

Is Moral Worth Compatible with Cooperating Inclinations?

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Resumo: Algumas passagens bastante controversas dos *Fundamentos da Metafísica dos Costumes* são comumente interpretados como se Kant propusesse a tese de que as ações não podem ter qualquer valor moral quando estiverem acompanhadas de inclinações (*Neigungen*) favoráveis a tais ações. O que resulta dessa interpretação é uma retrato de Kant como um severo defensor de uma moralidade em que sentimentos de compaixão e assemelhados nada acrescentam ao valor moral de uma ação, e em vez disso, o solapam. Neste artigo, sustento que tal interpretação não é apoiada pela evidência textual. Além disso, discuto tentativas feitas por diversos autores no sentido de mostrar que as inclinações favoráveis são na verdade compatíveis com a argumentação de Kant nos *Fundamentos* e defendo uma versão em particular da tese da compatibilidade.

Palavras-chave: Ação pelo dever, Ética normativa, Inclinações, Kant, Valor moral

Abstract: Some rather controversial passages in Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* are often regarded as containing the claim that actions cannot have any moral worth when they are accompanied by cooperating inclinations (*Neigungen*). What emerges on such an interpretation is a view of Kant as a stern proponent of a view of morality in which feelings of sympathy and the like add nothing to the moral worth of an action, but rather undermine it. In this paper, I claim that such an interpretation is not supported by the textual evidence. I further discuss attempts made by some authors to show that cooperating inclinations are actually compatible with Kant's argument in the *Groundwork*, and defend one particular version of the compatibility thesis.

Keywords: Action from duty, Inclinations, Kant, Moral worth, Normative ethics

In *Groundwork* 397-399, Kant sets out to demonstrate the particular value of actions done *from duty*. In contrast to actions that are done merely in accordance with duty, actions done from duty have moral worth.

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Kant's initial example is unproblematic. He asks us to consider the case of a shopkeeper who does not overcharge inexperienced customers on the sole ground that such a policy is conducive to success in business. He is not concerned to act honestly because honesty is what is required of him, but simply because a good reputation will help him make a profit. There is a clear sense here in which his actions, though dutiful, are not done from duty. And it is no less evident that one cannot ascribe moral worth to his actions.

It is Kant's other examples that present a problem for his interpreters. In one notorious passage, Kant argues that the beneficent actions of a man of sympathetic disposition – a man who derives great satisfaction from helping others in need, without hoping to attain the least personal advantage in the process – however amiable such actions may be, still lack moral worth. But if this man, deeply affected by some grief of his own, is no longer capable of sympathetic feeling towards others, and yet still does his best to benefit them, then, “the action first has genuine moral worth” (G, 399).

This suggests an easy generalization. Indeed, to many of his readers, Kant seems to have come to the shocking and counterintuitive conclusion that dutiful actions which are performed lovingly and with pleasure cannot have moral worth. In fact, the mockery of Schiller's verse rests on this interpretation:

Gladly I serve my friends, but alas I do so with pleasure, / Hence I am
plagued with doubt that I am not a virtuous person. / To this surely your
only resource is to despise them entirely. / And then with aversion do
what your duty enjoins you.

In the remainder of this essay, I shall argue, on textual grounds, that the above interpretation is incorrect. And, in reviewing some of the literature on this topic, I shall consider attempts that have been made to make sense of the notion that moral worth, as conceived of by Kant, is not incompatible with the presence of

supporting inclinations. And I shall state some reasons for preferring a particular type of interpretation of what Kant really meant.

It seems easy to imagine situations in which both the motive of duty and cooperating inclinations, not to mention purely prudential considerations, may favor a particular course of action. What is not so clear is how Kant would bring his conception of moral worth to bear on such cases.

As is noted by Henson (1979), if Kant himself were asked what his motives were for performing his duties as a Professor at Königsberg, he could easily come up with a fairly large list, which might include, in addition to the motive of duty itself, a) his enjoyment of lecturing, b) his benevolent concern for his students, and c) his wish not to be thought irresponsible. Items a) and b) clearly belong with inclinations in the *Groundwork* sense.

Let us assume that Kant usually had this plurality of motives for lecturing and that any of them, of itself, would have been causally sufficient to bring about his act of lecturing. Now, we may wonder what Kant's answer would be if he were further asked whether, under the circumstances, his act of presenting himself before his students had moral worth.

