

MOTIVATIONAL OVERDETERMINATION AS AN OBJECTION TO KANTIAN DEONTOLOGY

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Anyone who has studied Kant extensively will likely have encountered a joke by Friedrich Schiller, which served as a mockery, not only of Kant's Categorical Imperative, but of duty-based ethics in its entirety. Schiller wrote, "Gladly I serve my friends, but regrettably I do it with pleasure. Thus I am often troubled by the fact that I am not virtuous. The only advice for you is to try to despise them. And thus to do with repugnance what duty commands."¹ While the joke may be clever, it expresses a legitimate concern within the study of Kantian ethics, namely, when can one determine that an action is done "from duty"? Must the action be performed apart from all other motives, or can a dutiful action be executed alongside cooperative inclinations? Also, when can an action be attributed moral worth, and how is this concept affected by Schiller's objection? I will attempt to answer these questions by arguing that Schiller's refutation represents a severe misinterpretation of Kant's deontology, and in fact, when Kant is read correctly, he stands strong against the challenges of the overdeterminationalists.

Analysis of these objections must begin with a precise understanding of Kant's deontology, his philosophical goals, and the ideas of moral worth and acting from duty. Kant argues that there are a priori ethical laws that should form every maxim and direct every action. These laws, like the laws of nature, are universal, and apply to every individual in every situation. All rational beings have a duty, Kant claims, to act in such a way that these ethically pure maxims are followed, regardless of any external circumstance or possible consequence.² While the content of these moral laws is the centerpiece of Kantian ethics, it is not the focus of this paper, and I feel it extraneous to address it in this context, as it may lead to a diversion of focus from the central problem, namely, the possibility of acting from duty at all.

It is significant to note that prior to the idea of moral worth, deontology is an action-based ethics (as opposed to one based entirely on intentions). One can act in a way that aligns with her duties, even if her motives are entirely based on inclination. In the *Groundwork*, Kant, after identifying beneficence as a duty, provides an example of an individual who simply finds pleasure in kindness. There are many benevolent souls, Kant says, whose motives and inclinations all direct themselves toward goodness, and, since their actions align with their duties, these individuals are living in accordance with their deontological obligations. However, Kant follows this admission by stating, "Yet I maintain that, however dutiful and kind an action of this sort may be, it still has no genuinely moral worth..."³

Interpretation of this passage is rather difficult since Kant neglects to identify the motive, which drives these souls; he simply states that there are inclinations present that align

¹ Friedrich Schiller, *Friedrich Von Schillers Sämmtliche Werke* (Cotta 1818) 299

² Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002) 195-245

³ *Ibid.*, 199

with duty. Moral worth, it must be added, can only result from an action, which is done *from* duty, as opposed to actions, which simply happen to align with duty. Prima facie, it would appear that, under Kant's view, one's actions cannot be attributed any moral worth, unless the individual performing them has absolutely no cooperating inclinations (inclinations which would drive one to follow her duty, even if no consideration of the duty was present). Richard Henson, in his article *What Kant Might Have Said: Moral Worth and the Overdetermination of Dutiful Action* encounters the same problem, and he concludes, "Only when one acts *without any* (cooperating) *inclination* is one acting from duty."⁴ After a careful analysis of Kant's surrounding passages within the Groundwork, I feel I must dissent from Henson's conclusion, or at least request that his judgment be suspended.

Henson calls for those who disagree with him to defend themselves with passages from Kant, which he claims have not yet been provided. It is true (to my knowledge) that Kant never explicitly states a concern for overdetermination, but if one considers some of the passages surrounding Kant's writing on inclination, I believe that assumptions can be drawn which help to understand Kant's views on the matter. While Kant's writing on the passage referred to above does not explicitly state the motivations which drove these souls to act in accordance with duty, he follows this by relating their situation to a similar one, which he calls the "inclination to honor." He states,

It is on a level with other inclinations—for example, the inclination to pursue honor, which if fortunate enough to aim at something generally useful and consistent with duty, something consequently honorable, deserves praise and encouragement but not esteem.⁵

It would seem to follow, from this passage, that Kant was in fact arguing that these souls were acting from inclination, rather than from duty. However, he makes no comment regarding the possibility of acting from duty while having other inclinations present.

