

The Fact of Reason: An Analysis of Owen Ware's and Jeanine Grenberg's Interpretations

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Abstract: Jeanine Grenberg argues that in Kant's moral philosophy, we access the moral law through feeling, specifically the feeling of respect. She claims the fact of reason refers to our conscious experience of categorical imperative and moral necessity is revealed through this feeling. Owen Ware critiques this "affect of reason" interpretation, arguing it relies on the flawed premise that all facts forced upon us are accessible only through sensibility. He uses Kant's example of the concept of substance, which we comprehend through attention to its necessity, not sensation. Ware offers an alternative view, that we access the moral law by attending to its necessity, not through feeling. However, this view does not explain how we become aware of the content of the moral law. Though Grenberg's affect of reason interpretation coheres with the role of feeling in Kant's project, it struggles to preserve traditional understandings of the analytic. Ware rejects Grenberg's feeling thesis but fails to provide a substantive alternative for grounding morality. His critique of Grenberg raises important questions about the fact of reason but an improved synthesis is needed to reconcile feeling's epistemic role with the analytic. More work is required to articulate how we access the content of the moral law and explain Kant's notions of conflict and respect.

Keywords: Fact of reason, feeling of respect, moral law, necessity

1. Introduction

In the second critique, Kant writes about the fact of reason and since then there has been a long debate among Kant's scholars about what Kant means by the fact of reason [2,3,6,9-11,13,14]. Many of the commentators believe that the fact of reason is about how we experience moral obligations. Jeanine Grenberg in her very impressive commentary argues that the only way via which we access moral law is through *feeling*.¹ In Grenberg's understanding, Kant's moral philosophy is grounded in feeling of respect. Grenberg believes that the fact of reason refers to our conscious experience/affection of categorical imperative. In other words, the fact of reason is "a felt, given phenomenological experience of categorical obligation" [4]. Owen Ware calls Grenberg's interpretation as the *affect of reason interpretation* [15]). This interpretation is related to Grenberg's idea that the feeling of respect is the only way through which the validity of the moral law is revealed to us. Ware calls this idea the *feeling thesis*. Ware believes that Grenberg's view is problematic and then he offers an alternative that, I think, while has the advantage of preserving the standard interpretations, does not capture the significance of the role of feeling in Kant's project. Here is Ware's reconstruction of Grenberg's argument:

1) Facts force themselves upon us.

2) What is forced upon us is accessible only in our receptive faculty, i.e., in sensibility.

3) The fact of reason forces itself upon us.

4) Therefore, the fact of reason is accessible only in sensibility (through the feeling of respect). [15]

Let us divide all facts that force themselves upon us to empirical facts and non-empirical/a priori facts. The fact of reason, for Grenberg, is a synthetic a priori proposition. To have a sense of how the fact of reason forces itself upon us, we can start by studying the behavior of empirical facts in our cognition and how they force themselves upon us. When I look at an object in my environment, I will passively perceive the object. It seems that the object's being red is not manipulatable by me. In other words, the object and its properties are given to me and force themselves upon my perception. I access the qualities of the object through my passive sensations. The fact of reason though is not an object of perceptual experience, its forceful behavior upon our cognition is like the empirical facts: Both are felt facts.

In other words, analogous to the empirical facts, the fact of reason is given to our consciousness and comprehended passively. Now the question is what faculty of our cognition is responsible for passively comprehending the fact of reason. Here is where Grenberg comes to premise 2. She argues that the faculty of sensation is the only faculty through which we

¹ See also [5,12]

passively receive the fact of reason.

As such, explanation of how we take in this forced fact must involve some aspect of ourselves capable of being passive or receptive. But such a capacity is our capacity for sensibility' [4].

This idea, and generally the affect of reason interpretation is heavily relying on a more general idea of her: sensation is the only way we access all the given facts. I call this the *cognitive thesis* (CT).

CT: The faculty of sensation is the only faculty through which we passively receive the given facts.

2. Ware Against the Affect of Reason Interpretation

Ware argues that Kant would not admit that all forced representations are related to our sensibility, therefore CT and consequently premise two are false [15] He, in order to support this idea, refers to Kant's view on how the concept of substance is forced upon our cognition. At the end of the day, Ware wants to say that substance is forced upon us, but it is not forced upon us through sensibility. Here is my reconstruction of Ware's argument against Grenberg:

- 1) If it were true that what is forced upon us is accessible only in our receptive faculty (Grenberg's premise 2), then we would access the necessity that is attached to the concept of substance through our sensations.
- 2) But it is NOT the case that we access the necessity that is attached to the concept of substance through our sensations.
- 3) Therefore, it is NOT the case that what is forced upon us is accessible only in our receptive faculty.

Premise one is plausible because the necessity that is attached to the concept of substance is a forceful fact and according to Grenberg's premise two, all forceful facts are only accessible through sensation. Premise two is plausible because it is supported by the first critique where Kant writes:

If you remove from your empirical concept of every object, whether corporeal or incorporeal, all those properties of which experience teaches you, you could still not take from it that by means of which you think of it as a substance or as dependent on a substance (even though this concept contains more determination than that of an object' in general). Thus, convinced by the necessity with which this concept presses itself on you, you must concede that it has its seat in your faculty of cognition a priori [8](B6).

