

Kantian Moral Character Coming Off the Ropes: Is the
Kingdom of Ends a Sound Principle of Moral Education?
Moral Education in the Kantian Tradition

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A number of exegetical works have recently attempted to reconstruct Immanuel Kant's philosophy in light of an increasingly complex understanding of pluralism, culture and community in moral life.¹ The case has turned to Kant's writings on anthropology, religion, education and virtue. The main thrust of these projects is to demonstrate that, contrary to the received views that appear in much of the literature, Kant saw moral life as defined by agents comfortably situated in culture and community. Such agents are not simply defined by moral attitudes derived from the strictures of "empty formalism."

Recent work in the philosophy of education has taken a similar turn in emphasizing how social and cultural conditions can play a constitutive role in a Kantian vision of moral education.² One of the significant themes to arise out of this literature is Kant's understanding of moral character. In contradistinction to the received idea of the mature Kantian moral agent acting out of some vague sense of rational detachment, where the promotion of virtue and affect are merely derivative of such rational standards, the reappraisal of Kant's moral theory aims to show that good character is necessary for and constitutive of moral agency.

This work promotes a nuanced understanding of a complex body of philosophical work and is a valuable project in its own right. However, if the received critiques of the Kantian tradition are in fact based on a narrow reading or misrepresentation of that tradition, and further, if this tradition actually accounts for, contains within, and champions those very aspects of the moral life that it has been accused of undervaluing, it can then plausibly be claimed that longstanding grievances against Kantian moral theory do not represent a clash of rival moral paradigms but are instead an interpretive problem that can be resolved through careful exegetical work. On this view, a "rehabilitated" Kant may offer a rapprochement with other moral traditions in philosophy and, by extension, a more comprehensive picture of moral education and moral character.

Can such a project live up to its promise? In what follows, I offer a brief reconstruction of some of the central claims of this approach. I follow this with the likely critical replies to these claims. Finally, I argue that these critical replies can be addressed by showing how progress in our understanding of Kantian moral theory can best be achieved by refining its essential features in response to reasonable criticism. I will demonstrate this approach by distinguishing between the justification of moral actions and the meaning and character of moral actions as recently developed by T.M. Scanlon. I conclude that the contribution of Kantian scholarship to moral education lies not in a cohesive interpretation of his primary works, but

through ongoing reassessment, revaluation, and, where necessary, modification of the central insights of Kant's moral theory.

KANT, THE SOCIAL TURN, AND MORAL EDUCATION

Recent work in Kant and moral education seeks to integrate (or reintegrate) the formalism of Kant's moral theory with his substantive claims and observations about education, culture, and social life. This effort is over and against familiar claims that there really is not enough to Kant's theory to ground an understanding of the nature and purpose of education. For example, Kate Moran wants to demonstrate that:

Kant's philosophy of education makes sense as a part of his moral theory if we look not only at individual moral decisions, but also at the goals or ends that these moral decisions are intended to achieve. In Kant's case, this end is what he calls the highest good, and, I argue, the most coherent account of the highest good is a kind of ethical community and end of history, similar to the *Groundwork's* realm of ends.... Kant's philosophy of moral education exists as a coherent and important part of his moral philosophy. In turn, this fact about the role of education within the ethical community should help us to see the whole of Kant's moral philosophy in what is perhaps a new light.³

In addition, James Scott Johnston tries to develop an interpretation of the role of the Categorical Imperative in the development of moral reasoning that dovetails with Kant's later writings on character formation and culture (*CI*, 387). Klas Roth has recently argued that Kant's own account of rational agency presuppose the development of affective, pragmatic and moral dispositions within a social context.⁴

While the interpretive strategy of each author differs, all approach similar conclusions about the nature of Kantian character. For example, Moran focuses on Kant's later comments on the highest good and argues that, on this reading, moral education is a means to the actualization of the Kingdom of Ends. On this view, "Kant's moral philosophy is also centrally concerned with the ways in which our characters are shaped by participation in the institutions and relationships that make up a large part of our everyday life."⁵ Johnston, on the other hand, suggests that we cannot but "educate" the categorical imperative as a necessary condition, not only of individual rational thought, but of culture itself. Children learn to practice the application of duties and rules, and these duties and rules contribute to the formation of character (*CI*, 398). Cosmopolitan culture is necessary for moral character and we therefore have a moral duty to bring about this culture through educational means: "Culture is a necessary means to individual, moral self-perfection; a means to cosmopolitan citizenry; an means to the fulfilment of maxims of Understanding, and a requirement of the fulfillment of the Formula of Humanity and the Formula of the Realm of Ends" (*CI*, 401). Similarly, Roth interprets Kant to mean that the development of one's own agency is a moral contribution to the community:

