

KANT ON SYMPATHY AND MORAL MOTIVES

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to examine the role of sympathy in Kant's moral theory, in order to determine whether there is any essential change from the *Groundwork* to works of the 1790's (*Doctrine of Virtue* and the *Anthropology*).¹ The point of departure is the distinction between motive (the objective ground) and incentive (the subjective ground) of an action. I attempt to identify what constitutes a moral motive and a moral incentive in the philanthropist example of the *Groundwork*, and argue that the only moral incentive is the respect for moral law. The mere presence of sympathy, however, will not make an action morally unworthy, as long as this feeling is not what drives the agent to perform benevolent actions. The second part of the paper provides an account of sympathy in the *Doctrine of Virtue*. In the later works, Kant accepts that sympathy can be the incentive for moral action that is performed with the motive of duty, as long as it is useful to the accomplishment of the duty of humanity. I show that the duty of humanity plays the role of an intermediate principle that enables us to decide the right action in a particular case. Moreover, it works as a procedure to encourage good sympathetic feelings, which promote others' happiness, and to discourage feelings that lead to nothing but a shared state of pain. The third part of this essay asks whether Kant's moral account of sympathy is a coherent one, or whether there is an important turning point in the texts of the late 1790's.

I. The presence of sympathy and moral worth

What is the reason or cause of an action? We have two ways of answering this question: one lies in why we want to perform that action, another in what pulls us to perform it. Two different concepts apply: a motive is the intellectual reason for doing something; an incentive is what drives one to do it. A motive could, sometimes, provide one with an incentive, i.e., knowing that something is the right thing to do can push you to perform this action. However, at other times, while one can know that an action is the right thing to do, this mere thought lacks the necessary power to drive one to do it. One may need another, more powerful, incentive to do the right thing. The same happens with wrong actions; their motives may or may not provide an incentive. If you are the only heiress of a rich husband, although this fact can be considered a motive to kill him, it may not provide you with an incentive. When a detective tries to discover if the accused has a motive, he is

¹ An earlier version of this paper was written during my stay as a Visiting Scholar at the University of Pennsylvania in 1999, with a fellowship accorded by CAPES. I would like to thank Paul Guyer for suggestions and comments on the earlier version of this paper, and the *Kant Group* of the Department of Philosophy of the University of Pennsylvania, especially Cinthia Schossberger, Julian Wuerth, Lucas Thorpe, James Trainor and Autumn Fiester. Part of the earlier version of this paper has been presented at the Kant Congress in Berlin, 2000, and published in the proceedings of the *IX. Internationaler Kant-Kongress*, De Gruyter, 2001. The present version has been written with the help of a fellowship accorded by CNPQ.

attempting to determine if there is some reason for that person to have performed a crime. However, to find an intellectual reason for a murder is not to thereby determine the murderer, since this reason may not have been strong enough to drive the person in question to the crime.

In the *Groundwork*, Kant explains this distinction in terms of objective and subjective grounds for actions: “The subjective ground of desire is an incentive; the objective ground of volition is a motive” (G, 4:428).² The motive (*Bewegungsgrund*) is the objective ground of an action and the incentive (*Triebfeder*)³ is the subjective one. This distinction is crucial to contrasting actions according to duty with actions done from duty, because it underscores the distinction between what constitutes moral motive and incentive. The difference between moral and nonmoral incentives is explored in the philanthropist example, where we find two agents with different incentives for being benevolent. Neither of them has a “nonmoral motive like vanity or self-esteem” (G, 4:398); nevertheless, the first one has a natural inclination to do good for other persons, an inner happiness in making other people happier. Although his action has a moral motive, Kant maintains that in such a case an action of this kind, however right and however amiable it may be, has still no moral worth” (G, 4:398). Hence, a moral motive is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for a moral action. When does an action have moral worth? Kant answers with the case of the second philanthropist:

“Suppose that the mind of this friend of man is clouded with sorrow of his own which extinguished all sympathy with the fate of others, but he still had the power to help those in distress, though no longer stirred by the need of others because sufficiently occupied with his own and suppose that, when no longer moved by any inclination, he tears himself out of this deadly insensibility and does the action without any inclination, for the sake of duty alone, then for the first time his action has its genuine moral worth.” (G, 4:398)

Unlike the sympathetic philanthropist, the insensible one performs an action with moral worth; consequently, the absence of sympathy seems to make an action morally

² I will use the following abbreviations: **G** for *Groundwork*, **CPrR** for the *Critique of Practical Reason*, **DV** for *Doctrine of Virtue*, **Ant** for *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, **Ant M** for the Mrongovious transcription of the *Lectures on Anthropology* (1784/85) and **LE** for the *Lectures on Ethics*. The numbers refer to volume and page of the Academy Edition.

