

Perfect duties (*vollkommene Pflichten*)

In his 1785 *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant illustrates the categorical imperative by showing that it generates and explains duties from each of the four divisions of duty that obtain from “the usual division of them into duties to ourselves and to other human beings and into perfect and imperfect duties.” (G, 4:421 [1785]/CEPP:73) In a footnote, Kant adds that he reserves the division of duties for the *Metaphysics of Morals*, but adds that he understands by a perfect duty “one that admits of no exception in favor of inclination,” and that there are both external and internal perfect duties (G, 4:421n/CEPP:73n).

While Kant postpones an official discussion of the division of duties until the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), his appeal to the division in the *Groundwork* suggests that all duties are either perfect or imperfect, and that this distinction tracks a distinction between violations of duty that evince contradictions in conception (violations of perfect duty) and those that evince a contradiction in willing (violations of imperfect duty) (G, 4:421/CEPP:75). This link between the two parts of the categorical imperative and the distinction between perfect and imperfect duty is explicit in Kant’s lectures (e.g. MoM, 29:609-610 [1782]/CELE:232-233; MoV, 27:496 [1793-94]/CELE:264).

Kant returns to the four examples after articulating the formula of humanity, where he lists the first two (presumably, violations of perfect duty) as examples of breaches of necessary or owed duty, and the latter two as examples of breaches of contingent or meritorious duty (G, 4:429-430/CEPP:80-81). As these examples are also divided according to the two parts of the formula of humanity – that is, the requirements to treat humanity never merely as a means, and the requirement to treat humanity as an end in itself – this division suggests that violations of perfect duty violate the injunction to never treat humanity as a mere means, and violations of imperfect duty violate the injunction to treat humanity as an end in itself.

So, though Kant in the *Groundwork* postpones the division of duties to the *Metaphysics of Morals*, the *Groundwork* already suggest the following distinctions between perfect and imperfect duties: *Perfect duties*: are necessary and owed, admit of no exception in favor of inclination, and violations of perfect duty involve a contradiction in conception and treating humanity in oneself or others as a mere means. *Imperfect duties*: are meritorious (not owed),

possibly admit of exception in favor of inclination (though there is much debate on this point in the secondary literature), and violations of imperfect duty involve a contradiction in willing and a failure to treat humanity as an end in itself.

As promised, Kant returns to the division of duties in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. There Kant clarifies the distinction and uses it for architectonic purposes, including his division of the *Metaphysics of Morals* into the *Doctrine of Right* and the *Doctrine of Virtue* as well as the so-called “objective division” of duties to self into formal and material duties (MM, 6:419/CEPP:544-545). Formal duties to oneself are perfect duties, material duties to oneself are imperfect duties (MM, 6:421/CEPP:546; 6:444/CEPP:565).

With respect to the general division, Kant presents the following as a schematic overview of the division of duties “in Accordance with the Objective Relation of Law to Duty” (MM, 6:240/CEPP:395):

[Insert schema 1]

So, duties of right are perfect duties, and duties of virtue are imperfect duties. It is *not* the case, however, that all duties of right or perfect duties are dealt with in the *Doctrine of Right* and imperfect duties in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, for Book I of part I of the *Doctrine of Virtue* is about perfect duties to oneself, and these are, as described above, duties of right. That we find these duties of right in the *Doctrine of Virtue* indicates that Kant operates with two concepts of right and two corresponding understandings of duties of right. First, there are duties of right that correspond to rights of humanity, which are either in one’s own person or in others. Second, there are duties of rights as duties “for which external lawgiving is possible.” (MM, 6:239/CEPP:394; MoM, 29:617-618/CELE:237) This second set of duties of right is concerned with “the external [...] relation of one person to another,” (MM, 6:230/CEPP:387) and implies “an authorization to use coercion” (MM, 6:231-232/CEPP:388-389). Even on this point, however, Kant admits that there are exceptional cases. In an appendix to the Introduction to the *Doctrine of Right*, Kant concedes that, for example, an employee whose agreed-upon wage has lost value because of inflation has a *right* to an inflation-adjusted wage, even if there is no way for a judge to enforce this right if the employee’s contract makes no corresponding provision.

