps clear up earlier confusion about Kant’s assertion that “the ground of a positive feeling that is not of empirical origin and is cognized a priori,” (5:73) which seemingly conflicts with the claim that all feeling is sensible. However, the former claim alludes to the origination of the feeling’s production in reason alone. This a priori cognition generates the moral feeling.

Part III: The Feeling of Subordination & The Alteration of Dominance

In Kant’s earlier texts, he invokes the notion of subordination to describe the moral feeling. The goal of this discussion is to elaborate on how we are to act from duty, and what the positive aspect of the moral feeling feels like. In essence, we are to subordinate ourselves to the moral law and in doing so be free. The inspection of this earlier text helps to draw out an undertone in Kant’s later text; namely, that of changing the dominant principle from being based in inclination to being based in reason.

Kant has the moral feeling in mind as early as 1764, as evident in Notes and Fragments. Kant references “the immediate sensation of morality” and other key components of his theory of moral feeling: Kant writes, “The threat of eternal punishment cannot be the immediate ground of morally good actions, although it may be a strong counterweight against temptations to evil so that the immediate sensation of morality is not outweighed.” (Notes and Fragments, 4) Moreover, Kant repeatedly gives examples of what he later calls in the Critique of Practical
Reason the lessening of the hindrances to pure practical reason: “[Internal moral grounds] can perhaps bring him to be good if, in a condition of freedom, he does not have great temptations.” (Notes and Fragments, 7) Further, “A person’s contentment arises from satisfying many inclinations with many agreeable things, or from not letting many inclinations sprout, and thus being satisfied with fewer fulfilled needs.” (Notes and Fragments, 21) The notion here is the same as in the second Critique that is integral to the discussion of moral feeling: temptations interfere with someone acting from moral grounds and, were there to be none, he would be able act with morality as his motivation. So not only does Kant reference the concept of moral grounding and a sensation of morality, but he also gives an account of the same intuition that he explicates in depth in the Critique of Practical Reason. This is justification enough for beginning to speculate about a similarity between this earlier text’s descriptions of the moral feeling and those in the second Critique.

Kant invokes the notion of subordination to describe the act of having one’s motivation determined by the moral law. He writes, “To subordinate everything to the free capacity for choice is the greatest perfection.” (Notes and Fragments, 35) Subordination initially seems like a puzzling word to use when talking about the free capacity for choice. Presumably, if we are subordinated then we are not free. The subordinator is above us and determining our actions. This intuition about the notion of subordination should be incorporated into the moral feeling and act as a clue into Kant’s thinking. The subordination is not exactly done by oneself to oneself, but rather by one’s rational capacity to one’s inclinations. The rational capacity is identical to the free capacity for choice. A complete subordination would be complete perfection. The process of subordination is the process of the perfection of the will. When Kant writes, “The moral feeling is the feeling of the perfection of the will,” (Notes and Fragments, 32) we should understand
perfection to be the process of perfecting, rather than the complete perfection, of the will. The latter interpretation would imply that the moral feeling only arises with this complete perfection which is certainly not what Kant wants to assert.

