

On emotions as a condition for morality

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Abstract. The idea that we must free ourselves from the mastery of our emotions in order to act morally has been challenged over the past decades as Kant scholars have turned to the *Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Judgment* to regain the centrality of emotions in this tradition. I want to expand the claim about the positive role of emotions in Kant's moral theory by arguing that certain emotional states should be understood as having an even more fundamental role, namely, as an empirical condition for morality. Therefore, I will show that the structure Kant provides to explain the human mind conceives of our moral experience as relying on what he calls *lower faculty of feeling*. After sketching Kant's approach to cognition, I will show how some feelings are indissociable from the human moral experience – and notably, from the ability to act in accordance with our predispositions. I will discuss textual evidence for this view and explain that, although Kant himself failed to devise an explicit taxonomy of emotions, there is a sense in which pathological feelings are to be regarded as a condition for morality.

Keywords: faculty of feeling, emotions, pathological feelings, happiness, moral psychology, condition of possibility

1 Introduction

The traditional view that we must free ourselves from the mastery of our emotions in order to act morally has been challenged over the past decades. It has been argued, *contra* this view, that despite the inclinations' negative status, not all emotional states play the same role for Kant.¹ Furthermore, misconceptions resulting in the idea that Kant's moral theory is cold and overly focused on duties have been addressed (*cf.* Baron, 1995) and there has been a considerable number of scholarly works on the topic.² As a result, the positive role of emotions has finally been brought to the fore.

I want to expand the claim about the positive role of emotions in Kant's moral theory by suggesting that certain feelings should be understood as playing an even more fundamental

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¹ As Sorensen (2002) argued. It is important to note that Kant used several terms to designate what we currently label emotions, such as *Begierde*, *Rührung*, *Gefühl*, *Neigung*, *Affekt* and *Leidenschaft*. Correspondingly, the traditional view is a direct byproduct of putting all similar role emotions into the same group, as suggested by Geiger (2011). Another possible grounding for the traditional view is the conflation of the faculties of pleasure and feelings, as Williamson (2015) points out.

² *Cf.* McCarty (1993), Borges (2004), Reath (2006), Guyer (2010; 1996), among others.

role, namely, as *empirical* conditions for morality.³ Along with contemporary criticism, my claim gives strength to the idea that, even from a rationalist perspective, emotions must not be overlooked.

In this discussion, I focus on pathological feelings,⁴ since the feeling of respect for the moral law has already been discussed by several scholars. When it comes to morality, I adopt an action-based standpoint, meaning that I assume that determining the possibility of moral action is interchangeable with determining the possibility of morality as a whole. Thus, whereas stating that feelings are conditions⁵ for morality does not amount to authorising their presence in moral actions, I will engage in making clear *in which sense* pathological feelings render morality possible.

Textual evidence allows us to claim that it was not among Kant's aims to develop a theory of emotions.⁶ However, it is clear that underlying his theory there is an overall structure that unifies different emotional states into a systematic unit. From this structure emerges Kant's consistency in assigning different roles, weights and valences to human emotions. The threefold theory of the mental faculties, and the functioning of the faculties of feeling and desire are evidence of this. Understanding these divisions and the centrality of the faculty of feeling is essential for determining in which sense emotions are conditions for morality.

I begin by outlining the nature of some emotional states, mapping their function within our mental faculties. Specifically, I will discuss the connection between the faculties of feeling and desire. Next, I offer an account concerning the relevance of certain particular emotional states to morality by looking at ways that pathological feelings are seen to play a positive role in specific settings. Finally, I will be able to show how those feelings connect to our predispositions and how this enables them to be qualified as empirical conditions for morality.

2 The faculties of the human mind

According to Kant's account of cognition, representations, desire, and feelings of pleasure and displeasure belong to our mental faculties (*V-Met/Heinze*, AA 28: 228). Our representation of the world takes place via sensibility in combination with understanding (*KrV*, A 19 / B 33). Sensibility, as a passive faculty, refers to representations received from that which affects us, or which is *given* to us. On the other hand, understanding produces representations from that which was intuited by the former faculty. Therefore, an objective representation of something relies on the exercise of *both* powers, which is why Kant claims that "thoughts without content are empty and intuitions without concepts are blind" (*KrV*, A d51 / B 75; Kant, 1998, p. 107).

The Faculty of Cognition is responsible for the human affection by objects in the world, the Faculty of Feeling renders pleasure or displeasure with regard to what objects trigger in us, and the Faculty of Desire motivates actions towards those objects. The three main

³ For the sake of the argument, I am taking morality and moral agency as indissociable.

⁴ The concepts of pathological, i.e., *sensuous* feelings and lower feelings are taken up in this discussion as equivalents.

