

SHOULD KANTIAN CARE ABOUT MORAL WORTH?

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One of the central features of Kant's moral theory is the sharp distinction he draws between the moral rightness of actions and the moral worth or goodness of actions. As we know from the first pages of the *GROUNDWORK*, the rightness of an action is determined by the conformity of the agent's maxim to the categorical imperative; the moral goodness or worth of an action is determined by the agent's motives, by whether the agent acted from the motive of duty or from some other (nonmoral) empirical motive. Morally good actions must be morally right, according to Kant, but otherwise the two concepts are independent of each other.

Kant's doctrine of moral worth has been subjected to a number of criticisms, of which two in particular have been especially popular and persuasive. Both concern the apparent absence of any place for the empirical virtues--sympathy, benevolence, gratitude--in Kant's doctrine of moral worth. One objection (which raises what I shall call the problem of mixed motives) is that Kant overlooked the possibility of actions being motivated by both duty and, say, sympathy, and that such actions should have moral worth. The presence of an altruistic emotion such as sympathy as a motive along with duty should not, so the argument runs, be sufficient to deny moral worth to that action. Yet this is precisely what Kant does when he maintains (as I shall argue in the next section) that morally good actions must be motivated solely by duty.

The second objection is a bit more radical. It maintains that even actions motivated solely by some altruistic emotion should be able to have moral worth; the motive of duty is not the only motive capable of conferring moral worth on actions.

My purpose in this paper is twofold: first, to construct as plausible an account of moral worth as I think the Kantian text will allow; and, second, to argue that Kantians should cease to be interested in the moral worth of actions. I shall argue that even on my reconstructed account of moral worth, nothing of significant practical or theoretical interest is learned by determining whether an action is done from the motive of duty. The more interesting and important question concerns the goodness of one's will (or,

more generally, of one's character) and not the motives for one's actions.

A. Does Kant Hold That Only Actions Motivated Solely By Duty Can Have Moral Worth?

H.J. Paton is undoubtedly the best known of the commentators who have argued against reading Kant as saying that actions must be motivated solely by duty to have moral worth. He argues that in the early pages of the GROUNDWORK Kant was using a method of isolation to show that only the motive of duty is capable of conferring moral worth on actions. Paton concludes that Kant would allow other motives to be "present at the same time" (as the motive of duty)--as long as the latter was "by itself sufficient to determine the action."¹

This interpretation is contradicted, however, by much of the Kantian text. Duty and inclination, far from being able to coexist or even to reinforce each other, are said by Kant to be fundamentally incompatible: respect for the moral law as a motive or feeling is diminished, even negated, by the presence of heteronomous motives. In the CRITIQUE OF PRACTICAL REASON Kant writes that "all admixture of incentives which derive from one's own happiness are a hindrance to the influence of the moral law on the human heart."² And in the GROUNDWORK Kant says that "an action done from duty must altogether exclude the influence of inclination."³ In short, there is no getting around the fact that for Kant a morally good action must be done solely from duty.⁴ But let us set aside this feature of Kant's doctrine and suppose, for the sake of argument, that such actions are possible, that a single action can be motivated by both duty and an empirical motive. Should moral worth be attributed to such an action?

In her recent article, "On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty,"⁵ Barbara Herman gives an affirmative answer to this question. To avoid misrepresenting her argument, I shall briefly quote two passages from the article:

What is required [for moral worth] is that whenever duty is in question, we take no account of the nonmoral motives present. . . . That is, when an action has moral worth, nonmoral motives may be present, but they may not be what moves the agent to act.⁶

The motive of duty need not reflect the only interest the agent has in the action (or its effect); it must, however, be the interest that determines the agent's acting as he did.⁷

This interpretation represents an advance over Paton's because it is consistent with Kant's contention (quoted above) that "an action done from duty must altogether exclude the influence of

inclination. . . ."