³ I follow here the translation of Mary Gregor that is adopted also in the volume *Practical Philosophy of The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Some commentators, however, instead of the motive/incentive distinction, use reason to refer to the objective ground of the will, and motive to the subjective side.

worthy. If we consider this example in light of its historical background, it is clearly provocative. To say that the benevolent action of the man who is not touched by the misery of others has moral worth obviously stresses Kant's difference with the empiricists, such as Hume and Hutcheson, who attribute to the natural feeling of sympathy the role of a virtuous incentive.⁴

But from the denial of moral worth to this empiricist's virtuous motive, should we conclude that the bare presence of sympathy makes an action morally unworthy? If the answer is "Yes", shouldn't we be astonished with the Kantian condemnation of a feeling that is highly valued by common sense? Is there an alternative interpretation of Kant's statements?

These questions have been raised by Richard Henson and Barbara Herman, among others. Henson⁵ attempts to answer two important questions related to this astonishing example of the philanthropist. (1) What does it mean to ascribe moral worth to an act? (2) Under what circumstances are we to say that one acts from duty? The first question could have two answers: (1a) "that the person was at the time of the act in a fit moral condition, that is, devotion to duty was alive and well in her heart",⁶ (1b) "that she deserves a special citation for gallantry in that she has won a hard battle in the eternal war against evil".⁷ The second question could also have two answers: (2a) "since the reverence for duty was present and would have sufficed to perform the action",⁸ (2b) "since cooperative motives were present, we shall say that the action was not done from duty".⁹ The (b) answers give us what Henson calls the battle citation model; the (a) answers provide us with the fitness report model. According to the battle citation model, an action has moral worth only if the respect for duty was the sole motive tending to the direction of the dutiful act. In the fitness report model, other inclinations could be present, provided that respect for duty was present and would have sufficed by itself, even though other motives were also present and might

⁴ Hume even doubts the existence of a completely unsympathetic creature, which he calls a "fancy monster". "One may venture to affirm, that there is no human creature, to whom the appearance of happiness (where envy or revenge has no place) does not give pleasure, that of misery, uneasiness." David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by J.B. Schneewind (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 52.

⁵ Henson, R, "What Kant might have said: moral worth and the overdetermination of a dutiful action", *Philosophical Review*, 88 (1979): 39-54.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 42

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 42

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 44

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 44

themselves have sufficed. According to the fitness citation model, there is no need to banish all other inclinations toward an action, provided that respect would have been a sufficient reason to cause the action. Henson suggests a possible distinction between the *Groundwork* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*. According to him, the *Groundwork* conforms to the battle citation model and the *Metaphysics of Morals* to the fitness model, by arguing that in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, sympathy could be present, as long as it is not an incentive. Let us consider two propositions: (A) an action has no moral worth if, at the time of performance, the agent has an inclination to perform it; (B) the moral action does not require the absence of inclination, provided that respect for duty is present and would suffice to produce the dutiful action. Henson claims that (A) applies to the *Groundwork*, while (B) applies to the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

Barbara Herman considers the same problem in her book *The Practice of Moral Judgment*,¹⁰ where she attempts to determine whether the absence of inclinations is a necessary condition of the fulfillment of a moral action. She believes this would be unconvincing: “The apparent consequence of this view ... is at the least, troubling in that it judges a grudging or resentfully performed dutiful act morally preferable to a similar act done from affection or with pleasure”.¹¹ She disagrees with the traditional interpretation for which the mere presence of a non-moral motive means a lack of moral worth. However, she points out some problems with the idea of sufficiency employed by Henson in the fitness model. She goes further and proposes to strengthen the interpretation of the fitness model.