This end — the end of an ethical commonwealth or the kingdom of ends as an ideal — and in particular our actions aimed at attaining it reflect the necessity of transforming both the legal-political order and education in society...which includes the reshaping of social, political and cultural conditions.... [I]t makes a claim upon us as moral human beings, [and] is a call to our attentiveness to our moral predispositions. (*CI*, 274)

Taken together, this body of work represents an impressive attempt to incorporate aspects of Kant's later work with his moral theory in ways suggesting a more

vibrant role for education in the Kantian tradition. I see at least three dimensions common to this body of work.

First, it tries to correct ill-informed criticisms of Kant. These criticisms include the idea that his conception of the moral agent is atomistic and individualistic, ignoring the social and cultural context within which such an agent lives; that moral law emphasizes rule-following at the expense of concern for others; and that practical reasoning is focused more on satisfying duties than valuing relationships. Roth, for example, wants to challenge David Carr's claim that the development of Kantian moral character is limited to the conformity of actions to the categorical imperative.⁶ Johnston, similarly, wants to defend Kant against the charge of moral absolutism (*CI*, 386).

Second, the interpretive strategy, as we have seen, leads to an emphasis on Kant's Kingdom of Ends formulation of the Categorical Imperative. Here, education serves as a morally necessary means to the realization of an ethical community. This makes some sense because, if the emphasis is on the social aspects of Kant's work over and against received criticisms, this formulation seems to provide the conceptual resources to assist in just such an emphasis. The Kingdom of Ends formulation does indeed appear to have the most textual consistency with the idea of the end of morality as some form of communal moral perfection.⁷ Roth, for example, concludes that the ethical community or the Kingdom of Ends as an ideal necessitates our transformation into virtuous agents and consequently justifies education at the institutional level.⁸

The third and perhaps most crucial dimension is an account of moral education that shifts away from the grounds of moral obligation and moral motivation as detailed by the essential features of the theory and moves toward the dispositions and character traits that are necessary for bringing about this ethical community. By "essential features" I mean those signature features that, while they may be modified or revised to some degree, distinguish the Kantian tradition from other moral paradigms: the ideas that moral worth is conditioned by the moral law alone; that subjective maxims must conform to this moral law in the form of categorical imperatives; and that the motivational ground of morally worthwhile action is duty. To be clear, these accounts are not supposed to obviate or outright contradict Kant's moral theory. However, rather than take these essentials and spin a philosophy of moral education directly from it, they aim to show how conditions of character are basic to Kant's broader vision of virtue and moral life. Johnston, for example, argues that the practice of virtue presupposes rational autonomy (*CI*, 386). Moran, on the other hand, asserts that there is enough evidence in Kant's later work to conclude that "developing a moral disposition is, for Kant, both a crucial component of working toward a kind of ethical community, and it is a project that requires a great deal of social cooperation."⁹

The overall picture that begins to form of a morally educated person is of someone who acquires a virtuous concern for her actions as she matures, comes to invest in bonds shared with others in a common ethical community, and acquires an abiding interest in culture — all along the way to full rational autonomy. This

conception of Kantian character promises to go some way to addressing the oft-cited objections of virtue ethicists and other rival moral theorists.

LIMITATIONS OF THE REDEMPTIVE POWER OF KANT'S OEUVRE

How plausible is such an account, and how much of a rapprochement can we expect this account to engender from rival philosophies of moral education? I think there are at least two reasons why the account is insufficient for addressing objections proffered by virtue-based and other moral conceptions.