Moreover, this interpretation provides a plausible and textually sound⁸ answer to a question which Herman had posed earlier in her article: "What is the matter with doing an action from a motive other than the motive of duty?"⁹ The answer is that only the motive of duty gives one a direct interest in doing what is right. Other motives--sympathy no less than self-interest--may issue in actions that are in accordance with duty, but their doing so is (in Kant's terms) just a lucky accident; when one acts from duty, however, it is no accident that the resulting action is right, for one's intention in that case is to do the right action as such. Thus, to return to Herman's interpretation, if the nonmoral motives are (to use Herman's term) "inoperative," if they do not move the agent to act, then there is no chance that they will cause the agent to act contrary to duty.

For all its virtues and ingenuity, Herman's argument does not solve the problem of mixed motives; on the contrary, it sidesteps that problem completely. Here is the problem: suppose sympathy and duty are said to be the two motives for Jacob's doing X. But if sympathy does not move Jacob to act, if in acting he "takes no account of" his sympathy, if sympathy is an "inoperative" motive, then what sense does it make to say that sympathy is a motive for that particular action?¹⁰

Herman's notion of an inoperative motive is what causes her argument to derail. There may be little harm in speaking of inoperative motives when an agent desires to do X but fails to act on that desire. In that case we can say that she had an inoperative motive, namely, the desire she failed to act on.¹¹ But to speak of inoperative motives for actions which are performed is to court confusion. To say (as Herman wants to) that Jacob had two motives M1 and M2 for doing X, and did perform X, but acted only on or from M1, is to misuse the term. For it implies that M2 is nevertheless somehow relevant to explaining the performance of X, that M2 must be cited in any complete explanation of why Jacob did X. But if only M1 is operative, then only M1 deserves to be cited; M2 explains nothing. To call M2 a motive at all is, strictly speaking, improper, since it is not "what moves the agent to act" and does not in any way motivate the agent.¹²

In short, the notion of an inoperative motive does not show how moral worth can attach to actions motivated by both duty and sympathy. If sympathy is an "inoperative" motive, then the action is done

from the single motive of duty.¹³

Since Kant has denied that duty and inclination can mix as motives, I shall not linger further on this question. But my argument in the next section can be adapted to cover the case of actions done from mixed motives (if such are possible).¹⁴

B. Can Sympathy Alone Motivate Morally Good Actions?

Neither Paton nor Herman address the second and more radical objection to Kant's doctrine of moral worth, namely, that some empirical motives can by themselves confer moral worth on actions. In this section I want to sketch very briefly an interpretation of Kant according to which beneficent actions can have moral worth when they are motivated solely by an altruistic emotion like sympathy. I will focus upon Kant's duty of beneficence although my argument is meant to hold true for other wide (or imperfect) duties of virtue,¹⁵ e.g., the duties of gratitude and sympathy.

The duty of beneficence is a duty of virtue, i.e., a duty to adopt a certain end, in this case, the happiness of others.¹⁶ But one of the questions Kant never answers (in fact, never even asks) is what it means to adopt something as an end. I have argued elsewhere¹⁷ that the duties of virtue are best understood as duties to cultivate certain character traits. The duty of beneficence is thus a duty to cultivate the virtue of benevolence; the duty of gratitude is a duty to cultivate the virtue of that name, and the duty (to oneself) of moral self-perfection is a duty to cultivate a morally good will.

To return to the problem of moral worth. Kant's critics have argued that sympathy is the appropriate motive for certain acts of beneficence. People often benefit more by actions done from an altruistic emotion than from ones in which their benefactor is motivated by duty. (The standard example involves asking whether a hospital patient would prefer a visit by friends who are motivated by sympathy, or to be visited by persons acting from duty.¹⁸) Yet Kant seems to hold the counterintuitive position that an act of beneficence (such as a visit to a hospitalized friend) has moral worth only if it is motivated by duty, and not if it is motivated by sympathy.

I wish to argue that understanding the duty of beneficence as a duty to cultivate the virtue of benevolence allows us to extend Kant's doctrine of moral worth so as to confer moral worth on beneficent actions which are motivated by sympathy alone and not at all by duty. Three reasons can be offered in

support of this rather radical extension of Kant's doctrine.