Conversely, a shipwrecked passenger has *no right* to steal a plank from another passenger, despite the fact that no effective punishment for such a violation of another's right exists. (MM 6:234–236, CEPP: 390–392)

Perfect duties to oneself are duties of right in the first of the two above senses, since they correspond to the rights of humanity in one's own person (MM, 6:240/CEPP:395; MoV, 27:543/CELE:301; MoV, 27:592/CELE:341). But they are *not* duties of right in the second sense, for they are not duties for which external lawgiving is possible. That perfect duties to oneself are not about interpersonal relations is immediately clear. That they are not coercively enforceable is less clear, for conformity with perfect duties to oneself could conceivably be coerced – we could compel people to not commit suicide by, say, threatening to not bury them in hallowed ground. But even if conformity with perfect duties to oneself could be enforced, it is doubtful that it could be *permissibly* enforced, or enforced in a way that is consistent with the Universal Principle of Right. (MM 6:230, CEPP 387) Thus, we read in notes from Kant's lectures that: “not every *officium strictum*, or duty of right, is a coercive duty in the sense assumed [...] there are duties of right [...] to which I may be compelled without anyone else being able to compel me. [...] Duties of right, both to oneself and to others, are *officia juris*, the former *interna* and the latter *externa*. The *externa* are [...] coercive duties [...] legal duties, and in regard to them the coercion from without is an authentic feature.” (MoV, 27:581-582/CELE:332)

Here, then, is an overview of how the different divisions of perfect and imperfect duties are treated in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (cf. MM, 6:240/CEPP: 395; MoV, 27:581-586/CELE:332-336):

[Insert schema 2.]

Examples of perfect duties are, accordingly, of two kinds. The first kind, dealt with in the *Doctrine of Right*, are duties based on the right of humanity in others and includes all duties to respect the rights of others, such as to not aggress against, steal from, or defraud others. The second kind, dealt with Book I of Part I of the *Doctrine of Virtue*, are duties based on the right of humanity in oneself, and include duties of self-preservation (e.g. prohibition of suicide) and self-

respect (e.g. duties of honesty and not being servile or letting others belittle one's worth) (see also MoV, 27:600-602/CELE:347-349).

In the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant also makes clearer the distinction between perfect and imperfect duties. Here we learn that perfect duties require the performance or omission of acts such as keeping one's promises or repaying one's debts (MM, 6:220/CEPP:384; MoV, 27:578), whereas imperfect duties require the adoption of certain ends, namely, the ends that are also duties; general happiness and moral self-perfection (cf. MM, 6:379-395/CEPP:512-526; MoV, 27:543/CELE:301, 27:578/CELE:329-330, 27:651/CELE:388). Using Kant's terminology (MM, 6:390/CEPP:521; 6:411/538; MoV, 27:536/CELE:295-296; MoV, 27:577-578/CELE:329-330), we can elaborate on the distinction by saying that perfect duties are *narrow* and *strict* in the sense that they require a particular action (e.g. keep the promise given) and so permit no latitude for choice about how to satisfy them, whereas imperfect duties are *wide* and *permissive* in that they require the adoption of a certain policies of action (e.g. beneficence), which permit latitude for choice in how to satisfy them (e.g. where, when, and how to be beneficent) (MM, 6:390/CEPP:521; 6:542-544/CEPP:571-573). Finally, Kant suggests that failures to perform perfect duties is culpable, whereas failures to satisfy particular imperfect duties is deficient rather than culpable. A maxim or general principle *never* to perform imperfect duties would, however, be culpable. Conversely, the performance of perfect duties is not meritorious, whereas the performance of imperfect duties is meritorious (MM, 6:227/CEPP:382; 6:390/CEPP:521; MoV, 27:560-561/CELE:314-316).