First, the account seems unlikely to satisfy critics who are concerned that Kant's conception of moral worth is too impersonal and detached from questions of community, relationships, and affect. These criticisms are not always directed to the belief that Kant's account is entirely disengaged from such matters; rather, the account is seen to be merely consequent from or a subsidiary feature of moral worth. Consider here Carr's claim that for Kantians "the unconditional good will that drives moral conduct has its source not in any natural human desires or feelings, but in a rationally detached...grasp of ethically self-justifying principles of the categorical imperative"¹⁰ and that any Kantian view of character "could be little more than the contingent shaping of feelings and behaviour to [these] rationally independent moral standards."¹¹

It is not entirely clear what Carr means by his claim that Kant advocates for "ethically self-justifying principles" or "rationally independent moral standards." However, we can infer that the general thrust seems to be that the mature moral agent in a Kantian universe, perhaps ironically, treats his or her own actions as a mere means to some abstract conception of value. The objection appears to be driven by the reasonable expectation that people should, at least occasionally, act out of some emotive concern for the well-being of others. The purportedly "independent" or non-contingent standard of moral worth offered by Kant denies this to us and greatly limits the range of motives that underwrite morally worthy action. It suggests that we should act for the reason that we believe that the act will be morally worthwhile and not for the reason that we believe that the act will be good for others.

However, this critique is based on a misunderstanding of the basic elements of Kant's conception of moral worth. Christine Korsgaard articulates the misreading as follows:

When an agent finds that she must will a certain action as a universal law, she supposes that the action it describes has [moral worth or value]. Many of the standard criticisms of the idea of acting from duty are based on confusion about this point. The idea that acting from duty is something cold, impersonal, or even egoistic is based on the thought that the agent's purpose is "in order to do my duty" *rather than* "in order to help my friend" or "in order to save my country" or whatever it might be. But that is just wrong. Sacrificing your life in order to save your country might be your duty in a certain case, but the duty will be to do that act *for that purpose*, and the whole action will be chosen as your duty.¹²

It is just such a point of clarification regarding the essential features of Kant's moral theory that helps address important misunderstandings.

True, such a clarification also informs the kind of re-articulation of Kantian character proffered by Moran, Johnston, and Roth. They all understand, rightly in

my view, that respect for the moral law is a source of motivation for the Kantian moral agent, but does not by itself determine the *ends* of morally worthy action. Respect for the moral law by itself, without content or ends, toward which we direct such respect, is empty in just the sense that critics of Kant's theory suggest.¹³ Accordingly, Kant's later writings are seen to help in providing a more contextual picture of Kantian character. Such character develops organically out of ethical life as we each learn to pursue moral perfection in the Kingdom of Ends. Here, bonds of affection are not simply derivatives of the moral law but can themselves serve as morally worthy ends insofar as their achievement is *motivated* by duty. Autonomy and virtue of character are mutually presupposed because both are necessary for recognizing and working toward the very ends that are the subject of duty, such as strong relationships, care for others, and community membership. This is in stark contrast to a view of moral character derived solely from the requirements of the Categorical Imperative.

However, irrespective of the subtleties advanced in Kant's later writings, I think that critics will nonetheless have reasonable objections to the conception of moral worth on which all of this hangs. Regardless of the many things Kant may have had to say about education, community, and virtue, it remains the case that of our many and various motives for acting it is the motive of duty, and the motive of duty *only*, that is fundamental to moral worth. Kant's *Groundwork* begins with the claim that the only way we can regard anything in the world as good is through a good will, and a good will is a will capable of being moved by rational grounds of obligation. It is just this specific conception of moral worth that critics of Kant will find wanting even if they admit the addendums to the theory found in his later writings. At the end of the day, a conception of moral character patented by Kant's writings alone must be a character defined through and motivated by duty. This is an essential feature of the theory that must be addressed in any defense of Kant's ethics. We must address the criticisms of those who believe, rightly or wrongly, that moral worth can be derived from sources other than respect for the moral law.

This leads to the second objection. Much of the defense of Kantian character has rested on what Kant had to say about character and virtue. But it is not at all clear how these reflections should relate to the essential features of Kant's moral theory. Consider if the missing books of Aristotle's *Ethics* were discovered and it turned out that Aristotle had revised or even contradicted some of the things he has to say about virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. What would this work really mean for theories of virtue developed by neo-Aristotelians? Should they abandon the project? What the later Aristotle says about virtue does not overturn a particular theory *prima facie*. Aristotle may have misapplied or misinterpreted his own theory of virtue, or he may simply be wrong in his later claims. Similarly, the Kant of the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* has presented a worked-out theory of moral value. There are certain essential features to this theory that cannot be changed without making significant modifications to the theory itself.