(1) Since the duty of beneficence is, in the first instance, a duty to adopt a particular end, Kant's injunction to do one's duty from the motive of duty¹⁹ should be understood as requiring people to adopt the happiness of others as an end simply because it is a duty. But people who have adopted that end by cultivating the virtue of benevolence are free to perform specific beneficent actions from that virtue. After all, if the virtue is not to serve as a motive for action, what is the point of cultivating it in the first place?

(2) People who have developed the virtue of benevolence often become, by Kant's own testimony, unable to act from duty, for that virtue replaces duty as their motive for helping other people.²⁰ It would thus be perverse for Kant, having posited a duty to cultivate the virtue of benevolence, to maintain that actions motivated by it are morally inferior to (less virtuous than) actions performed by people who have not fulfilled that duty and thus must act from duty. It would imply that the more virtuous one's character is (in the sense that one has dutifully cultivated the various virtues), the less virtuous one's actions are (in that they lack moral worth). But if the virtues of sympathy and benevolence are the objects of duty, success in fulfilling that duty should contribute to the virtue or moral goodness of one's actions, not detract from it.

(3) Many acts (act-tokens) of beneficence are morally optional in the sense that a person who fails to perform them does not necessarily act wrongly. One is not obligated, in other words, to perform every possible beneficent action, to give to every charity, for example. But if an action is not morally mandatory, it cannot be carried out from the motive of duty. Individuals who choose to perform such actions must thus depend upon sympathy and other empirical motives since the motive of duty is unavailable to them. Therefore, if such actions are to have moral worth (and there seems no reason to deny it to them), some other motive will have to be its source.

In light of these considerations I would argue that beneficent actions should be granted moral worth if the following two conditions²¹ are satisfied:

- (1) the agent is motivated by one of the virtues which people have a moral duty to cultivate, and
- (2) the motive of duty--the categorical imperative--serves as a kind of limiting condition on the

agent's willingness to act from that virtue. If the action which the virtue inclines the agent to perform is contrary to duty, then the agent will refrain from performing it.

Actions satisfying these two conditions resemble actions motivated solely by duty in the one crucial respect: in neither case is it accidental that the action is morally right. If the second condition were not satisfied, if people were permitted to act from "blind sympathy," then it would be just a lucky accident that the sympathetic action was also the right action. But if the moral law serves as a limiting condition on the agent's willingness to act from an empirical motive, then the moral rightness of the action is no more accidental than if the agent had acted solely from duty. And it is this requirement--that the moral rightness of one's (intended) conduct is not accidental or contingent--that lies at the heart of Kant's doctrine of moral worth. Since actions motivated by sympathy can satisfy this condition as well as actions motivated solely by duty, I see no reason to deny moral worth to the former.

The following doctrine of moral worth thus suggests itself. Actions fulfilling the wide duties of virtue (e.g., of beneficence and sympathy) may be motivated by either duty or sympathy and have moral worth. If they are motivated by sympathy, then duty must be present as a limiting condition, as a negative motive, if you wish. But actions required by perfect or juridical duties--duties against lying, killing, stealing, etc.--have moral worth only if they are done solely from duty, for it does seem reasonable to say that duty is the proper motive or the right reason for doing the actions that fulfill these duties. One ought not to kill, for example, not because the potential victim is a friend, or because you'll go to jail and be miserable, but simply because killing is wrong. That the intended victim is a friend (or an enemy with friends) should not count as a reason in one's deliberations; the wrongness of killing should be sufficient reason or incentive. In short, only the motive of duty can confer moral worth on actions which fulfill the perfect or juridical duties.

C. Should Kantians Care About Moral Worth?

The final question to consider is whether this is a doctrine of moral goodness that is worth adopting. Does it provide interesting answers to important moral questions? I shall argue that although it is appropriate for the duties of virtue, it doesn't work for the perfect or juridical duties, and the necessary modifications cannot be made without abandoning Kant's doctrine.

