

## **Tact as Ambiguous Imperative: Merleau-Ponty, Kant, and Moral Sense-Bestowal**

### **Abstract**

I argue in this paper that some of the most basic commitments of Kantian ethics can be understood as grounded in the dynamic of sense that Merleau-Ponty describes in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. Specifically, I argue that Merleau-Ponty's account supports the importance of universalizability as a test for the moral permissibility of particular acts as well as the idea that the binding character of the moral law is given as something like a fact of reason. But I also argue that Merleau-Ponty's account of reversibility suggests an important dimension of moral experience that is given in the experience of contact and that is underthematized in moral philosophies like Kant's that emphasize the role of universalizability. Finally, I advance a positive account of moral experience that is centered on the idea of tact as ambiguous imperative.

In the Preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes that “because we are in the world, we are condemned to sense....”<sup>1</sup> We are condemned to sense in two senses, which are indissociable. On the one hand, to be in the world is to find oneself immersed in sense. That there is sense, in other words, is not attributable to the act of any subject. Rather the world is given to us as making some kind of sense even before we are able to determine more precisely what sense it makes. To be condemned to sense, then, is to find oneself subjected *to* the sense of the world always already. On the other hand, we are also subjects *of* the sense of the world. We do not receive the sense of the world entirely passively, as wax receives a seal. Rather, the subject actively intends the sense of the world. The subject does so, however, only by catching onto and rendering progressively more determinate the sense that the world itself adumbrates. Merleau-Ponty illustrates this condemnation to sense well in his account of what happens when we perceive a color. We cannot see a color as blue, for example, simply by opening our eyes and looking at a blue object. The blue only appears as blue for the embodied subject that knows how to let itself be affected by it in the right way. “Thus a sensible datum which is on the point of being felt sets a kind of muddled

---

<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. xix).

problem for my body to solve. I must find the attitude which *will* provide it with the means of becoming determinate, of showing up as blue; I must find the reply to a question which is obscurely expressed. . . . The sensible gives back to me what I lent to it, but this is only what I took from it in the first place.”<sup>2</sup> A similar dynamic accounts for the ways we make sense in contexts that are not simply perceptual. When I read a novel, for example, I do not find its sense arrayed before me fully formed in the black and white of its pages; it is not just there, fully present to my gaze. Rather, in order for the sense of the novel to emerge, I must animate the marks on the page with my meaning-bestowing intention. I must, in other words, act as the subject of sense. But of course I cannot animate the marks on the page with any intention I please, just as I cannot choose to see a perceptual stimulus as any color I please. To read the novel, I must make myself receptive to the sense that it itself adumbrates. This adumbrated sense exceeds the sense that I, the subject of sense, bring with me to the reading. If it did not, then novels would be of no interest to me: they would do no more than bring to mind significations I already had at my disposal. In reading a novel, then, “I am receiving and giving in the same gesture. I have given my knowledge of the language; I have brought along what I already know about the meaning of words, the phrases, and the syntax.”<sup>3</sup> The author then makes use of this knowledge to point me in the direction of a sense that is new. This kind giving and receiving of sense in the same gesture characterizes not just our perception of color and our reading of novels, but our entire meaningful being-in-the-world. To be condemned to sense, then, is to find ourselves given over always already to a dynamic of sense in which we find ourselves indissociably active and passive, subject and subjected.

---

<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 214).

<sup>3</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1974, p. 11).

In what follows, I would like to argue that the idea of our condemnation to sense, as Merleau-Ponty describes it, can yield important insights concerning the nature of our moral experience. More specifically, I will argue that this idea can be shown both to confirm and to challenge some of the most basic commitments of Kantian moral philosophy. First, I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's account supports the importance of universalizability as a test for the moral permissibility of particular acts. That is to say, it supports the idea that one's choice—*Willkür* in Kant's sense of the term—is insufficient to establish an act as morally permissible. We experience our choice as answerable to something else that functions as its measure. This insight, of course, is expressed in Kant's Formula of Universal Law, but I want to argue that it can also be expressed in terms of the dynamic of sense to which we find ourselves condemned. Second, I will attempt to show how Merleau-Ponty's account supports the Kantian idea that the claims that morality makes on us cannot be legitimated through any kind of deduction. The binding character of the moral law, according to Kant, is given "as it were, as a fact of pure reason of which we are a priori conscious and which is apodictically certain..."<sup>4</sup> Third, I will argue that Merleau-Ponty's account of reversibility suggests an important dimension of moral experience that is given in the experience of contact and that is underthematized in moral philosophies like Kant's that emphasize the role of universalizability in our moral reasoning. Finally, referring to and expanding upon some of the most important insights in Kantian ethics, I will advance a positive account of moral experience that is centered on the idea of tact as ambiguous imperative.

## I. The Imperative of the World

---

<sup>4</sup> Kant, (1996a, p. 177 [5:47]).