Henson thinks that Kant might respond to the question in one of three ways:

- 1) Since (by hypothesis) reverence for duty was present and would have sufficed, we shall say that the act *was* done from duty (never mind that other "cooperating" motives were present).
- 2) Since (by hypothesis) cooperating motives were present, we shall say that the act was *not* done from duty.
- 3) It all depends: the fact that both sorts of motives were present and in strength does not answer the substantive question *on which motive the agent acted*. (*op. cit.* p. 44).

I take this list to be especially valuable for my purposes. For most commentators seem to take one of these three approaches in their attempts to address the question which serves as the title of this essay.

Henson himself is adamant that Kant could only have meant 2) in the *Groundwork*. However, he hopes to show that, even then, Kant does not really deserve the sort of criticism found in Schiller's joking verse. He also believes that moral worth can be shown to be compatible with cooperating inclinations if one appeals to the notion of overdetermination¹ of dutiful action. In fact, according to Henson, Kant's later *Metaphysics of Morals* generally portrays moral worth and inclinations as being compatible, even though Kant seems to have lacked the notion of overdetermination.

Other commentators, such as Herman, Korsgaard, and Rawls, generally favor 3) as an account of how one can act from duty in the presence of supporting inclinations. As they see it, one's acts can have moral worth even if the agent has an immediate inclination to act as duty requires, as long as it is the motive of duty that the agent chooses to act on. This, in broad outlook, is the view which I shall set out to defend in this essay.

According to Henson, there is a distinguished line of interpreters who have done their best to deny that Kant ever held that moral worth is incompatible with cooperating inclinations. For those commentators, Kant's aim in the *Groundwork* examples was to call attention to those very extreme cases in which we can *know* that the agent acted from duty, and that, as a consequence, his acts had moral worth. Henson insists that this approach is doubly flawed: for one thing, it lacks support in the text; for another, Kant himself says elsewhere in the *Groundwork* that we cannot be sure that anyone's acts were ever done from duty.

It bears considering what an ascription of moral worth would amount to if Henson was right. Kant's examples leave no room for doubt that one can act from duty in the presence of *opposing* inclinations. In fact, the outstanding merit of the

¹ For Henson, overdetermination occurs when an agent "has two or more independent reasons for -ing, and -s, and would have -ed from any of those motives, even in the absence of the others" (*op. cit.* p. 42).

beneficent man who goes on helping² others after his sympathy with their lot is extinguished is that his immediate inclination is to turn his mind to his own sorrows and afflictions. His determination to act as duty requires, against overwhelming odds, deserves a sort of esteem that Henson likens to what we would feel for a “soldier whose comrades have been killed, who is severely wounded, but who manages (say) to prevent the enemy from crossing the crucial bridge for twelve hours until reinforcements arrive” (*op. cit.* p. 50). This analogy prompts Henson to say that the attribution of moral worth to persons and their acts in the *Groundwork* examples fits what he calls “the battle-citation” model.

Henson’s analogy may serve another purpose. Clearly, no one would expect a soldier to bring about situations in which he would have an opportunity to display his courage in such an extreme way. Similarly, no agent is under an obligation to put himself under those unfortunate circumstances in which he can only act from duty. As Henson notes, Kant is not committed to the claim that one has a moral obligation to act only from duty, even if it is only acts done from duty that have moral worth. Thus, Kant’s position is shown to be immune to Schiller’s criticism.

I think, however, that Henson’s interpretation of the *Groundwork* examples is mistaken. For one thing, one cannot legitimately invoke Kant’s declared belief in the inscrutability of human action in the way Henson does. Although, admittedly, Kant maintained that we cannot be sure on empirical grounds that anyone ever acted from duty, his aim in the examples is to conceive of ideal situations in which it is stipulated, for the purposes of his argument, that the agents act in the ways specified. Concerning these agents, it is said that their actions have moral worth only when they are done from duty.

And when Kant says that “it is much more difficult to note this distinction when an action conforms with duty and the subject

² For the sake of simplicity, I shall restrict my attention to Kant’s beneficence example, though his other two examples are, of course, no less relevant to the discussion at hand.

has, besides, an *immediate* inclination to it” (G, 397), this might be taken to mean that it is especially hard, though not impossible, to see the distinction between acts done from duty and acts which merely conform with duty precisely in those cases where the motive of duty might be found alongside immediate inclination. That might be the reason why Kant takes elaborate pains to isolate, as it were, the motive of duty from other motives.

