

The Place of Empathy and Kantian Ethics

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Abstract:

This paper examines the role of empathy in moral theory and its potential issues, particularly the risk of moral inequality due to varied empathetic capacities among individuals. It argues for prioritizing reason over empathy as the core basis of morality, drawing extensively on Kantian philosophy, which advocates for moral actions guided by universal principles and rational deliberation. While acknowledging the significant role that empathy traditionally plays in ethical discussions, the paper contends that basing morality solely on empathy can lead to inconsistencies and unfair assessments of moral worth. Instead, it posits that employing reason as the primary tool in moral decision-making ensures fairness, accommodating individuals irrespective of their natural empathetic capacities. Additionally, the paper explores how empathy serve adjunct to reason, enhancing moral decisions without being the primary criterion. Through this dual approach, the paper aims to reconcile the strengths of both empathy and reason within the framework of moral philosophy.

Keywords: Kant, Kantian Ethics, Ethics, Morals, Empathy

In contemporary culture, it is widely held that being empathetic is both a central aspect of moral behavior and a necessary trait to be considered a moral person. For example, in early education, people often make assumptions about a child's potential based on the extent to which they display a capacity for empathy (Carlson & Meltzoff, 2008, 2). Many believe that a lack of empathy is correlated with future immoral behavior and that being very empathetic is a sign of good character. Not only are such beliefs present in our culture today, but they have also played a significant role in the history of philosophy. Several philosophers assign empathy (though many refer to it as 'sympathy') a fundamental role at the heart of morality, including Hume, Smith, de Grouchy, and Schopenhauer.

Yet, despite the central role that empathy has played in philosophical discussions of morality, there is still ongoing debate about the precise nature of empathy and its relationship to morality. Empathy is often considered a crucial element of morality, as it allows individuals to understand and share the feelings of others. However, this raises an important problem. Some people are naturally more empathetic than others, and others may be incapable of experiencing empathy altogether. Suppose empathy plays a central role in determining moral behavior. In that case, that suggests individuals who struggle with manifesting empathy may be viewed as lacking in moral character, or may not be fully recognized as moral agents. This would amount to an inequality in the moral sphere, as some individuals would have a higher moral status due to their greater capacity for empathy. Such moral inequality seems problematic. It is unfair to base an individual's moral worth on their ability to empathize. It seems unjust to consider some people morally superior just because they are more capable of empathizing with others.

One way to avoid the problems that arise when empathy is seen as the foundation of morality is to assign this central moral role to reason instead. This approach emphasizes using rationally derived universal principles in moral decision-making, rather than relying on people's varying, subjective experiences of empathy. By basing morality on reason, a capacity almost all human beings possess, we can avoid moral inequality and ensure that moral decisions are consistent and fair in accordance with universal principles. Many philosophers have advocated this approach, most prominently Immanuel Kant, who argued that rational actions guided by universal principles are the basis of moral life.

Kant's philosophy provides an alternative approach to understanding the role of empathy in morality. Kant argued that reason, rather than empathy, should be the foundation of moral decision-

making. According to Kant, people can be motivated to perform moral behaviors based on reason alone. Moral actions are actions guided by reason, based on maxims that can be universalized and accepted by all rational beings. By basing morality on reason rather than empathy, moral issues can be handled in a more universal way because all humans have the capacity for reason, unlike empathy, whose presence in human beings is more variable. In this way, Kant's philosophy avoids the issue of moral inequality that arises when empathy is taken to be the cornerstone of morality.

This paper has two main goals. The first goal is to defend the Kantian view that reason, rather than empathy, should be the central foundation of morality. The second goal of the paper is to show that even if empathy is not the central foundation of morality, it can still play a valuable role in moral decision-making. Empathy can serve as a supplement to rationality. We can make moral decisions more successfully by utilizing emotional insight gained through empathy to supplement rational deliberation. In this way, I will show that despite the central ethical importance of reason, there is still room for the valuable insights that empathy can provide in moral decision-making.