In Chapter Four of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes what he calls “the tacit thesis of perception,” a pre-reflective commitment to the idea that

at every instant experience can be co-ordinated with that of the previous instant and that of the following, and my perspective with that of other consciousnesses—that all contradictions can be removed, that monadic and intersubjective experience is one unbroken text—that what is now indeterminate for me could become determinate for a more complete knowledge, which is as it were realized in advance in the thing, or rather which is the thing itself.<sup>5</sup>

In perception, our consciousness does not lose itself in the full and unchallengeable presence of its objects. Rather, its objects are given as hollowed out, as gesturing beyond themselves toward the world as an “open and indefinite unity.”<sup>6</sup> For example, often when I am driving on a hot summer day, I perceive a thin sheet of water some distance up the road. When this happens, I experience a kind of perceptual tension. On the one hand, the sheet of water is present, but on the other hand it is present *as* somehow unreal. This is possible because to see the water is also to see through it, in two different senses of “through.” In the first sense, I see through the water insofar as my gaze is not absorbed in it. In other words, I see the sheet of water as a part of a larger world in which it has its place. In the second sense, I see through the sheet of water insofar as I see beyond it *by means of it*. I do not, in other words, conceive of “world” in an act of pure intellection; rather, the things themselves point beyond themselves in the direction of a world. The sheet of water that I perceive on the road is given as incompatible with the world that it co-presents: it is a hot, dry day and nothing else in my field of vision seems to be wet. Unable to coordinate the perception of the water with the world as coherent, unified

---

<sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 54).

<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 304).

whole, my perceiving body sides with the world: I treat the sheet of water as an optical illusion.

To be condemned to sense, then, is to find oneself oriented toward the world as a whole. This world as open and indefinite unity is not given to perception as one object among others; if I were to take an inventory of the objects given in my perception, I would not write “road, car, trees, sun, water, world.” The world is given rather as a project, as that toward which I am constitutively oriented and as the measure for the reality of whatever appears within it. We could even say that the world is given as a kind of imperative addressed to the sensory-motor powers of the knowing, perceiving body.<sup>7</sup> Hilary Putnam articulates this idea perspicuously, stating that if he were a metaphysician, he would be tempted to “create a system in which there were nothing but obligations.... Instead of saying with Mill that the chair is a ‘permanent possibility of sensations,’ [he] would say that it is a *permanent possibility of obligations*.”<sup>8</sup> To perceive things, in other words, it is not sufficient merely to open one’s eyes. To perceive, one must perceive according to the things themselves, as they demand to be perceived. And as the example of the sheet of water demonstrates, that means perceiving things as inhering in and cohering with the world in which they are situated. The sheet of water that appears ahead of me on the road is given *as* not likely to be consistent with other perceptual experiences that I could arrange to have. It is given moreover as inviting my perceiving body to adopt the various points of view on it that would best settle the question of its reality or unreality. In sum, in its mode of givenness, the perceived object gives the world that measures it.

---

<sup>7</sup> Lingis (1998, p. 63-64).

<sup>8</sup> Putnam (1992, p. 115).

We can recognize in this centrifugal orientation of sense from the given particular to the world that measures it the basis of Kant's Formula of Universal Law: "Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law."<sup>9</sup> In our moral experience, our felt desires and the possible courses of action that we represent to ourselves are given as standing in need of justification. Just as we do not accept the sheet of water as real simply because it is given as an object of perception, so we do not accept the moral permissibility of a course of action simply because it is given as an object of our faculties of desire. Indeed, if possible courses of action were given as self-validating, as requiring no measure by which to test their validity, then moral experience would be unthinkable. The measure for the morality of our acts, I want to argue, is given in accordance with what we might call the tacit thesis of moral experience. That is to say, it is given *through* the objects of desire. I contemplate a course of action, and that course of action points beyond itself toward a moral world, an open and indefinite unity within which particular acts either have a place or do not. If an act does not have a place within the projected moral world, then the act is, to use Kant's formulation, morally impossible. If it does have a place, then it is morally permissible.

To see how this is the case, it will be helpful to look closely at one of Kant's well-known examples. If I am in serious financial difficulty, it might occur to me to ask a friend to lend me some money, even though I know perfectly well that I will not be able to pay her back at the agreed-upon time, if ever. If I am someone who is capable of moral experience, I find that my will—in the Kantian sense of *Wille*—is not determined to make the false promise simply on the basis of my having the inclination to do so. Like the sheet of water on the road, the inclination must be put to the test in order to determine

---

<sup>9</sup> Kant (1996b, p. 73 [4:421]). Italics omitted.

whether it really is what it gives itself to be, in this case a legitimate reason for undertaking a particular course of action. Once again, the act of putting the given to the test is not to be understood as a cognitive act entirely distinct from the act—in this case desiring—that first gives the object that is to be tested. Rather, to experience the inclination to make the lying promise is to experience it within the context of a moral world that transcends the point of view that I have on it at that moment. In the case of the sheet of water, I find that my sensory-motor body knows pre-reflectively how to take different points of view on the same object in order to determine whether or not it is really there. Likewise, the moral subject encounters the inclination to tell the lying promise as only provisionally justified and as soliciting different points of view, from which the act's moral permissibility or impermissibility can be more firmly established. I can imaginatively adopt the point of view of the person to whom I propose to lie and see how my inclination looks from there. And more generally, I can adopt the point of view of the moral world as a totality and see how my inclination looks from that perspective. Again, the inclination to tell the lie is given as hollowed out, as calling for those other perspectives. If the view I get of the inclination when I imaginatively adopt the perspective of the moral world is incompatible with the view given from my more limited, particular perspective, then I take the side of the world, experiencing the inclination to benefit myself through the lying promise as not providing sufficient reason to pursue that course of action. The act of making the lying promise is revealed as morally impossible in much the same way the sheet of water is revealed as illusory: it is given as incompatible with the tacit thesis of moral experience. Lying promises could only exist as exceptions to the coherent, ordered laws of a moral world.