Suppose that a shopkeeper has two sufficient motives to be honest: the moral one and the profit one. A shopkeeper with a sufficient moral motive will perform honest actions even if the profit motive were absent. Therefore, according to the fitness model, this would be a moral action. Herman argues that the fact that the moral motive is sufficient in this situation does not imply it would be in another one. If the profit motive is a strong one and drives the shopkeeper to act dishonestly, then the moral motive could not be a sufficient one. Herman claims that a moral action takes place, not only if the moral motive is a sufficient one in a specific situation, but if it is strong enough to prevail over other possible inclinations against the moral law that could arise in different situations. “ On a greater –

¹⁰ Barbara Herman, “On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty”, in: *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp.1-22.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 1.

strength interpretation of the fitness model, an action can have moral worth”- she says- “only if the moral motive is strong enough to prevail over the other inclinations”. In the strength interpretation of the fitness model, we will praise the man whose moral motive prevails over nonmoral motives, bringing us back to the battle citation model. Hermann explains: “A greater- strength interpretation of sufficiency would then undermine the claim that there are two notions of moral worth in Kant, and leave just with the battle-citation model’s powerful moral motive”¹². The idea of sufficiency, however, is not enough to determine if an action has had moral worth. Hermann points out that even if tomorrow the circumstances change and the dutiful action as a result is not done, this does not imply that the action that is done today does not have moral worth.

Hermann agrees with Henson that it is natural to accept that in a morally worthy action, moral motives may be present, as long as they are not the reason for the agent to act. However, she points out that it is not obvious how a motive could be present and yet not operative.

In order to understand Kant’s idea of moral worth, we should make a distinction between motives, incentives, desires or causes. Kantian motives are not desires or causes in the sense of vector-like forces. Desires are incentives (*Triebfedern*) not motives to actions. Following this line of reasoning, she concludes that the doctrine of moral worth can accept overdetermination with respect of incentives, not motives.

In any case she accepts that the sole presence of inclination does not turn an action into a nonmoral one. She acknowledges that in the case of sympathy, its sole presence does not make the benevolent action morally unworthy. The idea that the mere presence of sympathy does not affect the moral worth of an action, as long as it is not the incentive of that action, is now widely accepted by commentators. In the analysis of the example of the *Groundwork*, Korsgaard claims that when sympathy is present, but the person is motivated sufficiently by duty, the action has moral worth and “yet her native sympathy will contribute to her enjoyment of the action”.¹³ The thesis maintained by both Herman and Korsgaard, that if sympathy is not the moral incentive of an action the mere presence of it does not decrease the moral worth of that action, is corroborated by the difference Kant establishes between the principle of utility and Hutcheson’s praise of moral feeling. In the

¹² Herman, op. cit. p.9

Groundwork, while discussing Hutcheson's account of sympathy, Kant assumes that this feeling is closer to morality than the principle of utility, which only teaches us how to calculate better. He explains the difference:

“Moral feeling ... nevertheless remains closer to morality and its dignity inasmuch as it shows virtue the honor of ascribing to her immediately the delight and esteem we have for her and does not, as it were, tell her to her face that it is not her beauty but only our advantage that attaches us to her.” (G, 4:443)

Even if both the criticized principle of utility and moral feeling provide only empirical principles, the latter will be preferred to the former, since it is closer to morality. Nevertheless, moral feeling is still classified as a material principle and does not have the required purity of a moral incentive. Consequently, both in the *Groundwork* and in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, sympathy and other moral feelings are inadequate only when they are taken as determining ground of the will, because in that case, we would have a subjective and empirical principle, and not the formal one, the only one that can be the principle of the autonomy of the will.

However, in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant explicitly states that we should use sympathy as an incentive to benevolent actions when the sole respect for moral law is not sufficient.

“Sympathetic joy and sadness (*sympathia moralis*) are sensible feelings of pleasure or displeasure (which are therefore to be called “aesthetic”) at another's state of joy or pain (shared feeling, sympathetic feeling). Nature has already implanted in human beings receptivity to those feelings. But to use this as a mean to promoting active and rational benevolence is still a particular, though only a conditional, duty.” (DV, 6:456)

In this quotation, Kant explicitly admits the possibility of the use of sympathy as an incentive, a mean to activate benevolent actions. More than that, to use these sensible feelings is a duty called duty of humanity. It seems that we are confronted with a changing view about the pertinence of sympathy as a moral incentive, since there is a great difference between the statements of the *Groundwork* and those of the *Doctrine of Virtue*. In order to solve this apparent incompatibility, we should look again to the philanthropist example, to see if Kant leaves open the possibility of this later modification in the account of sympathy.

¹³ Korsgaard, K., *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 59.

