

PLEASURE AND MOTIVATION IN KANT'S PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

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1. CAN WE ACT WITHOUT ANY SENSIBLE INCENTIVE?

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 sensitivity”.² Iain Morison, in the introduction of the book *Kant and the role of pleasure in moral action*, also considers this problem in the following terms: “how can Kant account for moral motivation while divorcing the basis of morality from the pathological, and therefore motivational side of human agents?”³ 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 positive. Kant is explicit 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 oneself from oneself, independent of necessitation by sensible impulses. (KrV, A 534/ B562)

In the *Groundwork*, the answer seems to be also positive. Not only *can* one, but one *should* act without any moral feeling. Sympathy 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 philanthropists, distinguishing the one who possess a strong pleasure in spreading joy to his fellow human 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)

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 and an action done from duty: the first is performed out of compassion and the second is carried out even if the philanthropist does not care about other peoples’ misery. The difference between one and the other is that the incentive of the first is sympathy, which is a sensible inclination, while the action of second philanthropist is performed from respect to the moral law. Kant considers that, if compassion for other people’s luck is the incentive of an action, then this action does not have a true moral value.

The example of the philanthropists in the *Groundwork* clearly indicates that the mere presence of moral feelings annihilates the moral value of an action. On the other hand, the analysis of the majority of commentators grant that the mere presence of some feelings, such as sympathy, does not make an action morally unworthy, if respect for moral law was a sufficient incentive for the accomplishment of the action. This thesis is corroborated by the difference that Kant establishes between utility and moral feeling. In the *Groundwork*, when analyzing the role played by moral feeling in Hutcheson’s philosophy, Kant argues that this feeling is closer to morality than the principle of utility, which only teaches us how to calculate better. Despite the fact that they are both empirical principles and do not give us the necessary pureness and formality of a moral principle, at least the moral feeling remains closer to morality:

On the other hand, moral feeling- this supposed special sense ... nevertheless remains closer to morality and its dignity inasmuch as it shows virtue the honor of ascribing to her immediately the delight and esteem we have for her and does not, as it were, tell her to her face that it is not her beauty but only our advantage that attaches us to her (G, 4:443).

But from the fact that Kant prefers moral feeling to utility as a reason for moral action it does not follow that he claims moral feelings are necessary conditions to moral actions. Both in the *Groundwork* and in the *Critique of the Practical Reason*, the necessity to support morality in a non-material practical principle leads, obviously, to the refusal to ascribe the role of moral incentives to feelings such as love, benevolence and affection.

The aim of the *Critique of Practical Reason* is to prove at least the possibility of practical reason, that is, that reason is capable of driving us to act morally, in spite of the good or bad feelings we have. To prove that pure reason can be practical is to prove that it can, alone,

determine the will. We would fail to prove it if the will were always dependant on empirical conditions. If the will were always based on feelings or passions, this would mean that the pure reason cannot be practical and that the causality of freedom is impossible. The *Groundwork*, as well as the *Critique of Practical Reason*, has the aim of obtaining, respectively, the categorical imperative and the moral law, in an attempt to prove that reason can determine the will, without the help of empirical incentives. In this context, Kant refuses to ascribe the role of an incentive to benevolent feelings, since these would be empirical and contingent, not being able to be taken as a ground for the determination of the will. In these texts, Kant states clearly that a feeling is a subjective incentive, being inappropriate for the establishment of morality and its foundation upon reason.

In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, however, Kant surprises us with the claim that there are some feelings which are subjective conditions of receptiveness of the concept of duty. (TL, 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.” (TL, 6: 399). This ambiguous feeling can be pathological or moral: pathological if it “precedes the representation of the law”, moral if it “can only follow upon it”. (TL, 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 a susceptibility on the part of free choice to be moved by pure practical reason. He also asserts that “No human being is entirely without moral feeling, for were he completely lacking in receptivity to it he would be morally dead.” (TL: 6: 399). Here it seems that the answer to our question of 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.

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 *stimulo*, the second per *motiva*. 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. (*Nachlaß*, 15: 456)

The pleasure in the concept of moral law, the motive *intellectualia pura*, is not an incentive for moral actions. But what about the respect for moral law? Could this be considered an incentive to moral action? Is Kant presenting us with the solution for the sensible motivation for moral action, offering us a sensible incentive to it?

Kant is ambiguous about that. In the *Groundwork*, he states that “the determination of the will by the law and the consciouness of this determination is respect” (G, 4:401 note), apparently encouraging the interpretation that respect is not a feeling. However, in

the same text, he also states that respect is a feeling (*Gefühl*), although not created by an external object: “But though respect is a feeling, it is not one received by means of influence; it is, instead, a feeling self-wrought by mean of a rational concept and therefore specifically different form all feelings of the first kind, which can be reduced to inclination or fear.” (G, 4:401n)

There are three possibilities to be considered here: 1) respect is not a feeling, but only a consciousness of moral law; 2) respect is a feeling, so it cannot motivate moral action; 3) despite respect being a feeling, it can motivate moral action. Iain Morrison has argued for the third possibility. He asserts that

it is possible to read Kant as saying that respect is a complex feeling- made up of feelings of pleasure and pain- that is somehow produced or caused by (and therefore, distinct from) the moral law. On this view, respect is not identified with the moral law. Instead, it is a feeling caused by the moral law, and it motivates insofar as it is made up of a combination of feelings of pleasure and pain.⁴

My position here is slightly different from Iain Morrison’s. Although I recognize, as he does, that respect is a complex feeling and not only the conscience of moral law, I sustain that this feeling is not what motivates us, because no feeling should motivate us in a pure moral action. And that is what made Kant different from his sentimentalistic predecessors. Morrison considers that only the cognitive dimension of respect motivates moral action. For me, what Morrison calls the cognitive dimension of respect is nothing more than the thought of moral law, and not the feeling of respect itself. Then, I am inclined to sustain thesis 2: respect is a feeling caused by moral law and is not the incentive to act morally, but it is only an effect of the acceptance of moral law.