## II. The Fact of Reason

At this point in the project of showing how some of the most basic features of moral experience can be understood in terms of our condemnation to sense, we have yet to account for the most important thing. Let us suppose for the sake of argument that the account given so far is correct in at least its broad outlines: we recognize possible courses of action as morally prohibited or permissible by situating them in a larger context, and this context takes the form of something like a world as unified, coherent totality. What remains unclear is why we ought not to do what we recognize as morally prohibited and why we ought to do what we recognize as morally necessary. There is a large gap, it seems, between the *recognition* that  $x$  is wrong and the *obligation* to refrain from doing  $x$ . How, then, are we to close that gap?

Kant's solution to this problem is to reject it on the grounds that it presupposes an account of moral experience that is descriptively inaccurate. It is not the case that we first encounter moral goodness and badness as objects of theoretical reason, in the way that we recognize shape and magnitude for example. According to Kant, to recognize that an act is morally impermissible just is to experience oneself as obligated, as the addressee of an imperative to refrain from performing that act. Our recognition of a possible act as bad does not require any kind of supplement—be it a striving for *eudaimonia*, a fear of punishment, the promise of a reward in the afterlife, etc.—that would supply the incentive not to do it. If such a supplement were required to bridge the gap between recognition and obligation, then moral justification would be endlessly deferred. If I recognize my natural concern for my own happiness as giving me an incentive to do  $x$ , I am still left with the question, Why ought I to take that as a legitimate reason for doing  $x$ ?

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant argues that we do not need to answer this question. We do not have to give any kind of legitimation of the obligating force of the moral law, and indeed, we could not give such a legitimation even if we wanted to. According to Kant, the morally binding character of the law is given as a fact of reason: it “cannot be proved by any deduction, by any efforts of theoretical reason, speculative or empirically supported, so that even if one were willing to renounce its apodictic certainty, it could not be confirmed by experience and thus proved a posteriori; and it is nevertheless firmly established of itself.”<sup>10</sup>

There are, of course, some very serious problems with Kant’s invocation of the supposed fact of reason. First, the concept does not appear to be the conclusion of any kind of philosophical argument; it looks rather like a means of cutting the Gordian knot. This was certainly the way many readers of Kant have interpreted it. Hegel, for example, described the fact of reason as “the last undigested lump in our stomach, a revelation given to reason.”<sup>11</sup> Schopenhauer characterized it as “a Delphic temple in the soul.”<sup>12</sup> And more recently, Paul Guyer has suggested that the argument “seems to rely on a good deal of foot-stamping.”<sup>13</sup> Second, it is unclear how the concept of the fact of reason is even meant to cut the Gordian knot. Lewis White Beck has suggested that there are two possible interpretations of how it does so.<sup>14</sup> The first interpretation treats the doctrine of the fact of reason as a kind of intuitionism: we are conscious of the obligatory character of the moral law in an immediate way, much as we are conscious of the greenness of grass. If someone were to ask me to defend my claim that the grass is green, I would have

---

<sup>10</sup> Kant (1996a, 178 [5:47]).

<sup>11</sup> Hegel (1974, p. 461). Cited in Henrich (1994, p. 69).

<sup>12</sup> Schopenhauer (1903, p. 68). Cited in Henrich (1994, p. 69).

<sup>13</sup> Guyer (2007, p. 462).

<sup>14</sup> Beck (1965, p. 209-211).

nothing to say except that I just see it that way. On this interpretation, I cannot justify my claim that the moral law has obligating force; I can only report that I intuit it that way. This interpretation is unconvincing: my perception of color is certainly not infallible, and there doesn't seem to be any reason to suppose that my intuition of the bindingness of the law would be any different. (This, of course, presupposes that we have such an intuition in the first place; it is far from obvious that we do.) According to the second interpretation, it is simply a fact that we are conscious of the moral law as obligating us. This interpretation is even less plausible than the first. It is a fact that I am sometimes conscious of a sheet of water some distance up the road, and nonetheless it turns out that the sheet of water is illusory. Likewise, it may be a fact that I am conscious of the bindingness of the moral law, but that does not in any way establish the actual bindingness of the law. In both of these interpretations, the purported fact clearly stands in need of legitimation or confirmation, but that is exactly what Kant's recourse to the fact of reason was meant to preclude.

