

The Role of Sympathy in Kant's Philosophy of Moral Education

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Immanuel Kant argues in the *Doctrine of Virtue* in the *Metaphysics of Morals* that "To be beneficent, that is, to promote according to one's means the happiness of others in need, without hoping for something in return, is every man's duty."¹ The duty of beneficence is one species of the general duty of love to other men, which Kant describes as "the duty to make others' ends my own (provided only that these are not immoral)."² Like our other duties of virtue, the duty of love is an "imperfect" duty. An imperfect, "wide," or "broad" duty involves the will's prescribing as law the adoption of certain maxims, not the performance of specific actions. So our duty of love consists in adopting a maxim of making the subjective ends of others our own ends. Kant maintains that we cannot determine on *a priori* grounds alone what specific actions must be taken in order to fulfill this maxim. Thus there is a certain degree of latitude regarding how one goes about fulfilling the duty of love. Whom to help, when to help, how to help, and to what extent to help, are all matters of the agent's judgment.³

His characterization of duties of virtue as imperfect duties indicates that for Kant, as Mary Gregor nicely put it, "ethical laws [do not] prescribe or forbid specific actions; they prescribe that one strive to be a certain kind of person, for example, a benevolent person."⁴ Since we have a direct duty of beneficence, we also have an indirect duty to cultivate our natural capacities for participating emotionally in the joys and sorrows of others — for these feelings are instrumental to fulfilling our duty of beneficence.⁵ Kant writes:

But while it is not in itself a duty to share the sufferings (as well the joys) of others, it is a duty to sympathize actively in their fate; and to this end it is therefore an indirect duty to cultivate the compassionate natural (aesthetic) feelings about us, and to make use of them as so many means to sympathy based on moral principles and the feeling appropriate to them.⁶

A second passage, which deserves to be cited in full here, expands Kant's view:

Sympathetic joy and sadness (sympathy moralis) are sensible feelings of pleasure or pain (which are therefore to be called "aesthetic") at another's state of joy or sorrow (shared feeling, sympathetic feeling). Nature has already implanted in man susceptibility to these feelings. But to use this as a means to promoting active and rational benevolence is still a particular, though only a conditional, duty. It is called the duty of *humanity (humanitas)* because man is regarded here not merely as a rational being but also as an animal endowed with reason. Now humanity can be located in either the *capacity* and the *will to share others' feelings (humanitas practica)* or merely in the *susceptibility*, given by nature itself, to feel joy and sadness in common with others (*humanitas aesthetica*). The first is *free*, and is therefore called *sympathetic (communio sentiendi liberalis)*; it is based on practical reason. The second is *unfree (communio sentiendi illiberalis, servilis)*; it can be called *communicable* (since it is like the susceptibility to warmth or contagious diseases), and also compassion, since it spreads naturally among men living near one another. There is obligation only to the first.⁷

Nature, Kant tells us, implants a capacity for certain feelings in man, among them the feeling of sympathy. The feeling of sympathy can be realized in two ways. As *humanitas aesthetica* the feeling of sympathy is passive and unfree. This feeling

of sympathy results from the mere interplay of natural causes: one is "infected," as Kant might have put it, with the suffering of others when he perceives their suffering. As *humanitas practica* the feeling of sympathy is actively and freely cultivated in accordance with principles of practical reason so as to assist one in carrying out his moral purposes. One recognizes a duty of beneficence as a command of practical reason. As one acts on this duty, performing acts of beneficence, he develops moral sympathy, which is not a mere affective response to a natural cause, but is a practical attitude of the will towards others. Thus the feeling of moral sympathy is, in part, the product of our practical reason.⁸ One has willed that the suffering of others will affect him in a certain way so that he may be better prepared to alleviate suffering. Kant clearly believes that we can take an active role in shaping our feelings, specifically, in determining how we respond emotionally to the suffering of others, and that we are responsible for cultivating our feelings in a proper manner. Kant's emphasis here is on agency, particularly as it relates to self-control of one's affective responses.

