

Kant's will at the crossroads: An essay on the failings of practical rationality

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Jens Timmermann's study of practical failure begins with the remark that, "As always, Kant is good for a surprise" (p. ix). That is certainly true and Timmermann's work delivers in a way that will surprise many Kant interpreters by challenging certain mainstays of contemporary interpretation. What is not surprising is Timmermann's depth of erudition and keen philosophical analysis (in tight prose, no less), which are familiar from his other contributions to Kant scholarship.

The lead question of the study is: "how does Kant explain everyday decisions that deviate from the demands of reason?" (p. 2). In particular, Timmermann is curious whether Kant would align with the Socratic "intellectualist" position, that is, in which rational failure amounts to ignorance of knowing what the good is, or align more with the Aristotelian "anti-intellectualist" view, that is, in which rational failure is due to an akratic weakness of the will. The upshot of his analysis is that Kant would endorse *both*, but in a way that splits the normative sphere in two: "The answer, I shall argue, is that he [Kant] accommodates both approaches by assigning them to distinct normative spheres" (p. 2). This dualistic, or "hybrid," account of practical failure presents a challenge to many contemporary views. Indeed, Timmermann argues that the hybrid view presents the "mirror image of the view held by many distinguished Kantians" (p. 128). Thus, not only is this work intended to elucidate Kant's theory, but further provide a correction. *Pace* the efforts of notable interpreters, such as, Paton, Hill, Johnson, Kohl, Korsgaard, Longuenesse, Pollok, and Wood,¹ whom he thinks see a unity in Kant's practical theory between hypothetical and categorical, non-moral and moral end-setting, Timmermann argues that Kant's true position is inherently dualistic.

I first will present a broad-strokes summary of the two kinds of agential failure on Timmermann's reading. Then, I will turn to an overview of the work as a whole, presenting the structure of Timmermann's argument, which sometimes gets lost from view along the way.

A standard way of interpreting the categorical and hypothetical imperatives has been that they both represent two sides of the same normative coin of practical reasoning. We would be irrational to act contrary to the categorical imperative, since we would stand in contradiction with our conclusion of what anyone ought to do given the circumstances. And we would be equally irrational in the cases of hypothetical imperatives if we willed an end, but simultaneously failed to will the means. Both imperatives—so a standard view goes—are unified in that they both are instances of reason being practical.

Here, though, Timmermann makes the case that this popular way of interpreting practical rationality and its failure is completely wrong. While in moral actions reason is being practical, he argues that in non-moral actions reason is—actually—not "practical" in a proper sense at all (see, ¶¶ 18–19). Instead, a hypothetical imperative is merely a "theoretical proposition, a rule outlining causal connections, that we import into the will to realize our ends" (p. 49). Whether we "ought" to will the means, he argues has nothing to do with reason and everything to do with our

desires. If we *want* an end, then we will *want* the means. Thus, there is nothing rationally required whatsoever about an action that is guided by hypothetical imperatives, and hence no *ought*. With morality, however, the shoe is on the other foot. When faced with a categorical imperative, we notice that it has *nothing* to do with what we want personally and everything to do with what is rationally obligatory. Because of this, Timmermann's Kant thinks that only morality delivers an objective good: "The good is exclusively associated with reason. As a result, we do not always act under the guise of the good" (p. 45, see also p. 37). Both imperatives aim, therefore, at completely heterogeneous ends and fail for two completely different reasons. Based on these two unique forms of failure, Timmermann concludes that "if he [Kant] has no overall account of how reason *fails* to determine human action, he is unlikely to have a unified theory of human practical rationality" (p. 3). But in what do these failures consist?