I do not know precisely how Kant himself meant for the doctrine of the fact of reason to be understood; at different points in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he suggests very different, and indeed incompatible, interpretations. But in order for the fact of reason to play the role that Kant clearly meant it to play in his moral philosophy, viz. making unnecessary any deduction of the objective validity of the moral law, it must be understood in such a way as to render the practical subject responsive and responsible to the law always already. The problem that Kant means to solve is nicely articulated by Christine M. Korsgaard in *The Sources of Normativity*: as beings who are capable of reflection, we can always back up from the reasons for action that we experience and ask

ourselves whether they are ultimate and authoritative reasons.<sup>15</sup> Does the feeling of obligation I have, for example, when a police officer orders me to leave the scene of an accident or of a protest give me an authoritative reason to actually leave the scene? Does the feeling of obligation I have when I contemplate the majesty of the moral law give me such a reason? As long as it remains possible for the practical subject to step back in this way from the purported reason for action and to question its authoritativeness, the obligation remains merely provisionally valid. If unconditional obligation is a genuine phenomenon, then there must be some experience from which the practical subject cannot step back and reflect. What I want to argue is that the only such experience is that of finding oneself responsive to the law always already. And this experience must be what is named by the fact of reason. It must be the case, in other words, that one cannot even be a practical subject without already having taken the moral law as authoritative. One is not first a self-identical, fully-formed subject who would subsequently experience something like obligation and decide its validity or invalidity on its own terms. Rather, the very act of stepping back from the purported reason for action and testing its objective validity would be understood as responsive to a law whose validity the subject cannot help accepting. One is a practical subject only as having responded always already.

To say that we are condemned to sense, as Merleau-Ponty does, is precisely to say that we find ourselves responsive pre-subjectively to the imperative of the world in something like the way suggested by Kant's doctrine of the fact of reason. Merleau-Ponty expresses this idea with remarkable clarity in a passage from *Phenomenology of*

*Perception*:

---

<sup>15</sup> Korsgaard (1996, p. 93).

Each time I experience a sensation, I feel that it concerns not my own being, the one for which I am responsible and for which I make decisions, but another self which has already sided with the world, which is already open to certain of its aspects and synchronized with them. Between my sensation and myself there stands always the thickness of some *primal acquisition* which prevents my experience from being clear of itself. I experience the sensation as a modality of general existence, one already destined for a physical world and which runs through me without my being the cause of it.<sup>16</sup>

“World” here is not intended primarily in the sense of the projected totality with reference to which we measure the reality of given particulars. What Merleau-Ponty has in mind, rather, is the world as a kind of “nascent *logos*,” a pre-reflective ground of our meaningful being-in-the-world.<sup>17</sup> To return to an earlier example, the blue that I perceive is given first as “a kind of muddled problem for my body to solve.”<sup>18</sup> It is given as gesturing toward a sense—*blue*—that will only become crystallized for a subject that knows how to orient itself toward it in the correct way. The subject to which the muddled problem is addressed is not the self-conscious subject given in reflection. I do not encounter sense data as objects of my consciousness and then think to myself, “I shall comport myself bodily toward these puzzling data in such a manner as to see them as blue.” Rather, the subject to whom the sensible problem is addressed is “another subject beneath me, for whom a world exists before I am here.”<sup>19</sup> Between this pre-reflective, embodied subject and the world there exists a kind of communication “more ancient than

---

<sup>16</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 216).

<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1964b, p. 25).

<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 214).

<sup>19</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 254).

thought.”<sup>20</sup> This subject knows prior to all reflection how to respond appropriately to the nascent *logos* of the world because it is itself of the world.<sup>21</sup>

Importantly, this subject that has already sided with the world and that knows how to take up its nascent *logos* is not *me*, this particular person who identifies himself with this or that history and with this or that set of projects and responsibilities. Rather this other subject beneath me is impersonal and general, what Merleau-Ponty calls the “*On primordial*.”<sup>22</sup> Most fundamentally, I do not make sense of the world in accordance with my particular will (*Willkür*), but rather as “one” makes sense of the world, as anyone in general does. “One” is thus oriented by the imperative of the world, of universality and generality, always already. This is just a fact, in Kant’s sense of the term. I cannot effectively back up from this fact and demand a deduction of the imperative’s legitimacy, for that very imperative is the condition for the possibility of the question’s meaningfulness at all. I cannot even ask the question, in other words, without already having accepted the imperative’s binding force.

### III. Contact and the Ambiguity of Moral Subjectivity

Up to this point, the account of our condemnation to sense has suggested a picture of ethical experience that confirms some of the most basic commitments of Kantian ethics. But this account both of the dynamic of sense and of ethical experience has been one-sided. According to Merleau-Ponty, the centrifugal orientation of sense toward the world as open and indefinite unity is indissociable from a centripetal orientation of sense that anchors our being-in-the-world *here*, in the given particular. This point is developed most explicitly as the doctrine of reversibility in *The Visible and the Invisible*, but it is

---

<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 254).

<sup>21</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1968, p. 134-135).

<sup>22</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1964a, p. 175).

prefigured throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*. The paradigm case of this reversibility is the experience of one of our hands touching the other. If I touch my left hand with my right, I experience something like a double sensation: I sense my right hand as touching and my left as touched. But the characterization of this as a double sensation is somewhat misleading: “When I press my two hands together, it is not a matter of two sensations felt together as one perceives two objects placed side by side....”<sup>23</sup> Rather, what I have is one ambiguous sense. I sense my left hand as touched, but I also sense it as on the verge of touching. Correlatively, I sense my right hand as touching, but on the verge of being touched. The roles of touching and touched, subject and object, in other words, are experienced as reversible. My capacity to touch is inseparable from my capacity to be touched and vice versa. Because of this, I cannot straightforwardly occupy the position of subject of my experience. Rather, my subjectivity presupposes a contact with myself, such that I am indissociably subjected to that contact and subject of it.

