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Title	Reason as Master, Emotion as Slave? : What Kantian Virtues Demand
Author(s)	Shimizu, Hayate
Citation	Journal of the Faculty of Humanities and Human Sciences, 19, 1-8
Issue Date	2024-02
DOI	https://doi.org/10.14943/jfhhs.19.1
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/91156
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	03_Shimizu.pdf

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Journal of the Faculty of Humanities and Human Sciences, Hokkaido University
Vol. 19; pp. 1−8, February 2024

Reason as Master, Emotion as Slave?: What Kantian Virtues Demand

Hayate SHIMIZU

Abstract: Kant argues that human beings, who are both rational and sensible, are bound to have emotions and inclinations that are in conflict with moral law. Thus, in Kantian ethics, we must assume a dualism of reason and emotion; they must maintain an ordered governance structure. As Kant states, reason must always 'hold the reins of government in its own hands.' Kant's theory of virtue may then seem to assume that emotions should always be slaves that need to be subordinated. This, however, raises questions: are we required to always limit the workings of our emotions so that we are not influenced by them, and are we required to have control over them as if they are slaves? The answer is partly no. This is because, Kant also emphasizes that emotion can serve as a means for promoting the performance of duty based on reason. For example, in Kant's *Doctrine of Virtue*, cultivating emotions is necessary as a means of fulfilling duties, and one of these emotions is sympathy (Teilnehmung). Therefore, it is not only necessary to restrict the function of emotions in one aspect and to slavishly suppress and control them so that they do not interfere with reason as much as possible, but it is also necessary to cultivate them so they are compatible with reason to make them useful for the proper functioning of emotions that are to be used as means of reason. In this paper, I aim to clarify the role of emotions in Kantian ethics by interpreting the inner freedom that Kant's virtuous agents must have, with reason as their master, as a pluralistic and flexible way of controlling emotion. I argue that reason as the master must respond to emotions with two attitudes—suppression and cultivation—and that virtue finds a well-maintained balance between them.

Introduction

Kant defines virtue as 'strength of will' that enables reason to govern over one's emotions and inclinations. Kant specifies 'autocracy' and 'apathy' as the conditions of this virtue because they contribute to the government of reason; it keeps one's firm moral disposition from being affected by emotion. In other words, one must suppress the emotional dimension and instead act from the rational dimension. This relates to Kant's view of human beings and the premise of his moral theory, which describes a two-aspect view: human beings are both rational and sensible. Humans are influenced by emotions because of their sensible aspects. This view seems to assumes a fixed, dualistic model for the virtuous agent by which there exists a strict master-slave relationship between reason and emotion, with reason constantly suppressing emotion.

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Hayate SHIMIZU: shimizu.hayate.z4@elms.hokudai.ac.jp
10.14943/jfhhs.19.1

Indeed, in Kantian ethics, we must assume a dualism of reason and emotion; they must maintain an ordered governance structure. This, however, raises questions: are we required to always limit our emotions so that we are not influenced by them, and are we required to have control over them as if they are slaves? There is a clichéd view that Kant excludes emotions from morality(1). On the other hand, this paper aims to clarify the role of emotions in Kantian ethics by interpreting the inner freedom that Kant's virtuous agents must have, with reason as their master, as a pluralistic and flexible way of controlling the emotion. Hence, I argue that reason as master must respond to emotions with two attitudes—suppression and cultivation—and that virtue find a well-maintained balance between them.

1. Basic Structure of Kantian Virtue: Management of Emotions by Reason

First, I would like to briefly review the basic framework of Kant's theory of virtue. Kant mentions virtue several times, mainly in his works on ethics, stating that what the definition of virtue has in common is the 'strength' of the will or maxim in fulfilling one's duty. Kant defines virtue as follows: 'virtue is the strength of a human being's maxims in fulfilling his duty' (VI: 394); and 'virtue is, therefore, the moral strength of a human being's will in fulfilling his duty' (VI: 405). Kant expresses virtue as strength because it requires to maintain a moral disposition based on duty, despite the temptations of self-love and inclinations.