Consider a simple example of a perfect duty: keeping a promise one has made to a friend. The motives from which people keep such promises are multiple and diverse--sometimes from self-interest, sometimes from a desire not to cause the friend distress or disappointment, and sometimes from the motive of duty. In other words, people fulfill their perfect duties from the same range of motives--empirical as well as pure--as they fulfill imperfect duties of virtue.

And when people fulfill a perfect duty from an empirical motive, the moral law can serve as a limiting condition just as in the case benevolent acts motivated by sympathy. The motivation of these individuals is thus structurally identical to the motivation of the beneficent agents discussed above. In both cases the agent is acting from an empirical motive, but in each case the agent would act otherwise if morally required to do so. The moral law serves as a limiting condition in each case on the agent's willingness to act on an empirical motive.

The following question thus arises: what justification is there for saying that beneficent actions can have moral worth if motivated by sympathy (with duty as a limiting condition) but that actions fulfilling perfect duties cannot have moral worth under the same conditions? If it was proper to extend moral worth to beneficent actions satisfying these two conditions on the ground that the moral rightness of such actions was not accidental, are we not committed to making the same extension for actions fulfilling perfect duties (for in this case too it is not accidental that the agent does the morally right act even though motivated by an empirical emotion)?

But to confer moral worth on actions required by a perfect duty yet not motivated by duty, rather by an empirical virtue, is to tear the heart out of Kant's doctrine of moral worth. For there now exist no actions which must be performed from duty in order to have moral worth. However attractive this new doctrine of moral worth may be, it is no longer Kant's.

These difficulties point toward the following conclusion: the central concern of Kant's doctrine of moral worth--that the moral rightness of actions not be accidental--is not best addressed in terms of the actual motives of agents. What is important is the answer to the counterfactual question: how would that person act if sympathy and duty were in conflict, if the sympathetic action were not also the morally right action? If she is unconditionally willing to do what is right, regardless of the direction of her

empirical motives, then she has a good will, and when she acts in accordance with duty, it is "no accident," whatever her actual motive(s) may be.

To conclude: Kant's doctrine of moral worth takes us down a dead-end road. There is no reason to single out and attach special merit to actions motivated by duty. Kant's concern that the moral rightness of actions not be accidental is adequately met by requiring the moral law to serve as a limiting condition, as a negative motive. It is the state of one's character or will²² that determines whether the moral rightness of one's actions is accidental. The question of moral worth--of whether a particular action was or was not motivated by duty--is of only tangential interest. Kantians should therefore cease to care about moral worth.

FOOTNOTES

1.H.J. Paton, "Translator's Preface," *GROUNDWORK OF THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 19.

2.*CRITIQUE OF PRACTICAL REASON*, Ak. 156; cf. 25, 81. See also *ON THE OLD SAW; THAT MAY BE RIGHT IN THEORY BUT IT WON'T WORK IN PRACTICE*, trans. E.B. Ashton (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974), p. 286.

At an earlier point in the *CRITIQUE OF PRACTICAL REASON* Kant also writes:

The majesty of duty has nothing to do with the enjoyment of life; it has its own law, even its own tribunal, and however much one wishes to mix them together, in order to offer the mixture to the sick as though it were a medicine, they nevertheless soon separate of themselves; but if they do not separate, the moral ingredient has no effect at all (Ak. 88-89).

3.*GROUNDING FOR THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1983), Ak.400.

4. See also Tom Sorell, "Kant's Good Will and Our Good Nature," *KANT-STUDIEN* 78 (1987), pp. 87-101. This is the only article I have discovered in which the impossibility of duty and inclination as cooperating motives is recognized.

It should also be noted that Kant's argument is not a moral one about the worth of empirical motives but rather an empirical, psychological claim.

5.*PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW* 90 (1981), pp. 359-382.

6.Herman, p. 371.

7.Herman, p. 375.