One might suppose that this non-coincidence and ambiguity in subjective experience pertains only to the special case of one hand touching the other, since in that case the sensor and the sensed really are the same being. It seems that the phenomenon of reversibility cannot apply to cases in which the object of touch is something in the external world, for in such cases it is clear that the thing touched is the object and that the one who touches is unambiguously the subject. But this is exactly what the reversibility thesis denies. At the most originary level of my contact with the world, the level from which my meaningful being-in-the-world first opens out, I am touched by the world. This being-touched is not a vanishing moment that gives way in favor of the ideal sense-bestowal that it makes possible. Rather, I experience the object in the world with an

---

<sup>23</sup> Merleau-Ponty (1962, p. 93).

opaque affectivity that is ineliminable and that prevents that object from giving itself as nothing more than a token of its type. In being contacted by the world, I am anchored to the particular, and this anchorage is an ineliminable part of its meaning.

Let us suppose, for example, that I want to determine whether a particular Hermès necktie is genuine or counterfeit. As Hermès silk tends to have a very distinctive tactile quality, I would determine the true sense of the tie by touching it. Of course I cannot just lay my hand on top of the tie if I hope to determine correctly whether it is genuine or counterfeit. Nor can I touch the silk in the way that I would touch an iron to determine whether or not it was hot, or in the way that I would touch a table to determine whether or not it was sturdy. Rather, I must touch the tie in the way best calculated to ensure the success of my project. That means that I must touch the tie as it demands to be touched: I must move my finger lightly over its surface. In doing so, of course I feel the tie itself; it is the object of my touch. But in feeling the tie, I necessarily feel myself feeling the tie. Indeed, if I did not feel myself feeling the tie, then I would not be feeling the tie at all. The moment of activity would be impossible without the moment of passivity. If my touching the tie were not also a being-touched by it, I would be completely unable to catch on to the way that it needed to be touched in order to be given as what it is, namely as a tie of such and such a kind. In sum, it is only because this particular tie is present to me most basically as affecting and ordering my corporeal sensibility that I am able correctly to intend its sense and its place in the coherent and unified world. If the tie is given to perception in its truth as what it is—a genuine Hermès—it nonetheless remains ineluctably the case that it is *this* tie that is an Hermès. The stubborn persistence of the *this* in the experience of this thing *as* a genuine Hermès is due to the irreducible

ambiguity of the contact that gives our most originary opening out onto the meaningful world.

For Kant, this centripetal orientation of sense toward the given particular is the source of what we might call moral noise. For information theory, noise refers to the various kinds of interference that prevent a piece of information from being received without distortion. The static that distorts or drowns out the message conveyed by radio is an example. Noise for the most part gives itself as something to be eliminated, or at least minimized. The static on the radio, for example, is given as something *through which* one must struggle to hear the message. The static has no value in its own right; ideally it would not be present at all. For Kant's moral philosophy, the message is the moral law, which is valid for all rational beings, irrespective of their particularities—their likes and dislikes, their prospects for gain and loss, or their affective relations to particular persons or things in the world. In our practical dealings, we are in fact concerned with these particularities. I care about the well-being of this particular friend who finds himself in this particular bad predicament, and so I am inclined to help him by telling a lie. But the particular toward which I am oriented obscures my recognition of the obligatory character of the universal. For finite rational beings like us—beings who are capable of thinking the universal but who are also sensuous beings anchored to the particular—moral action takes the form of a constant struggle against the noise.

In thus prioritizing the centrifugal orientation of sense, Kant presents a one-sided, and thus misleading, picture of moral experience. What I want to argue, based in large part on Merleau-Ponty's account of the reversibility of the touching-touched relation, is that the objects of our moral experience are not given most originally simply as cases

falling under the universal moral law. My wealthy friend, for example, is not simply someone-in-general to whom I must not make a lying promise. The objects of our moral experience are, of course, given as cases falling under the law, but they are given just as ordinarily in the experience of contact, an experience in which I as moral subject am touched. As a being condemned to sense, I find myself—or rather, the other subject beneath me—oriented always already toward and by this particular person or this particular situation. This contact is morally meaningful; it is not merely the beginning point of a dynamic of moral sense that reaches its culmination in the universal. The importance for our moral experience of our anchorage in particular situations can be brought out especially clearly by reference to Kant’s notorious argument in the essay “On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy.” According to Kant, to tell the truth is “a sacred command of reason prescribing unconditionally.”<sup>24</sup> One must tell the truth even if one is asked by a prospective murderer at the door whether his intended victim has taken refuge within one’s home. This conclusion is counterintuitive, to say the least; it seems as if we would do a great and irreparable wrong to the intended victim by telling the truth to the prospective murderer. But for Kant, the moral sense of a situation emerges exclusively from our orientation toward the universal. The correct focus of our moral concern, therefore, is not this particular person—the intended murder victim—but rather this person *qua* case falling under the law. And the law, according to Kant, is unambiguous: we must tell the truth, irrespective of the good or bad consequences that might follow. From a moral point of view, then, this particular person is merely a person-in-general about whom the truth must be told. Any concern we might have for the well-being of the intended victim amounts to a kind of noise obscuring our recognition of the

---

<sup>24</sup> Kant (1996c, p. 613 [8:427]).

unconditionally obligatory character of the pure moral law. To make the intended victim's well-being the measure of our conduct would be to fall back onto the paradigmatically non-moral motive of "convenience."<sup>25</sup> But this seems like the kind of conclusion that one could accept only, as Aristotle says, if one were "maintaining a thesis at all costs."<sup>26</sup> Concern for the well-being of this particular person is obviously more than a concession to mere expediency or a pretext to disburden oneself of genuinely moral obligation. Our moral consciousness is and ought to be anchored at the level of the particular human being whose life or death depends on the course of action we choose.