Ware argues that premise two would not be plausible only if there was some textual indication according to which Kant was committed to the idea that we access this necessity through sensation. But there is no such indication in Kant's texts, therefore it is not plausible to say that we access the necessity that is attached to the concept of substance through our sensations. On the contrary, there is something against it:

We can become aware of pure practical laws just as we are aware of pure theoretical principles, by paying attention to the necessity with which reason prescribes them to us and

to the setting aside of all empirical conditions to which reason directs us. The concept of a pure will arises from the first, as consciousness of a pure understanding arises from the latter. (KpV 5: 30)

Ware moves forward and adds what Grenberg is taking from the distinction between empirical and a priori facts is not what Kant means by that distinction. Grenberg identifies 'being received passively' as the mark facts. Conversely, Ware argues that the point of the distinction/analogy is "only to register the unique modal status (necessity) of certain cognitions" [15]. In other words, the point of the distinction is not that facts are received, but the point is that facts are actual. Kant's point in this thought experiment is that once we conceive of detaching all the properties of a given object, we become conscious of the necessity of the substance.

Grenberg also refers to the following text to support her view and criticize other commentators like Henry Allison:

[A]nything empirical that might slip into our maxims as a determining ground of the will makes itself known at once by the feeling of gratification or pain that necessarily attaches to it insofar as it arouses desire, whereas pure practical reason directly opposes taking this feeling into its principle as a condition. The dissimilarity of determining grounds [of the will] (empirical and rational) is made known by [the] resistance of a practically lawgiving reason to every meddling inclination, by a special kind of feeling. [8](KpV 5: 91–2)

However, Grenberg's account interprets this piece of the second critique interestingly, it is not consistent with common understanding of the analytic, as we will see in following.

3. Ware's Alternative

Ware, based on the passage of KpV 5:30 [8] in addition to the passage of substance thought experiment, argues that "our faculty of cognition has a pure use by attending to the necessity of concepts such as 'substance'. Our actual consciousness of this necessity is sufficient to show that our cognitive faculty is not empirically conditioned all the way down" [15]. In other words, contrary to Grenberg that thinks that we access to the moral law by the feeling of respect, Ware is offering that we access it via a 'pure use of attending'. I reconstruct his argument as the following:

- 1) We are actually conscious of moral law in the same way we are actually conscious of pure theoretical principles.
- 2) We are actually conscious of pure theoretical principles by attending to their necessity.
- 3) Therefore, we are actually conscious of moral law by attending to its necessity.

Premise one seems problematic, because if that something is a law, then it implies that it is necessary. So, if I already know that something is a law, I already know that it is necessary. In other words, if we become aware not just of a law but that it is a law, then we become aware of its necessity as well. Because it is fine to say that laws are necessary-- that is what we mean by law. This problem is resolvable by maybe a slight change in this premise.

1*: We are actually conscious of the moral *statements'* necessity in the same way we are actually conscious of the necessity in pure theoretical principles.

Now the question that arises against 1* (and 1) is that how do I pay attention to the necessity of a theoretical principle if I am not already aware of that theoretical principle? I cannot pay attention to the necessity of the object of attention unless I am already conscious of the object itself. But then my actual consciousness of the object cannot be because of paying attention to the object's necessity.

A possible way to reply to this objection is to say that we might be aware of the moral statement but not as a law and then once we pay attention to the modal necessity of this moral statement, we become aware of it as a law. In other words, moral statements in 1* are law-like statements that we are not aware of them being laws before attending to their necessity. I think learning the necessity of a statement which already exists in my consciousness is fine, but if that is what Kant is saying about how we access the moral law, then that is trivial and not something philosophically interesting for Kant to say. Who would offer some other way of learning a statement is a law other than by paying attention to its necessity?²

Next, Ware endorses that according to KpV 5: 91–2 [8], Kant is committed to the idea that the validity of the moral law is revealed only through a felt experience of conflict. However, this interpretation of Kant's philosophy raises certain concerns. For instance, consider a scenario in which an abolitionist regards a black individual as an equal and is repulsed by the notion of slavery, while a slave-owner does not experience any such conflict between the treatment they afford themselves and their family versus the treatment they impose on the slave and their family. So how is there a moral law that we are to treat the black man as an equal? On one hand, the slave-owner when they think how am I to harvest my fields, their will is conditioned by their desires. On the other hand, the moral law says treat people as end in themselves, and the slave-owner admits that. But still the slave-owner does not experience any conflict between these two, roughly because they do not take the black man as a person. If the validity of the moral law is only revealed to us in a felt experience of conflict, there is no validity of moral law revealed to this slave-owner. They are acting in obedience to every moral law the validity of which is revealed to them. I think this is something that both Grenberg and Ware need to address.