It follows that virtue is 'moral disposition in conflict' between duty and the inclination to rebel against it. As Kant explains, 'his (human beings) proper moral condition, in which he can always be, is virtue; that is, moral disposition in conflict, and not holiness in the supposed possession of a complete purity of dispositions of the will' (V: 84). Virtue must take the form of conflict because humans are not pure and are affected by inclinations that oppose moral law. Kant often explains virtue as the moral strength of human beings not defeated by an inner enemy in conflict, as opposed to complete purity or holiness that does not require the assumption of an enemy. He expresses this contrast clearly in the following passages:

> For finite holy beings (who could never be tempted to violate duty), there would be no doctrine of virtue but only a doctrine of morals, since the latter is autonomy of practical reason whereas the former is also autocracy of practical reason; that is, it involves consciousness of the capacity to master one's inclinations when they rebel against the law; a capacity which, though not directly perceived, is yet rightly inferred from the moral categorical imperative. Thus human morality in its highest stage can still be nothing more than virtue, even if it be entirely pure (quite free from the influence of any incentive other than that of duty) (VI: 383).

Thus, there is no doctrine of virtue for holy beings; it exists only for human beings as an 'autocracy (*Autokratie*)'. Kantian virtue implies the mastery of inclinations by reason. Therefore, virtue is a moral condition specific to human beings, who are both rational and sensible; they cannot help but always involve inclination.

As rational beings, humans are aware of the demands of the moral law as obligations. As sensible

(1) cf. Hursthouse 1999: p.104. Blackburn 1998: pp. 243-250. Williams 1995: p. 104, Rinofner-Kreidl 2011: p. 423, J. Sabini and M. Silver 1987: pp. 165-75.

beings, we have impure emotions and desires to rebel against these demands. As such, Kant's virtuous agents must always place reason above emotion and overcome its resistance by strength. We must assume that humans are free, rational beings capable of legislating for themselves and thus autonomous, but that we appropriately restrict our emotions so to not be influenced by emotional rebellion. Kant regards the 'inner freedom' to define oneself rationally, without being influenced by emotions, as a necessary condition for virtue:

> Since virtue is based on inner freedom, it contains a positive command to a human being; namely, to bring all his capacities and inclinations under his (reason's) control and so to rule over himself, which goes beyond forbidding him to let himself be governed by his feelings and inclinations (the duty of apathy); for unless reason holds the reins of government in its own hands, his feelings and inclinations play the master over him (VI: 408).

As Kant explains, self-government by reason is seen as a duty of apathy—of not being governed by ones' feelings and inclinations(2). Since the attitude of virtue thus acquired is based on firm, rational determination undisturbed by impure emotions, desires, and temptations, 'the true strength of virtue is a tranquil mind with a considered and firm resolution to put the law of virtue into practice', which Kant also calls 'the state of health in the moral life' (VI: 409).

It is important to note that the argument about apathy is not that all emotional influences must be limited. According to Kant's theory of virtue, the point is simply not to lose the initiative of reason over inappropriate emotions that would make inner freedom impossible and disturb the mind's tranquillity. Of particular importance for virtue is the suppression of emotion, as agitated emotion makes rational deliberation impossible(3). This explains Kant's description of apathy as the 'absence of affects (Affektlosigkeit)' (VI: 408). According to Kant's theory of virtue, apathy is not merely the absence of emotion and desire. It must be maintained by one's strength of will to control emotions so as not to destroy the governance of reason; 'virtue necessarily presupposes apathy (regarded as strength)' (ibid). Kant's virtue dictates that in addition to a good will, it is necessary to have a strong and tranquil mind unaffected by emotion.

As long as human beings are sensible beings, emotions cannot be extinguished. Therefore, it is not a matter of striving to eliminate emotions from oneself, but of striving to manage them well and to make them compatible with the governance of reason. Kantian virtue presupposes the suppression of emotion—especially hasty emotions that would make rational judgement impossible—and the maintenance of the tranquillity of mind through one's strength of will. Kantian virtuous agents are those who fulfil their duties with a 'tranquil mind' without being bothered by emotions, but this does not mean

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(2) As is well known, the idea of apatheia is not unique to Kant. It was the ideal of ancient philosophy, especially the Stoics, who depicted it as the condition of the wise person who has acquired true virtue. Kant also praises the Stoic apatheia as a moral philosophy. For example, in his Anthropology, Kant describes the principle of apatheia as 'the utterly just and sublime moral principle of the Stoics' (VII: 253).