Part One

In this section, I will show how Kant's moral theory is based on the idea that reason is the foundation of morality. Kant believed that moral action should be guided by the dictates of reason rather than emotion or desire. He argued that moral law is determined by reason alone, and that the moral worth of an action depends on its motive rather than its consequences. Kant's theory emphasizes the importance of treating others with respect and fairness and recognizing everyone's inherent value as rational beings. Kant's moral philosophy addresses fundamental questions about the accessibility of morality, particularly regarding empathy's role as a foundation for morality. In contrast to empathy-based approaches, Kant's emphasis on reason enables him to avoid the problem of moral inequality. Moreover, I argue that Kant's theory provides a credible and comprehensive explanation of morality. Finally, I will address potential criticisms of my contentions about Kant's theory, most importantly the objection that Kant's theory does not avoid the moral inequality problem because not everyone has the same capacity for reason. I will show that despite these objections, the centrality of reason in morality avoids the moral inequality problem and leads to a plausible account of morality that can help foster a just and harmonious society.

Kant believed that moral action should be guided by the dictates of reason, rather than by emotion or desire. He argued that morality is grounded in the idea that a good will is the only intrinsic good (Kant, 2020, 2). Also that reason is central to determining moral duty; moral principles must be universal and unconditional, and determined through the use of reason alone (Kant, 2020, 2).

This perspective on morality minimizes the possibility of injustice, as it allows for the development of moral principles that can be universally accepted by all rational beings. Kant believed that reason is a faculty present in almost all human beings, operating according to the same universal principles in each person, and making the exact demands of each person, without regard for a person's social status or situation. By putting reason at the center of morality, Kant's perspective allows for the development of consistent moral principles that are fair and just for all individuals.

In contrast, Kant thinks basing morality on emotions like empathy leads to several problems. Most significantly, Kant thought doing what's right out of a desire for self gain has no moral worth; only actions from duty have moral worth "An action done from duty derives its moral worth, not from the purpose, which is to be attained by it, but from the maxim by which it is determined." (Kant, 2020, 11) Moreover, subjective and fluctuating affectations as desire and empathy can make it difficult to consistently make moral decisions because they are constantly changing, and are affected by individual experiences and circumstances. This leads to inconsistent conclusions and makes it difficult for others to predict or understand a person's moral decisions. Additionally, using highly variable emotions as the foundation of morality can lead to conflicting conclusions and moral anarchy when making decisions collectively. In contrast, reason is considered a more stable and consistent foundation for morality as it is based on universal principles that everyone can apply consistently in different situations.

Kant's moral theory is often classified as deontological ethics because it focuses on the idea of duty or moral obligation. According to Kant, our moral duties are determined by the categorical imperative, a universal moral principle that applies to all rational beings. The categorical imperative states that we should act such that we can sincerely will that the maxim of our action become a universal law "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." (Kant, 2020, 18) For Kant, this is equivalent to the claim that we should act so that our actions can be willed without contradiction by all rational beings.

In Kantian philosophy, the moral law is grounded in reason. He believed that individuals should use their rational capacities to determine the moral worth of an action, rather than relying on emotions or consequences "The moral law must be a law of reason alone, and it must be capable of being known through pure reason." (Kant, 2020, 30) Kant believed that the only truly moral actions are those motivated by a rational commitment to one's moral duty (Kant, 2020, 2). In other words, an action's moral worth is determined by its motives, and these motives must be based on reason. He believed that by basing the moral law in reason, individuals can ensure that they are making moral decisions that are universally applicable and not influenced by their own personal biases, feelings, or desires.

Kant's emphasis on reason as the foundation of morality is closely tied to his belief in the inherent value and dignity of all rational beings (Kant, 2020, 2). Kant argued that rational beings have this unique moral status because they can recognize and act on the moral law. This means that all rational beings have a moral duty to respect the autonomy and dignity of other rational beings and to treat them as inherently valuable ends in themselves rather than as a means to an end.