II. The four interpretations of the philanthropist

Herman interprets the philanthropist example according to what has been called the incorporation thesis and states that “moral worth does not turn in the presence or absence of inclination, but on its inclusion in the agent’s maxim as a determining ground of action: as a motive”¹⁴. She draws a distinction between incentives (*Triebfedern*) and motives (*Bewegungsgrunden*). The first are desires, passions, inclinations; the latter are reasons for actions. She writes:

“Kantian motives are neither desires nor causes. An agent’s motives reflect his reasons for acting. An agent may take the presence of a desire to give him a reason for action as he may also find reasons in his passions, principles, or practical interests. All of these, in themselves, are incentives (*Triebfedern*), not motives to action. It’s the work of a rational agent that incentives determine the will only as they are taken up into the agent’s maxim.”¹⁵

Herman accepts the incorporation thesis and claims that incentives determine the will only when they are taken up into the agent’s maxim. Suppose that I have the following maxim of action: “I should not give money directly to people in need, but only to public shelters” or “I should not give money to beggars because I have to pay my loan”. Nevertheless, suppose the pain of someone in need affects me, and disregarding my previous decision, I give him money. In this situation, the agent would act from the incentive of sympathy but without taking it into its maxim. This situation is not allowed by the incorporation thesis.

In the *Groundwork* example the first philanthropist acts having sympathy as an incentive, where sympathy assumes a form of pleasure for the happiness of the other. Kant explains that the sympathetic philanthropist is the one who, finding “an inner pleasure in spreading happiness” (4:398), is pushed to accomplish the dutiful act by the force of his sympathy. An immediate inclination drove the agent to the benevolent action, which makes sympathy his incentive. However, Kant does not specify what the maxim of the action was.

The second philanthropist acts from the motive of duty. Nevertheless, he needs a feeling to insure that the action will be done: this is the feeling of respect. In order to perform an action, the will should be determined in two different ways: the objective and subjective ways. As Kant declares:

¹⁴ Herman, *op. cit.* p.11

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

“Now an action from duty is to put aside entirely the influence of inclination and with it every object of the will; hence there is left for the will nothing that could determine it except objectively the law and subjectively pure respect for this practical law.” (G, 4:401)

On the *Groundwork*'s picture, Kant requires a feeling to predispose the will, something that can be done by reason alone. Kant replies to a possible critique that, as sentimentalists before him, he needs a feeling to excite an action that cannot be done from reason alone:

“It could be objected that I only seek refuge, behind the word respect, in an obscure feeling, instead of distinctly resolving the question by means of a concept of reason. But though respect is a feeling, it is not one received by means of influence; it is instead, a feeling self wrought by means of a rational concept and therefore specifically different from all feelings of the first kind, which can be reduced to inclination or fear.” (G, 4:401)

Kant accepts that a feeling is necessary to determinate the will subjectively; nevertheless, this feeling is of a different kind. It is not received from outside or reduced to inclination or fear, but produced by a rational concept. Therefore, he does not deny the necessity of a feeling, but only claims that this feeling is of a different kind; it is a moral feeling¹⁶ created by the moral motive. “Immediate determination of the will - Kant claims - by means of the law and consciousness of this is called respect, so that is regarded as the effect of the law on the subject, and not as the cause of the law” (G, 4:401).

The two philanthropists can be analyzed in four possible situations of philanthropy, two where the incentive of action is sympathy (S situations -type) and two where the incentive is the respect for moral law (R situations -type): (R1) sympathy is not present and the good action is performed by the motive of law and the incentive of respect, (R2) sympathy is present, but the motive is the moral law and the incentive is the feeling of

¹⁶ The importance of the main role played by respect is also emphasized in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, where the objective principle should also be subjectively effective: “Now, if by incentive (*elater animi*) is understood the subjective determining ground of the will of a being whose reason does not by its nature necessarily conform with objective law, then it will follow: first, that no incentive at all can be attributed to the divine will but that the incentive of the human will (and of the will of every created rational being) can never be anything other than moral law; and thus that the objective determining ground must always and quite alone be also subjectively sufficient determining ground of action if this is not merely to fulfill the *letter* of the law without containing its *spirit*” (CPrR, 5:72). Kant argues that moral law must be sufficient to determine the will subjectively. It might be objected that Kant does not explain how a law can be a subjective ground for an action. “It’s an insoluble problem”, he argues. The strategy to solve it is to suggest that the effect of the moral law as an incentive is only a negative one (CPrR, 5:73) and that “the negative effect on feeling is itself a feeling”. He shows

respect, (S1) incentive is sympathy, but it is not taken into the agent's maxim, (S2) incentive is sympathy and it is taken into the agent's maxim. I shall show how S1 is not allowed by the Incorporation thesis, and R2 is accepted by the Fitness Model, although subjected to Herman's criticism.

