

Is Kantian Ethics Morally Alienating?

Comments on Mudd

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Abstract: Kant's philosophy is notoriously based on the dichotomy between the phenomenal and the noumenal world. This dichotomy digs a rift across human nature by separating the animal and the rational parts of it, its heteronomous and autonomous components, duty and self-love. Such a dichotomy, according to Sasha Mudd, apparently gives rise to two forms of alienation: moral alienation and practical alienation. On Mudd's account, Kant successfully escapes the first kind of alienation through his doctrine of respect. Here I argue, contra Mudd, that there are at least two ways in which Kant leaves moral agents morally alienated, i.e., alienated from important dimensions of morality itself.

Keywords: objections to Kantian ethics, alienation, deontology, acting from duty.

Kant's view of human beings is, as much of his philosophy, notoriously based on the dichotomy between the phenomenal and the noumenal world. This dichotomy digs a rift across human beings by separating the animal and the rational parts of their nature, their heteronomous and autonomous components, their sense of duty and their self-love. Human beings, for Kant, inhabit both worlds.

This dichotomic view puts Kantian ethics in a sort of Cartesian predicament. Just as Cartesian metaphysics struggled to bridge the gap between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* – the thinking subject and the physical world – so Kant's moral philosophy is sometimes at pain to reconcile the tension between the two opposite dimensions of human nature. This tension manifests itself, as Sasha Mudd persuasively argued, in two specular phenomena. On the one hand, even if we agree with Kant that the fundamental moral norms are constitutive of our rational and autonomous agency and therefore inescapable, it remains unclear whether and how far these norms can motivate finite and heteronomous human beings, normally concerned with their own ends, interests and inclinations. On the other hand, although respecting moral laws may express and incarnate who we really are as rational beings, such laws may nonetheless leave us with an unfulfilled but legitimate need to reconcile morality with our own ends as finite, animal beings, inevitably concerned with living our own lives (Mudd 2023).

Mudd describes these phenomena as two forms of alienation: moral alienation (the estrangement of the heteronomous agent, motivated by happiness and inclinations, from a morality perceived as alien, foreign, and hardly motivating) and practical alienation (the estrangement of the autonomous moral agent from her empirical and heteronomous dimension – her projects, desires, aspirations, inclinations, and so on). On Mudd's account, Kant successfully escape the first kind of alienation through his doctrine of respect and attempts, unsuccessfully, to escape the second through his doctrine of the highest good.

Here I will focus on the first phenomenon, namely moral alienation. I will suggest, *contra* Mudd, that there are at least two ways in which Kant leaves moral agents alienated from morality itself.

I. ALIENATION, SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE

Let me begin by clarifying the notion of alienation. The concept primarily applies to a problematic separation between a subject and something else (Leopold, 2018), like an object (the product of one's work, or the natural world), other persons (one's partner, family, social group), or even a component of the Self (like one's social role, fundamental projects, desires, aspirations). Notice that there is an evaluative component in this concept. The separation is problematic, and this implies that the Self and the thing it is alienated from belong together in one way or another.

There would be a lot to add, but for my purposes the following qualification will suffice. A subject can be alienated from X in two ways. It may be *objectively* alienated from X, in the sense that the relationship between the two is actually damaged, broken, or severed in some way. Or it may be *subjectively* alienated from X, in the sense that the subject experiences X as distant, detached, or separated when this is not necessarily the case (Hardimon 1994, 119-22).

These two versions of alienation are, in principle, independent from one another. Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse, for instance, saw human life in an advanced capitalist society as objectively alienating, but were aware that most of the people living in these societies were feeling comfortably at home in them. On the other hand, one does not need to be objectively alienated from X to think that she is, and to suffer from this. Hegel, for instance, viewed the social and political institutions of the modern world as a place where humans should feel at home, but knew that many of his readers did not perceive them as such (Leopold, 2018)¹.

With this distinction in mind, let's now turn to moral alienation.