In sum, Kant believed it is important to use our reason, when making moral decisions instead of relying on our emotions or feelings. He believed that by using reason, we are more likely to make moral choices based on universal principles that can be applied in various situations, are fair and equal for everyone, and do not give preferential treatment to certain individuals. To support this idea, Kant introduced the concept of the *categorical imperative*, a rule that says we should always act in a way that could be a universal law for all rational beings, regardless of our own desires or interests. This means treating others with respect and fairness, and recognizing their inherent value as rational beings.

In general, Kant's argument is an especially powerful and plausible account of morality. This is because it emphasizes the importance of treating everyone with equal respect and fairness, which is widely agreed upon as a key component of morality. This egalitarian principle is essential for a just and harmonious society, as it ensures everyone is treated with dignity and respect through unbiased treatment stemming from commitment to an absolute, universal rational law in accordance with which every person must act. Kant's moral theory also promotes a sense of cooperation and mutual respect, as it requires us to consider the needs and interests of others when making moral decisions; after all, the maxims that would be universally binding must be capable of being willed by everyone.

Some might disagree with Kant's claim that all *must* act in accordance with the moral law. Instead, they could think it would be better for society to let people naturally behave in ways that the categorical imperative might demand rather than force them to constantly deliberate rationally about their decisions. This would be less psychologically demanding, and enable more people to count as morally good. However, Kant would respond that by lowering the standard for having a good will in this way, morality would be based on something fleeting, and it would be possible to avoid one's moral duty if one did not feel like performing it. That is precisely why Kant says the prudent shopkeeper and the friend of man are not worthy of moral esteem "An action done from duty derives its moral worth, not from the purpose which is to be attained by it, but from the maxim by which it is determined, and therefore does not depend on the realization of the object of the action, but merely on the principle of volition by which the action has taken place, without regard to any object of desire." (Kant, 2020, 51) Moreover, if we base moral conclusions on reason rather than emotions, such that they would be based on universal principles that can be applied in various circumstances, that would enable us to make universally valid moral decisions, rather than being tied to specific cultural or personal contexts, which cause outrage and inconsistency which can be harmful and unfair.

Kant's philosophy offers a solution to moral inequality by focusing on all rational beings' value and dignity. According to Kant, all rational beings have worth just by being rational. This means that everyone is equal in moral value, regardless of differences in abilities, talents, or circumstances. Kant believed that moral principles should apply to everyone equally, not just certain individuals or groups. This makes sure that everyone is treated with respect and dignity. By focusing on the value of all rational beings, Kant's philosophy offers a way to think about moral questions that avoids bias. That is why placing reason at the center of morality is superior to placing empathy at the center of morality.

However, another potential criticism of Kant's theory is that not everyone has the same capacity for reason, so not everyone can fully adhere to the moral law or have the same moral status. This would make reason no less problematic than empathy with regard to playing a central role in morality. However, this critique does not necessarily undermine the centrality of reason in morality. As Kant himself stated, "Moral principles are not based on individual reasoning, but on universal principles that can be deduced through reason" (Kant, 2020, 120). While it may be true that some individuals may have greater difficulty using reason to make moral decisions, this does not mean that the use of reason is not still the most objective, fair, and universal basis for moral decision-making. It is important to recognize that using reason is a skill that almost everyone possesses. That is why reason is better able to play a central role in morality.

So, we can see that Kant's view that reason is central to morality offers a compelling and fair approach to moral decision-making. It emphasizes all rational beings' inherent dignity and worth and provides a clear and objective basis for arriving at moral conclusions. While there may be challenges to implementing this view in practice, it is a valuable framework for promoting justice and harmony in society. The use of reason allows for moral decisions to be made consistently and predictably and for moral dilemmas to be resolved objectively and without bias. Reason is necessarily universal regardless of the position and relationships of any one person. This idea of universality is core to the egalitarian nature of Kant's morality, in that because everyone can come to the same moral conclusions, everyone has the same moral status. In that way, Kant's theory avoids the moral inequality problem.

Part Two

Having established the importance of a Kantian moral perspective, I now intend to provide a nuanced view of empathy's moral role in such a perspective. I will begin by showing why empathy should be considered a skill. Then, I will examine why unlike reason, empathy is a dangerous skill to position as central for moral decision making. Nonetheless, I will contend that empathy can still play a role in our moral decision-making process. Finally, I will focus on evaluating empathy's ability to be useful in moral and social situations.

