

Kant's Conception of Duty: An Expanded View

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In “Kantian Moral Character Coming Off the Ropes: Is the Kingdom of Ends a Sound Principle of Moral Education?,” Christopher Martin looks at readings of Immanuel Kant that seek to reconcile a divide between, on the one hand, scholarship that criticizes Kant’s moral philosophy as empty formalism, and on the other hand, scholarship that aims to contest charges by emphasizing Kant’s context-specific, communally situated writings on moral life and moral education. Martin rightly, as I see it, rejects an approach that would seek to resolve this divide by minimizing or omitting those aspects of Kant’s philosophy that have been dismissed as empty formalism; and he recommends — rightly again, in my view — that as we read Kant we keep in mind Kant’s assertion that the duty of respect for the moral law lies at the heart of morality.

For Martin the most promising way of reading Kant is to embrace his conception of duty as central in an account of moral education that would include, but not be limited to, Kant’s ideas. Martin thinks Kant’s conception of duty can be used profitably by moral educators together with other educational ideas that are consistent with Kant’s philosophy but not expressed in it. Martin’s discussion raises the possibility that, by using ideas from outside of Kant to supplement Kant’s ideas, we can develop worthwhile accounts of moral education and character education.

While I agree with Martin that, from a moral education perspective, Kant’s ideas may be supplemented usefully with ideas from outside of Kant’s writings, I hold that before leaving Kant behind we should spend more time examining Kant’s conception of duty and the place of that conception in the broader context of Kant’s many-faceted account of moral experience. I also hold that, while Kant’s moral philosophy may be useful for developing ideas about moral education, Kant’s thought is unlikely to be useful for character education, if character education is defined as the cultivation of desirable personal qualities the presence and absence of which one can recognize in other people. Therefore, in what follows I will present an argument in two parts. The first part will sympathetically expand on Martin’s approach to Kant, and the second part will debate against the linking of Kant’s moral philosophy with projects of character education.

EXPANDING ON KANT’S CONCEPTION OF DUTY

In describing contrasting readings of Kant, Martin sketches the scholarly conflict between the view of Kant as an empty formalist and the view of Kant as situating the moral agent comfortably in a communal context. I appreciate this good example of an unpromising dispute about Kant; in reality Kant viewed human moral agency *both* as being necessarily socially situated *and* as being, at times, necessarily profoundly uncomfortable. To be a moral agent, for Kant, is *both* to be in society *and* to be sometimes very uncomfortable there. Kant held that “company is indispensable for the thinker”¹ and appreciated the great value of diverse perspectives for

discerning the difference between one's own biased views and one's more nearly objective insights.² However, Kant also viewed the experience of dutifully respecting another human being as an end in herself according to the moral law³ as being an experience of terrible cognitive disorientation analogous to the experience of the sublime.⁴ For Kant, seeking to come to terms with another human being's perspective and experience means realizing — possibly to one's great discomfiture — that one can never fully comprehend, or conceptualize, that human being as one might prefer to do or to think oneself capable of doing. As Kant points out, in the very moment of wanting to feel and show full, strong understanding of another person, one is thrown back on oneself and made acutely aware of the humbling limitations of those personal, cognitive powers by means of which one wanted to be so masterful.

According to Kant, a similar feeling of being thrown back on the narrow limits of one's own cognitive power is likely to result from philosophical reflection on the nature and the applicability of the moral law, or the categorical imperative, itself. When all is said and done, Kant writes, a moral philosopher is no more likely to conduct herself morally than is an average, unschooled person. In fact, Kant believes the unschooled person may actually be more likely than the philosopher spontaneously to conduct herself morally in a given situation, since she is less likely to have confused her mind and slowed her moral responsiveness with refined and impractical, abstract philosophical speculation.⁵ Therefore, the best work of the philosopher may not be to build up conceptions and thought-images of morality, virtuous character, and the like, but rather to break down and challenge, or critique, such images in order to free her mind and moral responsiveness for the best possible kind of living. And it is with the work of critiquing, or breaking down, bootless intellectual schemes, edifices of thought, and imaginings of selfhood that Kant's critical philosophy (including the philosophy of the three critiques and related works) is largely concerned. Kant was a philosopher in sympathy with the leveling impulses of the French and American rights revolutions of his time,⁶ and he was a great leveler of inadequately founded philosophical speculation of his time,⁷ much of which was linked with totalitarian regimes against which eighteenth-century rights revolutionaries struggled.

From a moral-education perspective, the rewards of Kant's philosophical leveling are rich and wonderfully strange. What is the highest calling of the educator if not, paradoxically, to value humanity as an end in itself while at the same time realizing her own utter incapacity to comprehend that object — humanity — which she holds in the highest esteem? To be perpetually on edge and insecure cognitively in one's concepts, while also being consistently secure and gloriously joyful in believing that there is inestimable value in human possibility as expressed in each uniquely developing and ever-incomprehensible human being? And what worthier challenge, for an educator, than the challenge of communicating to students a sense of both the great worthiness and the care-requiring fragility of the moral imperative always to treat humanity as an end in itself, and never as a means only? In providing a philosophical foundation for the work of promoting full, and fully variegated,

human development while forestalling senseless destructiveness and inhumanity, Kant's writings on human moral experience have great educational value.

KANT'S PHILOSOPHY AND CHARACTER EDUCATION

What makes Kant's philosophy of moral experience unlikely to jibe with character education is its revolutionary quality. While character education aims to build up, in a student, an increasingly good and worthy self, Kant's moral philosophy aims to forestall and decimate the kind of sense of self that character education assumes and requires. Kant's leveling aim is evident whether one notes the emphasis on self-losing reverence and awe in his account of the interrelated experiences of duty, the sublime, and respect for the moral law and for humanity as an end in itself; or whether one reads Kant expressing, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, his deep skepticism about the possibility of asserting even the existence of a stable "I" — much less an "I" of which we can predicate a personal character whose moral qualities can be developed, step by step, over time.⁸ Further, Kant undermined his own hope of credentials as a person of excellent moral character by asserting that when it comes to everyday, practical morality, a sophisticated moral philosopher such as himself is probably less likely than the average person to do the right thing.

In effect Kant, like Socrates, is constantly saying, "Look how little you know about things you thought you knew so well!" That is why it is rewarding to study Kant from an educational standpoint, and that is why his philosophy is likely to be uncongenial to educators who want their students to realize a pre-specified image of "good moral character," or pre-specified stages of character development.

1. Immanuel Kant, "Reflexionen zur Anthropologie," no. 763, in *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, Prussian Academy edition, vol. 29 (Berlin: Reimer & de Gruyter, 1902/1983), 15:333; quoted as translated by Hannah Arendt and cited in Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 10.

2. Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Logic*, ed. and trans. M. Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 323.

3. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. L.W. Beck (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997), 46.

4. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. P. Guyer and E. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 140–141.

5. Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 20–21.

6. Susan Neiman, *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 37.

7. In his own time, Kant was referred to as the "alleszermalmer," or all-destroying, critic of metaphysics; see Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 251.

8. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. P. Guyer and A.W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 432–433.