

# Change and Moral Development in Kant's Ethics

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**Abstract:** This paper is concerned with an ambiguous aspect of Kant's ethics, namely, how moral change is possible. Kant conceives that change is possible, indeed desirable, without making clear the mechanism by which this change occurs. I conclude that one's moral development must come about through the autonomous rationality of humanity. This allows for the moral law to be held at all times and for the rejection of immoral sentiments and inclinations. Further, it is constant soul-searching that allows one to keep a check on their maxims, facilitating the development of a moral disposition.

Personal change and moral development is a goal for many individuals.<sup>1</sup> Yet there seems to be controversy surrounding how we achieve this desired end. Even within the works of Immanuel Kant, potential answers are vague and ambiguous. This paper will address this problem within the Kantian ethical system, seeking to offer a reading on how one may morally develop within this program. Certainly change is desirable for Kant, but by which means are individuals to acquire this moral goal? Kant's ethical theory relies upon reason as a metaphysical groundwork by which all moral actions are to be judged, allowing for uniformity and universality in the moral law.<sup>2</sup> If we follow Kant's understanding of morality and evil as well as his premises for human behavior, it would appear that personal change is made possible by appealing to this foundation of reason.<sup>3</sup> I argue that, based on Kant's conception of morality and evil, people have it in their capacity as rational agents to alter their behavior and will to accord with the categorical imperative, or, conversely, to become evil if they fail. Because of people's autonomous rational nature, actions are not only, in the strictest terms, dictated by mechanical bodily desires. At least in theory, Kant allows for individual moral change by appealing to humanity's

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<sup>1</sup> Personal change and development in this paper refer to the transition of a rational adult from a state of immorality to one of morality, and vice versa. Specifically, use of 'positive change' refers to the change from immorality to morality, while 'negative change' refers to the change from a moral to immoral status.

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Book I in *Ethical Philosophy: The Complete Texts of Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals and Metaphysical Principles of Virtue (Part II of the Metaphysics of Morals) with On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. James W. Ellington, Book I (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), Ak. 401, 413-4.

<sup>3</sup> Because this project concerns a challenge to Kant's ethics, I have taken reason to refer to that internal thinking process by which one can grasp abstract principles *a priori*.



possession of autonomous rationality, or in the case of negative change by admitting bodily desires into our maxim, "the subjective principle of volition."<sup>4</sup>

The controversy is not so much that people can change, but rather how, and what this mechanism by which we change is. Kant states:

a change of mentality is an exit from evil and an entry into the good, the putting off of the old human being and the putting on of the new one . . . this change as an intellectual determination, however, does not contain two moral acts separated by an intermediate time, but is only a single act, because the abandonment of evil is possible only through the good attitude that brings about the entry into the good, and vice versa.<sup>5</sup>

This passage is explicit: change is possible. In fact, Kant seems to imply that we ought to morally change, and yet he leaves ambiguity regarding which process one must use to achieve this moral development. I intend to interpret this Kantian conception of moral development and demonstrate the means by which this desired change may be achieved—means intimately connected to his conception of autonomous rationality.

By arguing this stance, I aim to contribute a number of ideas to a wider Kantian program: that failure in duties, whether in implementation or recognition, does not imply that one does not have moral capacity; that hope remains, insofar as people are rational agents, to change for the better; that morality, as an intrinsically individual exercise, relies significantly upon that old adage 'know thyself'; that despite one's personality and inclinations, morality is always in our capacity; and finally, that, despite uncertainties one may have over one's maxims, these same uncertainties are a strength in that such reservations add to a constant soul-searching and pondering of the moral laws. Neglecting to ponder one's moral choices results in either an unwarranted arrogance in our moral capacities or a disregarding of the moral laws entirely.

In the end, I believe the idea of change is fundamental to ethics as a whole, for it shapes our perceptions on whether we can be moral at all. Such an idea is foundational to theories of how people ought to act. If people ought to act in certain ways, change must lie at the core, for if people could not change to meet this "ought" then ethical theories would cease to have any true relevance to human behavior. Change as a concept deserves exploration as a crucial aspect of ethics. By explicating what I take to be Kant's mechanism for moral change, I intend to demonstrate how moral change is possible, both in Kant's ethics and in general.

I have already alluded to the double-sided nature of moral change. It is entirely possible that a morally corrupt person may become morally in line with the categorical imperative, "an action . . . objectively necessary in itself,

<sup>4</sup> Kant, *Grounding*, 13, note 13.