#### IV. Tact

At this point, I hope to have demonstrated an irreducible ambiguity right at the level of our most originary opening out onto a world of moral sense. The dynamic of sense to which we find ourselves given over always already orients us at once centrifugally toward the world as open and indefinite unity and centripetally toward particular situations. This ambiguous dynamic has its beginning in an experience of contact, which gives the moral subject as both touching and touched, subject and subjected. In this final section, I would like to argue that the ambiguity of moral subjectivity entails an ambiguity in the moral imperative. I will attempt to articulate this ambiguous imperative as a kind of tact. More precisely, I will argue that to be tactful is to be appropriately responsive to the ambiguous imperative that is given in our condemnation to sense. The word "tact" serves well here not only because of its obvious etymological connection to the sense of touch, but also because it gathers within itself the very ambiguities that Merleau-Ponty has described in his account of sense generally, and

---

<sup>25</sup> Kant (1996c, p. 613 [8:427]).

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle (1998, p. 7 [1096a1]).

in his account of reversibility more specifically. On the one hand, tact signifies a “keen faculty of perception or discrimination likened to the sense of touch.”<sup>27</sup> This sense of the term emphasizes the subjective role of mastery and sense-bestowal. I demonstrate my tact, for example, when I correctly determine the sense of the purported Hermès necktie as genuine or counterfeit. But on the other hand, we also mean by tact the “ready and delicate sense of what is fitting and proper in dealing with others, so as to avoid giving offence, or win good will; skill or judgement in dealing with men or negotiating difficult or delicate situations; the faculty of saying or doing the right thing at the right time.”<sup>28</sup> Alphonso Lingis captures this sense of tact well, characterizing it as “a light touch, supple and agile, a holding back. It contrasts with the touch involved in the apprehension, appropriation, and manipulation of tangible things and of others.”<sup>29</sup> In this sense of the term, one cannot exercise tact by subsuming a case under a rule; what is required, rather, is a sensitivity to the particularities of what is given in *this* situation. And as Lingis suggests, this requires a holding back, a resistance to the centrifugal orientation of sense that would lead us to submit the particularities of the case straightaway to the test of the universal. To tell the truth to the prospective murderer who asks after the whereabouts of his intended victim is, in this regard, to demonstrate a culpable lack of tact.

In the case of the prospective murderer, considerations of tact lead us straightforwardly to what most of us, I suspect, would regard as the obviously correct solution. It would be a mistake, though, to believe that this represents the normal case. Moral experience is irreducibly ambiguous; it has its basis in our being oriented both centrifugally and centripetally, in such a way that neither orientation simply trumps the

---

<sup>27</sup> OED Online. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/196957?redirectedFrom=tact#eid>. (Accessed 2 Jan 2013)

<sup>28</sup> OED Online. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/196957?redirectedFrom=tact#eid>. (Accessed 2 Jan 2013)

<sup>29</sup> Lingis (2007, p. 4).

other. Because of that, we can never be certain that we have done the right thing. There can be no rule for the application of tact, or for assessing the relative weights of the universal and of the given particular. We cannot, on the one hand, make it our rule that concern for the particular case ought always to override concern for the universal. If the police come to my door and ask if the murderer, who is a friend of mine, has taken refuge there, I probably ought to tell them the truth. The universal clearly does make a genuine moral claim on me: I ought not to take action that contributes to a world in which murderers go unpunished, even in the case where the murderer is my friend. On the other hand, for reasons that we have seen, we cannot make it our rule that concern for the universal ought always to override concern for the particular. This, of course, is what Kant denies. In the second *Critique*, he insists that what is required by the moral law “is seen quite easily and without hesitation by the most common understanding.”<sup>30</sup> And in the *Groundwork*, he argues that the moral subject has the law “always before its eyes and uses [it] as the norm for its appraisals. Here it would be easy to show how common human reason, with this compass in hand, knows very well how to distinguish in every case that comes up what is good and what is evil, what is in conformity with duty or contrary to duty. . . .”<sup>31</sup> But this, I want to argue, is clearly untrue. There are many cases in which we experience a morally significant pull toward the universal and a similarly significant pull toward the nuances specific to the present case. For example, we are often called upon to comfort those who have suffered greatly from illness or from the deaths of loved ones, or perhaps from failures of projects, such as marriage or professional advancement, that have been vitally important to them. We do not know easily and

---

<sup>30</sup> Kant (1996a, p. 169 [5:36]).

