


Kant's Reliance on Reason Rejects the Essence of Sympathy and Empathy in Any Moral Choice


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ABSTRACT

Kant is noted to have pioneered the deontological position when he argued in defence of reason and duty in moral decision-making. Kant's use of reason in moral decision-making has made him an ethical rationalist. As moral agents, our theories must be based on rational cognition. This can be said to have dominated Western philosophy since the time of Plato. During Plato's time, the tradition believed that one must know the object and possess the cognitive principles of practical reason. This must be exercised by the will or rational capacity guided by the categorical imperative. It is only when this is accomplished that it can be said that an action is morally worthy or morally permissible. This paper argues that Kant's reliance on reason rejects the essence of sympathy and empathy in any moral decision-making endeavour. To act justly there is the need to employ reason so that such action could be attractive as well.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Moral philosophy investigates the rightness and wrongness of actions and the theories we ought to employ to appraise morality. The moral agent stands at the centre of ethical discussions. A moral agent is, essentially, any being capable of reasoning and can distinguish rightness from wrongness and good from bad. By this definition, babies, mentally disturbed people, and animals do not lend themselves to the ethical assessments we would give to a human being; this is not to ignore the various arguments on animal rights. Numerous moral theories have been postulated in moral philosophy. Most notable are deontology, teleological theories, and Aristotelian virtue ethics. The omnipresence of these theories in ethics stems from their normative approach to ethical debates and dilemmas.

An interesting yet highly contested argument in ethics is the ethical implications of allowing rationality to supersede emotions (or will) in decision-making and the implications of espousing the precedence that emotions should have over rationality in morality. These arguments are dichotomised into two schools of thought: moral voluntarism and moral rationalism. Moral rationalism, as advocated by Immanuel Kant, postulates that an action is good if and only if rationality governs emotions in decision-making. Antithetical to the moral rationalists are the moral voluntarists, who insinuate that an action is considered good if and only if our emotions direct our reasoning in decision-making. The latter constitutes the thesis of David Hume's position in ethics. It is, therefore, a supposedly valid inference that moral voluntarism, teleological theories, and virtue ethics endorse the use of sympathy and empathy in our decisions. To what extent is Kantian ethics (deontology) susceptible to sympathy and empathy in our moral choices? Considering Kant's insistence on reasoning, the will, and duty in decision-making, this paper argues that Kant's reliance on reason rejects sympathy and empathy in moral decisions. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section begins by giving a concise discussion of Kant's metaphysics and epistemology. To this end, we will realise how his ethics directly corresponds to his metaphysics and epistemology. The second section discusses his ethics and elaborates on his moral rationalist position. The last section provides an explication of sympathy and



empathy. It brings the discussion to a close by affirming the neglect that Kantian ethics has on any moral decision-making.

2. KANT'S METAPHYSICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Kant's metaphysics and epistemology are based on his synthetic a priori position. Synthetic a priori essentially amalgamates a priori and a posteriori perception. In perception, we are introduced to two faculties of the mind: the intellectual faculty, which houses pure concepts and the categories of understanding, and the faculty of sensation, which encapsulates intuitions. Accordingly, through our intellectual faculty, we know the categories of experience that must be applied to our intuitions in cognition. The idea is that there is an intertwined and inextricable relationship between pure intuitions (a priori) and empirical intuitions (a posteriori). Every a priori concept is only meaningful when synthesized with our a posteriori experience. In turn, every a posteriori knowledge is comprehensible if and only if we synthesize our categories of understanding to them. This elucidation culminates in his famous statement that "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind" (Guyer & Wood, 1998, pp. 193–194), and only from their union do cognition arise. As stated differently, intuitions are meaningless and redundant if concepts are not applied to the experience of the subject, and invariably, thoughts that are not lodged in our intuitions are blind. Having understood his derivation of ethics from his metaphysics and epistemology, this paper now turns to his ethics.

3. RATIONALITY

Reason is an element central to the moral philosophy proposed by Immanuel Kant. The point is that goodwill is produced by reason. The purpose of this is to create a will that is good and not goodwill, just to aim at acquiring happiness in moral decision-making processes. The idea is expressed in the following words, "This also applies to mental life; and in human beings, the reason is, as it were, the organ which controls action..." (Kant, 1948, p. 18). What the passage affirms is Kant's insistence on the use of reasoning in moral decision-making. Since reasoning is central to human action and behaviour, it is only logically plausible to make moral actions all about rational actions. The reason is that goodwill helps to keep our unruly impulses and desires in check. Thus, without the use of human reason, our actions cannot be said to follow from duty employing goodwill. To use reason in this sense also is 'acting for the sake of duty' (Kant, 1948, p. 8). Kant argues that in our moral decisions, reason must be used in acting according to duty. Goodwill exercised using reasoning with the motive of duty is the central theme of Kant's moral rationalism. Emotions are not supposed to direct our actions. For instance, when a person decides to undertake an action with considerable moral implications, emotions are not the signpost to follow. The direction of the emotion could be uncontrollable and lead to disastrous ends. A person who derives pleasure and happiness from shopping, if following the lead of the desires, could end up shopping with his or her savings and eventually incur debt even though the pleasure was derived from the act. It is because of this that Kant argues in defence of the use of reason to serve as a check for the desires of humans, which could be uncontrollable. Moral action is good, not for any other reason, but it is good if it is done based on duty. This is expressed in the following words. "A human action is morally good not because it is done from immediate inclinations-still less because it is done from self-interest-but because it is done for the sake of duty" (Kant, 1948, p. 19).

