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## **THE POSSIBILITY OF MORAL ACTION IN A KANTIAN EPISTEMOLOGICAL METAPHYSICS**

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### **Abstract**

Immanuel Kant was an Enlightenment philosopher who strove to clarify the foundations of human knowledge and morality. Kant began his cosmopolitan efforts by establishing the metaphysical basis for all human cognition. His theories developed from an analysis of the writings of empiricist David Hume and classical metaphysical thought. Causality was a paradigmatic metaphysical concept that was assumed to be necessary and outside of the experiential world. Hume criticized the role of causality as understood by classical metaphysicians and argued that knowledge can only be gained from experience. His argument was based on the foregoing understanding of possible judgements and necessity, which limited the amplification of knowledge to synthetic judgements of experience. In response, Kant offered a new form of necessity that accounted for the metaphysical basis for the possibility of all experience. Kant's understanding of human action in cognition informed his moral theory and the role of *a priori* concepts in moral action. Kant's moral theory is based on the possibility of a moral action being simultaneously free from natural determinism and universally necessary. Following his dedication to the ideals of the Enlightenment, Kant bases the possibility of morality on universal moral laws which are accessible to all rational beings. This paper will evaluate the possibility of moral action based on Kant's establishment of the necessity of metaphysical concepts in human knowledge and experience.

### **Introduction**

Modern philosophy and society have denigrated Metaphysics to the status of mere opinions and feelings, stripping human action of a deeper reality than material motivations. Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, David Hume (1711-1776) was a pivotal character in the attack on metaphysical knowledge and the establishment of empirical investigation as primary. Hume's focus on scientific investigation of philosophical thought was rooted in his conclusions about Metaphysics, that is the study of the reality beyond the natural world. As experience tells us, things in the natural world are constantly passing away and changing. Classical metaphysicians, such as Plato, sought necessary knowledge by leaving behind the contingent nature of the physical world to grasp at pure Truth. Hume understood that gaining knowledge required investigating the world, he, however, hastily discredited the role of metaphysical concepts in knowledge. If left unanswered, Hume's challenge to Metaphysics would amount to the elimination of any objective basis for morality other than human custom and habit. Hume's writings gave rise to the problem of whether metaphysical knowledge was possible and could inform humanity about themselves, their moral lives, and the world they live in.

Hume's critique of Metaphysics was responded to by the German Enlightenment philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). He responded to Hume by identifying a new form of necessity based on the very possibility of experiencing the natural world, placing metaphysical

concepts in the act of experience itself. Kant first identifies this new form of necessity in his *Critique of Pure Reason* which focuses on understanding the aspects of human cognition that make knowledge of objects possible. He develops the notion of transcendental necessity developed in his *Critique* serves as the foundation of Kant's account of the possibility of moral judgements. Kant's moral theory is based on moral action being simultaneously free from natural determinism and universally necessary. True to his dedication to the principles of the Enlightenment, Kant bases the possibility of morality on universal moral laws which are accessible to all rational beings.

### **The Basis for All Human Knowledge**

Hume attacked the metaphysical assumption that causality was a necessary judgement independent of experience based on the two accepted types of judgements. And Kant praises Hume for helping him to identify that error, even though in Hume's case the basic insight "struck a spark... but brought no light" (Kant 2004, 7). Kant summarizes the spark that Hume struck regarding causality as an *a priori* concept, that is a concept independent of experience:

Hume started mainly from a single but important concept in metaphysics, namely, that of the connection of cause and effect, and called upon reason, which pretends to have generated this concept in her womb, to give him an account of by what right she thinks: that something could be so constituted that, if it is posited, something else necessarily must thereby also be posited; for that is what the concept of cause says. (Kant 2004, 7)

The foregoing understanding of necessity was based on the principle of contradiction and applied only to judgements in which the predicate is contained in the subject term. Take for example the proposition that "all bachelors are unmarried men." The term 'bachelors' entails the idea of 'unmarried men.' One cannot assert that bachelors are married without contradicting the term bachelors, which demonstrates the law of contradiction and the apodictic necessity at work in such judgements. These clarifying propositions, which Kant referred to as analytic *a priori*, are necessarily true because the predicate is "covertly" hidden in the subject and is known through an analysis of the subject term (Kant 1998, 141).

