

ACTIONS AND FEELINGS

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Abstract: In this paper, I analyze Kant's theory of action and if human beings can act morally without being moved by sensible feelings. I will show that the answer of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Groundwork* and the *Critical of Practical Reason* is without any doubt "yes", but Kant is ambiguous in the *Metaphysics of Morals* and also in the *Anthropology*. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant claims that there are some sensible conditions to the reception of the concept of duty: moral feeling, conscience, love of one's neighbor, and respect for one self (self-esteem). I examine moral feeling and love of human beings, trying to figure out whether or not they are necessary sensible pre-conditions to moral actions.

Keywords: Actions; Feelings; Moral.

1. CAN WE ACT WITHOUT ANY SENSIBLE INCETIVE?

In the article "Kant and Motivational Externalism", Karl Ameriks insists that "if a Kantian still wishes to reach a truly cosmopolitan audience, it makes sense to step back beyond the perspective of Kantian scholarship alone, and to reflect on the basic features that contemporary philosophers would insist that any acceptable theory treat with sensibility".¹ Commentators have been tempted to follow this Humean trend and find out sensible incentives in Kant. I will go back to Kant's texts, in order to locate where we can find sensibility or sensitivity and in which sense these feelings are necessary to action. Can we act morally without any sensible incentives?

For a traditional reader of the *Critique of Pure reason* the answer is unequivocally "yes". Kant is explicitly about this possibility in A 534/ B562:

The human power of choice is indeed an *arbitrium sensitivum*, yet not *brutum* but *liberum*, because sensibility does not render its action necessary, but in the human being, there is a faculty of determining one self from oneself, independent of necessitation by sensible impulses.

In the *Groundwork*, the answer seems to be also positive. Not only one *can*, but also one *should* act without any moral feeling. Sympathy² for other people's fortune, as a feeling that leads to beneficence, is analyzed in the well-known example of the *Groundwork*. When explaining the difference between acting from duty and according to duty, Kant presents the example of two

¹ Karl Ameriks, "Kant and Motivation Externalism", in: H. Klemme (2006).

² I take sympathy as translation for *Teilnehmung*, instead of compassion. *Affekt* will be translated by affect, while *Leidenschaft* by passion. I will reserve emotions for a generic term that denotes moral feelings, affection and passions.

philanthropists, distinguishing the one that possess a close pleasure in spreading joy to his fellow humans beings from the one who helps other people out of duty:

Suppose, then, that the mind of this philanthropist were overclouded by his own grief, which extinguished all sympathy with the fate of the others, and that while he still had the means to benefit others in distress their troubles did not move him because he had enough to do with his own; and suppose that now, when no longer incited to it by any inclination, he nevertheless tears himself out of this deadly insensibility and does the action without any inclination, simply from duty (G, 4:398)³.

Kant also asks if we should not consider that his action would have a higher worth if nature had put little sympathy in his heart, and the answer is negative: “By all means! It is just then that the worth of character comes out, which is moral and incomparably the highest, namely, that he is beneficent not from inclination but from duty” (G: 4: 399).

We can clearly distinguish in the example of the two philanthropists an action done according to duty from an action done from duty: the first one is carried out of compassion and the second one is performed even if the philanthropist does not care about other peoples’ misery. The difference between one and another is that the incentive of the first one is sympathy, which is a sensible inclination, while the action of second philanthropist is performed by the respect to the moral law. Kant considers that, if compassion for the other people's luck is the incentive of an action, then this action does not have a true moral value. If we consider this example in the light of the history of the Philosophy, we see that it is clearly provocative. To affirm that the benevolent action of a man who is not touched by the other people's misery does not have any moral value obviously emphasizes the difference between Kant and the empiricists, such as Hume and Hutcheson, who attribute to the natural feelings of sympathy the role of a virtuous incentive of moral actions.

In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, however, Kant surprises us with the claim that there are some feelings that are subjective conditions of receptiveness of the concept of duty (MS, 6:399). These are moral feeling, conscience, love of human beings and self-respect. Moral feeling is defined as “the susceptibility to feel pleasure or displeasure merely from being aware that our actions are consistent or contrary to the law of duty” (MS, 6: 399). This feeling can be pathological or moral: pathological if it “precedes the representation of the law”, moral if it “can only follow upon it” (MS, 6:399). Moral feeling seems to be a product of the representation of moral law; consequently, it is not an incentive to act morally. However, Kant is ambiguous when he claims that moral feeling is not a sense for the morally good, but susceptibility on the part of free choice to be moved by pure practical reason. He also asserts, “No human being is entirely without moral feeling, for were he completely lacking in receptivity to it he would be morally dead”. Here it seems that the answer to our question whether one can act morally without moral feelings is negative, although it does not imply that moral feelings precede the moral action and act as incentives.