II. MORAL ALIENATION

Following Tenenbaum (2019), Mudd's spells out the problem of moral alienation as follows:

The problem is that our capacity to care about and feel motivated by the constitutive end of agency is threatened by the very fact that this end seems to bypass the interests and inclinations that motivate the adoption of all our other ends. And yet, at least in principle, we need to be motivated by this end sufficiently enough for it to function as the constraint it is meant to be on our other choices. [...] Alienation, on this telling, refers to the agent's failure to stand in a correct affective or motivational

[1] Indeed, he partially conceived his political philosophy as a reconciliatory project, i.e., as way of showing that this was indeed the case (Hardimon, 1994).

relation to the ends and norms to which he is, supposedly, implicitly committed just in virtue of acting at all (Mudd 2023, 65).

The problem-solving task here is an empirical and explanatory one. We are not asking how we ought to see the moral law and why we ought to obey it, but whether the moral law can motivate our actions and feature in an account for our choices. We are in the territory of moral psychology. On Mudd's account, the Kantian doctrine of respect demonstrate that we can take a pure, a priori interest in morality, thereby committing ourselves to our constitutive moral ends and thus leaving the problem of moral alienation behind us. But is it so? I believe there are at least two different ways (one objective and one subjective) in which the Kantian moral agent would be left alienated from some vital component of the moral world.

III. OBJECTIVE ALIENATION: FAR FROM OTHERS

Let's concede that the Kantian doctrine of respect can shoulder the explanatory burden by showing (I am admittedly oversimplifying this doctrine here) that human beings can actually act out of deference to the moral law and out of a sense of awe toward it. I contend that this falls short of showing that there is nothing *objectively* alienating about Kantian morality. Indeed, although the notion of respect may reconcile us with the moral and autonomous dimension of ourselves, one may argue that it does so by alienating our moral agency from the social dimension of morality itself: our immediate concern for other persons.

Kant's discourse on the foundation of morality in the *Groundwork* relegates other persons in a quite secondary role. Indeed, the appropriate object of respect, in the Kantian framework, is the moral law, not other persons. When other persons show up in Kant's discussion they usually feature as abstractions and idealizations of humanity in general, as creatures enjoying the same autonomy and subjected to the same law – not as concrete individuals, as genuinely other agents, with their own lives, plans, and claims. As Kant writes, “any respect for a person is properly only respect for the law [...] of which he gives us an example” (2006[1785], 4: 402n, 14). And in his phenomenological description of respect – in the sense of awe, fear and deference the moral law instils – there is little if no trace of the care, attention, recognition and openness toward others that typically substantiate lived moral experience.

A version of such a form of alienation is at play in the difficulty that Kantians encounter in accounting for the moral weight of the agent's special relationships – loving relationships, friendships, group loyalties, and the like (a difficulty notoriously highlighted in Williams “one-thought-too-many” problem) (Williams, 1981). But the real problem runs deeper. It concerns one's moral connection with others *in general*, qua subjects with lives and experiences and concerns – not with *special* others.

Jack Samuel recently described the problem as one of social alienation in the following terms:

Kantians [...] hold that morality involves relations of mutual accountability with other people, so one might think that Kantian has therefore dodged the threat of social alienation. But these relationships of accountability can supposedly be derived from the idea of the agent as self-legislator, rather treated as *sui generis*. There is widespread skepticism that this derivation can be carried off, but even if it can, in conceiving of relations of mutual accountability as mediated by more basic self-relations, the Kantian risks social alienation. Since Kantian constructivism was in the first instance an answer to how agents recognize moral reasons, it leaves us with only indirect ways of recognizing one another. (Samuel 2022, 10)

The basic concern here is that, by constructing morality out of the constitutive features of agency and practical rationality themselves, Kantians may explain how moral reasons can motivate us, but at the price of leaving other subjects in the background (if not outside) of their image of morality, alienating moral agents from the social dimension of their moral world².

IV. SUBJECTIVE ALIENATION: ME, MYSELF, AND MY INTENTIONS

A second form of moral alienation is *subjective* in character. Indeed, even assuming sheer respect for the moral law can motivate human beings to act morally, and even assuming that there is nothing objectively alienating about morality, it does not follow that rational and autonomous moral agents will ever feel at home in the Kantian moral world. To the contrary, I think it is rather difficult for a reflective and sensitive moral agent to feel like she belongs to such a world.

