

## Amoral Actions: A Defense of Kant's Account of Moral Content

Immanuel Kant in his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* claims that an action is morally worthy only if it is done *from* duty. In this paper, I will defend this proposition against an objection. I begin by explaining Kant's view. Then, I consider the objection and subsequently respond to it by defending Kant's claim.

Kant identifies four types of actions:

1. Actions contrary to duty
2. Actions in conformity with duty but done for a self-seeking purpose.
3. Actions in conformity with duty but done out of an immediate inclination.
4. Actions in conformity with duty and done from duty.

Kant's assertion that the first two kinds of actions are immoral is uncontroversial when assessed under common rational moral intuition. The contentious claim is that only the last type of actions have moral worth, implying that the third type, that is, right actions done out of immediate inclination, do *not* have moral worth.

Kant gives the example of a philanthropist to demonstrate the difference between the third and fourth type of actions. He claims that if such a philanthropist helps people for the sake of an inner satisfaction he feels from the act (beneficence from sympathy), then his action is of the third type, and thus does not have moral worth. On the other hand, if this philanthropist is severely depressed and does not gain any inner happiness from helping people, *yet* he continues to give charity because he knows it is the right thing to do (beneficence from duty), then his action is of the fourth kind, and has moral worth.

Critics of Kant take the above proposition to mean that inclination and moral worth are mutually exclusive, i.e. the mere presence of inclination renders actions morally unworthy.

Friedrich Schiller famously expressed this objection by pointing out that according to Kant's view, in order to be virtuous, he ought to despise his friends before helping them, because if he loves his friends and *wants* to help them, then the act of helping is no longer virtuous.<sup>1</sup>

There is also an appeal to common moral intuition by critics of Kant. We do not generally view people as more virtuous if they do actions out of duty rather than sympathy and care. In fact, we often view naturally compassionate people who find an inner satisfaction from helping others as more admirable than those that don't have such inherent compassion towards others.

Thus this objection is two-fold: a) Kant is requiring us to despise others in order to be morally worthy and b) this does not align with common moral intuition. Before moving forward with my defense of Kant, I will establish some definitions:

**Reason** - The rational ability to think and understand things in a logical way.

**Duty** - "the necessity of an action from respect for law." (4:400)<sup>2</sup>.

**Inclination** - A subjective desire, the fulfilling of which causes a positive emotional experience for the subject.

**Praiseworthy** - something admirable, not necessarily relating to morality. This could include all sorts of things that one would admire for reasons other than moral content.

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<sup>1</sup> This objection is expressed in Schiller's famous epigram: "Gladly I serve my friends, but alas I do it with pleasure; Hence I am plagued with doubt that I am not a virtuous person; To this, this answer is given: Surely, your only resource is to try to despise them entirely; And then with aversion do what your duty enjoins." - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (n.d.). *Notes to Friedrich Schiller*. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schiller/notes.html>

<sup>2</sup> The question of *what* these duties are is addressed later in the Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals but that is a separate question from what I am addressing in this paper. For current purposes, in my examples I assume that certain actions are accepted to be in line with duty.

Like the talent of an artist, or the intellect of a great scientist. The important idea is that certain things can be praiseworthy without having moral content.

**Esteem/Respect** - A special kind of admiration reserved for someone whose actions have moral content. I discuss this further in a later part of the paper.

**Moral worth/content** - The unique characteristic of an action that makes it morally good.

Note that Kant uses the term “moral worth” and “moral content” almost interchangeably. However, in formulating his defense, I find the term moral content to be more appropriate. *Lacking moral worth* has an unnecessarily negative connotation (at least in English). This phrase is synonymous with the word unworthy, which implies that something is fundamentally bad. That, I believe, is a misrepresentation of Kant's idea. *Lacking moral content*, on the other hand, works better. The third type of action, i.e. right action done out of immediate inclination, does not have *immoral content*, rather it has *no moral content*. It may be good natured, kind and compassionate, thus *praiseworthy* and yet constitute no moral content.

I will defend Kant's claim by responding to both aspects of the aforementioned objection. I argue that the first part is a misinterpretation of Kant's proposition and in response to the second part, I show that upon inspection common moral intuition *does* agree with what Kant has proposed.

The first part of the objection protests that Kant is requiring us to despise others in order to have moral content. This is a misinterpretation of Kant's claim. One may experience an inclination to do what is in line with duty but the *decision* to act must be ultimately motivated by duty. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant calls this “*moral apathy*”, explicitly distinguishing it from the common understanding of the word apathy as subjective indifference. Moral apathy

does not indicate the *absence* of inclination, but simply that all such inclinations “lose their influence on moral feeling only because respect for the law is more powerful than all such feelings together.” You may be a compassionate person, but you ought to *reason* your way towards acting correctly, and in this process of reasoning, commitment to duty should play the decisive role. In other words, if your decision to act in line with the moral law is *independent* of whether or not you have an inclination to act as such, then your action has moral content.