This shows Kant's point of departure from consequentialist philosophy and egoism. When actions are performed to satisfy one's self-interest, such actions cannot be deemed as morally right actions. This happens to be the focus of Kant's first proposition on duty. As discussed above, rationality is indispensable to the attainment of moral fortitude. As Aristotle puts it, unlike animals, human beings can integrate rationality and emotions (which emanate from sensations). Hence, while we may choose not to painstakingly scrutinize the actions that a dog takes, we have a moral obligation to assess that of a moral agent (human beings). What it means here is that in morality, the a priori faculty of reasoning is indispensable to the actualization of probity; that is why Kant says, "A metaphysics of morals is therefore indispensably necessary, not merely because of a motive to speculation..." (Gregor, 1996, p. 3). It is essentially using our rationality that we can fulfil the moral law. The faculty of reasoning affords us the non-conformity of our inclinations. Consequently, it is through goodwill, which supervenes rationality, that we can satisfy moral law. Kant explains the dependence of goodwill on rationality: "Where nature has everywhere else gone to work purposively in distributing its capacities/the true vocation of reason must be to produce a good will, not perhaps as a means to other purposes, but good in itself for which reason was necessary" (Gregor, 1996, p. 10).

In Kant's moral rationalism, there is a focus on what Kant calls goodwill. Goodwill refers to that which is good without qualification. It is good in all circumstances and does not require other things

to make it good. It is absolutely and unconditionally good. They could become bad when they are used by bad will. In the case of goodwill, Kant argues that the product of goodwill is not that which determines whether goodwill is good or otherwise. The goodwill, as stated earlier, is good irrespective of the outcome of an action that was taken with the goodwill. Kant, in this sense, may have been construed by some critics as ignoring the consequences or ends of an action.

On the contrary, Kant argues that all actions should aim to produce results, even though the results cannot be used in determining the goodness of the goodwill. For Kant, goodwill is the basic condition in all moral decision-making processes. As moral agents, we must ensure that our actions are disseminated in austere conformity to goodwill. It is only then that our actions are moral due to the “universal ends” it seeks to achieve (Gregor, 1996, p. 7). Take the short scenario below for further apprehension of the goodwill.

Supposing Anthony has the yearning to eat French fries at (McDonald's) but does not have the financial means, and to his surprise, an old, seemingly rich woman drops a fifty-dollar note. Is Anthony justified in picking it up to purchase McDonalds? One might purport that the action is not necessarily bad, considering how little the old rich woman may value a fifty-dollar note. For Francis, however, the fifty-dollar note would do him a world of good. On the contrary, according to Kant, Francis' rationality will inform him not to steal the fifty dollars but rather impel Francis to hand over the money to the rich old woman. This is the causal potency that the goodwill possesses, the capacity to cause a subject to commit good actions. It is worth restating that goodwill is bound by the rational faculty of the mind. The cogent faculty has preeminence over our emotions in our decision-making. It is for this reason that Francis decides to hand the money back to the rich old woman despite his instantiable desire for McDonalds. The next point of consideration is duty.

The second proposition of Kant on duty is that: “An action done from duty has its moral worth, not from the results it attains or seeks to attain, but from a formal principle or maxim—the principle of doing one's duty whatever that duty may be” (Kant, 1948, p. 20). Thus, our moral actions must be performed with the motive of duty in mind. Any other reason we entertain for performing our moral actions does not make such moral actions worthy unless the action is performed from a position of duty. For instance, self-interest is not a good reason for a moral decision to be taken when acting. “An action even if it accords with duty and is in that sense right—is not commonly regarded as morally good if it is done solely out of self-interest” (Kant, 1948, p. 19). From the argument, Kant suggests that even though duty could be part of the motives for performing certain actions, an action is only morally right if duty is the sufficient reason for performing such action.