Judgements that derive from experience, known as synthetic *a posteriori*, "amplify" the subject by connecting something to the subject that is not already contained within it (Kant 1998, 141). Hume had already noticed that synthetic judgements could not be established analytically, because the predicate is not attached to the subject by way of contradiction. Hume asserted that an analytic judgement can be universally necessary, however, judgements of experience cannot be. He assumed that through repeated experiences of the connection between a subject and its predicate, humanity can gain relative certainty regarding the synthesis. Hume did not reject causality, instead he rejected the idea that causality was something that could be known necessarily because it puts two things together, namely the cause and the effect. Kant agreed that if apodictic necessity, the type found in analytic judgements, was the only type of necessity, then metaphysical knowledge was not possible. Metaphysical knowledge would not be possible because necessary judgments would only be possible in statements of clarification and not amplification. In response, Kant develops a new type of necessity by exploring human cognition.

Kant begins the exploration of human reason by distinguishing between two types of cognition; pure and empirical. There are some cognitions that are purely *a priori*, meaning they "occur absolutely independently of all experience" which is contrasted by empirical judgements which are *a posteriori* (Kant 1998, 136). Empirical knowledge is based on the phenomenal features

of the world and is therefore contingent and can be otherwise. Contingent knowledge can lead to certainty which is gained through repeated empirical exercises. On the other hand, pure *a priori* judgements can be known necessarily because they transcend the contingent nature of experience. He explains that we acquire all our knowledge through experience, “all our cognitions commence *with* experience, yet it does not on that account all arise *from* experience” (Kant 1998, 136). He qualifies this statement by adding “as far as time is concerned,” meaning that our capacity to reason is stimulated by experience in time, but itself is not a product of experience (Kant 1998, 136). What comes first in time is the actual experiential event, however, the principles that undergird the experience are primary.

Kant’s qualification gives great insight into the possibility of experience itself and synthetic judgements *a priori*, which are the amplification of necessary metaphysical judgements. He explains that all empirical cognitions are “composite,” because each judgement requires a passive and active component:

For it could well be that even our experiential cognition is a composite of that which we receive through impressions and that which our own cognitive faculty provides out of itself. (Kant 1998, 136)

The passive component is the phenomenon impressed on the mind and the active component is the concepts at work in human reason that allows for the experience to happen at all. The object experienced activates the reasoning capacity, however, this capacity is not a product of experience but rather arises *with* it. An example of a “composite cognition” that Kant proposes is “every alteration has its cause,” because, as he continues, causality “is an *a priori* proposition, only not pure, since alteration is a concept that can be drawn only from experience” (Kant 1998, 137). Kant asserts that *a priori* concepts are necessarily linked to the possibility of experience and are at work in the synthesis of a cause with its effect. The concepts that transcend experience, but are activated by it, are *a priori* because they do not “arise *from* experience” (Kant 1998, 136). Thus, Kant agrees with Hume that causality accompanies experience, however, he demonstrates that experience of an object is only possible with the application of *a priori* concepts to the object itself.

Traditional metaphysicians mistakenly attempted to know God, the soul, freedom, and immortality by expanding reason to transcend experience completely. Philosophers like Plato desired to go outside the realm of any possible experience to gain metaphysical knowledge. The necessity of analytic *a priori* judgements attracted metaphysicians and compelled them to delve deeper into “speculative” Metaphysics which was removed from the contingency of experience:

But what says still more than all the foregoing is this, that certain cognitions even abandon the field of all possible experiences and seem to expand the domain of our judgements beyond all bounds of experience, through concepts to which no corresponding objects at all can be given in experience. (Kant 1998, 138-139)

Kant argues that what the metaphysicians were searching for outside of experience, namely metaphysical knowledge, is inherently linked to experience and is at work in the very possibility of experience. Sensible experience “awakens” our metaphysical concepts, such that an investigation of our “composite” judgements is Metaphysics (Kant 1998, 136). Therefore, Kant not only overcame Hume’s critique of causality but also destroyed the traditional understanding of metaphysical knowledge which overlooked the *a priori* concepts at work in our empirical judgements (Kant 1998, 149). The traditional metaphysical attempt to grasp purely transcendent truths was replaced by a transcendental view of metaphysical concepts, placing these concepts nowhere else but in the actions of rational beings (Kant 1998, 150-152).