I contend that empathy is not a central arbiter of behavior, that controls every meter of a person's thoughts and actions and is capable of independently achieving a moral end, but rather a skill that may be cultivated and used as a tool to supplement reason in order to help us act morally. This is to say that empathy exists not as an innate ability that activates like an internal moral compass, but rather as a tool to reach a certain end in the same vein as logic, or creativity, as in things that can be cultivated and developed. This gives empathy a great breadth of use as empathy can be adapted to aid us in resolving all sorts of moral dilemmas.

Empathy is often thought of as an inherent trait that we are either born with or without. However, research suggests that empathy is actually a skill that can be developed and improved upon with effort and practice. Just as we can learn to play an instrument or speak a new language, we can also learn to become more empathetic. For a skill to be useful in achieving a particular objective, practice is necessary to improve the skill's application, as "Skills are not involuntary; if they were, it would be easy to be skilled. Rather, they are acquired and improved via effortful practice." (Battally, 2018, 283). This point is essential to understand empathy. Empathy must be approached with a specific sort of attitude and cultivated carefully; human beings must be taught to use empathy with more care. It is far more crucial to

develop empathy than other skills like instrument playing or athleticism because empathy is not only a personal trait but also a social skill that is essential for building strong relationships and creating a sense of community and connection with others, all of which can help people act morally by giving them extra motivation to do what their reason tells them to do anyway. To see this, consider the following example. Picture a mountain climber in peril on a cliffside. A passerby who happens to be a psychological egoist may use the philosophy of ethical egoism to rationalize that because he does not want to help the climber out of laziness, he ought not. However, a robust empathic capacity may motivate the passerby to disregard his laziness and help the climber.

It is important to note that empathy is not a one-size-fits-all skill. Different people may have different levels of natural ability when it comes to empathy, and what works for one person to cultivate empathy may not work for another. However, the good news is that empathy is a skill that can be developed and improved upon with practice and effort. By consciously cultivating empathy, we can become more compassionate and understanding individuals.

Having established empathy as a skill, I will now go into greater detail about how to cultivate it. One way to develop empathy as a skill is through education and exposure to diverse perspectives. By learning about different cultures, histories, and experiences, we can broaden our understanding of the world and develop a greater capacity for empathy. This can be achieved through reading, traveling, and interacting with people from different backgrounds and cultures. Additionally, self-reflection and mindfulness can help us become more aware of our emotions and their impact on others. This should be understood as a sort of experiential learning, or, as Amy Coplan puts it, a process involving “empathy that combines affective matching, other-oriented perspective-taking, and self–other differentiation provides experiential understanding.” (Coplan, 2011, 17). By paying attention to our own feelings and experiences in such situations and by actively seeking to understand the feelings and experiences of others, we can cultivate empathy as a skill, use it to enrich our relationships and lives, and have it provide us with motivational reinforcement for our rational moral deliberation.

Unfortunately, there has never been a sustained, systematic educational focus in society on the development of empathy. As a result, many people manifest an empathy deficit, especially those who may have insufficient opportunities to practice the skill of empathy. Adults affected by this deficit can pose a risk to others due to their underdeveloped empathy: they may behave in a way that could hurt themselves or others.

I contend that empathy is a skill that can become more refined in situations such as schooling, and that those without this emotional skill, such as psychopaths, are not doomed to be dangerous, anti-social, immoral people as is commonly believed (Anderson, Nathaniel E, and Kent A Kiehl, 2014, 105). In particular, research suggests that “younger individuals with nascent symptoms of psychopathy are more promising” and could be helped through empathy education (Anderson, Nathaniel E, and Kent A Kiehl, 2014, 105). While those suffering from empathy deficits are not incapable of being moral as they still have the capacity for reason, empathy remains helpful to many in providing extra motivation for them to act morally. So, for young people with psychopathic constitutions, more rigorous educational development of empathy may prevent the harmful, immoral tendencies associated with psychopathy later in life.