<sup>31</sup> Kant (1996b, p. 58 [4:403-404]).

without hesitation how best to proceed in these cases. Is it really the case that communicating our thoughts to such persons “through words that yet (intentionally) contain the contrary of what the speaker thinks” would constitute an unambiguous moral wrong, one that would annihilate the speaker’s dignity as a human being?<sup>32</sup> Faced with such situations, we often say things like “Everything is going to be all right,” even though we do not really believe that things will be all right. In doing so, we establish a kind of contact, one that is responsive to the needs of that person in that particular situation. And establishing that contact is a moral act despite its violating the categorical command never to express what one believes to be untrue; we would do the person a real moral wrong if we engaged with him in an utterly tactless way, reducing him to a case falling under the law. For all that, the person we comfort is still a person who falls under the law. While it seems appropriate to tell him things will be all right, we ought still to regard our dealings with him as falling under the rule about lying. We ought not, for example, to try to cheer him up by telling him that he has won the lottery or that his favorite baseball team has won when in fact they did not. We are pulled in two directions at once, and sometimes it is hard to tell which claim ought to win out. If my friend has just been fired from his job and expresses shock at the great wrong that his boss has done him, I might think the best thing to do is to say “yeah” and nod in agreement, even if I believe the firing was justifiable. There may come a time when I ought to tell him the truth, that he has engaged in conduct, probably unknowingly, that has alienated his colleagues and that has made him a liability in the workplace. But now may not be the time for that. I can never know easily and without hesitation when the right time is; to engage with my friend in the most morally appropriate way requires tact.

---

<sup>32</sup> Kant (1996d, p. 553 [6:429]).

A second illustration of tact as ambiguous imperative concerns our duty to beneficence. According to Kant, “to be beneficent, that is, to promote according to one’s means the happiness of others in need, without hoping for something in return, is everyone’s duty.”<sup>33</sup> Of course happiness means different things to different people, and so a certain degree of tact is required in applying the rule to particular cases. Moreover, the moral subject must use her judgment in determining how much effort she will expend to promote the happiness of a particular person; this judgment depends in large part on the details of the case, for example on the capacity of the other person to promote his own happiness without help. And finally, the moral subject is entitled to make her own judgments about what will make the other person happy, sometimes disregarding the person’s own opinion on the matter. Kant himself recognizes that the moral subject must exercise her own judgment in these ways, and that her judgment will require some sensitivity to the details of the case. But for all that, beneficence is a duty; the subject is “constrained by [her] reason to adopt this maxim as a universal law.”<sup>34</sup> What I want to argue is that tact is required in cases falling under the duty to beneficence to a much greater degree than Kant suggests, and that this tact may in some cases require us to hold back, to resist the centrifugal movement by which we would view the other person merely as a case falling under the law. According to Alphonso Lingis, for example, “tact understands that the other may need and want his suffering, in pursuing his destiny.”<sup>35</sup> There are surely cases in which we would wrong another person by treating her as someone-in-general whose happiness we ought to promote. I am thinking especially of the case of Simone Weil, who imposed enormous suffering on herself out of an

---

<sup>33</sup> Kant (1996d, p. 572 [6:453]).

<sup>34</sup> Kant (1996d, p. 571 [6:542]).

<sup>35</sup> Lingis (2007, p. 4).

extraordinary degree of compassion for others who were also suffering. Even as a very young child, Weil refused to eat sugar once she learned that the French soldiers in World War I could not have any.<sup>36</sup> Later, in a London hospital at the age of thirty-four and with her health rapidly declining, Weil again refused to eat sufficiently on the grounds that many of the inhabitants of occupied France were starving at the time.<sup>37</sup> Weil was clearly somebody who greatly valued her own suffering. Ought her friends to have urged her to renounce the lifestyle she valued so much in favor of one that would bring her a greater yield of happiness? I believe that if I had known Weil, I would have felt the pull of the duty to beneficence in the form that Kant articulates it. I would have felt I owed it to her to try to convince her to change her life, especially since the suffering she inflicted on herself produced scarcely any benefit at all for those for whom she expressed so much concern. But I certainly would not know easily and without hesitation that I ought to do that. Although her style of life is difficult for me to comprehend, I am nonetheless sensitive to the fact that she experienced it as absolutely necessary. Perhaps what I would have owed her is respect and support for her project. To choose correctly in a case like that would obviously be a matter of great moral importance, and yet it seems clear that the imperative that weighs upon the one who must choose is ambiguous, pulling simultaneously in two directions. Again, what is required to deal with the case appropriately is tact.

As a final example, I would like to examine the phenomenon of contempt. Once again, Kant has important insights into this phenomenon that come very close to expressing the moral importance of tact. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant asserts that

---

<sup>36</sup> Coles (2001, p. 26).

<sup>37</sup> Pétrement (1976, p. 536).