⁵ To avoid misunderstandings, it is important to note that I am referring to the concept of condition as *condition of possibility*. I do not adopt the standard theory of veri-functional logic, according to which necessity and sufficiency are converse conditions among themselves. For to assume that, given a conditional $p \supset q$, if p is a condition of possibility of q and q is a sufficient condition of p , would implicate that morality is a sufficient condition of emotions, which of course, is not the case.

⁶ While acknowledging the complexity of the structure of emotions with which Kant operates, Sorensen (2011, pp. 2-3) stresses that (1) terminologically it is a misunderstanding to say that there is a *theory* of emotions as Kant himself does not use "a single world to play this role" and, moreover, (2) "he never gives a general, overarching account of them in a single place."

faculties work together resulting in our objective perception of the world. As a result, human action in general as well as moral action become possible.

In contrast to the other technical terms used by Kant to frame his theory, defining the concept of feeling is difficult since, as Kant famously states, feelings cannot be understood but must be felt (*EEKU*, AA 20: 232).⁷ Given the special relationship between feelings and desires, no definition Kant offers about feelings is independent. They can be explained “by means of the effects that the sensation produces on our state of mind. What directly (through sense) urges me to *leave* my state (to go out of it) is *disagreeable* to me – it causes me pain. Just as what drives me to *maintain* my state (remain in it) is *agreeable* to me, I enjoy it” (*Anth*, AA 07: 231; Kant, 2007a, p. 334). Here, feelings are being addressed from a purely functional definition. As emotional states, they refer to particular instances, i.e. “they serve only as pointers to our phenomenology” (Deimling, 2014, p. 110). For example, the unpleasant feeling of hunger that leads me to perform the action of seeking food refers to the specific representation of that specific action. However, Kant also often refers to the very faculty of pleasure and displeasure for the same concept, i.e. the “*capacity* of having pleasure or displeasure in a representation” (*MS*, AA 06: 211; Kant, 1996b, p. 373; my emphasis).

Meanwhile, the faculty of desire “is the faculty to be by means of one’s representation the cause of the objects of these representations” (*MS*, AA 06: 211; Kant, 1996b, p. 373). Thus, as mentioned earlier, this faculty corresponds to the power to initiate actions towards the objects represented. While Kant offers us criteria for distinguishing feelings from desires, he also points out the importance of the connection between them.

To illustrate this connection, we might consider the concept of habit. For Kant, actions carried out by habit carry little or no reflection, thereby leading to a lack of the agent’s freedom in adopting his maxims (*MS*, AA 06: 409; Kant, 1996b, p. 536). Thus, since a free action must follow from one’s deliberation, actions performed by habit have no moral worth. Consider, for example, the habit of eating meat. It is said that an agent who regularly eats meat without reflecting on the reasons for such a behaviour does so out of a habit. It involves little or no reflection and is likely an outcome of one’s *desire* to eat meat. Apart from leading us to highlight the relevance of reflection for the performance of moral deeds, this example prompts us to observe that desires are often connected with feelings of pleasure or displeasure, whether as a cause or an effect.

But even when a feeling causes a desire, it is still possible for us to act in disagreement with this desire. In fact, even if our desire points to the performance of certain actions, it is always possible for us to decide whether or not to engage in that action.⁸

The ground for the moral obligation is, according to Kant, the ability of the moral law to bind us regardless of previous desires, meaning that we must be able to act *in another way* – endorsing or opposing our desires.⁹ In short, desires do not decisively ground our deeds. Although they are often connected to feelings, we must be able to choose whether or not our actions will conform to them.

3 Accounting for pathological feelings

The relevance of the faculty of feeling is often stressed by arguments concerning the positive role of certain affective states for morality. Affects (and specifically, reason-caused affects)

⁷ This difficulty is clearly expressed by Kant (*GMS*, AA 04: 212).

⁸ This view is known as the incorporation thesis. According to it, for a certain mental state to determine an action, it must have been embodied into the maxim of that action as a result of the agent’s will. See Allison (2010).

⁹ Otherwise, the moral law would not be able to take the form of categorical imperatives but only hypothetical ones, as underlies Nauckhoff (2003).

can play this role by helping us meet the requirements of the moral law.¹⁰ Rescuing a drowning person requires, for example, an action which, though caused by reason, does not need to involve a complex reflection at the very moment it is performed.¹¹

There are several feelings that make moral life more meaningful while orienting us towards our moral ends. Sympathy (*sympathia moralis*), for example, refers to sensibility “at another’s state of joy or pain” (*MS*, AA 06: 457; Kant, 1996b, p. 575). Accordingly, this feeling helps us to understand the moral salencies and identify when action should be taken. It can, for example, give us insight into someone’s suffering – when recognising that suffering is a condition for the adoption of the generosity required in such situations. Emotional nuances are also required when we act morally, so that we are able, for example, to communicate our intentions appropriately since, for Kant, “we can and should perform difficult but necessary work in good humor [...]: for all these things lose their value if they are done or endured in bad humor and in a morose frame of mind” (*Anth*, AA 07: 236; Kant, 2007a, p. 339).¹² In sum, certain feelings guide us in the moral field, providing data that make us able to determine the best means of going along this path.¹³