The case in which respect is the incentive can be understood in two different ways: The first (R1), in which sympathy is not present; the second (R2), when sympathy is present, but the agent does not act from it as his incentive, but only from respect for law. The R2 situation is the one accepted by the fitness model, although subjected to Herman criticism of how could an incentive be present and yet not operative at all.

We can also have two different versions of the sympathetic philanthropist. In situation (S1), the agent acts from the incentive of sympathy but without taking it into his/her maxim, which is "I have to be benevolent because it's my duty". This case is forbidden by the incorporation thesis.

Let's consider a second situation (S2) when the incentive is taken into my maxim: "I should use my natural feeling of sympathy to help me to perform benevolent actions". In the *Groundwork* picture, the mere fact that sympathy plays the role of incentive decreases the moral worth of an action. In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, however, Kant seems to authorize that S2 situations should be promoted by rational agents, when respect is not a sufficient incentive. Perhaps the possibility of taking sympathy into the maxim of a moral action will rely on an account of a rational control over a feeling, which was not yet in the horizon of the *Groundwork*. I will try to determine if there is a modification in the later texts regarding the possibility of the cultivation of sympathy.

III. Sympathy, love and *humanitas*

The same sympathy that has no intrinsic moral worth in the *Groundwork* and *Critique of Practical Reason*, is considered in the *Doctrine of Virtue* as belonging among the main duties to other human beings. Sympathy, gratitude and beneficence are duties of love. I shall suggest that:

that the feeling of respect has both a negative aspect -the pain caused by the humiliation of self conceit- and a positive aspect. This is the only example of a feeling connected to pain and joy that could be known *a priori*.

-There is a different role assigned to sympathy in the *Doctrine of Virtues*, when contrasted to that of the *Groundwork*, and that in the former sympathy plays the role of a moral incentive;

-Kant distinguishes between two kinds of sympathy, one related to the *humanitas practica*, where the capacity to share the feelings of others is useful to actions that promote other's happiness, the other related to *humanitas aesthetica*, where the sharing of others' feelings does not necessarily lead to practical actions. While the latter sympathy is a natural and irrational feeling, the former could be cultivated and trained by reason.

Let's begin by situating sympathy in the *Doctrine of Virtue*. Virtue is defined as an end that is, at the same time, a duty. There are two ends that are also duties: **one's own perfection** and **the happiness of others** (DV, 6:386). These two ends give us two different kinds of duties: duties to oneself and duties of virtue to others. The duty of love is one of the duties to others. The difficulty in understanding how a duty of love (*Liebespflicht*) can be a part of the pure reason construction is that love was always considered as an empirical virtue or a passion of the soul. Therefore-Kant argues- the virtue of love is not the same as the feeling of love:

“In this context, however, **love** is not to be understood as *feeling* (ästhetisch), that is, as pleasure in the perfection of other men; love is not to be understood as *delight* in them (since others cannot put one under obligation to have feelings). It must rather be thought as the maxim of *benevolence* (practical love), which results in beneficence.” (DV, 6: 449)

In this paragraph, Kant distinguishes love-virtue from love-feeling. Practical love, the duty to promote others' happiness, is different from the delightful passion of the soul. It's not a matter of pleasure or joy; otherwise, we would have to admit the necessity of a pathological feeling as a source of moral value. If Kant were to admit that the virtue of love is identical to the sentiment of love, he would be avowing that the pure practical reason doctrine can admit an empirical support. For that reason, Kant aims at distinguishing the virtue of love from the love that gives us pleasure or satisfaction, even if it is a pleasure taken from another person's happiness.

In the paragraph 34 of the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant admits that sympathetic feelings also play the role of practical love, in addition to beneficence and benevolence. Should sympathy be considered as having moral worth, even if it is a natural feeling? Kant answers

this question positively. Going beyond the spirit of the *Groundwork*, Kant proposes in that paragraph that we use sympathy, this “feeling of pleasure and displeasure for another’s state of joy and pain, in order to promote rational benevolence, e.g., sympathy can be a good natural encouragement for practical love.”