To fully address Henson's claim, it is important to analyze the Kantian passage that led Henson to this conclusion. Kant provides an example of a man whose life has encountered so much hardship that his mind was "overclouded by the sorrows of his own which extinguished all compassion for the fate of others."⁶ That is to say, he notices the sorrows and misfortune of others, but he is simply no longer emotionally affected by them, since he is overwhelmed by his own troubles. However, when he notices another individual in pain, he "tears himself out of this deadly apathy and does the action without any inclination, solely out of duty."⁷ Only now, Kant says, can this man's actions receive the title of moral worth.

From this passage, Henson concludes that Kant's intention is explicitly clear: only when one has absolutely no inclinations supporting a given action, and many inclinations opposing it (and of course, this action aligns with one's duty) can one's actions have moral worth. Now, Henson addresses one objection to his interpretation, namely, that Kant was not arguing that this was the first time the sorrowful man's actions had moral worth; it is simply the first time the reader can *know* that his actions have moral worth. Henson vigorously dissents from this argument. He claims that this is not supported by any outside Kantian passages, and that those who perpetuate such an argument are attempting

⁴ Richard G. Henson, *What Kant Might Have Said: Moral Worth and the Overdetermination of Dutiful Action* (*The Philosophical Review*, 1979) 33

⁵ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 200

⁶ *Ibid.*, 200

⁷ *Ibid.*, 200

to apply ambiguity to a passage that has none.⁸ I agree with Henson; it does not appear that Kant intended to claim that only when the sorrowful man was free from inclinations could we *know* that he was acting with moral worth. This is a misinterpretation. Rather, when examining the surrounding passages, I believe Kant's intentions with this passage were more nuanced than Henson first believed them to be.

The way in which Kant ends this paragraph is intriguing, and I think that it is important when we consider the shaping of Kant's story as a whole. Kant says, "It is precisely in this that the worth of character begins to show--a moral worth, and incomparably the highest--namely, that he does good, not out of inclination, but out of duty."⁹ Kant's focus in creating the story of the sorrowful man, I believe, becomes clear after one encounters this passage. When the reader considers this man, his disposition, and his actions, she is not simply looking at the man's actions in isolation. Kant is expressing the development of moral character, and how one breaks away from his inclinations and his base desires in order to mold into the higher, moral character.

It is important to note that the sorrowful man did not act out of reluctance, as it would first appear. As his moral character developed, he *desired* to aid in the suffering of others, even though there was no inclination within him which drove him to such action. (I also think that it is interesting to note that, contrary to general assumption, there is nothing within this passage to suggest that this man had any inclination, which would drive him against helping others. Perhaps this man had already done as Kant prescribed, and constituted his nature in such a way that there would be no opposing inclinations.) Kant is telling the story of a man whose moral character has finally developed, and showing the reader that, even in the worst of circumstances, moral character can shine through.

Also, the ending of this paragraph mirrors Kant's story of the sympathetic souls almost verbatim. Kant says that the sorrowful man in his story did good *not* out of inclination, *but* out of duty. Again, Kant is not considering the possibility of *both* inclination and duty existing within the man.

This option, that it is possible for one to be acting *from duty* along with corresponding and opposing inclinations, must be addressed. It is a possibility which is considered by Allen Wood, in his book, *Kant's Ethical Thought*. While I disagree with some of Wood's conclusions in his section on overdetermination, he appears to draw the same overall conclusion that I did: Kant is painting the picture of a Good Will, a moral character, and not simply one of actions and duties.

Wood, like myself, disagrees with Henson's conclusion that one (or one's actions) cannot have moral worth unless her actions are performed from duty *alone*, separate from all corresponding inclinations. Wood points out that there are very few places in which anything close to an idea of motivational overdetermination is addressed by Kant, but one of them is in a journal article in which Kant says, "...he [the rational human being] must, as far as is possible for him, strive to become aware that no incentive derived from that gets mixed, unnoticed, into the determination of duty..."¹⁰ Kant is not saying here that one cannot have incentives alongside duty; he is simply saying that they cannot be

⁸ Henson, *What Kant Might Have Said: Moral Worth and the Overdetermination of Dutiful Action*, 46

⁹ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 200

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *On the Common Saying: That may be correct in theory but it is of no use in practice* (*Berlinische Monatsschr.*, 1793) 8:279

mixed in the *determination* of duty. This confirms my earlier belief that, for an action to have moral worth, it must be *from* duty, but nowhere in this passage does Kant condemn corresponding inclinations which do not affect the actor's decision. In Wood's words, "... we must not let them corrupt our judgment about what our duties are."¹¹ Thus, Kant is, again, placing emphasis on the fact that we must transform our character in a way such that we act purely on duty, with a truly Good Will, rather than acting based on the whims of our inclinations.