Moreover, it is worthwhile to have a closer look at the way Kant’s examples are constructed. As Barbara Herman (1993) points out, in the beneficence example we see the *same* man confronted with sharply opposed circumstances. When all goes well for him, he helps other people from immediate inclination alone. When his world falls apart and an immediate inclination to help is no longer present, he still acts as duty requires. Concerning *this* man, it is said that in the second scenario his action “first has genuine moral worth” (G, 399). Clearly, Kant is not concerned here with the entire spectrum of situations ranging from cases where one acts solely from inclination, to cases in which the motive of duty might be found alongside with cooperating inclinations, to cases where one acts from duty alone, with no supporting inclinations or even against the pressure of inclinations *not* to act as duty enjoins.

Granted that there is no decisive textual evidence to the effect that Kant considered moral worth to be incompatible with cooperating inclinations, it remains to be seen what the compatibility in question could amount to. Henson bases his account on the premise that human actions can be overdetermined. This means that more than one motive can be causally efficacious in bringing about an action. To ascribe moral worth to an agent’s act, and derivatively to an agent, is, on this conception, tantamount to saying that the agent was, at the time of the act, morally fit, and that “respect for duty was present and would have sufficed by itself, even though (as it happened) other motives were also present and might themselves have sufficed” (Henson, *op. cit.* p. 48). Ascription of moral worth in this case is like a fitness-report. Accordingly, Henson speaks of the ‘fitness-report’ model of attribution of moral

worth, which figures prominently in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, and contrasts it with the ‘battle-citation’ model, which he takes to predominate in Kant’s *Groundwork*.

This might seem like a promising way of making room for moral worth in the presence of cooperating inclinations, but, as Herman points out, an account based on overdetermination faces considerable problems of its own.

As a preliminary to showing that Henson’s account does not work, Herman starts out by asking what is so special about acts done from duty, as opposed to acts done from nonmoral motives. And the clear answer is that in acting from nonmoral motives agents lack an interest in the rightness of their actions, which alone can be relied upon to bring about actions which conform with morality. As opposed to the motive of duty, nonmoral motives are fundamentally unreliable.

To show why this is so, Herman turns to the details of Kant’s examples. There is no denying that the shopkeeper in the first example behaves honestly towards his customers. As Kant notes, “where there is a good deal of trade a prudent merchant does not overcharge but keeps a fixed general price for everyone” (G, 397). Under the circumstances described, honesty is in the shopkeeper’s best interests. But there is clearly no guarantee that under altered circumstances the shopkeeper will go on acting as honesty requires. One might conceive of situations in which the motive of profit would cause him to act dishonestly.

Less obviously, the actions of the naturally beneficent man who helps others disinterestedly, solely because he takes delight in so doing, also lack the firm basis which only actions done from duty can have. For one thing, a person who helps others because he believes that this is what morality requires of him cannot fail to be attentive to the morally relevant contextual features which might attend his offer of help. Such a person will refrain from helping others if it is plain that his help would promote the pursuit of immoral goals. But a person who helps others from sympathy alone might be willing to do so in cases in which this is morally

impermissible. The motive of sympathy cannot be relied upon to bring about morally right action. It is only a fortunate accident if it does.

Herman brings similar considerations to bear on her assessment of Henson's views on overdetermined dutiful actions. It is crucially important for her account of moral worth that the performance of a right or dutiful action be "the nonaccidental effect of the agent's moral concern" (*op. cit.* p. 8).

Now, on Henson's view dutiful actions may be due to the joint operation of the motive of duty and nonmoral motives. One's acts can be said to have moral worth, even in the presence of causally efficacious nonmoral motives, if the motive of duty would have been sufficient to bring about the dutiful action.

Herman observes that the sufficiency in question might be taken to mean two different things. It might be the case that the motive of duty is sufficient in the sense that it alone, in the absence of cooperating motives, would have sufficed to bring about an action that accords with duty. Alternatively, it might have been sufficient in the sense that it would have prevailed over conflicting motives even if cooperating motives were not present.

For reasons of space, I cannot hope to do full justice here to the complexity of Herman's rebuttal of Henson's account, but it seems clear that the problem with the both interpretations of sufficiency is that they fail to conform with the demand that the performance of morally worthy actions leave little or nothing to chance.