In summary, then, morality, understood as the realm of duties, divides into perfect and imperfect duties. Here is a list of the features by which Kant characterizes the division:

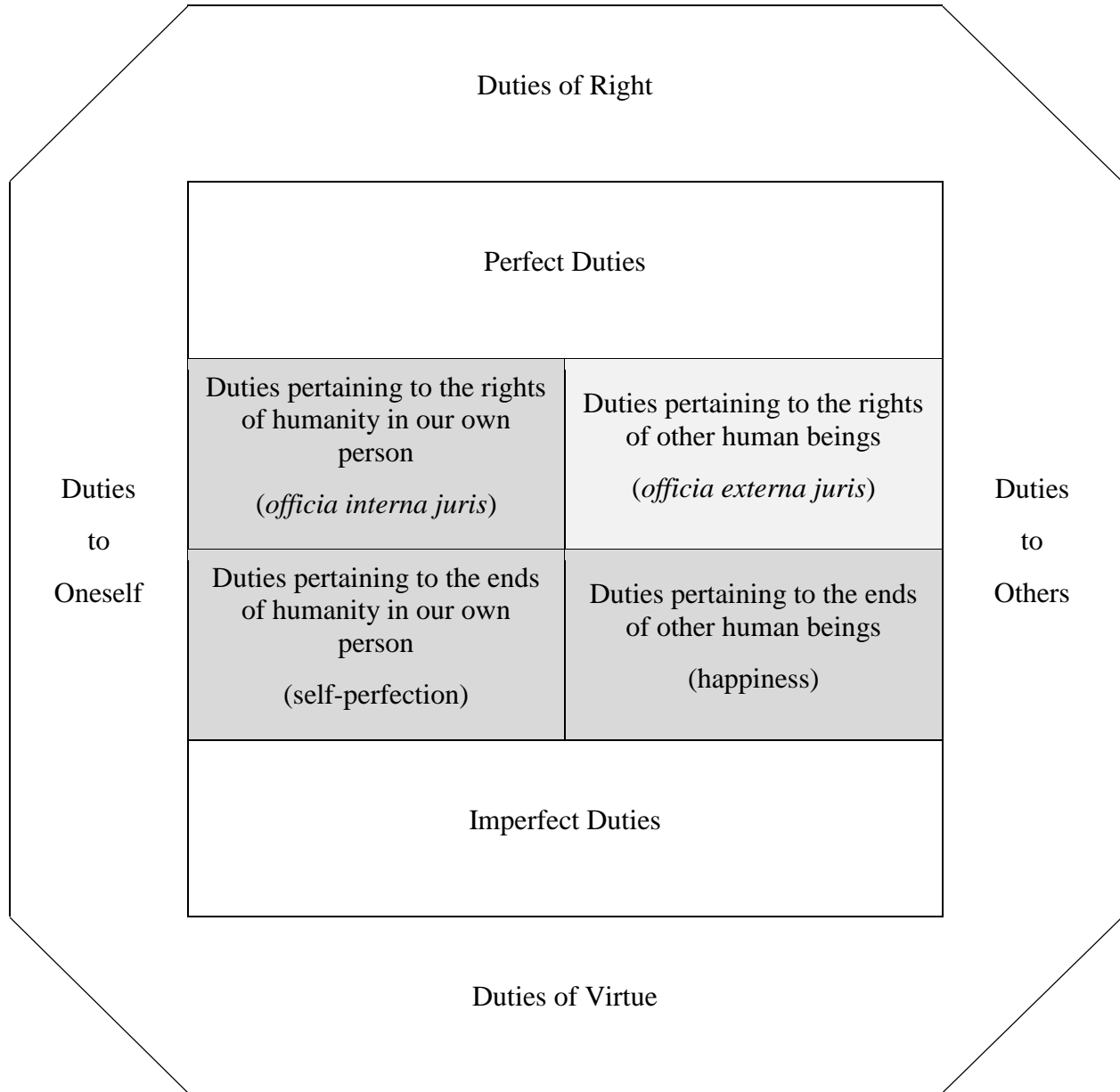
<i>Perfect duties</i>	<i>Imperfect duties</i>
Duties of right	Duties of virtue
Require the performance or omission of acts	Require the adoption of certain ends
Narrow and strict	Wide and permissive

Necessary / owed	Contingent / meritorious
Fulfilment not meritorious	Fulfilment meritorious
Breach is culpable (demerit)	Breach is deficiency (not demerit)
Breach leads to contradiction in conception	Breach leads to contradiction in willing
Breach treats humanity as mere means	Breach fails to treat humanity as end in itself
No exception in favor of inclination	Possible exception in favor of inclination

Related terms: categorical imperative, duties to others, duties to self, duties of virtue, ends, ethical duties, imperfect duties, latitude, maxims, narrow obligation, strict duties, virtue, wide duties, wide obligation

Related works: Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals (1785), Lectures on Ethics, The Metaphysics of Morals (1797).