<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009), Ak. 74.

without reference to another end,” just as a morally righteous person may become corrupted and ‘evil’ in a Kantian understanding.<sup>7</sup> Both are in line with Kant’s program. It is worth noting that the type of moral change I refer to is not directed toward one end alone. Further, it is pertinent to note that reaching a perfect Kantian ideal does not make one impervious to corruption.

In order to establish this capacity to change, I refer to Kant’s *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* and “Duties to Oneself” to demonstrate Kant’s description of an individual moral agent’s rational autonomy. Kant argues in the *Grounding* that “reason must regard itself as the author of its principles independent of foreign influences . . . this is to say that the will of a rational being can be a will of its own only under the idea of freedom, and that such a will must therefore . . . be attributed to all rational beings.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, although people have a bodily nature, it is through rationality that people are free, “for independence from the determining causes of the world of sense (an independence which reason must always attribute to itself) is freedom. The idea of freedom is inseparably connected with the concept of autonomy, and this in turn with the universal principle of morality, which ideally is the ground of all actions of rational beings.”<sup>7</sup> The result is that through rationality people are able to free themselves from the senses. Without rationality, people would not be free, only acting mechanically and as animals. Kant notes that “all animals have the faculty of using their powers according to will. But this will is not free. It is necessitated through the incitement of stimuli, and the actions of animals involve a *bruta necessitas*.”<sup>8</sup> Kant further notes “man alone is free; his actions are not regulated by any subjectively necessitating principle.”<sup>9</sup> The restriction to this freedom is the universal law and the ignoring of one’s inclinations so that one may live in line with the “essential end of humanity.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, people have it in their capacity, according to Kant, to isolate this rational aspect and act according to its precepts. This is crucial for our understanding of how people can change within a Kantian moral system.

Perhaps this is still too metaphysical an explanation to illustrate how this change is possible, and a more specific look at what Kant calls duties is needed. Kant notes that there are both perfect duties (specific actions) and imperfect duties (general behavior) which people ought to strive for based on the categorical imperative.<sup>11</sup> Let us consider perfect duties by examining the act of charity. As the focus is change, I will begin with positive change and suppose there is a person who is not charitable trying to become so. Kant considers the unsympathetic person who, it is presumed, would not donate to charity based on inclinations, but through the appeal to rational autonomy, can do so insofar as he remains a rational agent.<sup>12</sup> Supposedly, through reason

<sup>6</sup> Kant, *Grounding*, Ak. 448.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, Ak. 452-3.

<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Duties to Oneself,” in *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1963), 121.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>11</sup> Kant, *Grounding*, Ak. 422-4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Ak. 398-9.



people are able to grasp principles of motivation without necessary reliance upon sentiments of any kind, indicating potential for moral change and the potential to avoid these would-be immoral influences.<sup>13</sup>

However, Kant's conception of human nature, and by extension motivation, seems biased if we consider the question of differing psychologies. It is not clear that rational capacity corresponds to action. For example, consider those with social anxiety. Kant seems to suggest that it is quite simple to conceive of an individual who rationally grasps duties and then moves to implement these by appealing to dictates of reason.<sup>14</sup> However, it is unclear how Kant understands those with anxieties within social situations, where the duty is to act in a way that would put said individual in a stressful situation where he is unable to complete the duty altogether. There would appear to be a disconnect between rationally grasping the moral laws, which Kant may be correct about, and putting these into practice. Simply, this can be formulated as a person who rationally deduces his duties but is unable to complete them despite understanding the implications. In what may be described as a physical entrapment, the will would not be able to express itself through duties despite having what in this case may be a perfect rational understanding of the duties. This indicates a possible problem with Kant's program.

This is no easy comparison to our aforementioned unsympathetic character, for unlike a person devoid of emotion, the person with anxiety can deduce by reason the moral law, but cannot put it into practice. Despite this, Kant's program is not entirely lost. Retaining rational capacity and access to the categorical imperative, these individuals may well strive towards the Kantian imperfect duty to bring one's self and behavior closer

to morality. Although potentially failing in perfect duties, these persons, by still having the capacity to reason, may still aim to perfect themselves in line with the moral law. Although anxious, they may still strive to act in cases where they are uncomfortable. While they may still fail, in many ways they are not alone. I find it difficult to believe that even the most rational and able person would be able to live up to his or her duties at every instance. Thus, these cases remain as nothing more than what seems to be the norm: people with weaknesses looking to make themselves better for the world. Therefore, they still fit into a broad understanding of human nature. What at first might have appeared to be a failing is ultimately compatible with Kantian morality insofar as the subjects have reason and are able to work at perfection and morality. While potential failure is present in certain situations, people are able to strive for change and moral development as long as they are rational agents. Therefore, change is very much possible by using reason as a benchmark for long-term behavioral developments.

