



October 2023

Kant's Implicit Suggestion of the Negative Formulation of Duty

Gilbert Enejajor
info@ubiquitypress.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca>

Recommended Citation

Enejajor, Gilbert (2023) "Kant's Implicit Suggestion of the Negative Formulation of Duty," *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, Article 15.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7710/2155-4838.1086>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca/vol5/iss2/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@CWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@CWU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@cwu.edu.

Kant's Implicit Suggestion of the Negative Formulation of Duty

Abstract

In this paper I argue that in *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant suggests that while I can never know when I am acting from duty, I can know when I am not acting from duty. In this paper I neither reconcile Kant's imperatives with his statement that we will never know if we are definitely acting on his maxims, nor do I mount an argument against his perfectionist ideal theory. Instead I propose a negative formulation of his perfectionist ideal theory that argues Kant implicitly suggests I can only know when I am not acting from duty. First, I describe how the conditions of moral worth which Kant outlines make it so that I can never definitely know if I am acting from duty. I then take these conditions and show that Kant indirectly suggests that I can, however, know when I am not acting from duty. Specifically I examine the conditions Kant places on moral actions viz. the relationship inclinations and duty have with the moral worth of an action. Next, I provide a non-exhaustive refutation of potential arguments against my negative formulation proposition. Finally I discuss the implications of my negative formulation proposition on Kant's perfectionist ideal theory as a whole.

Kant's Implicit Suggestion of the Negative Formulation of Duty

Gilbert Enenajor
Trent University

Published online: 19 June 2013
© Gilbert Enenajor 2013

Abstract

In this paper I argue that in *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant suggests that while I can never know when I am acting from duty, I can know when I am not acting from duty. In this paper I neither reconcile Kant's imperatives with his statement that we will never know if we are definitely acting on his maxims, nor do I mount an argument against his perfectionist ideal theory. Instead I propose a negative formulation of his perfectionist ideal theory that argues Kant implicitly suggests I can only know when I am not acting from duty. First, I describe how the conditions of moral worth which Kant outlines make it so that I can never definitely know if I am acting from duty. I then take these conditions and show that Kant indirectly suggests that I can, however, know when I am not acting from duty. Specifically I examine the conditions Kant places on moral actions viz. the relationship inclinations and duty have with the moral worth of an action. Next, I provide a non-exhaustive refutation of potential arguments against my negative formulation proposition. Finally I discuss the implications of my negative formulation proposition on Kant's perfectionist ideal theory as a whole.

I begin by outlining Kant's conditions of moral worth, and showing how these conditions makes it impossible to know I am acting from duty. Kant defines an action as having genuine moral worth when the action is performed "without any inclination at all, but solely from duty..."¹ Kant is proposing a distinction here that separates an act done from duty with an act simply done in accordance with duty, yet motivated by inclination; the former having genuine moral worth, the latter lacking it. If this is the case, then it should be simple enough to conclude that I can know when I am acting from duty, and it is simply when my action is free of inclination. To emphasize this point Kant states, "...an action done from duty must altogether exclude the influence of inclination and therewith every object of the will."² Kant, however, counters this by pointing out a feature of moral value, stating, "...the concern is not with the actions which are seen, but rather with their inner principles, what are not seen."³ As such, Kant is suggesting that there is no way to know these inner principles and thus no way to know a true absence of inclination. Kant confirms this when he says, "...we can

never, even by the strictest examination, completely plumb the depths of the secret incentives of our actions.”⁴

An important distinction needs to be made here with regards to the conditions of moral worth and subsequently those of duty. Kant is not suggesting that because I cannot know my motives, I cannot act from duty. Kant is simply suggesting that because I cannot know my motives, I cannot know if I am truly acting from duty. The aforementioned conditions make such a certainty impossible.

The same conditions that make it impossible to know if I am acting from duty make it possible to know if I am not acting from duty. Because I know that an act from duty requires a complete absence of inclinations, and I cannot know for sure that the act is free of all inclinations, I cannot ever know that an act is done from duty. This model however tells me that if an act does have an inclination, I know it is not done from duty.

In order to better explain my thesis I will structure Kant’s conditions for an action done from duty as a logical conditional proposition.

If: (1) an action is done from duty **[D]**,
 Then: (2) it must altogether exclude the influence of inclination...⁵ **[~I]** (~I = ‘not I’, meaning no inclinations)
[D] – > [~I]

This logical conditional proposition could be used to determine and thus know if an action is done from duty, not just in accordance with it. A problem arises, however, with this condition as **[~I]** can never be known.⁶ As such, while this proposition would allow me to know if an action is done from duty, the fact that Kant rules out the possibility of **[~I]** means it cannot be known.