Kant presents us with a more complex theory about the role of sympathetic feelings. Although he thinks that sympathy can be an incentive of a moral action (or a natural incitement to practical love), this does not mean that all sharing of feelings is good. In order to show this, humanity is divided into *humanitas practica*, “the capacity and the will to share the feelings of others”, and *humanitas aesthetica*, “the receptivity, given by nature itself, to the feeling of joy and sadness in common with others” (DV, 6:456). The first is desirable, but not the second, because the first is free and depends upon the will whereas the second spreads naturally among persons “like the susceptibility to warmth or contagious diseases” (DV, 6:457).

The reason to honor *humanitas practica* and criticize *humanitas aesthetica* is that compassion, when not accompanied by a practical action, is a way to increase evil in the world. If a friend is suffering and I cannot do anything to assuage his pain, there is no such duty to be sympathetic to his feelings, because this would just make me increase the suffering and, therefore, the ills in the world.

Kant undoubtedly recognizes the possibility that sympathetic feelings play the role of a moral incentive, when the representation of duty alone would not be a sufficient one, “for sympathy is still one of the impulses that nature has implanted in us to do what the representation of duty alone might not accomplish” (DV, 6:458). Sympathy teams up with moral incentive (respect) in order to perform the moral action. If the representation of the law is not sufficient to accomplish it, it’s a duty to promote our natural good feelings to add a natural incentive to a moral one. Then, going beyond the spirit of the *Groundwork*, Kant acknowledges that cultivated sympathy can be the incentive of a moral action that is performed from the motive of duty. In this case, duty should be understood in a two- fold way. First, it is a duty to perform the right action. Second, I have a derived duty to use natural feelings when the regard of the rightness of the action is not sufficient to trigger the action.

Sympathy, when controlled and trained by the will, can play the role of a moral incentive. And that's the reason why humanity is divided into free and unfree humanity. Free humanity (*humanitas practica*) is the capacity and the will to use sympathetic feelings to promote others' happiness. It includes a procedure that consists in deciding in which case I should use my natural feelings. The helpful Stoic¹⁷ who decides he will not trigger his own sympathetic feelings does so because there is nothing he can do to help his friend. However, if there is anything he can do to help his friend, he should activate his sympathetic capacity. Hence, in this new account, sympathy is taken as a moral incentive, because it's supposed to be controlled by reason.

In the *Groundwork's* picture, Kant did not accept the view that sympathy could play the role of a moral incentive, even if it could be present. The same account was given in the student's transcriptions of the *Anthropology* taught the same year that the *Groundwork* was published. One of the reasons that makes sympathy inappropriate as an incentive is its sensible inscription. As is stated in Mrongovius transcription of the *Lectures of Anthropology* (Mrongovius):

“Now man has created physiological sympathy that concerns joy and sorrow. If it becomes affect, then man is very unhappy. Man become by sympathy only tender and doesn't help the others.”

In the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant assumes that, besides physiological and helpless sympathy, there is another one which can be used to effectively help others. In order to accomplish this task, we should, for instance, go to places where people suffer. It is therefore a duty “not to avoid the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found but rather to seek them out” (DV, 6:457). This *habitus* does not mean to develop unreflecting, pitiful characters. Just as a medical student should be desensitized to blood before beginning to practice surgery, we should make our natural sympathetic emotions arise in order to be capable of controlling and using them on appropriate

¹⁷ “It was a sublime way of thinking that the Stoic ascribed to his wise men when he had him say ‘I wish for a friend, not that he might help me in poverty, sickness, etc., but rather that I might stand by him and rescue a human being’. But the same wise man, when he could not rescue his friend, said to himself “what is it to me?”. In other words, he rejected compassion”(DV, 6:456).

occasions. However, our sympathy should never tell us when to be benevolent;¹⁸ the rational duty of humanity will decide when to trigger the sympathetic feeling.

Should we conclude that Kant finally acknowledges a moral role to feelings and emotions and assumes that we are not passive with respect to them?