Take the example of a doctor who gains intellectual fulfillment in the medical profession, and experiences emotional satisfaction when he treats patients who are unwell. Every morning, however, he wakes up and tells himself, “I ought to go to work because sick patients are relying on me to treat them.” He may feel satisfied after working but it is not pursuit of this satisfaction that convinces him to go to work, rather the awareness of his duty to treat his patients. That is, even if one day he wakes up exhausted and unmotivated with an urge to stay in bed, he will still reason the same as before by telling himself he ought to go to work, and thus will go anyway. In this way, his action of going to work has moral content.

Thus, Kant does not mean that the existence of inclinations in line with duty will destroy chances of doing morally worthy actions. Rather, in order to be morally worthy, the hierarchy of considerations that move a person to act needs to have the obligation to duty at the top, such that even in the absence of all other inclinations, the person would act in line with duty.

I will now respond to the second part of the objection, i.e. I will show that common moral intuition aligns with Kant’s proposition. To do so, I claim that actions fall into 3 different normative categories: **moral**, **amoral** and **immoral**. The amoral category is essential in understanding why the above objection does not hold its ground. An action is amoral when it

does not relate to morality, it is neither good nor bad, neither moral nor immoral, and thus falls into a third unique normative category.

The necessity of this amoral category can be demonstrated with an example. Consider the case of a mother jumping in front of a bullet to save her child versus a woman jumping in front of a bullet to save a stranger. While the first case is admirable, according to common moral intuition, the second case induces a different, somewhat stronger sense of praise and respect. It is this distinction that separates moral from amoral actions. We need the amoral category of actions because the binary classification of actions between moral and immoral does not capture the intuitive difference between these two acts.

I now explain why this second case demands a different, stronger kind of admiration, what Kant terms *respect* or *esteem* as opposed to ordinary *praise*. The second case, when the woman acts from duty unlike the mother who acts from inclination, doing the right thing is *harder*. Consider another example. Jane has an income of \$1000 while Alice has an income of \$10,000 per month. Both of them see a child left alone in the street, whose family has been killed in a sudden accident and it would take \$500 to get him to a safe institution. For Jane, contributing this \$500 is significantly *harder* than for Alice, because Jane would go through a more difficult financial struggle than Alice in doing the right thing. Analogously, if Alex gets a great internal feeling from spending his day volunteering for a homeless shelter, but Jack is clinically depressed and finds interacting with human beings draining and volunteering doesn't add any positive emotions to his day but in fact only makes him feel worse because of social anxiety, then doing the "good act" of volunteering in the homeless shelter is significantly *harder* for Jack due to a more difficult *emotional* struggle than Alex. This is similar to the case of Alice and Jane above. In these cases, Alice and Alex would not be considered *bad* or *immoral* people,

their inclinations would be praiseworthy and admirable, but Jack and Jane intuitively would be considered more impressive, more worthy of moral esteem because doing good when it is hard deserves a different kind of esteem.

Kant says respect is “a feeling of a special kind” [6:403], which is reserved for “only what is connected with my will merely as ground and never as effect, what does not serve my inclination but outweighs it or excludes it altogether from calculations in making a choice.”

[4:400] Respect is the praise that is warranted when the practice of will defeats overpowering emotions. Thus choosing to do good despite the inclination *not* to shows a superiority of will, which demands this special kind of respect. This doesn't mean that respect is only warranted when an opposing inclination is present. Rather respect is warranted when a person's will to do good is decisively stronger than any inclinations, whether opposing or in line with what duty demands.

Finally, I apply the above reasoning to the original example given by Schiller, that is the need to despise friends in order for our good acts towards them to have moral content. Consider a friend who has had an accident. It is praiseworthy when you help her out of love. But the act is *amoral* if your love for her is the *reason* you help her. If, on the other hand, you see your friend and think this human being is suffering and I *ought* to help, then your act does have moral content because despite the inclination, your decision to act was based on a commitment to duty. Contrastingly, imagine another friend that betrayed you terribly and is now an enemy. You see him injured in an accident and a part of you feels like he deserves to suffer. But you choose to help him anyway because it's the right thing to do. This case has moral content and demands respect, since the decisive role was surely played by your commitment to duty. In both cases,

friend or enemy, your action has moral content if you would choose to help regardless of whether or not this person in an accident was your friend, your enemy or a complete stranger.

### **References**

Mary Gregor (ed.), Kant, Practical Philosophy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Paperback. ISBN 0-521-65408-4

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (n.d.). Notes to Friedrich Schiller. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schiller/notes.html>