In both cases, change is possible through rational autonomy. This is predicated on Kant's ideas regarding reason and its impervious nature to

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<sup>13</sup> I have used the term 'sentiment' to refer to that individual feeling of how one wants to act, emotional desires, feelings or other principles of self-love in one's volition. Sentiment is therefore opposed to the categorical imperative and is non-objective. What one wants to do is irrelevant when following the categorical imperative, which is the sole indicator of morality.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, Ak. 453-4.

disregard immoral inclinations completely.<sup>15</sup> On this point I agree with Kant. I believe it is true that people have a rational aspect, and it is this rational aspect that prevents people from acting as animals, i.e., only by reference to stimuli. This point can be illustrated by referring to the phenomenon of hunger strikes. My intention here is not to argue the ethics surrounding such protests, but only to use these actions as an illustration of this point. If humans were merely compelled by stimuli and bodily needs, hunger strikes would not exist as a human phenomenon, because people would never choose to deliberately starve themselves despite access to food. This phenomenon is only possible if humans have a rational capacity to operate outside of bodily demands and do things from a strictly rational maxim. This point helps illustrate that, since the rational capacity remains autonomous from sentiment and it is this rationality upon which universal morality is based, people can appeal to reason to change for moral development.

I have largely considered moral change in my foregoing analysis, but now I must refer to immoral change, that is to say, from a state of morality to one of depravity. Kant, in *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, defines evil as a person who is “conscious of the moral law and yet has admitted the (occasional) deviation from it into his maxim.”<sup>16</sup> Further, Kant notes that this capacity for evil is natural to humans insofar as all humans have it in their capacity, as embodied beings, to include sentimental inclinations in their maxims.<sup>17</sup> Kant understands that “all evil in the world springs from freedom . . . free beings can only act regularly, if they restrict their freedom by rules,”<sup>18</sup> and that it is the “inner baseness, and not the consequences” which is the principle of evil.<sup>19</sup> On Kant’s account, evil arises because of the admittance of non-objective volitions into one’s maxims.<sup>20</sup> In essence, this action is to ignore the objective law which reason guides us to. To refer back to the unsympathetic person, let us suppose that she has been consistently charitable in reference to the moral law as incentive. If this person should falter in her morality and not give to charity, instead using her money for a luxurious dinner or for some other personal reason, this would be an evil. Like morality, evil results from our maxims or reasons for doing something, not necessarily the consequences of action. Where morality arises from adopting objective incentives, evil arises from non-objective sentiments.

Thus, the question of whether or not people can become evil is answered with a resounding yes: immoral change can be accomplished via inherent human subjectivity or non-objectivity. Kant admits of no doctrine of ‘once saved, always saved’ and, as is noted in the *Religion*, deviation from the moral law is “necessary in every human being, even in the best.”<sup>21</sup> It is clear

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., Ak. 448.

<sup>16</sup> Kant, *Religion*, Ak. 32.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Non-objective’ refers to nothing more than the rejection of the universal Kantian law and categorical imperative. This is opposed to the objective and universal Kantian moral law.

<sup>21</sup> Kant, *Religion*, Ak. 32.



that change occurs in a negative sense. All humans, being embodied, have non-objective incentives which they can succumb to. As long as a moral person remains a physical person, he is subject to inclinations that he must always resist through rationality, implying that there is potential for evil if he should fail.

It is at this point I must make a note of the type of change this implies. Both changes I have elucidated are internal changes, which are changes only in our maxims. If a person gives to charity because she wishes to be seen as charitable or wants to impress her peers, this would be a sentimental reason. To be truly moral, she must act objectively. Therefore, change may only be accurately judged by the individual. Since people have rational autonomy, they are able to reflect on their motives and change to become internally moral if need be. People can change insofar as they are individually able to change their internal thinking process. Consider if the opposite were true, and people were conscious of their thoughts but could not change them. The implication would be that the entire Kantian program is false. Also, it would imply that human actions and maxims were completely determined by forces outside of a rational agent's control. However, I do not think this is the case. Because reason is autonomous, it is seemingly able to compete with sentimental inclinations.<sup>22</sup> Kant argues, and I agree, that like the unsympathetic altruist, all people have it in their capacity to rationally isolate themselves and act or strive to reach the moral laws. Change is possible on these grounds.