(3) Kant distinguishes between affects (Affekt) and passions (Leidenschft) as the former as feelings and the latter as desires. There is a conceptual difference between affect, which is a feeling typified by emotions such as anger, and passion, which is regarded as the most troublesome of the inclinations in that it belongs to the faculty of desire (cf. VII: 251, VI: 408).

that they are free from emotion. They simply possess the ability to deal successfully with emotional upsurges that would, if left unchecked, make the performance of moral acts difficult. In other words, emotions are not mere slaves of reason, thoroughly deprived of their freedom and dominated, but like subordinates or servants, managed so as not to interrupt the work of reason. Emotions can therefore be an effective means for reason to cooperate in promoting moral action. Reason must relate to such emotions not in an attitude of mere restriction or suppression, but in an attitude that cultivates and serves the emotions. How is it possible?

2. Duties of Virtue and Role of Emotions

In this section, I focus on the context of the 'duty of love towards others' as described in the *Doctrine of Virtue* to examine how emotions can contribute to the fulfilment of duties. Notably, Kant stipulates the special obligation that, to perform the duties of virtue, one should properly cultivate and use morally useful emotions. According to Kant's theory of virtue, suppressing emotions that are not conducive to being virtuous and cultivating emotions that can function properly is required as part of one's duty. Here, I discuss which emotions are effective in fulfilling the duties of virtue and why it can also be a duty to cultivate emotions, even though they always involve the risk that they will rise to an agitating level.

First, it is necessary to review the basic premises of *Doctrine of Virtue*. In his framework, Kant argues that emotions are actively involved in virtuous actions and serve as a means of facilitating the performance of duties; this thought is developed in the context of the 'duties of virtue' in *Doctrine of Virtue*. I begin my examination by briefly discussing one of the duties of virtue that Kant presents in *Doctrine of Virtue*, namely 'to promote the happiness of others'. Kant calls these duties of virtue 'an end that is also a duty'; it requires self-constraint to determine ends that are duties themselves, rather than forcing acts that are duties through external constraint (VI: 383). Since duties of virtue only command the end as a duty and not the act itself, 'the law cannot specify precisely in what way one is to act and how much one is to do by the action for an end that is also a duty' (VI: 390). In other words, since no specific actions are prescribed, there is 'playroom (*Spielraum (latitude)*)' through the free choice of the agent as to what actions and to what extent they are to be performed for the end (ibid). Therefore, duties of virtue have only a 'wide duty' and are positioned as imperfect duties (ibid).

Kant then identifies 'perfection of the self' and 'happiness of others' as ends that are at the same time duties. He specifies that duties of virtue cultivate one's own natural or moral dispositions without corrupting them and actively help others in need (cf. VI: 391-393). In this paper, I focus on the latter to discuss the 'duty of love towards others', which concerns the happiness of others. The duty of love is to take the happiness of others as one's end and to strive to realise it[(4)]. Hence, pursuing the happiness of others as one's end is classified as a duty of love and a 'duty of beneficence'. As Kant puts it, 'to be beneficent, that is, to promote according to one's means the happiness of other human beings in need, without hoping for something in return, is everyone's duty' (VI: 453)[(5)]. Thus, performing beneficence

(4) It is important to note that 'love' here is practical and not a natural emotion (cf. VI: 449-450).

(5) Beneficence is an obligation that directly commands us to promote the happiness of others, which is also referred to elsewhere in *Doctrine of Virtues* (cf. IV: 393, 402). For example, 'to do good to other human beings insofar as we can is a duty, whether one loves them or not' (IV: 402).

according to one's capacity is required as a duty of love towards others.

It may seem obvious that promoting the happiness of others is a virtuous action, but in Kant's context, it is not so simple. This is because one must not promote the happiness of others from emotions, but only practice it as a duty. If we are not obliged to help those in need and are merely influenced by our emotions, then beneficence to others can be accidental. We must adopt promoting the happiness of others as an obligatory end, and if we do not, then the act of helping others has no moral worth. For example, seeing others suffering and being sympathetically influenced by them to perform beneficent acts is not virtuous. The only basis for beneficence is duty, not sympathetic feelings. As Kant says: 'but there cannot possibly be a duty ..... to do good from compassion. This would also be an insulting kind of beneficence' (IV: 457). For beneficence to be binding as a duty, it must be assumed that a maxim with the end of the happiness of others as its material is valid as a universal law (IV: 393).