“to be *contemptuous* of others (*contemnere*), that is, to deny them the respect owed to human beings in general, is in every case contrary to duty.”<sup>38</sup> What is especially remarkable about this prohibition of contempt is that it applies in all cases, even in our dealings with people who have acted in ways that really do make them worthy of contempt. Kant is not arguing here that we must not feel contempt at all for such people; indeed, he suggests that in many cases we cannot help doing so.<sup>39</sup> Rather, what we must never do is express the contempt that we feel. And this means that we must hold back, resisting the movement by which we would deal with persons merely as cases falling under the law. Taking the perspective of the moral law, for example, we cannot judge the person who commits fraud in his business dealings as anything but contemptible, and yet we must not put that judgment into practice by treating him as contemptible. What does it mean in practice to treat someone as contemptible? Kant answers this question by means of examples that seem so wildly different that they could not possibly function as examples of the same phenomenon. His first example concerns excessively cruel forms of punishment, “such as quartering a man, having him torn by dogs, [or] cutting off his nose and ears.”<sup>40</sup> The second example of treating others with contempt is judging their errors too harshly, “calling them absurdities, poor judgment, and so forth.”<sup>41</sup> What these examples have in common is that both involve closing off our receptiveness to the claims that the others might make on us. Reducing others to moral nothings, we foreclose the possibility of experiencing them as constraining our conduct in relation to them. This is obviously the case in the example of torture, but it applies in the case of censuring others’

---

<sup>38</sup> Kant (1996d, p. 579 [6:463]).

<sup>39</sup> Kant (1996d, p. 579 [6:463]).

<sup>40</sup> Kant (1996d, p. 580 [6:463]).

<sup>41</sup> Kant (1996d, p. 580 [6:463]).

errors too severely as well: according to Kant, to treat others as utterly lacking in understanding is to close off the opportunity to help them recognize the ways in which their reasoning went wrong.<sup>42</sup>

But here again, I want to argue that our duty not to treat others with contempt requires more in the way of sensitivity and receptivity to the particularities of the other's position than Kant himself believes. If my reason for not criticizing another's judgment too harshly is that I would thereby close off the possibility of helping him to see his error, then I conceive of myself as having the right to make unilateral judgments about the other without the possibility of appeal. My judgment that the other is in error and ought to be corrected is not in question. To adopt this kind of position relative to the other, I want to argue, is still to view the other with a degree of contempt. To genuinely treat the other with respect, I ought not to arrogate to myself the right unilaterally to determine the sense of his words or deeds. I ought rather to approach the other in something like the way Merleau-Ponty suggests that we approach a novel, bringing with me the stock of understanding that I already possess but also maintaining myself in a position of openness to the other's sense, which is not already mine and which is in many ways unforeseeable. It is possible, although by no means certain, that the other's action has a moral sense to which, for whatever reason, I had been blind. The duty not to hold others in contempt must be understood as requiring us at minimum to remain open to that possibility.

What all three of these examples demonstrate is that there is always more moral sense in play in any given situation than we have at our disposal. There is no position from which we can survey all of the relevant meaning, and this is just because our moral

---

<sup>42</sup> Kant (1996d, p. 580 [6:463-464]).

subjectivity is irreducibly ambiguous in the ways that Merleau-Ponty has described. As practical subjects, we find ourselves oriented always already by the imperative of the world, determining the moral sense of particular acts in something like the way prescribed by Kant's Formula of Universal Law. But this movement toward the universal begins with a kind of contact that is generative of a moral sense that also makes a claim on us. Owing to this irreducible ambiguity of moral sense, we are unable to rely on any rule or decision procedure to show us the way to the unambiguously right course of action. But this does not absolve us of the responsibility for getting the moral sense right. What I have attempted to show in this paper is that there is no access to the right moral sense except by means of the specific kind of sensibility called tact.

## References

- Aristotle. 1998. *The Nicomachean Ethics* (ed J.L. Ackrill and J.O. Urmson, English trans David Ross). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Beck, Lewis White. 1965. *Studies in the Philosophy of Kant*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Coles, Robert. 2001. *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage*. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths.
- Guyer, Paul. 2007. Naturalistic and Transcendental Moments in Kant's Moral Philosophy. *Inquiry* 50: 444-464.
- Hegel, G.W.F. 1974. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 3 (English trans E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simpson). Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.
- Henrich, Dieter. 1994. *The Unity of Reason: Essays on Kant's Philosophy* (ed Richard L. Velkley). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel, 1996a. *Critique of Practical Reason* in *Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (English trans and ed Mary J. Gregor). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel, 1996b. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* in *Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (English trans and ed Mary J. Gregor). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, Immanuel, 1996c. On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy in *Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (English trans and ed Mary J. Gregor). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Kant, Immanuel, 1996d. *The Metaphysics of Morals in Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (English trans and ed Mary J. Gregor). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Korsgaard, Christine M.. 1996. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lingis, Alphonso. 1998. *The Imperative*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Lingis, Alphonso. 2007. Contact: Tact and Caress. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 38: 1-6.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception* (English trans Colin Smith). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964a. *Signs* (English trans Richard C. McCleary). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964b. *The Primacy of Perception* (ed James Edie). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1968. *The Visible and the Invisible* (ed. Claude Lefort, English trans. Alphonso Lingis). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1974. *The Prose of the World* (ed. Claude Lefort, English trans John O'Neill). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- OED Online. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/196957?redirectedFrom=tact#eid>. Accessed 2 Jan 2013.
- Pétrément, Simone. 1976. *Simone Weil: A Life* (English trans Raymond Rosenthal). New York: Schocken Books.
- Putnam, Hilary. 1992. *Realism with a Human Face* (ed James Conant). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. 1903. *On the Basis of Morality* (English trans A.B. Bullock). London: S. Sonnenschein.