However, such emotional states cannot be conditions for morality as they hold a purely instrumental worth, meaning that, depending on the circumstances, these feelings may suit shady interests. The courage that motivates one to throw oneself into the water to save another can, at the same time, provide the means for an agent to perform actions contrary to duty. Someone may be sympathetic to someone else’s diabolical plan and thereby support its implementation. In addition, still on the subject of sympathy, the potential self-indulgence of the agent is a concern of Kant, for “the sympathiser can easily become engaged by his own sympathy: there you are, in distress and pain, and here I am, offering you the magnanimous gift of my sympathetic attention and care” (Sorensen, 2018, p. 210). Thus, not even the fact that “reasoning about the moral law strikes down this propensity” (*ibid.*) would suffice to guarantee to feelings such as sympathy the status of a condition for morality.

Now I want to turn to a thought experiment we usually engage in when it comes to determining whether *x* is a condition for *y*. If we imagine a life free of feelings such as sympathy, would it still be possible for an agent to perform moral actions? A possible answer may find its expression in Kant’s account of apathy. For Kant, the motivational ability of certain emotional states¹⁴ hinders us from being able to govern ourselves. Moral apathy i.e., a life without affects and other sensuous feelings is therefore “highly commendable, insofar as it consists in freedom from those mental propensities” (*Refl 1526*, AA 15: 940; Kant, 2007b, p. 184).¹⁵

This sharpens the point: is it possible to predicate morality to the actions performed by agents lacking these predispositions? Without them, how should we conceive moral experience? These topics will be discussed in the following.

¹⁰ Sorensen (2011) discusses the positive contributions of certain reason-caused affects to morality by stressing that there are cases where these emotional states are necessary to the practice of actions required by the moral law.

¹¹ The lack of reflection is an outstanding feature of affects, as they are “*precipitate or rash (animus praeceps)*” (*MS*, AA 06: 408; Kant, 1996b, p. 535; see also *Anth*, AA 07: 252; *KU*, AA 05: 272n; and *VM*, AA 28: 256).

¹² The argument about the appropriate emotional tone is drawn by Sherman (1997).

¹³ As Sherman (2014) argues, it is in this sense that certain emotions have a positive status for morality. Although contingent upon human nature, emotions are intrinsic to our moral responses.

¹⁴ Remarkably, passions and affects. They are pathological emotional states of the faculties of desire and feeling respectively (*cf. VM*, AA 28: 256).

¹⁵ Thus, because virtue presupposes apathy, the principle of apathy (*apathia moralis*) is acknowledged by Kant as a duty (*cf. MS*, AA 06: 408-409).

4 Lower feelings as empirical conditions

As human beings – sensible and intelligible – our will is dually determined. Unlike a holy will which is already in conformity with its subjective constitution, the human will is governed both by moral law and by the dispositions resulting from our sensible nature (*GMS*, AA 4: 414). Thus, when performing moral actions our sensible nature, *viz.* our inclinations, is in place. This difference explains the normative character of human moral experience: whereas for a holy will the moral law is descriptive, for sensibly affected rational beings the law presents itself through categorical imperatives.¹⁶

Since our cognition depends both on sensibility and intellect, we can divide our three mental faculties into lower and higher. “All lower faculties” claims Kant, “constitute sensibility, and all higher faculties constitute intellectuality” (*VM*, AA 28: 229, Kant, 1997, p. 48). Thus, the *lower* faculty of pleasure and displeasure refers to the capacity “to find satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the objects which affect us”, while “the *higher* faculty of pleasure and displeasure is a power to sense a pleasure and displeasure in ourselves, independently of objects”, and therefore, formal (*ibid.*). Our lower feelings result to a great extent from what Kant calls our predispositions *to the good*, which correspond to our predispositions as living beings, as rational beings, and finally, as beings who are not only rational but also responsible (*RGV*, AA 06: 26-28; Kant, 1996a, pp. 74-76).