Ware might bite the bullet and say that there might be a moral law and since the slave-owner does not feel any conflict between empirical and rational grounds of choice, he is not aware of the validity of that law. But then how do we blame slave-owner for doing something wrong? If the only sense in which the slave-owner is doing something wrong is the sense in which they are violating a law that has not been revealed to them, then surely ignorance is a good excuse. It is not as though that the slave-owner can make the moral law reveal

itself to them, because as Grenberg pushes, we are just passive and have no choice but to be passive and receptive and the moral law forces itself upon us. If the law chooses not to reveal itself to me, then I have a good excuse to violate the law. I would have obeyed, had the law chosen to reveal itself to me.

Regardless of Grenberg's view of the role of feeling in Kant's project, we know that feeling thesis has some role in play. Grenberg views the feeling thesis crucial for justifying the authority of moral law over us. On the other side, according to Allison [1] feeling is crucial for us to make sense of the interest we have to act according to moral law. Meanwhile he thinks that the authority of the categorical imperatives should be proven without invoking feeling. The following passage of the second critique is what Ware appeals to support Allison's view:

The division of the Analytic of pure practical reason must turn out like that of a syllogism, proceeding from the universal in the major premise (the moral principle), through undertaking in a minor premise a subsumption of possible actions (as good or evil) under the former, to the conclusion, namely, the subjective determination of the will (an interest in the practically possible good and in the maxim based on it) (KpV 5: 90) [8].

While the passage from KpV 5:90-1 [8] opposes Allison's view, the above piece of second critique supports his view. Allison's view though has a hard time with interpreting the passage from KpV 5: 90 [8], has the merit of respecting other commentators' understanding of the analytic. We must decide which parts of the text to preserve. Ware prefers Allison's view because his view only has to deal with a text from the second critique, whereas Grenberg has to deal with entire analytic. Ware offers that we can peruse Allison for pushing back against Grenberg by endorsing his view about separating the *fact* from *respect* and denying his specific view of their relation to get rid of the problematic passage from KpV 5:90-1 [15].

Now the question that arises is that if Grenberg's view and her feeling thesis is false, how do we confirm the validity of the moral law as a categorical imperative? Grenberg has a suggestion how to situate feeling in Kant's project. She is offering a justificatory role for feeling. But what happens once we reject this role? I think once Ware rejects Grenberg's view (that the feeling is where the justificatory weight comes from), he will encounter two questions:

- 1) Where does the justificatory weight come from?
- 2) What is the role of feeling of respect in Kant's project?

Ware seems to appeal necessity to answer the first question. He focuses on the modal status of the law rather than its content. It seems Ware says we become actually conscious of the moral law by paying attention to the necessity of the moral law. But that does not seem plausible. Because it leaves out how we become aware of the content of the moral law. It seems that we cannot become aware of the content of

² Another issue is that we need to be more precise about the necessity that Kant writes in KpV 5: 30 [8]. It is not that we are paying attention to the necessity of the statement/pure practical law/pure theoretical principle. Rather, we are paying attention to the necessity of reason's prescription. When it comes to the theoretical

principle of substance, for instance, it is not that I am paying attention to the fact that substance is necessary. Instead, I am paying attention to the fact that reason tells me to apply substance in every instance and that reason forces me to posit substance as ineliminable.

something by paying attention to its modality. So, Ware still owes us an explanation as to how we access the *content* of the moral law. I might become aware that a statement that has moral content is a law by paying attention to its necessity, but the more important question is how we become aware of the *content* of the moral law. The slave-owner recognizes the necessity with which we are to treat people as an end in themselves, but the slave-owner seems to be wrong about the content of the moral law. Because they think that the content of the moral law is something that entails the claim that only white-skin people are people. So however, the slave recognizes the modal status of the statement, they misinterpret its content by thinking that its content is only about white folks. On Ware's view having actual consciousness of the necessity is the end of the story. But it seems we also need to have actual consciousness of the content of the claim.

Ware rejects Grenberg's view and he does not offer us an alternative explanation of the role of feeling in the second critique. So, he leaves the second question unaddressed. But this question cannot be just an open question for Ware. Because Kant's entire project needs this question to be answered. For we need to know what the role of feeling is if it is not serving a justificatory role. Grenberg's view at least answers this question. Though on her answer we have problems with making sense of the analytic. Ware's answer is that feeling is what reveals to us the dissimilarity between the conflicting grounds of action. He writes:

On closer inspection all that the passage from KpV 5: 91–2 states is that the 'dissimilarity' between empirical and rational grounds of action is revealed to us by 'respect' [15]

But this understanding is again subject to the objection of the slave-owner that I mentioned earlier. The slave-owner does not seem to experience any conflict. So, how is the moral law revealed to the slave-owner who does not *feel* any conflict between the moral law and their empirically conditioned desires?

4. Conclusion

However, the *affect of reason interpretation* of the fact of reason seems to give us a genuine understanding of the role of respect in Kant's project, it is hard to save the traditional understanding of the analytic and meanwhile make sense of this interpretation. This interpretation heavily relies on the cognitive thesis in favor of which Grenberg does not offer any argument. Ware's suggestion that we can accept Allison partially without committing to the way he relates facts to feeling is flawed, because it does not have any positive alternative account and leaves the epistemic question unanswered.

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