IV. A sentimentalistic turning point?

From the *Groundwork* to the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant apparently changes from a formal theory to a theory of the cultivation of feelings. The positive consideration of sympathy in the *Doctrine of Virtue* seems to have led some commentators, like Nancy Sherman and Marcia Baron, to maintain that Kant, at least in the later works, became an enthusiastic defender of the moral role of emotions in the moral domain. In order to draw the conclusion that we still require pathological emotions to know when and where to apply moral principles, Sherman refers Kant's statement that we should not avoid places where we shall find the poor and sick because this is one of the "impulses nature has implanted in us to do what the thought of duty alone might not accomplish" (DV, 6:457). She calls this function the perceptual claim of emotions. It seems to me that the process Kant points to is the opposite as explained by Sherman. The pathological emotions don't enable us to know when and where to apply moral principles, rather this is decided by the duty of humanity, which rationally figures out in which cases we should activate our natural sympathy and in which we should prevent it from arising. Pathological feelings, according to Kant, will be always blind to decide the right action in the right context, therefore the supposed perceptual claim of emotions is misleading. The novelty of the *Doctrine of Virtue* is the use we can make of the specific feeling of sympathy in cases previously decided by reason, when the respect for law is not a sufficient incentive to excite the action

Marcia Baron also attributes to emotions a major role in Kant's philosophy. In *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology*, she aims at showing that "it is a misconception that Kant maintains that inclinations (and everything else affective) are bad and that we are not responsible for our inclinations and emotions because we are passive with respect to them".¹⁹ She also claims that if we take into account the texts like the *Religion* and the

¹⁸See Nancy Sherman "The Place of Emotions in Kantian Morality", in *Identity, Character and Morality*, ed. Owen Flanagan and Rorty (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), pp.158-159.

¹⁹ Marcia Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost Without Apology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p.194.

Anthropology “that Kant does not hold that we are passive with respect to our emotions and feelings is easy to establish”.²⁰ It is a courageous hypothesis to state that at least in the later texts we are not passive regarding our feelings and emotions and that, consequently, they have an intrinsic moral worth. Since we cannot deny the clear praise of the non-sympathetic philanthropist in the *Groundwork*, we should ask if there is really a serious modification in the later texts. One way to test the hypothesis that something changed between the years of *Groundwork* and the texts of 1790’s is to analyze the theory of passions and affects in two versions of *Anthropology*, comparing the Mrongovius transcriptions of the *Lectures on Anthropology* (1784/85) with the published version of *Anthropology* (1798).

The Mrongovius transcriptions of the *Lectures on Anthropology* of 1784/85 define affect as a feeling, while passion belongs to the faculty of desire.²¹ The account of both passions and affects is negative, “affect is like an inebriation that makes one sleep, passion is like a lasting madness” (AntM, 25, 2:1341). In the *Anthropology*, published in 1798, passions and affects do not obtain a better account: they are considered “illnesses of the mind”, because they “exclude the sovereignty of reason”(Ant & 73). Affect is a storm that makes the reflection impossible, while passion is a cancerous store for practical reason (Ant &74).

The general account of these emotions does not change in these thirteen years, and it seems contrary to the text to ascribe any positive role to them or to maintain that Kant attributes to the rational agent responsibility for what excludes the sovereignty of reason.

Since in the *Doctrine of Virtue* sympathy can be trained in order to become a helpful incentive, we should begin by considering whether this feeling pertains to the class of affects. In the Mrongovius transcriptions, Kant maintains that if sympathy becomes an affect, it is not considered useful from the moral point of view, because man is thereby unhappy and cannot help others (AntM, 25,2: 1348). In the Collins transcriptions of the *Lectures on Ethics*, taught in the same academic year of 84/85, the idea of a loving heart that derives satisfaction from helping others is also considered unimportant from the moral point of view. If this inclination should be satisfied, it’s only because it’s a sensible need, not because of its moral worth. Thus, the philosopher seeks a rational principle of benevolence. It is not the task of the moralist to cultivate a “kindliness of heart and

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.195.

temper”, because such a temper is based on man’s inclinations and needs, which “give rise to an irregular sort of behavior” (LE, Collins, 27:415).

Thirteen years later in the published *Anthropology*, Kant claims “the prudent man must at no time be in a state of emotion, not even in that of sympathy with the woes of his best friend” (Ant, & 75). He admits that sympathy is a magnanimous emotion; however, it is helpless and only “can be can be excused in a man whose eyes are shining with tears, as long as he does not allow them to fall in drops, and as long as he can avoid accompanying the tears with sobbing, thus making disagreeable music” (Ant, & 76). However, he draws a distinction between sensitivity and sensibility:

“Sensitivity is a faculty or a power that either permits the states of pleasure or displeasure, or even keeps them from being felt. Sensitivity is accompanied by a choice. Sentimentality, on the other hand, is a weakness because of its interest in the condition of others who could play the sentimentalist at will, and even affect that person against his will.” (Ant, & 62)

A man, for instance, is using his sensitivity when he takes into account the delicate feelings of his wife and children, because “the delicacy of his sensation is necessary for generosity”. But if the man just feels the others’ feelings, without any decision, or rational choice, he is merely being passive, and should be called “silly and childish”.