Kant offers transcendental necessity as a solution to Hume's criticism of metaphysical knowledge. Human beings experience the world in a unique way which requires them to make judgements about objects and connect them to *a priori* concepts. Kant explains that there are laws that permeate all of nature, which allow human beings to experience the world:

The foregoing empirical rule is now regarded as law, and indeed as valid not merely of appearances, but of them on behalf of a possible experience, which requires universally, and therefore necessarily valid rules. (Kant 2004, 64)

For Kant, these necessary laws condition the possibility of having an experience and connecting each perception to each other. He establishes the concept of transcendental necessity, which allows for necessary judgements that are synthetic and *a priori*. These judgements are synthetic because they allow the connection of two things that are not already contained within each other. In addition, they transcend experience because they are the necessary conditions which make human experience possible. Kant illuminates the "Humean doubt" about causality and Metaphysics by establishing a new form of necessity and judgement (Kant 2004, 62).

### **Transcendental Foundation of Moral Action**

Kant employs his foundational understanding of *a priori* concepts as the necessary condition for the possibility of experience to understand the foundation of morality. Through his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explains that the *a priori* concept of causality is employed in the synthesis of a cause with its effect, which is stimulated by experience itself. The application of *a priori* concepts to sense perceptions is the necessary precondition for the possibility of experience. Kant explains the role of *a priori* concepts in experience:

I, therefore, have quite good insight into the concept of cause, as a concept that necessarily belongs to the mere form of experience, and into its possibility as a synthetic unification of perceptions in a consciousness in general. (Kant 2004, 54)

He concludes that the empirical dedication of many philosophers, like Hume, is dependent on the human application of *a priori* concepts to objects of experience. The necessity at work in experience, transcendental necessity, is based on the premise that the concept that makes the experience possible is not itself an element of the experience but rather it is at work within a cognizing human being. This idea is best illustrated by a circle. A circle is defined as a series of points equidistant to a central point. The central point is not an element of the circle; however, the very possibility of the circle is dependent on the existence of that central point. As Kant critically evaluated the necessary conditions of experience, he applied his understanding of human experience to the possibility of morality; which hinges on the Good being both outside and within moral actions.

To begin his investigation into the grounds for the possibility of morality Kant addresses the moral end of man. According to Kant, if man's purpose is to be happy then human nature was poorly equipped to achieve such an end. As he explains:

Now in a being that has reason and will, if the proper end of nature were its preservation, its welfare, in a word its *happiness*, then nature would have hit upon a very bad arrangement in selecting the reason of the creature to carry out this purpose. For all actions that the creature has to perform for this purpose, and the whole rule of its conduct, would be marked out for it far more accurately by instinct. (Kant 1997, 8-9)

If our true purpose is happiness, then we are not created to reach our purpose, because our reason and will do not naturally bring us to happiness. Instead, an implanted instinct would allow human beings to achieve their pleasures without reason interfering. The will then would be guided by

inclinations and instinctual desires as opposed to the flawed reasoning of man. Kant proposes instead that the purpose of beings endowed with reason and will is to be good. Kant begins the *Groundwork* with this subtle distinction between happiness and goodness in order to demonstrate that humans could be happy by instinct, which is to say automatically or without freedom. However, unlike happiness being automatically good is not possible because goodness itself must be a choice of a completely free creature. Freedom, therefore, is one of the necessary conditions of morality.

To demonstrate the importance of freedom, Kant begins by focusing on moral actions that are in accord with human inclinations or consequential reasons. Kant offers the example of a shopkeeper who refuses to over-charge children in his business practices. This action is in accordance with a moral duty to not defraud others, however, the driving force behind the action is a desire to promote himself and his business. According to Kant, an action that agrees with the moral law may not be a moral action if the moral agent is inclined for reasons other than a pure duty to the moral law. He also discusses an example of a person whose intentions are pure and good:

To be beneficent where one can is a duty and besides there are many souls so sympathetically attuned that without any other motive of vanity or self-interest they find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy around them and can take delight in the satisfaction of others so far as it is their own work. But I assert that in such a case an action of this kind, however it may conform with duty and however amiable it may be has nevertheless no true moral worth but is on the same footing with other inclinations. (Kant 1997, 11)

There are people who do good acts, not as the shopkeeper did, but out of a concern for the happiness of others. However, if the inclination, no matter how “good,” determines his action then the action is not in Kant’s strict sense “morally good” (Kant 1997, 11). His key insight, in short, is that moral actions, unlike those dictated by the natural law, cannot be inclined or caused. The natural world is determined by causal relations, however, to step into the moral universe the moral agent must leave behind natural causation. If our moral actions are caused in the same way as an event in nature, then it would not be free and could not be moral. The focus on inclinations or consequences to determine the morality of an action is to leave the moral universe of freedom and rely on the causal universe of the natural world. Therefore, the beneficent man’s actions are devoid of true moral worth because “the maxim lacks moral content, namely that of doing such action not from inclination but from duty” (Kant 1997, 12).