Kant addresses the idea of mixed inclinations and duties again, in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, in which he says, "...it is even hazardous to let any other incentive (such as that of advantage) so much as cooperate *alongside* the moral law."¹² While Kant says that mixing inclinations with duties is hazardous, it does not necessarily imply that any moral worth is lost if this procedure is followed. Kant, showing his Rousseauian nature, believes that individuals are born with a purely Good Will, which gets corrupted by society over time. However, we can act in such a way that we steer our inclinations toward goodness. It is hazardous for us to let any inclination cooperate alongside duty since it may corrupt our judgment, but if we are able to act in such a way and preserve our ability to act *from* duty, Kant would not condemn it. This developed from Kant's theory of human nature, which he derived heavily from the Stoics. The Stoics separated all of philosophy into three parts: Logic, Physics, and Ethics. Logic was thought to be the driving force, which regulated all other study across all disciplines.¹³ The rational mind, the part of human composition which determines and interprets logic, is the part which creates maxims, discovers moral principles, and legislates oneself. The subsequent part of human disposition is our nature, or the human condition, which is easily corruptible but can also be shaped by the rational mind. An understanding of this also helps one understand Kant's ultimate mission in the Groundwork, which was to lead his reader to develop the moral character, and shape herself in such a way that she aligns her nature with her rational mind.

Wood concludes by denying that a will can be good only when it acts from duty. He states, "The motive of duty is then seen as one of these [desires, impulses, or passions] tugging at us along with other inclinations and producing actions by something like a parallelogram of psychic forces."¹⁴ It would seem to me, then, that Wood would subscribe to one of the options listed by Henson in his article, namely, as long as duty is one of those cosmic forces, one can be considered to be acting from duty. I agree with Wood in the sense that duty can cooperate alongside other forces, but I tend to dissent in this area. One is acting *from duty* if duty is the *only* force, which is driving her actions, regardless of the other inclinations, which would attempt to drive her. This is Kant's whole point in creating a moral character; it seems absurd to me that one would then conclude that Kant would allow almost any action to be considered from duty, as long as duty is one of the driving forces. Why, then, choose duty as the one that the action is "from"?

¹¹ Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge, U.K., Cambridge University Press, 1999) 34

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Cambridge, U.K., Cambridge University Press, 1997) 5:72

¹³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (Cambridge U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2013) 151

¹⁴ Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, 33

Let us imagine a man whose soul is not so pure as the ones provided in some of Kant's examples: a man who has been told a secret by another person, whom he hates. Now, one of their peers approaches this man and directly asks him a question which would expose the secret. "Good," the man thinks, "Now I can shame my enemy by refusing to lie and exposing his secret." However, this man has also read Kant, and he knows that it is his duty to refrain from lying. Thus, he has an inclination and a duty to tell the truth. Yet, are we to say that this man, by refusing to lie and exposing the secret, was acting *from duty*? If so, we must also say that this man was acting maliciously, out of hatred for his neighbor, and from an evil inclination. It would seem to me that this is not the moral character that Kant desired to inspire.

There is still a significant question which has gone unanswered, namely, how can one act from duty while still being influenced by cooperating inclinations? To answer this, we must again refer to the Stoics. It is important to remember that, while an individual can, to a certain extent, attempt to shape her disposition in a way such that her inclinations align with her duties, it is ultimately impossible to fully control our base desires. If we are to act from duty, we must acknowledge our animal inclinations, but ignore them in such a way that we are acting from our rational, logic-based mind, and not letting our inclinations control us. Only then can we truly embody Kant's moral character, and only then can we truly act from duty.

To conclude, let us return to Schiller's joke. It may be applicable if one were to subscribe to Henson's interpretation of Kant's deontology. However, if one analyzes Kant's arguments fully in context, one realizes that Kant's mission was not to define duty as simply impossible situations in which one's inclinations are fully aligned in such a way that acting from duty is immediately noticeable. Kant intended to portray a moral character, which allows the possibility of cooperating and opposing inclinations. Ultimately, when one studies Kant's true objective, one can see that Schiller's joke fails, Kant stands tall against objection, and his moral law shines through.

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