This may give the impression that emotions are ultimately incompatible with duty in general, and that there is no positive way to contribute it. However, the fact that one is commanded to perform a beneficence not on the basis of any emotion but solely on the basis of duty does not mean that emotions can be dismissed as completely contradictory to virtuous action. This is because, the performance of beneficence towards others on the basis of duty can be accompanied by emotions such as love and sympathy. Furthermore, these emotions can serve as a means of facilitating the performance of the duty of beneficence towards others. Hence, in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, where the adoption of the happiness of others as one's end and even the actual performance of the duty of love towards others is discussed, it is argued that 'the impulses that nature has implanted in us to do what the representation of duty alone might not accomplish' (VI: 457). Kant regards the cultivation of emotions as the means required to fulfill duties, and it is 'sympathy.' Since the *Doctrine of Virtue* also assumes the performance of the 'duty of beneficence', for which no specific act is assigned, the emotions contribute to it.

3. Cultivation of emotions: sympathy for others

In Kant's view, cultivating emotions is necessary as a means of fulfilling duties, and one of these emotions is sympathy. In *Doctrine of Virtue*, the 'duties of sympathy' is listed as one of the 'duties of love towards others'. In section 34, entitled 'Sympathetic Feeling (Teilnehmende Empfindung) is a Duty in General', Kant argues that active sympathy for others does not directly concern promoting the happiness of others; rather, it is an indirect duty because it contributes to the end. This argument is often referred to when the important role of emotions in Kant's moral theory is pointed out(6). Although a susceptibility to feelings of pleasure or displeasure at the satisfaction or pain of others is not directly involved in moral obligation because it is a naturally given emotion, 'to use this as a means to promoting active and rational benevolence is still a particular, though only a conditional, duty' (VI: 456). In addition, the experiential training of not 'shun[ning] sickrooms or debtors' prisons' to actively share in the suffering of others can strengthen this argument (VI: 457).

(6) cf. Sherman 1990, 1997; Baron 1995. Guyer 1993. Fahmy, on the other hand, refuses to translate Teilnehmung as sympathy, pointing out that the cultivation of Teilnehmung is not an indirect duty to perform the duty of beneficence. She suggests that the cultivation of a natural sensitivity to share the feelings of others is a duty of direct and active sympathetic participation (Fahmy 2009).

Kant does not accept the moral worth of helping others from sympathy, but he does accept that it is useful in the practice of the duty of beneficence. In other words, Kant believes that being sympathetic towards the suffering of others can be an indirect duty because, when cultivated, it develops into an emotion that serves as a means of promoting active beneficence towards others. Kant explains:

> 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 in us, and to make use of them as so many means to sympathy based on moral principles and the feeling appropriate to them (VI: 457).

Kant's premise that sharing in the suffering and joy of others is a natural emotion and, therefore, has no moral worth in itself remains. However, as the above quote asserts, if the emotion is cultivated, it can lead to sympathy for others on moral principles. Therefore, we are morally required, albeit indirectly, to cultivate emotions and use them as a means of promoting the duty of beneficence towards others.

How does sympathy contribute to morality? Kant does not explicitly state it, but there are two possibilities. One is that cultivated sympathy enables us to perceive people and situations in need of help appropriately. Kant seems to think that sympathy enables us to become appropriately attuned to situations and demands for help. This is the perceptual contribution of sympathy(7). The other is that cultivated sympathy promotes acts of beneficence towards others. Kant seems to think that sympathy is a motivational force that drives the performance of duty of beneficence to others because, according to Kant, sympathy contributes as 'the impulses that nature has implanted in us to do what the representation of duty alone might not accomplish.' This is the conative contribution of sympathy(8). They are not in an exclusive dichotomous relationship. In other words, cultivated sympathy enables us to perceive information that we could not perceive without it and to obtain motivational power that we could not obtain without it.