³ I will use the following abbreviations: G for *Groundwork*, MS for *The Metaphysics of Morals* and KpV for *Critique of Practical Reason*. The numbers refer to volume and page of the Academy Edition.

What could be the role of moral feeling, if it is not an incentive? Moral feeling can be understood as a satisfaction through the understanding, as a pleasure in the concept of moral law. As Kant writes in the *Nachlaß*, 1020:

The *causa impulsiva* is either an impression or a concept, a representation of satisfaction or dissatisfaction through senses or the understanding, of the agreeable or the good: The first impel per *stimulus*, the second per *motive*. The *arbitrium immediate determinatum per stimulus* is *brutum*. (...) The *motive intellectualia pura* are what pleases immediately in the concept, now this is nothing other than a good will, since everything else can only please conditionally as a means (15: 456).

The pleasure in the concept of moral law is necessary for human beings to be affected by the concept of a good will; however, it is not an incentive for moral actions.

2. SYMPATHY ON THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS

The same affection that does not have any intrinsic moral value in the *Groundwork*, come out in the *Doctrine of the Virtue* as a feeling of pleasure and displeasure that should be used to promote benevolence, being itself an incentive for moral actions:

Sympathetic joy and sadness (*sympathia moralis*) are sensible feelings of pleasure and displeasure (which are therefore to be called 'aesthetic' at another's state of joy or pain (shared feelings, sympathetic feeling). Nature has already implanted in human beings receptivity to these feelings. But to use this as a means to promoting active and rational benevolence is still a particular, though only a conditional, duty (MS, 6:456).

In this quotation, Kant explicitly admits the possibility of using the feeling of sympathy as an incentive, a way to activate benevolent actions. More than that, to use sensible feelings is a duty called humanity. It seems that here we are confronted with a modification in the understanding of the role of feelings as incentives. Does Kant change his mind about the role of feelings in the later texts, such as the *Doctrine of the Virtue* (1797)? A provisory answer can be found on the remark he makes about the duty of humanity: "It is called the duty of humanity (*humanitas*) because a human being is regarded here not merely as a rational being but also as an animal endowed by reason" (MS, 6: 457). In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant seems to have abandoned the pure a priori domain of practical reason. It is not anymore a matter of incentives that work for pure rational beings, but incentives that work for animals endowed by reason. If one is not anymore in the pure practical domain, why call this work *The Metaphysics of Morals*?

Kant admits that a *Doctrine of the Virtue*, as part of a *Metaphysics of Morals*, should be built upon a system of concepts, which are independent of empirical intuitions: "A philosophy of any subject (a system of rational cognition from concepts) requires a system of pure rational concepts independent of any conditions of intuition, that is, metaphysics" (MS, 6:375).

The philosopher who wants to construct a Metaphysics of Morals looks for rational pure concepts, unconstrained by empirical conditions. To be faithful to the spirit of the Metaphysics of Morals, it should be possible that the *Doctrine of the Virtue* gives us a system of rational pure concepts:

If one departs from this principle and begins with pathological or pure aesthetic or even moral feeling (with what is subjective rather than objectively practical); if, that is, one brings to the matter of the will, the end, instead of with the form of the will, the law, in order to determine duties on this basis, then there will indeed be no metaphysical first principles of the doctrine of virtue, since feeling, whatever may arouse it, always belong to the order of nature (MS, 6:376-7).

A Doctrine of Virtue, being a part of a Metaphysics of Morals, cannot be based on feelings, since feelings are always physical, related to pain and pleasure. Although in the *Preface of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant clearly states that morality cannot be based on empirical feelings, here we come across the duty to love as a first chapter (*Of the duty to love other men*) of the first section, of the second part (*Of the duties of virtue in relation to other men*) of the *Doctrine of the Virtue*.

A Metaphysics of Morals intends to build a system of duties, which are free from pathological feelings. In this context, how can we have a duty to love? Another problem that occurs here is the possibility of a priori construction that leads to a theory of virtue, since virtue is usually defined as habits that belongs to the empirical domain. However, Kant seems to look for a way to establish a Metaphysics of Morals in the pure practical domain. Is this really the case?