Beginning with hypothetical (or instrumental) imperatives, Timmermann thinks that Kant is an intellectualist when it comes to agential failure. We begin when our "sensuous side prompts us to action" (p. 75). We desire something and enlist reason in its theoretical use to determine the best means for achieving our end. Now: "In the absence of moral concerns, if a certain end is judged worth pursuing overall, any failure to act on hypothetical imperatives is due to mistaken judgement about how it is best realized" (p. 7). That is, we fail when acting on hypothetical imperatives due to "some cognitive defect or a flawed piece of reasoning" (p. 7). This failure, though, cannot be due to any form of irrationality. If we *knew* the correct means, certainly we would want to pursue them. The problem, instead, must be due to a failure of the intellect. Or as Timmermann notes: "We violate hypothetical imperatives if and only if we fail to grasp the instrumental connection they contain, i.e., out of ignorance" (p. 57). Thus, the reason we fail in this regard is quite unintentional. Because we are after our own happiness, we can only chalk up shortcomings to a lack of knowledge as opposed to a lack of will.

When it comes to the categorical imperative, by contrast, Timmermann thinks that we fail for a completely different reason that has to do with volition. In this area of practical failure, Kant comes closer to Aristotle's view that we can be akratic. Timmermann thinks that we begin with the same process of our inclinations stirring. Despite our own inclinations, however, our agency is waylaid by an awareness of a law that stands opposed to our personal interests, desires, and wishes. We realize that, since it is not our sensibility that is setting us on the road to action, it must instead be reason that is asserting itself into the sphere of agency. If we then choose *not* to obey this law of reason, it is not because of "some cognitive defect or a flawed piece of reasoning. It consists in the conscious, knowing, voluntary choice not to will the moral end" (p. 7). Hence, when we fail morally it is due to a volitional failure. Indeed, only on such an account—which Timmermann points out is one strength of his reading—does it make sense to hold individuals accountable for immoral action: "The cause of immoral action is not cognitive error. It is an act of will" (p. 121). On this basis, Timmermann also insists that only in moral matters are we free: "If we go wrong, it is not because we judge the wrong thing to be right. It is because we opt for the wrong thing; and we know it" (p. 117). Failure in moral matters is completely non-intellectualist. It is a failure that we cannot weasel out of by claiming ignorance. It is for this reason that Timmermann thinks we are in an utterly different normative domain than when we are acting non-morally.

So much for the broad strokes of Timmermann's overarching view of how we come to fail in two completely different spheres. I turn now to present the structure of Timmermann's work as a whole, which is built around showing the dualistic nature of agential failure. Along the way I highlight various areas that I found particularly interesting. Here the standard book review caveat is in order: I can only highlight some of the details of this rich work.

Although Timmermann does not explain it, a clear plan is evident in how the work proceeds. A grounding premise of the entire work is, of course, in the titular "crossroads" of the will. Timmermann notes that for Kant: "Our will has two masters whose sovereignty is limited, if in different ways: reason *and* pleasure" (p. 45). It makes sense, then, that Timmermann first—after the Introduction (Chapter 1)—explores these two masters of the will in isolation from each other, devoting a chapter to exploring "Happiness" (Chapter 2) and the next to exploring "The Law and the Good" (Chapter 3). After analyzing the two, heterogeneous ends that determine our willing, Timmermann turns to the two, respective forms of imperatives that come into play to achieve each end respectively. If we are pursuing our happiness, then we employ "Instrumental Imperatives" (Chapter 4). But we often come to junctures where we

feel called to deviate from pleasure and our own wellbeing. We are confronted, namely, with the law and the good, and here encounter the categorical imperative as “The Emergence of Practical Reason” (Chapter 5). Timmermann then turns to troubleshooting misunderstandings of this properly dualistic arena of agential failure by detailing the complexities that beset all interpreters when accounting for “Incentives, Maxims, and Freedom” (Chapter 6). The last two chapters conclude the study by summarizing the “Two Types of Practical Failure” (Chapter 7) and drawing out its “Conclusions and Implications” (Chapter 8). The slim, “Kant’s Practical Dualisms: A Fifteen-point Summary,” is but a cherry on top to enumerate various dualisms that reveal how the hybrid nature of Kant’s theory is a feature and not a bug of the system.