However, it is important to note again that not all sympathy can be a useful means for reason. Here, we must carefully distinguish which attitudes are to be used to deal with the workings of emotions. For example, as Kant explains in *Doctrine of Virtue*, the mere contagion of the suffering and joy of others is to be avoided, because not all sympathetic emotions lead to duty. In other words, sympathy is morally useless if it does not lead to the fulfilment of the duty of beneficence. If, as Kant argues, sympathy only brings with it the suffering of others, then there will simply be more people tormented by negative emotions (cf. VI: 457). We must be careful not to be disturbed by suffering, but rather to use rational sympathy for the beneficence of actively helping those who need support(9). Rather than simply feeling the suffering of others, sympathy must be under the reason if the emotion is to be used to help those who

(7) cf. Baron 1995, Sherman 1997.

(8) cf. Borges 2019.

(9) This point is also noted by Baron (Baron 1995: 215). See, among others, Timmermann, 2016. For example, Timmermann notes that the Germanically unfamiliar term '*Mitleidenschaft*' is used only twice and considers the reasons for this particular instance of use. According to him, the reason was simply to depict the spread of suffering naturally, like the conduction of heat or contagion, as Kant knew that the contagion of states of mind between human beings occurs through the imagination. This '*mitteilend*' transmission of emotion is not free, and the mere transmission of suffering through the imagination is a situation to be avoided.

are suffering. We are therefore required to cultivate these emotions so that they can function effectively insofar that they facilitate the performance of moral actions based on duty through rational judgement[10].

So, why is it necessary to consider attitudes towards emotions in such a complex way? This is because human beings exist as both rational and sensible. If humans were beings of infinite intelligence, like God, they would not need to rely on sympathy. If the will immediately accord with the moral law, there would be no need for perceptual and conative support such as sympathy. However, as long as we are human, we will need the contribution of our emotions to enable us to fulfil our duties[11]. For such an imperfect and finite human being, emotions, such as cultivated sympathy, play a supportive role. Therefore, insofar that the virtuous agent is a rational and sensible human being acting in the world, the question of how to deal with emotions is of crucial importance. We can, and thus ought to, cultivate and use emotions that enable us to fulfil our duties, while suppressing the influence of emotions that threaten the inner freedom of our minds.

Conclusion

As long as we are human beings, even if we are aware of our duties under the judgment of reason, emotions are naturally involved in performing moral actions. So, how reason responds to emotions is therefore a point of argument. Natural emotions are not only to be restricted or enslaved, but rather be regarded as pluralistic—even to the extent that they are useful for moral action when cultivated under reason. Therefore, it is not only necessary to restrict the function of emotions in one aspect and to slavishly suppress and control them so that they do not interfere with reason as much as possible, but it is also necessary to cultivate them so they are compatible with reason to make them useful for the proper functioning of emotions that are to be used as means of reason. At this point, the emotions are not mere slaves, but more like subordinates cooperating with reason. We must maintain the stance that reason is superior to emotion. However, at the same time, for humans as rational beings to be virtuous, they must be proficient in controlling and using their emotions. This is the inner freedom that Kant designates as the condition of virtue. In this sense, it is essential for a Kantian account of virtue not to highlight either suppression or cultivation of emotion but to highlight a balance of both.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank S. Kahn for useful comments. This work was supported by JST SPRING, Grant Number JPMJSP2119.

(10) In this context, the following summary by Guyer is appropriate: ‘feelings are not fall-backs, but, when properly cultivated and constrained, are precisely the natural means to morally worthy actions in creatures like us: the means that reason uses to achieve the goals it sets for us’ (Guyer 2019: p. 60). Note that this paper does not make a conceptual distinction between emotions and feelings.

(11) For example, as A.Cohen also states, insofar as our moral practice has to be made in the empirical world, we cannot ignore the human emotional dimension; Cohen suggests that ‘we can conclude that whilst claims about feelings are not morally relevant from the standpoint of the rational deliberating agent, from the standpoint of the human deliberating agent, an embodied agent who acts in the empirical world, feelings are morally relevant because they interfere with the realization of autonomy at the empirical level’ (Cohen 2017: pp. 177-180).

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