Kant continues the story of the beneficent man to demonstrate the importance of clarifying moral maxims from duty, not from inclinations or merely in conformity with duty. The example is altered so that the beneficent man is overcome with grievous personal problems, depleting him of his concern for the problems of others in such a way the he is not inclined to act for their benefit (Kant 1997, 12). If this man continues to act as he had before without the inclination or “inner satisfaction” to act but “simply from duty; then the action first has its genuine worth” (Kant 1997, 12). Prior to his grievous situation, the beneficent man was acting in accordance with duty and good intentions, however as long as those intentions caused his actions, they were not moral. The stripping away of all other inclinations or reasons to act demonstrates the moral worth of the action as from duty to morality itself.

The role of the will and necessary moral law illuminates the emphasis Kant places on acting from duty. The will is free to act in accordance to desire or inclination, however, the will can be good “only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself” (Kant 1997, 8). The will

can only be “considered good without limitation” when the object of its actions is nothing other than the formal principles that undergird the possibility of morality, which Kant refers to as the categorical imperative (Kant 1997, 7, 14-15). As he explains:

the unconditional and moral worth [of actions] can lie nowhere else than in the principle of the will without regard for the ends that can be brought about by such an action. For, the will stands between its *a priori* principle, which is formal, and its *a posteriori* incentive, which is material, as at a crossroads; and since it must still be determined by something, it must be determined by the formal principle of volition as such when an action is done from duty, where every material principle has been withdrawn from it. (Kant 1997, 13)

The unconditional moral worth of an action is based on freedom from material causes. As discussed above, the natural world is causal and moral actions cannot be caused by natural inclinations or consequences. Kant explains that “in adding anything empirical to [moral actions] one subtracts just that much from their genuine influence and from the unlimited worth of actions” (Kant 1997, 23). Kant’s categorical imperative is an *a priori* “principle of the will” that brings about moral action. The universal law is explained as a maxim which is formulated as follows, “I ought never act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (Kant 1997, 15). True unconditional moral action comes from duty which is defined by Kant as “the necessity of an action from respect of the law” (Kant 1997, 13). It is pure respect for the moral law which impels the will to unconditional moral actions which derive their worth from duty. The will must not be inclined by any natural cause, it, however, can be determined by the law and a “pure respect” for the law so that in willfully complying with it an action could be “a universal law” (Kant 1997, 14).

This account of a good will seems to present us with a contradiction within Kant’s moral theory. First, he asserts that an action must be completely free to have moral worth, however, a good will should be determined by a pure respect for a necessary moral law. This seeming contradiction is answered by Kant’s formulation of synthetic *a priori* judgements and transcendental necessity. In *a priori* synthetic judgements, the concepts make possible the action of synthesis within human reason. *A priori* concepts are the necessary condition of the possibility of experience and they allow human beings to experience through the act of synthesis. The application of concepts to an object is a human action by which the object is represented in the mind; *a priori* synthesis is the necessary condition of representing the object as an object in the human mind. Therefore, *a priori* concepts are both necessarily involved in and yet outside of experience as was demonstrated in the concept of a circle. Kant explains how this understanding of transcendental necessity applies to morality:

Nothing other than the *representation of the law* in itself, which can of course occur only in a rational being, insofar as it and not the hoped-for effect is the determining ground of the will, can constitute the preeminent good we call moral, which already present in the person himself who acts in accordance with this representation and need not wait upon the effect of his action. (Kant 1997, 14)

The Good, therefore, is not transcendent as classical metaphysicians had claimed, but it is the principle that is both outside and within moral acts. Humans must “act” not by virtue of the causality of the moral law but by their representation of the law as a basis, in the will, for any moral action. Unlike in natural representations of objects, the moral object of the law must be represented so that what determines the will is a cause that does not cause actions stripping them of their moral worth.

The thing that impels moral action, cannot be a natural cause because it must be free, so it must be the condition for the very possibility of morality at all. The possibility of morality depends on a necessary law which when represented in human reason is synthesized to the will so that a person is impelled by a pure respect to act out of duty to that law. Kant adds to his understanding of man's purpose by stating "reason...cognizes its highest practical vocation in the establishment of a good will" (Kant 1997, 10).