In Kant’s Lectures on Metaphysics, recorded sometime between 1764 and 1768, Kant writes, “Freedom is actually a faculty for subordinating all voluntary actions to motives of reason.” And further, “Freedom consists in the capacity to act independently of external determining grounds in accordance with the intellectual power of choice. All sensibility is subordinated to this.” (Notes and Fragments, 3865, 3872) The subject of the subordination is both all sensibility and all voluntary actions, and they are being subordinated to motives of reason. The first puzzling thing about this passage is the lack of reference to the actor- to the subordinator. Kant says that freedom is a faculty – a faculty for whom? Implicit in this account of freedom as subordination is an assumed “I”; a necessarily posited agent. So the confusion that arises is how this agent can freely choose to subordinate all his/her voluntary actions to the free capacity for choice, since for one to freely choose that in the first place presupposes that one is already acting freely. We can resolve this problem by realizing that we are not precisely subordinating our voluntary actions to a vague notion of “our own self”, but rather to the moral law. Instead, Kant’s notion of subordination does not require there to be an agent that is doing the subordinating. Rather, it is a predicate ascribed to something logically dominated by a more general principle – the categorical imperative. What it means to be free is to be subordinated to this law. Thus it is not the case that we must first subordinate our actions to the moral law in order to subsequently become free. Rather, it is the subordination to the moral law that is itself freedom. The moral feeling, therefore, which is the feeling of action from respect for the moral law, is identical to the feeling of subordination.
Elsewhere in *Notes and Fragments*, Kant uses the term “subordinate” to talk about logical necessities (e.g. that the particular is subordinate to the general) This may prompt the objection that I have tried to deflect multiple times, namely, that Kant does not want to use “feeling” in an actual sense but rather for a vague oblique notion of an intellectual response. So too, the objector may assert, Kant’s use of subordination merely indicates the demand that the logic we apply to judge our actions be subordinate to, or under the determination of, the overarching moral law, which is the most general law of reason. It serves only this purpose and my speculation of Kant’s intent to signal an actual sort of feeling is unfounded. (Pointing to the 1769 passage from his Notes on Metaphysics when he writes, “Objective, pure philosophy has either analytic *principia* without any axioms of experience of synthetic ones. The former rest on universal judgments in accordance with the rule of identity and on the subordination of the particular under the general.” (*Notes and Fragments, 3952*)). While Kant does use “subordination” in this way, it is precisely this meaning of subordination that I am using to refine the conception of the moral feeling. When we determine our actions based on considerations of the moral law, we implicitly accept the commands of the most general law of pure practical reason. It is because we are finite creatures that we experience the moral feel as a consequence of acting in such a way. So while it is the case that subordinate has a specific logical meaning for Kant, it is the way in which that logical principle applies to human volition that refines for us Kant’s imagination of the moral feeling.

Underlying the explication of the mechanism by which the moral law can act as a subjective determining grounds is a deeper claim about human nature. By considering what is objectively good, we can shape ourselves to act morally. Humans have the capacity to make reason dominant over our sensible inclinations. As I have already mentioned, this capacity
cannot be argue for but is rather posited in the beginning. But intuitively, the extent to which this claim is correct is unclear. Hunger and thirst seem to be sensible inclinations which cannot be eliminated, while inclinations from addictions can be eliminated. Inclinations are not normally thought of in a “removable” sort of way. While the details of each desire being removable or permanent are hazy, this is the target of the consideration of the moral law (the moral law does not demand that we renounce food and water, as we need those to continue living, but rather a motivation. In effect, considering the moral law effects an alteration of dominance from these inclinations to reason. The notion of humans choosing to act from duty rather than self-love or self-conceit raises the idea of an inexorable dominance; it is not a question of humans no longer being dominated, for this is an incoherent notion to begin with, but rather of humans choosing the correct thing to be dominated by. That thing is reason, rather than inclination. This, I assert, is the reason why Kant uses the word “subordination.”

Part V: The Feeling of Respect

The concept of the moral feeling as the feeling of respect for the moral law is developed in Kant’s later writing, and gives us more clues as to what the positive moral feeling is like. By observing how Kant imagines the moral feeling effect us, or subjectively determine our actions, the hope is that the path towards cultivation of the moral feeling becomes clearer. This conversation is tied closely with that of subordination. Finally, it cements certain elements of our conception of the negative aspect of the moral feeling.

In Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he connects subordination to the notion of respect for the moral law. He writes,
It could be objected that I only seek refuge, behind the word *respect*, in an obscure feeling, instead of directly resolving the question by means of a concept of reason. But though respect is a feeling, it is not one *received* by means of influence; it is, instead, a feeling *self-wrought* by means of a rational concept and therefore specifically different from all feelings of the first kind, which can be reduced to inclination or fear. What I cognize immediately as a law for me I cognize with respect, which signifies merely consciousness of the *subordination* of my will to a law without the mediation of other influences on my sense. Immediate determination of the will by means of the law and consciousness of this is called *respect*, so that this is regarded as the *effect* of the law on the subject, and not as the cause of this law. (*Groundwork*, 4: 401 FN)

I want to draw out three noteworthy things about this passage. First, he refutes the notion that the motivational aspect of the moral law is directly resolvable “by means of a concept of reason; it is indeed a feeling, which surpasses the descriptive abilities of concepts of reason. Second, the meaning of my cognition of the moral law as a law for me is the same as my cognition “of the subordination of my will to a law.” Third, it is the cognition of this fact that gives the law the power to immediately determine the will. Consciousness of this “is called respect.” Tying these together, we can understand respect to be simultaneously a feeling and a mode of consciousness wherein we cognize ourselves to be under a supreme legal sovereign. This notion is very close to the positive
aspect of the feeling of respect discussed in the second Critique, and provides a conceptual link between subordination and respect.