8.In the *RELIGION WITHIN THE LIMITS OF REASON ALONE* (trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson, New York: Harper and Row, 1960), Kant writes that "when incentives other than the [moral] law itself . . . are necessary to determine the will [*Willkür*] to conduct conformable to the law, it is merely accidental that these causes coincide with the law, for they could equally well incite its violation"(26).

⁹Herman, p. 361.

10. Herman herself exhibits a moment of doubt about her solution to the problem of mixed motives when she wonders whether "the very idea of having two sufficient motives but acting on only one of them is incoherent"(370).

11. It would, nevertheless, be more accurate, and prevent misunderstanding, to say instead that S had a desire to do X but lacked a motive unless she actually did do X.

12. Writing about Ross' interpretation of Kant, Lewis White Beck argues: "There seems to be an open contradiction in saying: I have two motives, A and B; each would lead me to do action C; I do perform action C, but I do so purely and simply from motive A alone. How can there be two motives pointing in the same direction, but only one of them actually effective in the determination of the action? And if anyone claimed that he did an action 'purely' and 'simply' out of a sense of duty but admitted at the same time that he had an inclination to do it, I think Kant would say that this was the merest cant" ("Sir David Ross on Duty and Purpose in Kant," PHILOSOPHY AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH 16 (1955), p. 103).

13. Of course, one might choose simply to deny that duty and inclination are incompatible as Kant believed, but it is not clear that that will solve all of the problems being raised. What I shall argue is that allowing the possibility of cooperating motives only solves one problem--whether those actions have moral worth. It does not address the more radical objection that some actions motivated solely by sympathy or some other altruistic emotion ought to have moral worth.

14. Briefly, the argument would be that if actions done solely from an altruistic emotion can have moral worth, then actions motivated by that emotion and duty should also have moral worth. If Kant is right that the presence of an empirical motive cancels the motive of duty, then such actions are in fact done solely from the emotion. In other words, if actions motivated solely by an altruistic emotion can have moral worth, then it is a matter of indifference whether actions can be motivated jointly by duty and inclination.

¹⁵In the GROUNDWORK Kant divides duties into perfect and imperfect (as well as into duties to oneself and duties to other). The former distinction is replaced in the TUGENDLEHRE (Metaphysical Principles of Virtue) by a distinction between juridical duties (all of which are perfect duties) and duties of virtue, some of which are perfect (narrow), others of which are imperfect or wide duties.

¹⁶METAPHYSICAL PRINCIPLES OF VIRTUE, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1983), Ak. 385-386.

¹⁷"Kant's Architectonic of Duty," PHILOSOPHY AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH (December, 1987), and "Kant on Virtue and Moral Worth," SOUTHERN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY (Winter 1987).

¹⁸See Michael Stocker, "The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories," JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY 63 (1976), pp. 453-466, and Lawrence Blum, FRIENDSHIP, ALTRUISM, AND MORALITY (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

¹⁹The Universal Ethical Command states: "Act in accordance with duty from duty" (METAPHYSICAL PRINCIPLES OF VIRTUE, Ak. 391).

²⁰In the METAPHYSICAL PRINCIPLES OF VIRTUE Kant explains that although the duties of love are not duties to have the feeling of love, if one repeatedly performs acts of beneficence from the motive of duty, the virtue of benevolence will be acquired.

Benevolence is a duty. Whoever often exercises this and sees his beneficent purpose succeed comes at last really to love him whom he has benefited. When therefore it is said, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," this does not mean you should directly (at first) love and through this love (subsequently) benefit him; but rather, "Do good to your

neighbor," and this beneficence will produce in you the love of mankind (as a readiness of inclination toward beneficence in general)"(Ak. 402).

²¹These are two necessary, but not necessarily sufficient, conditions. One might also want to add a cognitive condition, for example, that the agent believe that beneficence is a duty. (For a more complete defense of this account of moral worth, see "Kant on Virtue and Moral Worth," note 17 above.)

22. One's character, as I am using the term, includes not only one's will (whether one is unconditionally willing to act as duty requires) but also the various empirical virtues (and vices).