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DISCUSSION

AN UNAPOLOGETIC DEFENSE OF KANT'S ETHICS

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Perhaps the most prevalent criticism of Kant's moral philosophy concerns its strong emphasis on the notion of duty. According to his critics, Kant's obsession with duty causes him to make at least two major mistakes. First, they claim, he tries to subsume too much of morality under the notion of duty, leaving no room for the supererogatory. Second, he places too much value on acting from the impartial motive of duty, to the exclusion of such partial motives as love, compassion, loyalty, care, and so on. Marcia W. Baron's *Kantian Ethics Almost without Apology* is devoted to defending Kant against these objections.[1] Baron is thorough without being tedious, her treatment of the views of Kant's detractors is thoughtful, and her arguments against them well-crafted. In the first half of the book she considers supererogation, in the second half, the motive of duty.

Those who believe that any adequate moral theory must include the category of the supererogatory hold that without such a category, morality is rendered either too minimal or too demanding. A theory that excludes the supererogatory, and which narrowly conceives the scope of duty, will fail to ascribe any moral value to actions we normally think of as morally good. A theory that excludes the supererogatory, and which broadly construes the scope of duty, will oblige us to perform morally good actions that we normally regard as optional. Including the category of the supererogatory allows us to curb the scope of duty, so that morality is not too demanding, while at the same time enabling us to recognize the moral value of actions falling beyond the reach of duty.

Baron rejects the claim that an adequate moral theory must acknowledge the supererogatory. She maintains that Kant's notion of imperfect duties suffices to prevent his theory from

[1] Marcia W. Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost without Apology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 244, $37.50.

being either too minimal or too demanding. Imperfect duties are duties to adopt certain obligatory ends, namely the ends of one's own perfection and the happiness of others. According to Kant, agents may choose which actions to perform to satisfy their imperfect duties. We have latitude, in other words, in deciding how we will meet the demands to perfect ourselves and promote others' happiness.[2] Therefore, we are not required to do everything within our power to, for instance, help others, nor are we excused from helping others at all. Kant's moral theory, then, recognizes the value of morally good actions while allowing that those actions are sometimes optional. It contains exactly the balance, Baron claims, that the supererogationist is looking for.

But supererogationists, Baron grants, are generally not happy with Kant's way of achieving this balance. Underlying their dissatisfaction, she argues, are two assumptions about the nature of morality that are at odds with Kant's approach. First, some advocates of supererogation have a conception of duty that diverges from Kant's. In particular, they hold that all duties have corresponding rights. If this is the case, then, if I have a duty to promote another's happiness, he a has a claim against me to promote his happiness. But, the supererogationist says, since it is implausible to think that someone has such a claim against me, then I must not have such a duty. So, if helping others is morally good at all, it must be supererogatory.

The second assumption held by some supererogationists is that moral constraints are impediments to freedom and so should be kept to a minimum. The more requirements a moral theory imposes, they say, the more it inhibits individual freedom. The ideal moral theory, then, would have as few obligations as possible, relegating most morally good acts to the realm of the supererogatory. But of course, Kant rejects the idea that morality constrains our freedom. Indeed, on his view, acting morally is an expression our free agency. As a Kantian, Baron naturally finds these assumptions untenable, but she does not offer arguments against them. Her task is to tease out these assumptions and permit the reader to assess them for himself.

The complaint that Kant assigns too much value to the motive of duty commonly takes one of these three forms. First, some say he fails to acknowledge that in certain contexts, such as friendship

[2] Baron devotes the third chapter of the book to the extent and nature of the latitude Kant's theory allows in the satisfying of our imperfect duties.

or love, acting from duty is morally inappropriate.[3] In these contexts, the argument goes, one should act from such motives as loyalty or affection, and these motives are precluded by the motive of duty. But suppose we grant that acting from duty is morally appropriate in these contexts. Critics say Kant's view is untenable for a second reason. Because he maintains that moral worth attaches only to actions done from duty alone, he ignores the moral importance of actions done from both duty and affective inclinations (so-called 'overdetermined' actions). But suppose we even go so far as to grant Kant's claim that actions conforming to duty that are motivated partly by inclination lack moral worth. Critics maintain that his view is still vulnerable to the criticism that he denies the moral significance of affective inclinations to the evaluation of one's character.