The distinction between *humanitas practica* and *humanitas aethetica* corresponds to a distinction Kant subsequently makes in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. In this work he distinguishes between "sensitivity" and "sentimentality." "[Sensitivity] is a *power* and *strength* by which we grant or refuse permission for the state of pleasure or displeasure to enter our mind"; whereas, sentimentality is "a *weakness* by which we can be affected, even against our will, by sympathy for another's plight."⁹ Regarding sentimentality, Kant writes, to "share ineffectually in others' feelings, to attune our feelings sympathetically to theirs and so let ourselves be affected in a merely passive way, is silly and childish."¹⁰ Again, Kant's emphasis here is on agency. But the final quote also suggests that not only are the sentimental man's feelings unfree, they are also ineffective. Kant's worry is that one whose feeling of sympathy for others is mere sentimentality, will not connect his feelings with action. The sentimental man might be too overcome by emotion to assist those suffering. Indeed, he might even *avoid* those who suffer, so as to avoid the personal pain caused him by seeing others suffer. Thus sentimentality does not *facilitate* the fulfillment of our duty of beneficence; rather it might well *deter* us from fulfilling our duty. Sensitivity, or *humanitas practica*, as a practical attitude of the will toward others, connects one's affective response to suffering with the maxim of beneficence. Again, the reason why one is to cultivate moral sympathy is because it facilitates the fulfillment of the duty of beneficence. Our duty of beneficence is fulfilled in *doing* something to help alleviate the suffering of others, not merely in *feeling* for the suffering of others or in *wishing* that their suffering would end. Kant made this plain in his lectures on ethics: "I see a man miserable and feel for him; but it is useless to wish that he might be rid of his misery; I ought to try to rid him of it."¹¹ It is quite natural that Kant should stress in his moral philosophy the practical use to which feelings such as sympathy can be put in making our maxim of beneficence more effective. Accordingly Kant argues that we must strengthen our sensitivity to the suffering of others: "It is...a duty not to avoid the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found but rather to seek them out, and not to shun sick-rooms or debtors' prisons and so forth in order to avoid sharing painful feelings one may not be able to resist."¹²

These themes carry over into Kant's writings on moral education. In his lecture notes on education Kant writes:

"Sympathy" [*Sympathie*] is a matter of temperament. Children, however, ought to be prevented from contracting the habit of a sentimental maudlin sympathy. "Sympathy" is really sensitiveness, and belongs only to characters of delicate feeling. It is distinct from compassion [*Mitleid*], and it is an evil, consisting as it does merely in lamenting over a thing. It is a good thing to give children some pocket-money of their own, that they may help the needy; and in this way we should see if they are really compassionate or not. But if they are only charitable with their parents' money, we have no such test.¹³

Despite the fact that Kant here identifies compassion with *humanitas practica*, and sensitivity with *humanitas aesthetica*, his fundamental distinction between an active feeling of sympathy and a passive feeling of sympathy remains. The child must not be allowed to develop that passive feeling for suffering which does not lead to helpful action, but only to lamenting the suffering of others. The child must cultivate the active feeling for suffering which will lead him to help others for their own sake. One test for determining whether a child has developed *humanitas practica* is whether he is willing to act on his feelings for suffering by parting with some of his own money so as to relieve the suffering of others.

Kant has argued that since we have a direct duty of beneficence, we have an indirect duty to cultivate our natural capacity of feeling sympathy for the joys and sorrows of others; for these feelings help us in carrying out our duty of beneficence. The main interpretive question for Kant's view is: exactly how do these sympathetic feelings help us in carrying out our duty of beneficence? Kant tells us that sympathy "is still one of the impulses that nature has implanted in us to do what the representation of duty alone would not accomplish."¹⁴ Thus the question is: *what* is it that the feeling of sympathy can do that the representation of duty alone cannot? Henry Allison has argued that sympathetic feelings, when properly cultivated, "provide an important counterweight to the self-regarding inclinations that we tend to allow to tempt us into taking moral holidays."¹⁵ On Allison's reading what the representation of duty alone cannot do is provide sufficient motive to overcome our self-interested inclinations, which are generally opposed to duty. The motive of duty must be bolstered by sympathetic feelings if we are to have sufficient motivation to perform our duty.¹⁶ I think that Allison is right to an extent — Kant does believe that sympathetic feelings motivate us in a way that the representation of duty alone cannot — but his understanding of how sympathetic feelings motivate us is flawed. Allison's reading conflicts with Kant's general doctrine that the motive of duty *alone* is fully sufficient to motivate dutiful action in the virtuous man. His interpretation involves what Kant calls an "impure" will — one deliberately seeks out other non-moral motives rather than adopting the moral law alone as a fully sufficient motive.¹⁷ We should not attribute to Kant a view that is so clearly at odds with some of his most fundamental theses.