This proposition, however, can be used to support my thesis. If I were to take the contrapositive of this conditional proposition, I would find a valid proposition that translates directly into my thesis. The contrapositive of **[D] – > [~I]** is **[I] – > [~D]**. This conditional proposition translates to the following:

If: (1) the influence of inclination is included **[I]**
 Then: (2) an action is not done from duty **[~D]**

Unlike **[~I]**, **[I]** and **[~D]** are not excluded as possibilities by Kant. As such, it follows that influence of inclination on my actions means that I can know that my actions are not done from duty. Thus, while I can never know if I am acting from duty, I can know if and when I am not, as it is dependent only on the influence of inclination. While the

absence of inclination can never be known, such a condition does not apply to the presence of inclination.

A possible refutation to my thesis can be found in the claim that knowing when one is not acting from duty does not add to the perfectionist ideal theory as it does not contribute to what we ought to do. If I know that I am not acting from duty, that in and of itself does not bring me closer to what I ought to do, it simply lets me know what I ought not to do. This knowledge can be used negatively, however. Kant states, "But they can also become extremely bad and harmful if the will, which is to make use of these gifts of nature and which in its special constitution is called character, is not good."⁷ This knowledge of when one is not acting from duty can be used in the same way as intelligence, wit or judgment for negative ends so long as it does not have a good will. What I suggest, however, is that knowing when one is not acting from duty does contribute to the theory, as it gives a more detailed account, however small that increase in detail may be, of Kant's theory. Knowing when one is not acting from duty narrows the scope of acts done from duty, and thus does contribute to commanding what we ought to do. This knowledge is actually very important, as it is the only knowledge that can definitively tell us anything about the moral worth of our actions.

This paper was indirectly inspired by A.T. Shillinglaw's article "Dr. Ross's Criticism of Kant's Theory of Duty"⁸. While I do not draw upon any content from that article, I do draw upon its form. In this article A.T. Shillinglaw takes the statement "I ought to do 'X' from a sense of duty"⁹ and reframes it into a logical proposition.¹⁰ In doing so he is better able to criticize Dr. Ross's Theory of Duty. I was inspired and decided that taking an argument and reframing it into a logical proposition might, and in this case did, express it with more clarity and bring about a better understanding of it, thus strengthening my thesis.

It is important to understand that this is a new negative formulation of Kant's perfectionist ideal theory and not an attempt to reconcile his imperatives with his statement that we can never know if we are acting on them. I refute any claim that suggests so. First, even though Kant's imperatives demand one thing while he, at the same time says we will never know if we are doing so, such a statement does not necessarily need to be reconciled. Kant's imperatives are the prescriptive part of his normative theory. This is the part that tells us what we ought to do. His statement that we can never know if we are acting on the maxims is the descriptive part of his theory. As such, these two parts are separate in their nature and do not necessarily need to be reconciled, especially in this case. Simply because we cannot know if we are doing what we ought to does not mean that we ought not to do it. Kant himself explicitly states this point, "...even though there might never yet have been a sincere friend, still pure sincerity in friendship is nonetheless required of every man..."¹¹ A formulation that allows us to know when we are not doing what we ought to actually supports

Kant's perfectionist ideal theory and makes it more robust, especially since the idea is extracted directly from the theory itself.

References

Kant, Immanuel; translated by James W. Ellington [1785] (1993). *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals 3rd ed.* Hackett. AK 398.

Schillinglaw, A.T. (1933). "Dr. Ross's Criticism of Kant's Theory of Duty." *Mind, New Series, Vol. 42, No. 166*, pp. 213-216.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/mind/XLII.166.213>

¹ Kant, Immanuel; translated by James W. Ellington [1785] (1993). *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals 3rd ed.* Hackett. AK 398.

² *Ibid.* AK 400.

³ *Ibid.* AK 407.

⁴ *Ibid.* AK 407.

⁵ *Ibid.* AK 400.

⁶ *Ibid.* AK 407.

⁷ *Ibid.* AK 393.

⁸ Schillinglaw, A.T. (1933). Dr. Ross's Criticism of Kant's Theory of Duty. *Mind, New Series, Vol. 42, No. 166*, pp. 213-216.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 213.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 215.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, AK 408.