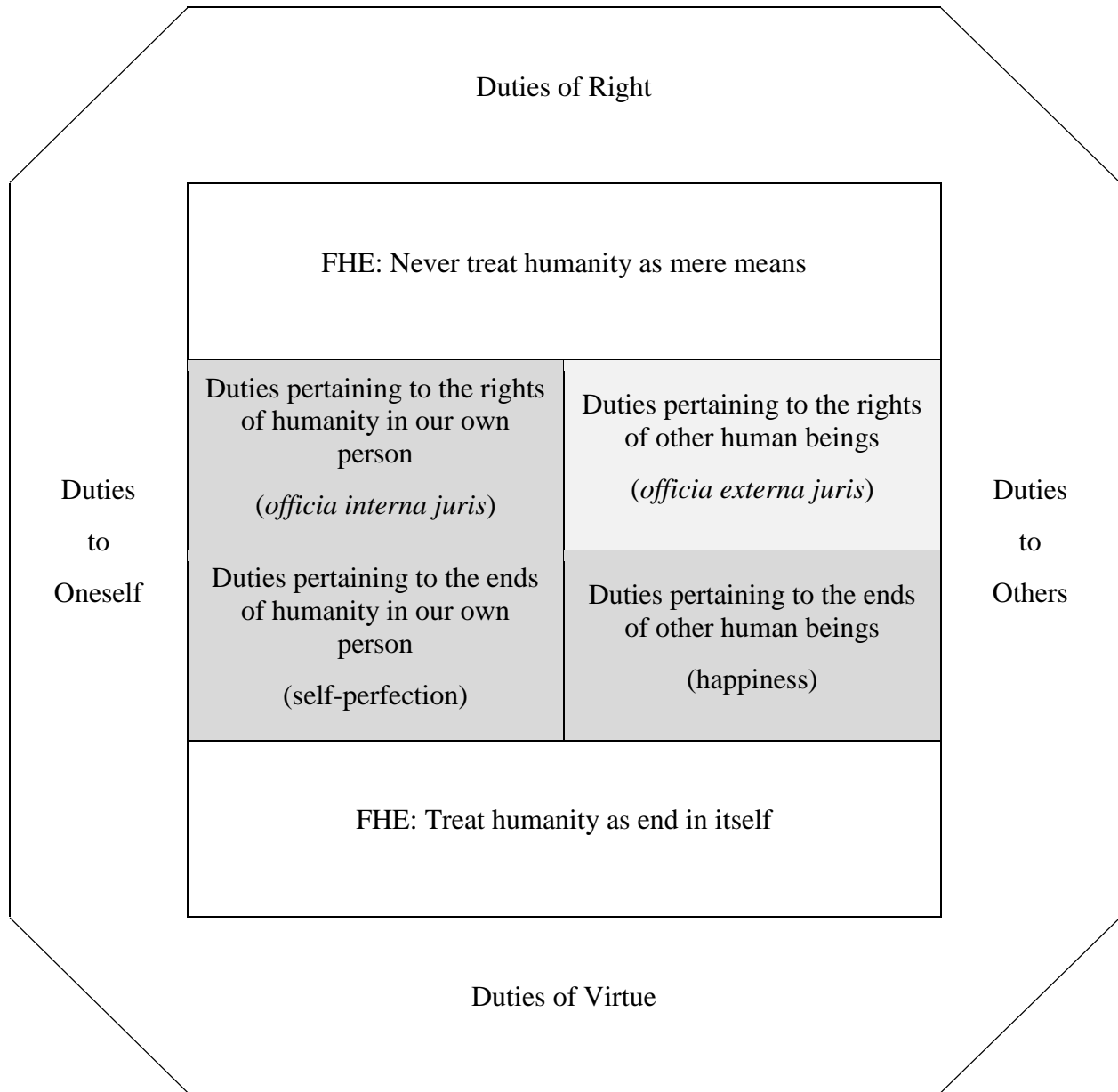
KANT'S DOCTRINE OF RIGHT ACCORDING TO THE *MdS*



: = doctrine of virtue

: = doctrine of right

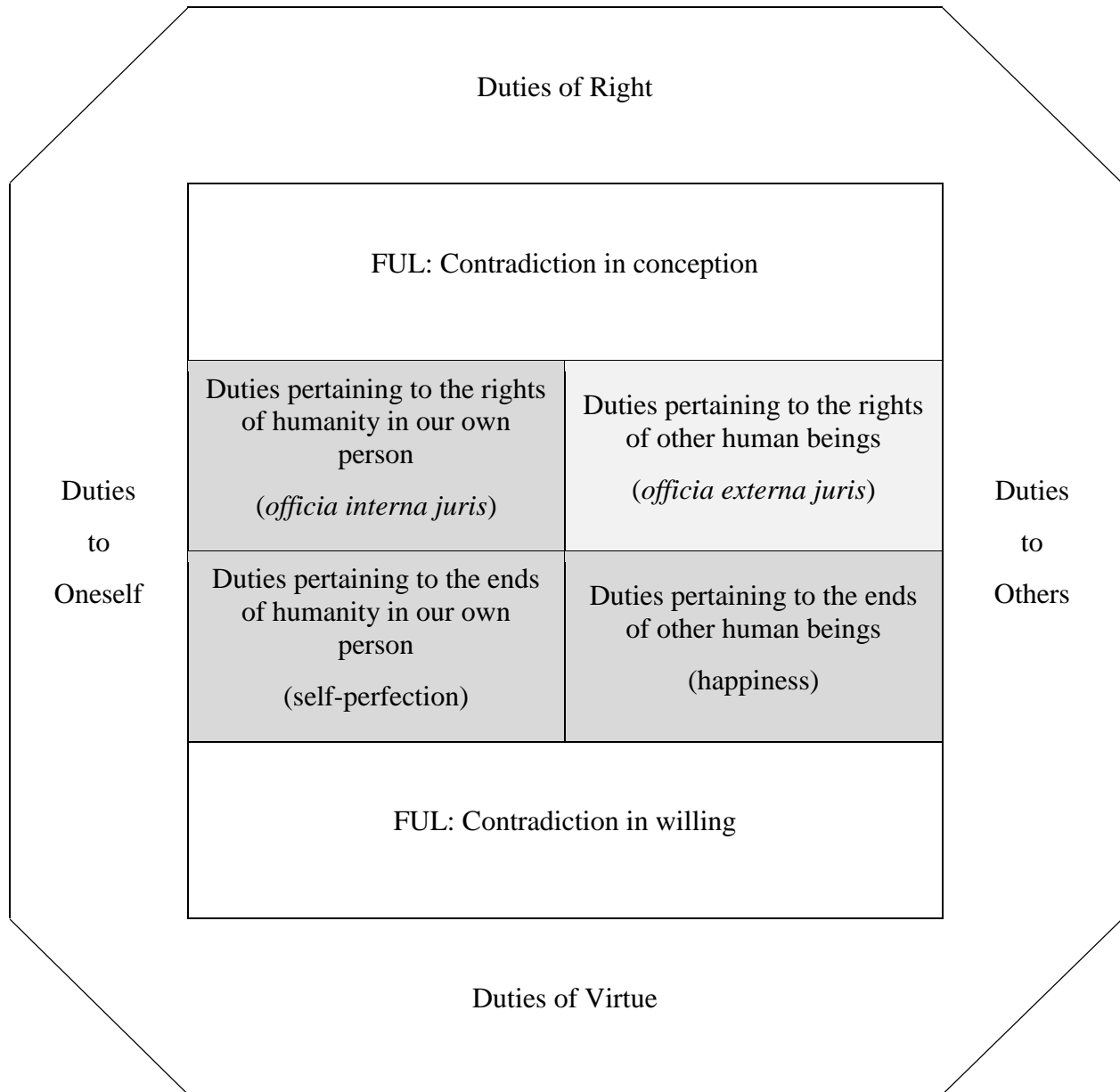
KANT'S DIVISION ACCORDING TO THE FHE



⌈:⌋ = doctrine of virtue

⌈.:⌋ = doctrine of right

KANT'S DIVISION ACCORDING TO THE FUL



⌈:⌋ = doctrine of virtue

⌈:] = doctrine of right