Kant implores all our actions to be motivated by duty. As moral agents, the utmost duty is to ensure that our actions correspond to goodwill. There are a few salient qualities of duty we should enumerate. First, duty is essentially influenced by our rational capacity to achieve goodwill, and therefore, duty is devoid of inclinations. An example here is the preservation of the life of the moral agent by the moral agent. In a case where one does not like the life that they are living and perceives that a self-inflicted truncation of that life would be beneficial, the moral agent must preserve their life. To this end, the moral agent abrogates any inclinations that may entice their decision and turns their attention to the rational disposition towards duty. In addition, any action motivated by fulfilling one's self-interest is immoral. Such actions are propelled by our conceited inclinations, and thus, the actions we commit are likely to be deprived. Second, duty is committed not to an end but simply as a means. We commit duty because it is good and a prerequisite for other actions to be good. It follows that duty gives an imperative for moral agents not to look at the consequences of their actions but rather commit actions for goodwill. Third, and more importantly, duty must be guided by the universal law, particularly the categorical imperative. The categorical imperative is the universal law that preserves the impartial and objective appraisal of a moral agent's decisions.

4. THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE (THE UNIVERSAL LAW)

Kant expatiates the categorical imperative in two main facets: universality and the principle of humility. The discussion will focus on the principle of universality; nonetheless, let us briefly discuss the principle of humility. The principle of humility urges moral agents not to treat other people to an end but as always as an end. Since human beings reason, they should not be treated as a means to an end. More so, only objects cannot reason and can be used to another end. Conversely, human beings should be treated as ends and not as means to an end. Kant posits: “Now I say that the human being and in general every rational being exists as an end in itself, not merely as a means to be used . . .” (Gregor, 1996, p. 37).

Universal law, which serves as the yardstick for the justification of the morality of actions, is the categorical imperative. Insofar as our actions impartially and objectively are willed to be universal laws, that action is right. What does Kant mean by willing our actions to become universal laws? By

willing our actions to be universal laws, it suggests that if that action is committed at any place and at any time and, of course, to anyone, not least the moral agent that wills it, that action is morally right. Suppose you decide to avenge the infidelity of your wife by inflicting physical punishment. Would you like that action to be a universal law? By affirming the action as a universal law, it connotes that you give countenance to physical punishment inflicted on a spouse who commits infidelity and espouses this to be lawfully implemented universally. That is why the categorical imperative is a law that requires reasoning about an action and its universality. So, the categorical imperative states, "act only by that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (Gregor, 1996, p. 31). This moral law ultimately is the law of reason. This means that moral law must be obeyed for its own sake and not for other reasons. The second principle of Kant's formulation equally rests on reason. The import of the second formulation is as follows: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your person or the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end" (Kant, 1948, p. 96).

The point established by Kant is that individual moral decision-making scenarios cannot be used as a parameter for morality, and as such, there is a need for moral law to guide human conduct. This is worth noting since individual moral actions may have unique underpinnings, so using one out of the lot to serve as the yardstick would not be logically accurate. However, with rationality as the fundamental principle common to all, the categorical imperative formulated based on a priori reason will stand the test of time in all moral situations.

5. KANT'S REJECTION OF SYMPATHY AND EMPATHY

The disparity between sympathy and empathy is profoundly subtle. It seems putative that while sympathy is the feeling of pity for a situation or circumstance that has befallen another, empathy is a virtue in which the subject attempts to immerse themselves in the experience of another moral agent to understand the moral agent's understanding. For instance, Anthony has been constantly betting on the Golden State Warriors to win their NBA matches by a margin of ten points. Sadly, Anthony has lost over five thousand dollars on betting and has surprisingly never won any money from the numerous bets. Take Anthony's two friends, Grace and Gertrude, Grace is sympathetic, and Gertrude is empathetic. Grace's emotional faculty instils in her a vivid sense of sympathy for Anthony's financial loss. Grace might be pushed to subsequently help Anthony by giving him money for his trouble. Nevertheless, Gertrude, being empathetic to Anthony's plight, would try to understand what it is like to be Anthony. In so doing, Gertrude may not necessarily hand Anthony money but would realize why Anthony is committing to betting and, consequently, find the right antidote to Anthony's betting habit.

The above has given an elaborate scenario to depict the discrepancy between sympathy and empathy. It is obvious that sympathy and empathy emerge from our inclinations, and our inclinations are a property of our emotions. In this accord, empathy or sympathy affirms the causal potency that emotions have on our decisions. Undoubtedly, this is antithetical to Kant's moral philosophy but rather an affirmation of Hume's moral philosophy. So, sympathy, for Hume and other moral voluntarists, determines the rightness and wrongness of actions. Moreover, for Hume, the use of sympathy and empathy could actualize goodness in the decisions of the moral agent. Kantian ethics does repudiate the essence of sympathy and compassion in decision-making.