There is an alternative, and I think superior, account of how sympathetic feelings help to motivate us.¹⁸ We are obliged to cultivate sympathetic feelings because they facilitate the fulfillment of our duty of beneficence, an imperfect duty. Given the nature of an imperfect duty, the representation of an imperfect duty cannot motivate us to do *specific* acts of beneficence. The motive of duty cannot motivate

me to shovel the snow out of my elderly neighbor's driveway, since it is not my duty to shovel the snow out of his driveway — though shoveling the snow falls within the scope of an imperfect duty of beneficence. Sympathetic feelings do indeed motivate us, but not together with the motive of duty as a primary motive. Rather, they operate alone, motivating us to perform *specific* acts of helping others. We cultivate sympathetic feelings from the motive of duty, but we perform specific acts of beneficence from these sympathetic feelings, not from the motive of duty itself. This understanding of the role of sympathetic feelings is consistent both with the text and with Kant's general moral action theory.

I have attempted to clarify Kant's views on our obligation to nurture sympathetic feelings. I have suggested that with respect to the imperfect duty of beneficence, sympathetic feelings have a crucial role to play in motivating acts of beneficence. Again, for Kant, sympathy is morally valuable inasmuch as it is practical. Sympathetic feeling, *qua humanitas practica*, provides us with the motivation to perform specific acts of beneficence, thereby fulfilling our duty of beneficence.

1. Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (1797; reprint, Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 247. Ak. 6: 453. Along with the English translations of Kant's works, I cite *Kants gesammelte Schriften, herausgegeben von der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 29 volumes (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902).

2. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 244. Ak. 6: 450. Kant's emphasis.

3. Commentators disagree about the extent of the latitude Kant intends in the fulfillment of imperfect duties. Mary Gregor distinguishes between the "rigoristic" view, according to which the agent is bound to do as much as possible in the way of helping others, and the "non-rigoristic" view, according to which the extent of the agent's obligation to help is entirely arbitrary, that is, the agent may always refuse to help others on merely subjective grounds. Gregor herself defends the non-rigoristic view. See Mary Gregor, *Laws of Freedom* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), chap. 7.

4. Gregor, "Introduction," in Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 25.

5. Kant also claims that we have an indirect duty to guard against the vices contrary to the duty of love — envy, ingratitude, and malice. See Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 251-54. Ak. 6: 458-62.

6. *Ibid.*, 250-51. Ak. 6: 457.

7. *Ibid.*, 250. Ak. 6: 456-57.

8. Regarding the feeling of moral or practical love, Kant writes: "*Beneficence* is a duty. If someone practices it often and succeeds in realizing his beneficent intention, he eventually comes actually to love the person he has helped. So the saying "you ought to *love* your neighbor as yourself" does not mean that you ought immediately (first) to love him and (afterwards) by means of this love do good to him. It means, rather, *do good* to your fellow man, and your beneficence will produce love of man in you (as an aptitude of the inclination to beneficence in general)." Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 203. Ak. 6: 402. I assume that these comments would apply to moral or practical sympathy as well.

9. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Mary Gregor (1789; reprint, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), 104. Ak. 7: 236.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 199.

12. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 251. Ak. 6: 457.

13. Immanuel Kant, *On Education*, trans. Annette Churton (Bristol, U.K.: Thoemmes, 1992), 97-98. Ak. 9: 487.

14. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 251, Ak. 6: 457.

15. Henry Allison, *Kant's Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 167.

16. There are other places in the corpus of Kant's work that might be taken to suggest that a view close to Allison's is correct. Consider a passage from *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 60: "In view of the weakness of human nature and of the little force which the universal moral feeling would exercise over most hearts, Providence has placed in us as supplements to virtue assisting drives....Sympathy and complaisance are grounds of beautiful deeds, which would perhaps be altogether suppressed by the preponderance of a coarser selfishness," Ak. 2: 217. Consider also a passage from the later work "End of All Things" in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 101: "then is love, as the free integration of the will of another into one's maxims, an indispensable addition to human nature's imperfection....For what one does not do gladly he does so grudgingly — even to the point of sophistical pretext to avoid duty's command — that this incentive [of duty] cannot be counted on to any great degree unless the command is accompanied by love." Ak. 8: 338.

17. Kant explains his notion of a morally impure will most clearly in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore Greene and Hoyt Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 25: "the impurity...of the human heart consists in this, that although the maxim is indeed good in respect of its object (the intended observance of the law) and perhaps even strong enough for practice, it is yet not purely moral; that is, it has not, as it should have, adopted the law alone as its all-sufficient incentive: instead, it usually (perhaps, every time) stands in need of other incentives beyond this, in determining the will to do what duty demands; in other words, actions called for by duty are done not purely for duty's sake." Ak. 6: 29-30.

18. Here I follow Marcia Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), 220.