The establishment of "a good will" consists in acting as a human being, that is both inside and outside of the causal order. As beings in the causal universe we are pushed and pulled by various causes. Objects and non-human beings are unaware of the causal factors that dominate this world. Human moral action consists in being aware of the causal forces affecting your inclinations and choosing to act in accordance with duty and respect for the moral law. Human beings, therefore, must have a 'moral moment' within this causal chain to choose the effect as opposed to automatically living it out. Kant explains that in order for the moral law to command or necessitate our actions, the actions must be universally applicable:

When the general inclination to happiness did not determine his will...there is still left over here, as in all other cases, a law, namely, to promote his happiness not from inclination but from duty; and it is then that his conduct first has properly moral worth. It is undoubtedly in this way, again, that we are to understand that passage from scripture in which we are commanded to love our neighbor, even our enemy. For, love as an inclination cannot be commanded, but beneficence from duty – even though no inclination impels us to it and, indeed, natural and unconquerable aversion opposes it – is practical and not pathological love, which lies in the will and not in the propensity of feeling, in principles of action and not in melting sympathy; and it alone can be commanded (Kant 1997, 12-13).

In understanding love as a command of the moral law, Kant's answer demonstrates love as an act of the will as opposed to an instinctual appetite. The will has the infinite capacity to be good, so by placing love "in the will and not in the propensity of feeling," Kant is emphasizing the importance of the moral command. A person cannot be commanded to feel or be inclined in a specific manner; however, good actions can be commanded because they rely not on the whims of human feeling but on the infinite capacity of the human will.

Essential to Kant's understanding of morality is his analysis of freedom of the will as a necessary precondition for the possibility of moral action. Kant explains that there is a distinction between ideas and concepts. Metaphysical ideas are not knowable because they do not enter the sphere of possible experience. Concepts are activated by and make experience possible. There is, however, one idea that Kant says is known purely by its necessity:

But among all the ideas of speculative reason freedom is also the only one the possibility of which we know *a priori*, though without having insight into it, because it is the condition of the moral law, which we do know (Kant & Gregor, 3-4).

The idea of freedom is completely removed from the causal world, so much so, that it is only knowable as a necessary condition for the possibility of a morally worthy act. It is, however, precisely the removal of the idea of freedom from the causal world that makes free action in the causal world possible.

Kant's emphasis on the will and freedom demonstrates his concern with ensuring that the Good is not considered a "thing" but is itself an uncaused cause that inspires due respect and duty. It is not some "thing" in the causal universe that you can point to and say this is "good." Instead, it

determines moral actions in that it must be represented in the human mind as an object of the will. The Good is therefore within us, however, we do not contain or control it. Kant explains the unique relationship of humanity with the Good:

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily we reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me. I do not seek or conjecture either of them as if they were veiled obscurities or extravagances beyond the horizon of my vision; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence. (Kant & Gregor, 133)

The moral law should inspire “admiration and awe” because, like the “starry heavens,” it is inexhaustible yet visible. For Kant, the moral law is visible, because unlike the transcendent Good of Plato, he recognizes its necessary role in human action. For the will to be “good without limitation,” it must will to be good, meaning will to act free from natural causation. Human beings must as much as possible avoid acting like things in the world, moral action is therefore acting in accordance to the possibility of acting freely.

### **Conclusion**

Kant establishes a universal moral law that is accessible to all human beings by redeeming Metaphysics as a necessary component of human cognition. The universal laws of nature allow for human beings to synthesize concepts to objects to represent them in their minds. The synthesis is caused because it is intermixed with natural things which are bound to the law of causality. Morality cannot be caused by natural factors; however, the moral law necessitates the very possibility of morality. The moral law is a necessary condition of the possibility of morality because it allows rational beings to act freely. Universal standards for morality that are knowable to all rational beings are not possible without the establishment of universal laws that are independent of human action. The moral law, therefore, must be good in itself, meaning that it is independent of human action, and it must also be the component of moral action that makes it possible. The Good is transcendentally necessary because as the center of a circle, it makes good actions possible. The moral law, as free from natural factors, impels human action with an increasing respect for the law as represented in the human mind. For Kant the representation of the law within human reason and will is an attractive force which impels good human action from duty. As Kant explains, “that just in this purity of [the moral law’s] origin lies their dignity, so that they can serve us as supreme practical principles” (Kant 1997, 23).

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