Recall that Kant deems rationality to have precedence over emotions in decision-making. In this vein, Kant admits that we have inclinations that, notwithstanding, the a priori faculty of rationality determines our moral decisions. The determination of the a priori faculty of reasoning warrants that the moral agent necessarily takes actions that correspond to the categorical imperative. Kant, therefore, admits that our understanding, which is aided by the faculty of reason, aids moral agents in making judgments that are not influenced by the world of sense, that is, our inclinations. Conclusively, the effect that the world of sense may have on the subject's will is dispelled due to our "world of understanding" that governs the will. As indicated above, we have the world of sense through which our inclinations emanate, and we have the world of understanding governed by reasoning. A Rational being subjugates their inclinations using understanding. To this end, our actions are rationally driven and hence devoid of emotional influence and aim to fulfil the categorical imperative. Essentially, in Kant's moral philosophy, sympathy and empathy are dominated by reasoning and thus have no potency in moral decisions. In the case of Anthony's habit of betting, with Kant's philosophy, Gertrude would not have sympathy for Anthony but rather construes Anthony's habit of betting as immoral. It is immoral because it is contrary to duty, goodwill, and the categorical imperative. It is thus unquestionable that Kant's philosophy rejects the essence of sympathy, empathy, and emotions in moral judgments.

In our attempt to address whether Kant's reliance on reason rejects sympathy and empathy, one could deduce from Kant's arguments that our actions are only moral if such actions are performed

using reason from the point of duty. No room is made for emotions, sympathy, and empathy. It is in line with this that Kant maintains 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 ..." (Kant, 1948, p. 31). Should actions be based on self-interest and what the result of such actions should be, then there will be no need for rational a priori universally binding principles in moral decision-making. Nevertheless, Kant argues that such actions whose rightness or wrongness are based on emotions and self-interest will be considered morally worthless actions. Such actions have no moral worth. One would agree with Kant that such an observation is quite profound because most of our actions are generally geared towards the achievement of some desired result, to satisfy a need, or to make one experience some level of pleasure. One implication of acting towards ends, pleasure, happiness, and self-interest is that, sometimes, interests could clash. For instance, when the individual interest of a moral agent clashes with that of the nation, what becomes the morally right thing to do? In a situation where the interest of an individual breadwinner comes into conflict with the interests of most of the people in his family, moral theorists who argue about the interests of the majority in a moral decision (Utilitarians) will suggest that such an individual yields his interest to favour the interest of most of the family members. However, in Kant's rational morality, the morally right thing to do in a situation where the interest of the individual breadwinner clashes with the interest of most of the family members is to act based on duty using goodwill. Reasoning on the principle of using goodwill requires that moral action is assessed rationally, subjecting the contents of the action, to a priori rigorous reasoning.

Kant's moral reasoning, which is based on rationality, ensures that you act based on duty. In conclusion, it prevents the forms of contradiction and conflicts that could plague other moral theories, such as utilitarianism and Hedonism. Thus, Kant's reliance on reasoning in his moral philosophy suggests that the autonomy of the will yields moral truths in action. However, violating the moral law leads to heteronomous actions, and practising goodwill leads to autonomy. Kant's emphasis on the use of reason is evident in his formulation of all his versions of the moral imperatives. The universal categorical imperative, which admonishes actions to be done solely with the ability to implement such acts into universal laws, shows the extent to which reason takes precedence over empathy or sympathy in any moral decision-making situation.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper admits that Kant's ethical position of reason seems quite logical for impartiality and objectivity. If we allow our inclinations to have potency over our decisions, there is a propensity for us to allow murderers, thieves, and, more so, immoral people to be vindicated for their actions. Everyone has a reason to commit immoral actions, and immorality is mostly driven by our inclinations. Even more daunting is the influence that sympathy and empathy may have on the impartial and objective perception of moral decisions. So, although empathy and sympathy are emotional dispositions that cannot be completely ignored, we are urged to ensure that our reasoning immensely determines our decisions. It is only then, through Kant's philosophy, that we make good moral decisions.

Kant's reliance on reason has brought to light the need to emphasize a priori reasoning when assessing principles that must be applicable universally. It also shows the weaknesses and the shortfalls of moral theories that base their outcomes on emotions, self-interests, and pleasure. What needs to be said here is that Kant does not say empathy and sympathy do not operate in moral decision-making. He talks about indirect duties, some of which could be preserving oneself to attain happiness. However, for an action to have moral worth, Kant believed there is a need to rely on reason. Sympathy and empathy in any moral action do not give moral worth to such an action. It is only by the application of reason that we can determine the moral worth of actions: "To help others where one can is a duty, and besides this, there are many spirits of so sympathetic a temper that ... Yet I maintain that in such a case, an action of this kind, however right and however amiable it may be, has still no genuine moral worth" (Kant, 1948, p. 66).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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