To answer to this question, it will be necessary to correctly understand the conception of a Metaphysics of Morals, as that doctrine that contains in it principles of application of the universal law to the “particular nature of the human beings, which is only known by experience” (MS, 6:217). The other side of the Metaphysics of Morals is a practical Anthropology, which gives the conditions to the acceptance or rejection of the moral law by human beings. This does not mean, Kant claims, “that a Metaphysics of Morals must be based on an anthropology”, but “that it must be applied to this” (MS, 6:217). In the *Groundwork*, Kant clearly distinguishes between a Metaphysics of Morals, that presents “the laws in accordance to which everything must happen” and a practical anthropology, which exhibits “the laws in accordance to which everything happens” (G, 4:388). Twelve years later, however, the idea of a Metaphysics of Morals includes in itself an empirical knowledge on the nature of human beings, without which it would not be possible to determine a concrete system of duties for the human beings. Allen Wood (1999, p. 196) correctly analyzes this displacement in the conception of Metaphysics of Morals that occurs between 1785 and 1797, regarding the separation between the empirical and pure part of the ethics.

According to him, when Kant alters the content of a Metaphysics of Morals in order to encompass the empirical nature of human beings, he is not abandoning or modifying its basic thesis, that the basic principle of morality is total a priori. He is only restricting its previous thesis that a *Metaphysics of Morals* is only related to the ideas and principles of a possible pure will. In

other words, Kant does not consider anymore that a *Metaphysics of Morals* is composed only of a set of pure moral principles, but it is a system of duties that result when the pure moral principle is applied to the empirical nature of the man.

The application of the pure moral principle to the empirical nature of the man gives us a system of virtues, defined as ends that are, at the same time, duties. Kant enumerates two ends that should be considered as duties: self-perfection and other people's happiness. These two ends lead to two different types of duties: the duties of man related to him, and duties related to others, among which we find the duty to love, which consists in promoting the happiness of others. However, this virtuous love is not a love related to the pleasure experienced in the presence of other person, but it is a principle to do benevolent actions:

In this context, however, love is not to be understood as feeling, that is, as a pleasure in the perfection of others, love is not to be understood as delight in them (since others cannot put one under obligation to have feelings). It must rather be thought as the maxim of benevolence (practical love), which results in beneficence (MS, 6:449).

The duty to love must be understood as a principle of benevolence, which consists, not in wanting the good of the others without practically contributing for this, but in a practical benevolence, or beneficence, that consists in consider the good of the others as end in itself. *The benevolence principle* will produce, in turn, the *duties of beneficence* (to help the needed ones to find their happiness) and of *recognition* (to honor a person due to a favor that was received) and of affection (*Teilnehmung*). Kant accepts that to participate in the pain or joy of the others is, without a doubt, a feeling, apparently falling again, in a material determination for morality. The introduction of the feeling of sympathy must be, however, interpreted, not as a ground of determination for the action, but as a natural feeling that we must use in order to accomplish benevolent actions. It will be our duty, therefore, to cultivate in us those sympathetic feelings, although the moral law should not be based on that, but on the pure reason.

In the *Doctrine of the Virtue*, Kant presents a more complex moral theory on the role of the feelings related to moral actions. Even though sympathy can be an incentive to the accomplishment of a moral action (or an incitement to the practical love), this does not mean that all the sharing of feelings are positive. We can see it in the division of the humanity in *humanitas practica*, “the capacity and the will to share in others’ feelings” and *humanitas aesthetica*, “the receptivity, given by nature itself, to the feel of joy and sadness in common with others” (MS, 6:456) the first one is desirable, but not the second, because the first one is free and depends on the will, while second is spread among people “as the susceptibility to heat or the contagious diseases” (MS, 6:457).

The role that Kant attributes to sympathy is, therefore, of a provisory moral feeling, which can assist in the accomplishment of good actions, when the feeling of respect for the moral law is not yet developed enough. As Nancy Sherman analyzes (1990, p. 159), this is a morality *faute de mieux*, that is, a type of provisory morality: it is a morality of inferior type, an immature morality

that finally will be substituted in the progress of the individual. Nancy Sherman, however, admits that feelings such as sympathy, compassion and love possess a perceptive moral role in Kant, that is, that “we still need the pathological emotions to decide where and when these ends (of the moral law and its spheres of justice and the virtue) are appropriate”.

Sherman seems to be correct and faithful to the texts when she examines the provisory role of feelings such as compassion, love, affection, since Kant really admits a function for these in the accomplishment of the moral actions, when the mere respect for the law will not be strong enough to trigger the action. The perceptive role, however, is more doubtful, since the idea that emotions are blind seems to remain a constant in the Kantian work, without variations from the *Groundwork* to the *Doctrine of the Virtue*. The critique of sympathy as a possible incentive for a moral action was based, in the case of the philanthropist, not in the absence of contempt for sympathy in itself, but in the idea that sympathy, for itself, could not show us which course of action is the moral one. A good example given in the contemporary literature is supplied by Barbara Herman: we hear somebody crying out for aid to load something heavy, we help this person, and later we come to know that a sculpture of an art museum was stolen by a thief. In this example, one ended helping a thief to carry on his misdemeanor. In addition, this was done out of sympathy.