In a nutshell, the reason is the following. One thing is to know that respect can act as a motive for a moral agent, as the Kantian doctrine of respect establishes. Another is to know that respect moved me to act in a certain case. Now, according to Kant, only an action done from the motive of duty alone, and thus out of sheer respect for the moral law, has moral worth. However, moral agents rarely (if ever) act out of duty alone, and it is difficult for them to tell when they genuinely acted out of duty. Hence it is difficult for moral agents to know whether their actions have moral worth, and thus whether they really belong, as agents, in the moral world. As a result, they may feel alienated from it.

The argument hinges on the notorious Kantian idea that only actions performed from duty have moral worth, and this idea notoriously puzzled friends and foes of Kant alike. One reason to be puzzled is the following. Situated moral agents rarely act from duty alone and seldom face the subjective limitations, obstacles, and reluctance that would allow the motive of duty to shine clearly through one's action (as it does in Kant's own examples in the *Groundwork*). This is so because inclinations, desires to live up to

²] This becomes particularly evident in the Kantians' difficulty to account for directed obligations. See Tarasenko-Struc (2020) and Samuel (forthcoming).

certain standards and to be a certain kind of persons and other heteronomous motives often team up with duty in most of the dutiful actions occurring in the world. In other words, actions conforming to morality are often overdetermined. But can these actions be morally worthy, if only actions performed from duty are morally worthy? And, when they are morally worthy, can we know that they are? Without positive answers, moral agents can hardly ever feel at home in the moral world.

Kantian scholars seem to agree that dutiful, overdetermined actions can have moral worth, but which conditions should be satisfied for these actions to have moral worth remain a debated issue, in which I cannot venture in here. Luckily, Kant himself was quite adamant about the fact that no one can ever say to know that these conditions (whatever they are, precisely) have been met on any given case. As Kant writes, “It is absolutely impossible [...] to make out with complete certainty a single case in which the maxim of an action otherwise in conformity with duty rested simply on moral grounds and on the representation of one’s duty” (Kant 2006, 4: 407, 19). Even after the most thorough introspection, according to Kant “one cannot show with certainty [...] that the will is here determined merely through the law, without other incentive, although it seems to be so” (Kant 2006, 4: 419, 30). In other words, we might believe to have acted from duty, but we cannot claim to know that we had.

In an influential contribution, Barbara Herman tried to downplay this worry by remarking that Kant only says that we can never be certain, and that “this kind of failure no more undermines our ability to judge the motives we have acted upon than sceptical arguments undermine our ordinary judgments about ordinary objects” (Herman 1981, 370). But the analogy is misleading in at least two respects.

First, in contrast with our motives, which are accessible only through introspection, we have multiple sources of evidence about ordinary objects: at the very least, our own perceptions, others’ testimony, and a scientific image of the world in which they nicely fit. Second, we have no common-sensical reasons to doubt the reliability of our perceptions about ordinary objects, whereas we have good reasons of this sort to doubt the results of our introspection into the nobility of our motives. Whereas scepticism about ordinary objects usually appeals to evil demons or brain-in-vats scenarios to put our sources of evidence into question, scepticism about the purity of our motives can rest on the documented self-indulgency and rationalizing tendencies of human psychology. In other words, both the quantity and quality of our evidence about our motives is limited, and insofar as this is the case, one may reasonably doubt of his own moral worth and feel alienated from the Kantian moral world. The kind of purity the latter requires may be simply too hard to come by.

This form of alienation is not necessarily a bad thing from a moral point of view. Indeed, one may plausibly argue that ignoring whether one’s actions are truly morally worthy is desirable, as it keeps moral agents humble, reduce feeling of moral superiority and lead to a non-judgmental attitude toward fellow human beings. But it is nonetheless

a painful form of alienation, one that can make a good person with enough self-doubt feel as a moral impostor.

V. CONCLUSION

Kant's supporters may have other resources to defuse, to some extent, both these forms of moral alienation. They may draw a distinction between the moral worth of actions and that of agents or argue that moral worth is just one form of moral value (Wood 2014). And they might be right. What I hope to have showed or, at least, plausibly suggested in these few pages, is that if Kantian morality is supposed to offer "a shelter against luck" (Williams 1995, 241) – a Nietzschean point in Bernard Williams's critique of the morality system on which David Owen would probably agree³ – then it is not a comfortable one.

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³] See Owen (2018).