Timmermann begins the study with an in-depth analysis of happiness, which is quite welcome since, as he notes, “Nowhere in his works does Kant develop a clear and authoritative account of the nature of human happiness” (p. 10). Nevertheless, Timmermann pieces together the evidence, which is quite compelling for seeing Kant as holding a “hedonistic” view of happiness.² We seek out states in which we experience pleasure or expect to experience pleasure (employing the imagination). And this represents simply the default condition of us as natural beings. Importantly, though, “the inevitability of the desire to be happy does not endow it with objective normative force” (p. 88). For Timmermann, this is the essential point of Kant’s theory of happiness. We simply desire happiness as a brute fact, which is why claiming that we “ought” to pursue it is absurd. We do not need to be obligated to pursue something that we pursue anyway. Hence, “we never ‘have reason’ to pursue our own happiness” (p. 88). We just do.

The second master of the will is “radically different from the value of the objects we fancy” (p. 30). Whereas the objects that we find agreeable are “ineliminably first-personal, subjective, and contentious” (p. 41), we encounter in certain moments a point where our pleasure seeking is interrupted by a law. Timmermann shows this deftly through an analysis of Kant’s response to Hermann Andreas Pistorius, a reviewer of the *Groundwork* who found it problematic to call anything good that had no relation to an intended, external object. Through an analysis of what Kant calls the “paradox of method” in the second *Critique*, Timmermann argues that Kant’s response is a step-wise series of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments against the assumption that pleasure or instrumental advantages could ever serve as a stable foundation for objective norms about what is good. Each of Kant’s *reductios* aims to show that the “good” and the “agreeable” are not identical. Beyond presenting a compelling account, the chapter is filled with small nuggets of insight, for example, regarding the historical notion of paradox at work in Kant’s usage (p. 33), as well as his explanation of why “böse” had a broader meaning for Kant because the term “schlecht” had not “yet been firmly established in the late eighteenth century” (35n14).

After having detailed the two masters of the will, Timmermann turns to the two unique ways for satisfying these masters (or better: failing to do so). The next chapter on instrumental imperatives, one of the longest of the book, is essential reading for those who work on hypothetical and categorical imperatives. It is here where Timmermann makes his case for seeing hypothetical imperatives as having nothing to do with reasons and everything to do with theoretically rational means toward satisfying desires. In the course of his analysis, Timmermann highlights the widespread view that one is irrational if failing to act on such imperatives. But he points out that such a view has its costs, the most significant of which is that it cannot account for “non-moral action” (p. 58). On the hybrid view, though, one can make perfect sense of non-moral action, since it allows us “to interpret actions as expressions of the agent’s actual preferences” (p. 59). Here I was convinced: When we fail to act in non-moral cases, it makes more sense to blame our underlying desires as opposed to our rationality. Given a desire and a rational means for attaining it, there is nothing inherently rational that justifies my employment of those means. The justification is best sought in my preferences.

When it comes to obeying the other master of the will, that is, reason, Timmermann provides a “genetic account of motivation, deliberation, judgment, and choice” (p. 75) in the next chapter. The genetic account is a highlight of the book, although it certainly will be a source of debate amongst scholars. Timmermann’s proposal is that there are 12 “aspects” of human agency. The first eight are “pre-moral aspects” that lead from the first “*stirrings of inclination*” (p. 75) to the “*prudential choice and action*” (p. 80). In gist, the vast majority of our behavior is an ongoing pursuit of seeking means for the attainment of felicitic ends. Until the initial choice-point, Timmermann thinks that prudence

guides us (via instrumental imperatives) to arrive at a “candidate maxim” (p. 79) that can then be considered for choice and action in the last step of non-moral agency. But with us, reason has the last word. Here is where I think much debate will center. For Timmermann, the transition to pure reason depends on the “inconclusive nature of prudential thought” (p. 81). That is, there is something in us that pauses before the choice-point, wondering whether the candidate maxim is something that can yield a “certainty” (p. 81) in us about its justifiability. But it cannot (since only reason can offer objective reasons), which then transfers us from the non-moral domain into the moral one, in which reason “resorts to its very own standard” (p. 81). The remaining steps bring this unique standard (the categorical imperative) to bear on the candidate maxim, find motivation in pure respect, and culminate in the crossroads: should one obey reason or follow one's desires?