Frierson, in the book *Kant’s empirical psychology* call attention to the debate between “intellectualists” and “affectionists”:

Intellectualists (Allison, Guyer, Reath) claim that morally good action is motivated solely by cognition or consciousness of moral law, with a feeling (of respect) generally seen as an effect of moral motivation rather than its cause. Affectionists (McCarthy, Singleton, Herrera, Morrisson, Nauckhoff) argue that the feeling is the immediate cause of moral motivation, the means by which an otherwise inert cognition of the moral law can give rise to an action.⁵

According to Frierson, the intellectualist-affectionist debate presents textual evidence for both sides. However, I maintain that the stronger evidence is on the side of the intellectualists. In the *Groundwork*, Kant claims that “immediate determination of the will by means of the law and consciousness of this is called respect, so that this is regarded as the *effect* of the law on the subject and not as the *cause* of the law” (G, 4: 402). Also, in chapter III of *the Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant claims that:

If the determination of the will takes place *conformably* with the moral law but only by means of a feeling, of whatever kind, that has to be presupposed in order for the law to become a sufficient determining ground of the will, so that the action is not done *for the sake of the law*, then the action will contain *legality* indeed, but not *morality*. (KpV, 5: 71)

In this sense, I agree with some commentators, such as Reath, for whom the feeling of respect cannot be a motivation for the moral law. Frierson claims that affectionists have a point if we consider the texts where Kant claims that respect is a feeling produced by an intellectual ground (5: 73) or a feeling self-wrought by means of a rational concept (4:401n). He tries to solve the problem by appealing to a distinction between empirical and transcendental psychology.

I think that there is no contradiction to solve, because to claim that respect is a feeling does not entail that this feeling should have the role of an incentive or motive for a moral action. Also, the fact that respect is a feeling self-wrought by a rational concept does not imply that respect lacks sensible properties. In the *Anthropology*, Kant claims that feelings of pleasure and displeasure can be an effect of an idea or concept. (Ant, 7:230). Then, an intellectual feeling, as he calls it, does not mean that a feeling is itself a concept, lacking sensible properties. It means that it is a feeling (*Gefühl*) and has sensible properties, but was caused by an idea. A misunderstanding of the sensible property of something that can be caused by an idea is the source of some Kant scholars' mistakes.

Kelly Sorenson in her article Kant's taxonomy of emotions⁶, explains the nature of respect, when she analyses the relation between desires and feelings;

Desire necessarily involves feelings, but desire is of two sorts, depending on whether the pleasure associated with it is the *cause* of the desire or instead its *effect* (K3 5: 221-2; M M 6: 212). Kant calls *pleasure-caused desire* 'desire [*Begierde*] in the narrow sense' (MM6:212). In this case, an agent seeks to bring about the existence of some object or state of affairs because of some antecedent pleasure. When these desires are habitual, Kant gives them their own term: inclinations. In the case of the other sort of desire, pleasure is the *effect* of the desire. Here it is *reason* that causes the desire, which in turn results in pleasure. As early as the *Groundwork*, Kant recognizes the existence of at least one such *reason-caused desire*: he calls the feeling necessarily connected with it 'respect' or 'moral feeling'.⁷

Sorenson also shows that the treatment of respect and moral feeling in Kant's treatment of respect in the third *Critique* is consistent with the characterization of these emotions in the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*. In the *Critique of judgment* (KU, 5: 289), Kant claims that when an *a priori* principle determines the will, there is pleasure associated with that, the moral feeling, that is the consequence of that determination. This is not in contradiction with what is stated in the *Groundwork*, where respect is said to be "a feeling self- wrought by means of a rational concept" (4:401n).

The difference between object-caused desire and reason-caused desire can explain how pleasure and displeasure could be an important part of morality, without being the motive or incentive of moral action.

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G-*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (AA 4)

TL-*Tugendlehre* (AA 6)

KpV-*Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (AA 5)

KU- *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (AA 5)

KrV- *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (A/B)

Ant-*Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (AA 7)

Nachlass (AA, 15)

Translations:

I used the translation of the Cambridge Edition of The Works of Immanuel Kant, with the exception of the *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*, for which I used Victor Dowdell's translation, in: Kant, *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1978.

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I analyse the theory of motivation in Kant's practical philosophy. I begin by asking if there is motivation without a sensible incentive. I show that Kant offers different answers to this question in different works. In the *Groundwork*, the answer is positive, not only one *can* act morally without any sensible incentive, but one *should* act without it. In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, however, Kant claims that there are some feelings which are subjective conditions of receptiveness of the concept of duty. I examine the sensible aspects of the feeling of respect and moral feeling, showing their relation to pleasure and displeasure. I also present the intellectualist-affectionist debate among Kant scholars.

KEYWORDS: Motivation, Kant, Pleasure, Respect.

NOTES

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2 Ameriks, Karl, "Kant and Motivation Externalism", in: H. Klemme, M. Kuhn, B.D. Schoneker (eds.), *Moralische Motivation*, 2006, p. 3.

3 Morrison, Iain, *Kant and the Role of Pleasure in Moral Action* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), p. 1.

4 Morrison, Iain, *ibid.* p. 5.

5 Frierson, *Kant's empirical psychology* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014), p 117.

6 Kelly Sorensen, "Kant's taxonomy of emotions", *Kantian Review*, nº 6, 2002, pp. 109-128

7 Kelly Sorensen, "Kant's taxonomy of emotions", *Kantian Review*, nº 6, 2002, p.114.

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