In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, sympathy can play a role of a moral incentive, if it is trained and controlled by the will, which will also inform when this feeling must be activated. This is the reason why humanity is divided in free and non-free humanity. The free humanity (*humanitas practica*) is the capacity and the will to use the feeling of sympathy to promote the happiness of others, which includes a procedure to decide in which cases I must set in motion these feeling. A stoic that decides that he will not set in motion his feelings of sympathy, acts in such a way, because he knows he cannot do anything to help his friend; however, if he had something practical that he could do, he would activate his feelings of compassion, since these would have as consequence a real beneficent action. Consequently, in this new vision of sympathy presented in the *Doctrine of the Virtue*, this feeling is of possible controlling by reason, what disagrees with the negative approach of sympathy presented in the *Groundwork*, that is confirmed by the of Mrongovius notes on Anthropology. According to such notes, one of the reasons that sympathy ,are inappropriate as an incentive is its sensible register: “if [sympathy with the joy and pain] becomes an affect, then the human being becomes unhappy. The human being becomes, through sympathy, only sensible and he does not help the others” (AntMrongovius, 25:1348).

So, in order to make sympathy effective and turn it into beneficence, one should go to hospitals and other places, in order to see the suffering other people’s; it is a duty, says Kant “not to avoid the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found but rather to seek them out, and not to shun sickrooms or debtors’ prisons and so forth in order to avoid sharing painful feelings one may not be able to resist” (MS, 6:457).

3. WHAT SHOULD WE TAKE FOR GRANTED?

In the book *Kant and the Historical Turn*, Karl Ameriks (2006, p. 91) argues that Kantians should prove moral law can move the agent to act, because action is not a matter of mere judgment. If one has an impulse to do something, this could not be a mere thought

If we take for granted that only feeling could move us to action, Kantians should explain themselves what kind of feeling move the agent, or how can we act without feelings. As Ameriks himself stressed in an earlier work (2000, p. 310), “since the ground of duty is defined independently of all our natural inclination, it seems that Kantian morality leaves the very motivation of moral activity unexplainable. However, if we do not take for granted that one should act from feelings, then we do not have to prove anything.

In fact, Kant does not take for granted that we need feelings in order to accomplish moral actions. On the contrary, tender feelings make the heart weaker and not stronger. Since virtue for Kant is before anything strength, to teach tender feelings will build a weak character, which cannot meet the demands of morality:

In our times, when one hopes to have more influence on the mind through melting, tender feelings or high-flown, puffed-up pretensions, which make the heart languid instead of strengthening it, than by a dry and earnest representation of duty, which is more suited to human imperfection and to progress in goodness, it is more necessary than ever to direct attention to this method (KpV, 5: 157).

The method mentioned here is the moral education of young man. In order to develop moral character in the children, it is not useful to tell histories about magnanimous and noble actions. Is it worthwhile to call the attention to the holiness of duty alone. In pedagogical terms, this is more useful, because feelings do not develop character since they calm down and the organism tends to go back to its natural vital motion.

All feelings, especially those that are to produce unusual exertions, must accomplish their effect at the moment they are at their height and before they calm down; otherwise they accomplish nothing because the heart naturally returns to its natural moderate vital motion and accordingly falls back into the languor that was proper to it before, since something was applied that indeed stimulated it, but nothing that strengthened it (KpV, 5: 158).

A possible objection from a sentimentalist would refer, not to the duration of the incentive, but to its force. Even if feelings cannot last for a long time, they give us more intense incentive to the moral action. Kant would not disagree with that, he would even give us an example of someone who tries with extreme danger to save people from a shipwreck, finally losing their own life in the attempt. In this case, there is more “subjective moving force as an incentive if the action is represented as a noble and magnanimous one than if it is represented merely as a duty in relation to the earnest moral law” (KpV, 5:158). However, the incentive presented in the pure law of duty is the more elevated of all.

Not only it is possible to act from the motive of duty alone, but also it is as well desirable. In addition, the conscience of moral law is a sufficient motive to do it, because this consciousness must be so deeply rooted in our persons as rational beings that this law by itself can be a sufficient motive for us to act from it, whatever our natural desires are.

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