So, as far as education to cultivate one’s empathy is concerned, it is best to start as young as possible. We understand this for fundamentals like mathematics, common sense, and language. However, we ignore it in the case of empathy because empathy is still too often looked at as more of an instinct. For this reason, it is essential to cultivate cognitive empathy, which includes teaching perspective shifting, exposing oneself to various art forms, and valuing animal life. Developing empathy is vital for people of all ages; however, it is easier for the brain to form connections and learn when it is still developing. Consequently, it is essential to begin teaching empathy at a young age. To see how we might go about doing this, it is worth examining how other subjects are taught. Language Arts classes are seen as the most effective way to develop such skills as grammar and rhetoric. The way Language Arts classes get these points across is through practical application; drilling into a student’s head the difference between “there” and “they’re” really has no effect unless this can be contextualized in the practice of writing.

From this, we can see that any effective empathy-cultivation curriculum will give students ample opportunities to practice empathizing with others. A course load of literature, art criticism, theater, and writing aimed at helping students develop empathy can be helpful in this regard. We can already see this at work in how medical students are taught to empathize with patients using theater (Shapiro and Hunt, 2003, 922). After students viewed a theater piece, according to the study, “informal verbal feedback and written self-evaluations were collected from audience members following performances about AIDS and ovarian cancer. Participants reported increased empathy and understanding of the illness experience” (Shapiro and Hunt, 2003, 924). While the data of that particular study was not conclusive enough to observe lasting development of the audience’s empathy in the long run, we can say that both because skills require constant development to be optimized and because the research showed that even one performance positively impacted the audience’s capacity to empathize, such practices can be an important part of empathy education.

Similarly, training in Narrative Medicine is a technique used in healthcare to help medical professionals better understand and connect with patients through increased empathy. Healthcare professionals are taught to empathize with their patients and provide more effective and compassionate care by employing techniques such as active listening and Reading reflective writing, such as personal narratives, essays, or poetry, written by patients about their own experiences with illness, including their emotional, psychological, and social experiences, can provide valuable insights into the lived experience of illness and enhance empathy among healthcare providers. This strategy has been shown to improve patient outcomes and healthcare providers’ well-being. Training in narrative medicine can also assist in bridging the gap between patients and healthcare providers by fostering open communication and mutual appreciation of each other’s perspectives through increased empathy. Additionally, it can boost patient satisfaction and reduce the likelihood of medical errors. According to scientific studies, narrative medicine training improves patient satisfaction, comprehension of their health conditions, adherence to treatment regimens, and overall health outcomes. All these examples from the field of medicine show that when done right, empathy education can be effective and can lead to positive results.

Some might object by saying that the empathic development a child goes through, for instance, when developing friendships or encountering the homeless, is sufficient empathetic education and renders any further education one could receive in a classroom superfluous. However, the skills of direct classroom education could help avoid significant issues related to deficits in the capacity for empathy developed outside the classroom. Outside the classroom, we may be initiated into harmful nationalistic ideologies and subsequently participate in immoral actions, as it far easier to align our feelings with those of the same nation – something David Hume pointed out long ago (Human, 2008, 56). Empathy education in a formal classroom setting can help mitigate this risk.

Conclusion

A commitment to reason and duty must temper the proper role of empathy in moral life. Without guidance from reason, empathetic impulses can lead us astray, mistaking the guise of another’s suffering for the reality of their experiences. This paper has argued that empathy is a vital life skill that can be honed through education, citing examples from language arts, medicine, and narrative medicine to support this claim, all for the sake of being a tool to aid in the capacities of reason.

The relevance of this discussion lies in the potential of empathy education to foster a more compassionate and understanding world. Specifically, by supporting and strengthening empathy education, we can support rational moral deliberation and reduce the influence of empathy’s contents. Empathy education makes those who are different from us more salient in rational deliberation, leading to improved outcomes in various fields, including medicine.

To conclude, the case for empathy education is clear. We must prioritize the cultivation of empathy to support reason in rational moral deliberation. That way, we can foster a society that is more understanding, nuanced, and compassionate in our approach to morality.

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