In looking into the first interpretation of sufficiency, Herman asks us to consider the shopkeeper example once more. One might easily imagine a situation in which both the motive of duty and the profit motive favor his performance of honest actions. And we may grant that his respect for duty is strong enough to ensure that, even if the profit motive was absent in the circumstances, he might go on performing honest actions. But we are still left with the possibility that a different business climate could arise in which the profit motive would lead him to forsake his current policy of

honesty. Would we be willing to say that the shopkeeper's acts had moral worth? It seems clear that his performance of dutiful actions was originally a result of felicitous circumstances. But, as Herman points out, "to say that an action had moral worth we need to know that it was no accident that the agent acted as duty required" (*op.cit.* p. 9). If one's actions are to have moral worth, it should be expected that, given the same configuration of motives, one will still perform morally correct actions under altered circumstances.

If, on the other hand, it is stipulated that the motive of duty is sufficient in the sense that it would have necessarily prevailed over conflicting motives, the performance of morally worthy action would certainly be no accident. Yet, this is not a viable notion of moral worth. To say that an action had moral worth is to say that, given the agent's configuration of motives, it was no accident that the agent performed as duty requires. If this configuration of motives remains in place, the agent will still perform morally correct actions under altered circumstances. But this is not the same as saying that the motive of duty would have to prevail, no matter what, even if stronger conflicting motives made their appearance on the scene and altered the initial configuration of motives. Intuitively, at least, our readiness to ascribe moral worth to an agent's present actions does not depend on its being the case that the motive of duty would have to prevail in any situation one can think of. My present actions may have moral worth today even if it is the case that I might succumb to temptation tomorrow. To say that my present actions have moral worth is not the same as saying that I am a uniformly virtuous person.

Now, let us recall Henson's list of the answers which Kant might have given to someone wishing to know whether his act of lecturing had moral worth. Henson's attempt to show that moral worth is compatible with inclinations is a detailed elaboration of 1). Herman's arguments appear to show that this attempt is unsuccessful. Since 2) leaves no place for inclinations, we are left with 3), which Henson himself dismisses as implausible, but which is favored by Korsgaard and Herman.

Herman's own approach contrasts interestingly with that of Rawls (2000), in that the latter author, though also insisting that Kant is not committed to the thesis that cooperating inclinations ought to be entirely absent if the agent's actions are to have moral worth, seems to suggest that merely permissible actions done from inclination *can* have moral worth. For Rawls, Kant's point in setting up his examples in the way he did was simply to call attention to hypothetical situations in which the moral worth of one's actions would be especially manifest. In performing merely permissible actions, our actions may be brought about by inclinations and affections so long as the motive of duty has *regulative priority* in decision making. This is to say, inclinations may be present and lead to the performance of morally worthy action, on condition that the action may be incorporated into permissible maxims, maxims that pass the C. I. procedure. Herman, for her part, denies that such merely permissible actions can have moral worth, since they are done from inclination. All the same, the motive of duty plays an important role even in cases where an agent may act permissibly on nonmoral motives, because the moral motive functions as a limiting condition which, since it requires that an agent's acts conform with duty, places constraints on what nonmoral motives may be acted on.

Another important strand in this discussion is found in Korsgaard (1996), where she argues that Kant's views on the nature of agency provide us with what we need to make room for moral worth in the presence of cooperating inclinations. She starts by stressing the need to go beyond the Kantian premise that morally worthy action is action that the agent performs for its own sake, without any further end in mind.

Although this must be granted, the lack of any motive of self-interest is not enough to ensure that one's actions have moral worth. In the beneficence example, the naturally sympathetic person is said to be "without any other motive of vanity or self-interest" and his actions are described as "amiable" (G, 398). Clearly, his actions' lacking moral worth is not due to some hidden selfish purpose. Rather, as Korsgaard reminds us, Kant sees moral worth as being

dependent on the nature of the agent's willing, or, as she puts it, on the nature of his choosing, rather than on the purposes he hopes to attain. As Korsgaard says, "[m]oral value supervenes on choice" (*op. cit.* p. 208).

In the normal course of affairs, we are confronted with incentives which exert pressure on the way we choose to act by presenting certain ends, and the actions needed to achieve them, as desirable. But, as Korsgaard notes, "the incentives do not operate on us directly as causes of action. Instead, they are considerations that we take into account in deciding what to do" (*op. cit.* p. 207). On Korsgaard's interpretation of Kant's views on agency, incentives may be present and remain inoperative, as long as they are not incorporated into the agent's motives, the reasons that agents take themselves to have for acting as they do. This makes it possible for us to make sense of the notion that one's actions may have moral worth even if inclinations are present.