In the second Critique, Kant provides a discussion of the feeling of respect. He never gives an easy summary of what the moral feeling feels like for the reason that by its nature that would be impossible, as it is not a normal sort of feeling. But he does write, “Something that comes nearer to this feeling [of respect] is admiration, and this as an affect, amazement, can be directed to things also, for example, lofty mountains, the magnitude, number, and distance of the heavenly bodies, the strength and swiftness of many animal, and so forth. But none of this is respect.” (5:77) Continuing, acting from duty bestows an “inner tranquility” upon the agent and a freedom from inclinations. The tranquility is “merely negative with respect to everything that can make life pleasant; it is, namely only warding off the danger of sinking into personal worth.” There is a calm “in contrast with which life with all its agreeableness has no worth at all.” (Critique of Practical Reason, 5:88) Agreeableness here means for Kant the fulfilling of one’s inclinations, which is also Kant’s notion of happiness. This perfection of the will entirely surpasses that sentiment in value. These passages in the second Critique are concerned with the description of the moral feeling, rather than with the possibility of the moral feeling as he was earlier. The distance between words and thoughts make this task difficult. If Kant is correct, then we have the capacity for this feeling in virtue of our being free, so for every rational being, comprehension of this feeling is possible.

Finally, Kant concludes his chapter, writing “[the genuine moral incentive] is nothing other than the pure moral law itself insofar as it lets us discover the sublimity of our own supersensible existence and subjectively effects respect for their higher vocation
in human beings, who are at the same time conscious of their sensible existence and of the
dependence, connected with it, on their pathologically affected nature. (5:88) This passage illuminates our reading of Kant by making explicit the metaphysical presupposition of “our own supersensible existence.” This notion has been expressed before, and it is crucial to understanding Kantian metaphysics, but applied to the discussion of moral feeling, it gives a sense of the importance of this feeling; it is the discovery of the sublimity of our existence that transcends what is sensible to us. The latter concept, that of our supersensible existence, should not be understood as a milquetoast reference to our capacity to reason which grays out the profundity of this concept. Kant understands the word “sublimity” to denote peacefulness and serenity. He writes, “The beautiful and the sublime in the highest degree are closely related. To be felt, both presuppose that the soul is at peace. Yet they are so different that if it is busyness, cheerfulness, and liveliness that dominate them, then it is beauty that shines forth, while if they come to a stop and peaceful contentment shows through, then the sublime stands out.” (Notes and Fragments, 28)

Part VI: Conclusion

On how to actually go about acting morally and cultivating the feeling of respect, Kant writes, “One talks so much about virtue. But one must first eliminate injustice before one can be virtuous. One must first set aside the luxuries of excess and everything that elevates me by oppressing others in order that I should not be one of those who all oppress their own kind. All virtue is impossible without this decision.” (Notes and Fragments, 40) This passage advocates
the surrendering of “luxuries of excess.” It is the goal of Kant’s moral law to judge our maxims by the standard of reason and consequently guide us towards a renunciation of inclinations as they incentivize our action in contradiction with the moral law. Indeed, it may even be intuitive that to live morally involves distancing oneself from material or sensible desires. So when we ask the question, “how does one act morally,” we get a picture of cultivation through the renunciation of sensible desires.

With this understanding of the moral feeling, it is clear that Kant was not ignoring the finitude of human nature and asking us to transcend all sensibility to act from the moral law. Indeed, the discussion of the moral incentive only makes sense with respect to a finite being. An infinitely rational creature (a “holy” creature) would neither feel nor need to experience the moral feeling. And so this reading of Kant both lets us dismiss the criticism of Kant that he forgets human nature and bestows upon us a method for cultivating morality.