Nonetheless, granted that those emotional states often prevent us from “bringing all [one’s] capacities and inclinations under (reason’s) control” (*MS*, AA 06: 408; Kant, 1996b, p. 535), it does not follow that they are not meant to *exist*. In fact, “considered in themselves, natural inclinations are [...] not reprehensible, and to want to extirpate them would not only be futile but harmful and blameworthy as well” (*RGV*, AA 6: 58; Kant, 1996a, p. 102). Feelings of pleasure and displeasure, (as well as habitual sensible desires/inclinations) are not evil in themselves. As Merritt points out, “human thought irremediably involves mechanisms of habit, inclination and imitation [and] we cannot change this about ourselves” (Merritt, 2018, p. 40). Moreover, the foundation for evil must always be rational in such a way that those emotional states *alone* are insufficient to provide us with reasons to act. Instead, they require a rational force resulting from a free will in order to be incorporated into the maxim of an action.

This leads us to the fact that free action – and therefore the possibility of moral action – does not relinquish our sensible nature.¹⁷ Sensible impulses are, conversely, intrinsic to our power of choice “for otherwise it would be a pure power of choice *<arbitrium purum>*, a pure self-dependent being, which can determine itself only according to the laws, not against them” (*VM*, AA 29: 1016; Kant, 1997, p. 485). Our sensible nature renders it possible for the moral law to impose itself on our will in such a way that it can be incorporated as a maxim. Adopting the moral law as a maxim, in other words, is only possible due to our sensible structure.

Clearly morality relies on our sensible nature, in that without the sensible experience we would be morally dead,¹⁸ for every action resulting from a will requires a determination

¹⁶ Every human decision about how to act based on the categorical imperative has the moral law as its ground of determination [*Bestimmungsgrund*].

¹⁷ Taking reason away from us, we would be animals whose actions would correspond to direct responses to our stimuli. As rational animals, however, our stimuli do not impose themselves with necessity, but only urge us to perform certain deeds. It is known that free choice, for Kant, is the result of overcoming these impulses as elements that determine this action. This is not equivalent, however, to dismissing these elements as needless.

¹⁸ For “no man is entirely without moral feeling, for were he completely lacking in susceptibility to it he would be morally dead; and if [...] the moral vital force could no longer excite this feeling, then humanity would dissolve [...] into mere animality” (*MS*, AA 06: 400; Kant, 1996b, p. 528).

through feelings. Yet, in light of the relationship between desires and feelings as discussed earlier, it turns out that our lower feelings have a peculiar connection with our predispositions. For example, actions concerning our self-preservation, actions that we practice in pursuit of happiness and, of course, actions whose maxims are moral, require lower feelings to be brought about. While higher feelings provide us with principles such as “love your neighbour”, lower ones provide us with the empirical content necessary to motivate us in performing specific deeds.¹⁹

To exemplify this, consider the distinctive characteristics of human moral experience such as the idea of happiness.²⁰ Lacking the lower feelings, human experience would not encompass happiness, a prominent feature of our moral experience, as all finite rational beings want to be happy as a matter of fact.²¹ Therefore, a life free from lower feelings would not conform to our moral experience. To say that, for Kant, actions must be performed out of cold blood would not imply that *the existence* of those feelings is unauthorised, but rather that, given the makeup of our human nature, these emotional states must be brought into harmony in such a way that moral law can present itself as normative for us.

The actions we take to satisfy what is determined by our predispositions depend on the pathological feelings as they provide empirical material for our predispositions. Thus, to maintain that lower feelings account for the empirical – and therefore necessary – structure of our moral experience is to take a step back and ensure these emotional states as elements without which our moral experience would not be possible.

5 Conclusion

As I have shown, the approach Kant provides regarding the functioning of the human mind leaves plenty of room for emotions when it comes to morality. Not only do the three faculties have to work in agreement if we are to be able to represent objectively the world around us, but the lower and higher parts of each faculty are closely related.

Contemporary accounts regarding the role of emotions in Kant’s moral theory highlight the common intuition that a life devoid of emotional nuances does not accurately describe human moral experience. Along with those views, I have argued that we neither can nor should try to get rid of our natural inclinations, given their key role for moral motivation. For they yield content for us to make sense of our moral experience; pathological feelings do play a part as an empirical condition for morality. Without them we would not be able to fulfil the particular ends arising from the propensities determining our human nature.

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¹⁹ DeWitt (2014, pp. 25-26) makes a similar point by arguing that “in order to satisfy a physical need, we must be able to engage in a particular action in the world [...]. But this sort of action requires the adoption of an empirical object or state of affairs as the matter of my will.”

²⁰ In my interpretation, happiness is a sort of system whose contents are inclinations in harmony. Hills (2006, p. 250) emphasises we can have an idea of happiness by means of the sum of our current inclinations and also inclinations throughout our moral life, whereby Kant defines happiness as indeterminate, for “no one could be sure what elements are included in it.”

²¹ Although Kant acknowledges that empirical principles, while based on the principle of happiness, are not capable of grounding moral laws (*GMS*, AA 04: 442) and thus, the value of one’s life whose actions are performed from what one enjoys, is worth less than nothing (*KU*, AA 05: 433).

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