The account is compelling. But one worry is whether it can account for all instances of moral action. While it makes sense perhaps to think of negative duties as following this 12-step process, since they put the kibosh on certain candidate maxims that cannot find justification beyond one's own self-serving ends, it is harder to see how this will apply to positive duties. It seems like our striving to help others need not always begin with a stirring of our “sensuous side” (p. 75). Indeed, it seems like the call to act—say in a moment demanding unexpected but immediate expediency—will have little or nothing to do with any preceding or current candidate maxims that are merely prudential. Certainly one must abandon the candidate maxim of relaxing on the beach, when one notices someone yelling for help in the waves. But the maxim of *Help that person posthaste!* is not obviously one that originates in some previous, non-moral pursuit of happiness. In short, it seems that some moral actions will take their point of departure from attending to immediate needs in the environment that have no direct relation to our previous means-end maxim creation. Perhaps there are ways of accounting for this in Timmermann's framework, according to which: “Morality begins where prudence ends” (p. 80). But such a model—for me at least—seems to underdetermine the variety of cases in moral life. What of such cases of moral action that require us to *end* prudence in a completely non-sequitur fashion? There are moments in which we are going along with what we think will make us happy, when suddenly we are sandbagged by new circumstances. And with these, a new rational certainty requires us to drop everything and just act. It was not a waffling about the previous candidate maxim that prompts us to seek out a new standard in reason in such cases, rather it seems we might be triggered by events that require that we creatively assert ourselves in the world in impromptu ways.

I must leave discussion of the final two chapters unfortunately brief to draw this review to a close, although I have already detailed some of the broad strokes covered in them. The chapter immediately following the complete account of how the will might act in following its two masters is an intervention to set the Kantian story straight by addressing shortcomings in alternative readings that seek to treat moral failure in intellectualist terms (chief amongst them, those that subscribe to the Allisonian “incorporation thesis,” see ¶ 32). And in the penultimate chapter, Timmermann ties everything together by presenting in thorough detail the two forms of practical failure.

I am inclined to accept Timmermann's interpretation as the more-or-less correct Kantian account of agential failure. But this leaves me with a lingering question about what this does to the standing of Kant's moral theory. And it is here where I would have liked to hear more from Timmermann about his own take. While he notes that he is correcting a long trend that seeks to overcome Kant's dualistic theory, heavily influenced by Rawls, he leaves it open to the reader about whether this correction is a good thing. He states in the final, 15-point summary that “we should be attentive” to Kant's dualisms and that it “may be time to reassert them, both as an interpretive move and as a philosophical option” (p. 153), but it is not abundantly obvious *why* we should, apart from trying to stay truer to the letter and spirit of Kant's texts. For instance, on this account, “The kind of certainty reason hopes for in assessing maxims can only be found in the moral sphere” (p. 156). Yet, treating reason as always providing certainty seems dubious. And it also would mean that “human beings never willingly forfeit happiness” (p. 158). But this seems far from obvious. What of Kierkegaard's theory of human psychology? For many, Kierkegaard convincingly argues for the need to sacrifice what one desires, not because of a law or moral certainty, but rather because of love for the divine, which often demands us to will the absurd and suspend the ethical. Of course, there is a virtue in presenting

a case and allowing the reader to decide for him- or herself. However, quite selfishly, I wanted a little more guidance from this leader in the field.

Regardless, if you want to know more about Kant's ethics, then you absolutely should read this book. Although, if Timmermann's Kant is correct, your failure to actually read it will only be evidence that you might not be clear about the state of your desires. By reading this review, at least, you can no longer claim ignorance about knowing one sure means of sating your thirst for understanding why Kant thinks we fail as agents.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Timmermann is, of course, careful to not lump all these interpreters together. But he mentions that they all arguably fall into the trap of thinking that instrumental imperatives provide normative weight in the sense that we fail to act rationally if we flout them. And there are traces, sometimes more and sometimes less, explicit in these thinkers Timmermann contends, that show them adhering to the view that there is a singular form of “the” hypothetical imperative, akin to: if you will the end, so too must you will the means (on pain of irrationality). Here, Timmermann pushes back and in particular in Chapter 4.

² Although qualified in the sense that is “experientialist” in that it “is the experience of objects possessing certain qualities that pleases us, not desire satisfaction as such” (p. 15).