Each of these objections, Baron argues, fails to appreciate the primarily regulative role Kant assigns to the motive of duty. According to Baron, to act from duty is, in many cases on Kant's account, to govern one's conduct as a whole by a commitment to acting according to duty. When one governs one's conduct in this way one acts from duty as a secondary motive.[4] One may act from an inclination as one's primary motive, while also acting from duty, provided that one acts on that inclination only after determining that the action is morally right. Baron does not deny that in certain situations, one's sense of duty serves as a primary motive. This occurs when one is inclined to act contrary to duty. For instance, if one wishes to tell a lie, but tells the truth because it is morally required, one acts from duty as a primary motive. So, when one's sense of duty prompts one to do things one is disinclined to do (or to refrain from doing things one is inclined to do) it serves as a primary motive. When one's sense of duty

[3] The most famous criticism of this sort is offered by Michael Stocker in 'The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories', *Journal of Philosophy*, 73 (1976): 453–466. He imagines a case where a friend comes to visit you in the hospital out of a sense of duty alone, rather than from feelings of concern or affection. Baron discusses Stocker's case at length on pages 118–136. Bernard Williams gives another rather famous case in 'Persons, Character and Morality,' in his *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). He maintains that one's preference to save one's spouse, rather than a stranger, from drowning should not have to be ratified by the notion that it is morally permissible to save one's wife rather than a stranger. Baron's response to the sort of case raised by Stocker does not extend to the case raised by Williams. She provides an independent response to Williams on pages 136–140.

[4] She borrows this term with modification from Barbara Herman. See Barbara Herman, 'On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty', *Philosophical Review*, 90 (1981): 359–382.

endorses an action that one is already inclined to do (or rejects an action one is already disinclined to do) then it serves as a secondary motive.

This interpretation of Kant's view of the motive of duty serves as a response to the first objection – that the motive of duty, in supplanting other more fitting motives, has no place in intimate relationships – in the following way. To begin, one must note that the kinds of actions that critics typically think should not be motivated by duty, such as helping a friend in need, are classed by Kant as imperfect duties. Such actions, on Kant's own view, are never, as particular actions, morally required, because we have latitude in deciding how to fulfill our imperfect duties. But, if particular actions fulfilling imperfect duties are never morally required, then they cannot be motivated by duty alone; one cannot be moved to do something exclusively by the fact that it is her duty when it is not in fact her duty.[5] It follows that actions that satisfy imperfect duties must be done from duty as a secondary motive. But if this is the case, then other motives must be behind these actions. So, Baron concludes, critics of Kant are wrong in thinking that acting from duty necessarily precludes acting from other noble motives. Indeed the logic of imperfect duties entails that when people perform acts of kindness, generosity, etc., they must have, as their primary motive, something other than duty.

How does Baron defend Kant's claim that only actions done from duty alone have moral worth? Should not an action done from duty and inclination, where each alone would have sufficed to prompt the action, have moral worth as well? Such a case, Baron argues, is unintelligible. 'If I act from the thought that [something] is required,' she says, 'it does not make sense to say that I may at the same time be acting from other motives.'[6] If for instance, I believe I am required to give a student an A on her paper, wanting to give her an A cannot be an additional motive without 'detracting', in a sense, from the motive of giving her an A because duty requires it.[7] One cannot be motivated to the right thing in this case, and be motivated to what one wants, since acting on the desire to give the student an A would be incompatible with

[5] Which is not to say, of course, that she cannot be moved to do something which she *believes* to be her duty, when it is in fact not her duty. But that is a different case.

[6] Baron, p. 159.

[7] This example is from Judith Baker, 'Do One's Motives Have to Be Pure?' in *Philosophical Grounds of Rationality*, ed. Richard Grandy and Richard Warner (London: Oxford University Press, 1986).

doing what is morally required because it's required. An action, then, cannot be done both from a sense of duty and from an inclination where each is sufficient to prompt the action, for if it is done from inclination at all, then it is not done from a sense of duty, or, more precisely, not done from duty as a primary motive. Kantians need not be embarrassed, Baron claims, by Kant's assertion that actions have moral worth only if done from duty alone, because it is logically impossible for actions (that fulfill perfect duties) to be done from mixed motives.

But what about cases where duty serves as a secondary motive? These actions, as we saw above, necessarily have mixed motives. Is Kant, then, not committed to the claim that any action done from duty as a secondary motive (which includes, remember, all actions satisfying imperfect duties) lacks moral worth? Baron concedes that the answer to this question is 'yes'. She believes that this implication is of little consequence and reminds us that Kant's assertion that moral worth can be attributed only to actions done purely from duty was not directed at the issue of overdetermined actions. Rather, Kant was concerned that people resist seeking out incentives other than duty which might serve as substitute or bolstering motives. He believed that unless we regard the motive of duty as sufficient we will be inclined to question the supremacy of morality. The very activity of searching for substitute or bolstering motives implies that we do not hold moral considerations to be decisive. It was this concern that prompted Kant to hold that an action has moral worth only if the motive of duty suffices to produce it.