Of course, we can progress in terms of our understanding of Kant's moral theory and we can certainly modify the theory in order to address pertinent objections. The

inspiration for some of these modifications might be found in Kant's other writings. Yet, once we treat his moral theory in this way it really is not Kant's moral theory anymore. He no longer owns the patent. Why, then, should what the later Kant had to say about education or anthropology hold greater epistemic weight than what, say, Parfit or Korsgaard has to say? Why should the fact that Kant made a variety of *assertions* about the contextual nature of moral character and developing moral reasoning serve as a sufficient rejoinder to critics of Kant's moral theory? This all seems like a category mistake: it confuses a clarification of what Kant the person *believed* about the moral life with the cogency and validity of Kantian moral theory. If it follows logically from the basic tenets of the theory that moral character is defined by the motive of duty, claims by Kant about the value of context, community, and virtue will not obviate this logical relationship. Attaching the predicate "Kant also wrote that" in replies to critical claims about the basic features of Kantian moral theory lends no greater justificatory weight to the theory.

IS EDUCATING FOR THE KINGDOM OF ENDS A SOUND PRINCIPLE OF MORAL EDUCATION?

Despite the objections as I have articulated them, I believe that much critical work about Kant has relied on received criticisms that no reasonable reading of his primary work should suggest. Accordingly, the recent broadening of Kantian scholarship can suggest ways of incorporating themes such as virtue into our understanding of his moral theory, especially if it turns out that the basic features of Kant's moral theory are in no way antagonistic to these themes. Nonetheless, I believe that such an incorporation should (i) remain consistent with the essential features of his moral theory and (ii) be seen as a contribution to an evolving understanding of Kantian moral theory beyond what Kant himself may have believed about moral life.

In this last section, I want to demonstrate briefly how this approach can work in the context of the argument for the Kingdom of Ends as a principle of moral education. One of the central principles of moral education derived from the reappraisal of Kantian scholarship is the idea that we have a duty to engage in a process of moral perfection as a means of actualizing an ethical community modelled on Kant's Kingdom of Ends. Given our previous comments, the objection will likely center on the fact that the Kingdom of Ends is too abstract a notion of community, disconnecting the agent from the concrete features of ethical life. This again seems to come back to a discomfort with the specific conception of moral worth that underwrites Kantian moral education.

Consider the ways in which the mature Kantian agent is supposed to conduct herself within such a community, such as in Roth's account of conscience as a reflective attitude about reasons: "Conscience ... demands that we come to '*know* (scrutinize, fathom)' ourselves in relation to the reasons and maxims upon which we act, and in particular when we make mistakes or err.... Kant did not identify conscience with moral judgment but ... he related it to the process of moral reflection."¹⁴ Similarly, Johnston emphasizes Kant's view that we separate principle from content in our moral thinking only as a way of ensuring that the reasons informing our maxims are universalizable (*CI*, 390).

Now for Kant these reasons are simply reasons warranted by duty. Only these reasons are universalizable and can motivate morally worthwhile action. What can we say in reply to those who believe that this is far too narrow a conception of moral value? On the one hand, it seems intuitively right that we should scrutinize our reasons for acting from the perspective of others. But there is nonetheless something lacking in this account. Why should reasons warranted by duty be the only morally worthwhile reason for acting?

This shortcoming (if it is in fact a shortcoming) does not have to be attributed to a fundamental failing of Kant's moral theory. As Scanlon argues, Kant's moral theory involves a duality that leads to confusion about the nature, scope, and meaning of moral value.¹⁵ Scanlon articulates this duality as follows:

The injunction to "treat others as ends in themselves", like any injunction to treat certain considerations as reasons, can be understood in two ways, either as a claim about what reasons there are — in this case, a claim about permissibility — or as a directive about what attitudes to have.... In Kant's case this duality is particularly unsurprising, since the idea of "moral worth" is central to his moral philosophy. Kant says that for an action to have moral worth it is not enough that it be "in accord with duty" (that is, permissible); it must also be "done from duty."¹⁶

Scanlon shows that we can distinguish between an assessment of what is in fact a permissible or impermissible act, on the one hand, and the assessment of the agent based on what he or she takes to be good reasons for acting, on the other. For Kant, the two are collapsed into a unitary conception of moral life: having a conscience moved by duty (or permissibility) is both necessary and *sufficient* for good moral character. We can see this collapse in the accounts offered by Roth and Johnston: the Kantian person of good moral character in the ethical community is motivated by the moral law in such a way that the motive of duty is a decisive feature in all that he takes to be a good reason for acting.