However, there are reasonable challenges to this idea of change. Consider once again the unsympathetic person. Despite becoming charitable, it is unclear whether her personality changes. It seems as if by not changing her inherent personality, she has not changed at all. However, this change may never be possible, nor does it really matter. This is because personalities of this sort are based on sentimental inclinations. Changing inclinations is near impossible within Kantian understanding, if we take what I have noted above, for there is no objective metaphysical basis by which an appeal to change can be made. This leaves only reason, and reason cannot alter inclinations, but can only exclude them from our maxims. When this unsympathetic character acts charitably by reason, this does not change her personality but does change her internal maxims, and through this can change her behavior. Kant is not concerned with inclinations, which by definition are transitory, but with the rational aspect of humanity. A person may be cold in disposition and yet still appeal to reason to start acting morally by adding this objective law into his or her maxims, and therefore change. Indeed, Kant understands that "cold-blooded goodness is better than a warmth of affection; because it is more reliable."<sup>23</sup>

Certainly, it is unnecessary for a person to feel and to have sympathy feelings, to even be a sympathetic person, in order to be a moral person. Sympathy, which is nothing more than any other sentiment, does not bring about a person's moral status. Nor does the lack of sympathy, as in the case

<sup>22</sup> Kant, *Grounding*, Ak. 448-9 & 452-3.

<sup>23</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Duties Towards Others," in *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1963), 199.



of our unsympathetic altruist, preclude one from achieving morality. To be a moral person, it is unnecessary to say that a person must be sympathetic. Sympathy, as non-objective sentiment, can lead one to both moral and immoral ends. Kant goes so far as to suggest that sympathy inclinations cannot sustain one's morality. Kant notes that a person "benevolent from love, who loves his neighbour from inclination . . . will be charitable, by inclination, to all and sundry; and then, if someone takes advantage of his kind heart, in sheer disgust he will decide from then onwards to give up doing good to others. He has no principle by which to calculate his behaviour. Therefore, the moralist must establish principles, and commend and inculcate benevolence from obligation."<sup>24</sup> The difference, indeed the foundation for morality, is this autonomous rationality and obligation of the categorical imperative.

Sympathy feelings are unnecessary for morality, but Kant allows that morality, practiced through the categorical imperative, may result in sympathy inclinations. "If we do good from duty," Kant says, "it becomes a habit and we ultimately do it from inclination."<sup>25</sup> Such a causal relationship is difficult to establish, for it is not clear that the moral duty necessarily leads to sympathy sentiments. I can only say with certainty that duty and reason are necessary for morality. The unsympathetic person, whether remaining cold in disposition or developing sympathetic inclinations directed with duty, is nevertheless changed from his previous state of uncharitable disinterest to one where duty and morality follow from reason. Reason is the mechanism by which moral development is achieved in either case.

Another criticism derives from a Kantian doubt. This doubt asks whether we are able to know with certainty our maxims, noting that the "insidiousness of the human heart . . . [can deceive] itself concerning its own good and evil attitudes."<sup>26</sup> It would follow that if we were not certain of our maxims, then an implicit bias could prevent us from changing at all. However, it seems as if this does not diminish the rational autonomy per se, only the certainty such capacity gives us. In such a case, we may still appeal to reason to give an approximation of what is moral. While Kant does admit the uncertainty of our maxims, there does seem hope for approximations that we can reasonably deduce by appealing to the idea of maximizing an action to a universal proportion.<sup>27</sup> The unsympathetic character may donate to charity by appealing to this notion despite not knowing whether this is correct.

Furthermore, I find that Kant has strength in his program insofar as we are required to think on our actions, to exercise a "*vigilantia moralis*."<sup>28</sup> Thinking allows us to ponder morality and what we think we ought to do by appealing to an objective universal law. If we believed ourselves certain, there would be no self-criticism of our maxims. This is the essence of Kant's claims, and it is a strength requiring us not to simply disregard morality despite not being certain, or become arrogant in our certainty. I think it is quite likely that,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>26</sup> Kant, *Religion*, Ak. 38.

<sup>27</sup> Kant, *Grounding*, Ak. 403.

<sup>28</sup> Kant, "Duties to Oneself," 126.



through constant pondering of this law, we can become ever more moral in our actions. Being uncertain does not give us justification for not thinking about morality and acting as we please. Rationality gives us the best option for acting morally.

This paper has sought to answer a crucial question in the Kantian program: what is the mechanism that allows for individuals to morally change? I argued that an individual moral agent's change comes about by appeal to reason and autonomy from inclination. This resistance of non-objective inclination is crucial. While one may understand his duty, it is this autonomous disinterest in sentiments and sensations that is vital for one to achieve this morality. Further, it is the questioning and soul-searching that allows for a constant maintenance of one's maxims, thereby facilitating moral change. Negative change occurs when one rejects the moral law and fails to exclude sentiments from one's maxims. I considered objections to this idea, but ultimately must conclude that change is still possible through an individual's rational autonomy. ❖