The third criticism of Kant's giving prominence to the motive of duty is that he gives no credit to agents who exhibit affective virtues. He holds that the good moral agent is simply the one who acts from duty. The implication is that one who acts consistently from duty but is devoid of, say, sympathy is no worse a person than one who acts consistently from duty but also shows sympathy. Baron rejoins by pointing to a number of passages which make it clear that Kant does endorse and encourage sympathetic feelings. In fact, he says we have a duty to cultivate these feelings in ourselves. But, the critic might ask, why are we to nurture these feelings if they are inadmissible as morally worthy motives? Why should we be sympathetic if our acting from sympathy is not to our credit as moral agents? Again, the notion that duty often serves as a secondary motive underlies Baron's response. She reads Kant as viewing our sympathetic feelings as aids to fulfilling

our imperfect duties, since actions fulfilling them cannot be done from duty alone. Baron admits that Kant's view is flawed in attributing such a narrow role to sympathy and related virtues; hence the 'almost' in her title.

The notion that acting from duty can, and often does, serve as a secondary motive is obviously central to Baron's defense of the emphasis we find in Kant on acting from duty. On her view, actions done from primary motives other than duty can fulfill the demands of morality provided that duty serves as a secondary motive. If, for example, I help a friend out of sympathy as a primary motive and duty as a secondary motive, then, since I have acted from duty in the requisite sense, I have fulfilled my imperfect duty to help others. If I unreflectively act upon my sympathetic inclination and help my friend without regulating my conduct by my sense of duty, I have not succeeded in fulfilling my imperfect duty to help others. Now consider a different case. I am inclined to help a friend because only I, with my remarkable helping skills, am in a position to lessen her burden. My primary motive is arrogance. But suppose I reflect upon my action, determine that it is right and act on that condition. Then, duty has served as my secondary motive and so, it would seem, my action fulfills my duty to help others. Baron's account implies that either of these acts of helping will suffice to meet the moral requirement that we aid others.

There are two problems with this implication. First, it seems that Kant might want to exclude the second case as a candidate for fulfilling one's imperfect duty to help others. This fact may cast some doubt upon the plausibility of Baron's interpretation. But even if her interpretation is sound, it goes against the grain of the criticisms she attempts to counter. Kant's critics would not be comforted by an interpretation of his moral theory that allows that actions done from ignoble inclinations can satisfy the demands of morality just as easily as actions done from admirable inclinations. They do not object to Kant's disqualifying actions done from inclination *per se* from meeting the demands of morality, they object to his barring actions done from good inclinations from meeting the demands of morality.

In response to this worry, Baron could claim that some primary motives (the bad ones) are incompatible with duty as a secondary motive. Above, in the example regarding grading standards, we saw that certain inclinations as primary motives are logically incompatible with duty as a primary motive. But there is

no logical conflict in the case involving arrogance. So, the incompatibility would have to be ethical. But it will not work to say that one's commitment to doing the right thing is in fact a commitment to doing-the-right-thing-for-the-right-motive, for one's commitment to doing the right thing *is* the right motive, on Kant's account. There is no criterion, in Kant's theory, for 'right motive' when the motive is an inclination. It appears, then, that as long as one honors the motive of duty as a limiting condition on her actions, she can act on any primary motive she pleases, and, on Baron's account, meet the demands of morality.

Even if I am wrong that there is a conceptual barrier, in Kant's theory, to distinguishing good from bad motives when they are inclinations, a picture of moral deliberation that requires sorting inclinations in this way is unKantian in spirit. It entails that actions done from good inclinations as a primary motive could fulfill our moral requirements, while those done from bad inclinations as a primary motive could not. But, of course, Kant would reject the idea that actions could meet or fail meet the demands of morality depending on the nature of the inclinations that prompt them. In summary, I worry that Baron's interpretation of Kant's motive of duty, in allowing that duties can be fulfilled by actions done from inclination, renders the view either implausible (by giving, for example, arrogant and sympathetic actions a similar moral status) or unKantian, by making the fulfillment of one's duty depend on the nature of the inclination that prompted it.

In spite of this worry, Baron's defense of Kant's moral philosophy is a force to be contended with for all those who would accuse Kant of stressing duty to a fault.

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