Scanlon does not think these two features of moral action are as inseparable as Kant's original theory might suggest. Kant's theory is suggestive of a framework of justification for the permissibility of our actions. But recognizing and honouring reasons of duty or permissibility clearly are suggestive of our character as well. Scanlon adopts Parfit's well-known example of the polite gangster who treats the barista who serves him coffee politely, even though, should the situation require, he would have no hesitation in killing her.¹⁷ On the one hand, the gangster does nothing impermissible. Yet he would still fail to live up to Kant's moral standard because his attitude toward her is not to see her as an end. This latter moral assessment brings out the aspect of Kant concerned with the meaning and character of our actions. For Scanlon, the attitudinal assessment of what a particular agent sees as reasons for acting is distinct from the assessment of what is in fact permissible for any agent.

Accordingly, reasons warranted by duty are not the *only* reasons relevant to moral character. Scanlon's analysis suggests that we can maintain Kant's framework of moral permissibility (about what reasons there are for acting) without having to commit ourselves to the view that these are the only reasons an agent of good character will see for performing an action. If someone helps a friend *only*

because duty supplies reasons for helping, this implies something negative about this person's character and attitude toward friendship. In this respect, moral education should include reasons pertaining to moral permissibility in a manner similar to the Categorical Imperative *as well as* an education in character focused on a better understanding of our reasons for acting and what these reasons mean for our relationships with others. In this way, a conception of Kantian character can develop that is clearly inspired by the moral attitudes suggested by the essential features of Kant's moral theory, such as a respect for moral law, though not limited to such moral attitudes at all. As Scanlon's analysis suggests, the reasons we see for acting inform our relationships with others, and the diversity of these reasons are suggestive of an ethical community that is more contextual and relational than the Kingdom of Ends might suggest on the surface, and not quite as subsidiary to Kantian moral law. None of this requires defending a thesis about what Kant himself may have believed about anthropology or education.

The moral theory as originated by Kant is not Kant's alone, and its implications for moral education must move beyond its own oeuvre if we wish to continue on in our moral understanding. A Kantian philosophy of moral education does not stand and fall with the fate of exegetical scholarship. On the contrary, by developing the essential features of Kant's moral theory in ways that are responsive to the reasonable objections of contemporary critics we can begin to see a picture of moral character emerge that reflects our growing understanding of moral life.

1. Influential work in this area includes Robert Lowden, *Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

2. See, for example, James Scott Johnston, "The Education of the Categorical Imperative," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 25 (2006): 385–402; this work will be cited as *CI* in the text for all subsequent references; James Johnston, "Moral Law and Moral Education: Defending Kantian Autonomy," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 41, no. 2 (2007): 233–245; Klas Roth, "Understanding Agency and Educating Character," *Educational Theory* 61, no. 3 (2001); and Kate Moran, "Can Kant Have an Account of Moral Education?," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 4 (2009): 471–484.

3. Moran, "Can Kant Have an Account of Moral Education?," 472.

4. Roth, "Understanding Agency and Educating Character."

5. Moran, "Can Kant Have an Account of Moral Education?," 472.

6. See Roth, "Understanding Agency and Educating Character," 257; and, David Carr, "Moralized Psychology or Psychologized Morality? Ethics and Psychology in Recent Theorizing about Morality and Character Education," *Educational Theory* 57, no. 4 (2007): 393.

7. See Jennifer Moore, "Kant's Ethical Community," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 26, no. 1 (1992): 51–71; and Christine M. Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

8. Roth, "Understanding Agency and Educating Character," 273–274.

9. Moran, "Can Kant Have an Account of Moral Education?," 483.

10. Carr, "Moralized Psychology or Psychologized Morality?," 392.

11. *Ibid.*, 396.

12. Christine M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity and Integrity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11.

13. See, for example, Johnston's claim that "[t]he construction of morally worthy maxims and the ends to which the maxims serve are thus inseparable. The separation of maxim from law can only be of functional, and not principled, significance" (Johnston, "The Education of the Categorical Imperative," 389).
14. Roth, "Understanding Agency and Educating Character," 263.
15. For a more detailed account of this duality in the context of moral education see Christopher Martin, "T.M. Scanlon on Meaning and Moral Permissibility: Limitations of Moral Pluralist Accounts of Moral Education," *Ethical Perspectives* 18, no. 1 (2011): 53–78.
16. Thomas M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 100–101.
17. *Ibid.*, 99–100.