Looked at this way, the crucially important distinction between morally worthy actions and actions lacking moral worth lies in the attitude agents take to their incentives. The sympathetic person of Kant's example is naturally inclined to help others and takes the presence of this inclination to be his sole reason for helping. He does not help others because helping is required of him. Instead, he helps because helping is something he enjoys doing. His maxim, or principle of volition, is to do what he wants – what pleases him. This agent's principle of volition is self-love, as his choice is to do whatever will gratify him.

However, as is noted by Korsgaard, Kant suggests, in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, that an agent's decisions may be governed by a principle other than self-love, namely morality.

Thus, in contrast to the naturally beneficent person, the person who helps others from the motive of duty operates under the principle of morality. The essential feature of such an agent is that he takes a more reflective attitude towards his actions. Though he may additionally have an immediate inclination to help, he does not

take the presence of this inclination to give him reason to help. Rather, the reason why he helps is that he can see that helping is required of him because helping is the sort of action that it is. For him, a world in which people did not help one another is not the sort of world he would like to live in.

So interpreted, there is nothing in Kant's example to rule out the possibility that the actions of one who helps others, and concomitantly derives pleasure from doing so, may have moral worth, as long as his *reason* for helping is the motive of duty.

Korsgaard points out that one can come up with reflective and unreflective versions both for a person who helps others from immediate inclination and for a person who helps from the motive of duty. One of the reasons why Kant is so often misinterpreted is that Kant's readers tend to think of the naturally beneficent man as someone who is spontaneously moved to help others without any clear realization of the fact that his maxim of action, in so doing, is simply that of doing whatever he wants to do, taking this to be his reason for helping. The person who helps from the motive of duty, on the other hand, is often construed as someone who follows the call of duty blindly – perhaps because he was taught to do so by his elders or superiors – without any proper understanding of why the action at issue is a duty. We naturally tend to think more highly of the first of these two characters.

But if Korsgaard is right, Kant's intention is to compare the unreflective version of a naturally beneficent person with the reflective version of a person who takes the motive of duty as his reason for action. The superiority of the motive of duty is evinced, on this interpretation, precisely because the latter person is "moved by a more substantial thought that inherently involves an intelligent view of *why* the action is required" (*op. cit.* p. 209).

Whereas Herman lays emphasis on the reliability of the motive of duty in bringing about dutiful action, Korsgaard stresses the fact that an enlightened agent, in acting from duty, has a proper understanding of why the performance of certain actions is necessary in the first place. One might perhaps attempt to bring the

two approaches together by noting that the reliability of the motive of duty comes about as a result of the fact that the agent is in the full possession of the sort of understanding required.

The success of both approaches depends, of course, on whether or not a certain view on the nature of human agency is indeed tenable. The motive of duty is not to be thought of here as being just another incentive favoring a certain course of action, on the same descriptive level as the agent's desires. If this were the case, one might conceive of dutiful action as the resultant of competing forces, in such a way that the moral incentive just happened to outweigh other non-moral incentives.

Rather, the Kantian view seems to be that human action does not issue directly from incentives. In virtue of being creatures endowed with practical reason, human agents may take a reflective attitude to the incentives which favor the performance of certain actions. Although the agent's desires or interests may present certain actions as eligible, the mere fact that they are present need not imply that the agent will incorporate them in his maxims of action, the maxims from which his actions flow. Of course, one can only make good sense of this position if it is indeed the case that incentives may be present and yet remain inoperative by failing to be part of an agent's reasons for acting.

Support for this interpretation of Kant's views on agency is found in the way his examples are set up. After all, he is quite explicit in saying that inclinations which oppose dutiful action can be resisted, and thus not acted upon.

To summarize: we have seen that there is no decisive textual support in the *Groundwork* for the claim that the notion of moral worth is incompatible with cooperating inclinations. In an attempt to show what their compatibility could amount to, one might resort to an account in terms of overdetermination, such as the one proposed by Henson. However, since it seems certain that such an account cannot be made to work, we have no option but to interpret Kant as having literally said that the condition for one's actions having moral worth is that they be done from the motive of duty alone. But

this is not to say that the performance of such actions cannot be attended by inclinations. Rather, all that Kant really needs is that the agent, though well aware of and responsive to inclinations, does not take them to be a part of his reason for acting in the way that is required by the motive of duty.

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