Consequently, if there is no radical change in various versions of the *Anthropology* related to passions and affects in general, we can see a minor difference concerning sympathy: there can be a rational decision about being affected by the feeling of others persons. The same difference appears in the *Doctrine of Virtue* about the possibility of sympathy being able to operate as a moral incentive. My thesis is that there is a more sophisticated account that is shown in the *Doctrine of Virtue* and in *Anthropology (1798)*, where we can see a division between sensible and practical sympathy. The first kind of sympathy is related to sentimentality and means the passive capacity to feel the joy and pain of others. Since we are passive with respect to this feeling, it should be called an effect. However, practical sympathy involves choice and we can train our natural response to the appropriate situation. We should conclude that we can be active regarding this feeling, since we can cultivate it to the appropriate moral response in the right situation. This does not imply, however, the possibility of an overall cultivation of all affects and

²¹ See *Vorlesungen uber Anthropology*, Mrongovius, 25, 2:1340.

even less the idea that we are not passive with respect to our emotions in general. The possibility of a radical change from the first formal theory to a non-formal one, which would highly praise emotions, should be avoided, because we find in the Mrongovius notes the same account of passions and affects as in the published *Anthropology* of 1797 and in the *Doctrine of Virtue*. In general, we can answer that the *Groundwork*'s claim that affects and passions have no intrinsic moral value remains true. However, there is a further development of the "subjective conditions of receptiveness to the concept of duty" (DV, 6:399), feelings that help the mind's receptivity of moral concepts, which includes, besides moral feelings, conscience, love of human beings and respect for oneself. Since they are natural predispositions, there is no duty to acquire them, but only to cultivate them, when we are endowed with such feelings. However, the consciousness of obligation cannot rely on feelings. This is especially clear related to moral feeling, the pleasure or displeasure that we feel when we know that our actions are consistent with or contrary to the law. Kant explains why we cannot call this feeling a moral sense:

"It is inappropriate to call this feeling a moral sense, for by the word 'sense' is usually understood a theoretical capacity for perception directed toward an object, whereas moral feeling (like pleasure and displeasure in general) is something merely subjective, which yields no cognition." (DV, 6:400)

Once we admit that good and evil are not directly intuited by a feeling, we can, however, admit a sensible and natural susceptibility to be moved by what pure moral reason dictates. This is clear in the case of sympathy, which can be trained to correctly perform this role. If we consider that these feelings can be also called emotions, then it is true that we can cultivate some emotions that can ease the task of reason. Nevertheless, Kant does not extend this position to affects or passions, that is, to the totality of our affective states. Kant, in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, continues to sponsor the non-sympathetic view of humanity when he remarks that "our species, on closer acquaintance, is not particular lovable" (DV, 6:402); nevertheless, he praises the love that is not a cause, but an effect of benevolent actions,²² and can be acquired by habituation. Practical sympathy, that is not an affect, but a sensible feeling that can be modified and cultivated by reason, is related to this love that

²² "So they say 'you ought to love your neighbor as yourself' does not mean that you ought immediately (first) to love him and (afterwards) by means of this love to do good to him. It means, rather, *do good* to your fellow human beings, and your beneficence will produce love of them in you (as an aptitude of the inclination to beneficence in general)." (DV, 6:402)

can be an effect of the practice of good actions. It is effective and helpful to the accomplishment of beneficence, instead of being a mere condition of pain or joy, which blindly affects people like a contagious disease.

V. Conclusion

The possibility of cultivation of sympathy in the *Doctrine of Virtue* clearly points out a different account of this feeling if compared with the *Groundwork*. In the latter the only morally worthy incentive is the respect for moral law, while in the former sympathy can also occupy the place of an incentive of a moral action. This is due to a development and refinement of the account of sympathy. Kant seems to acknowledge in the later texts the existence of two kinds of sympathy: the physiological and the practical ones. The latter can be cultivated, while the former is out of control by the will.

The acceptance of the moral role of practical sympathy does not imply that Kant finally attributes a main role to emotions in moral life, since they are incapable, by themselves, to determine the right action to be performed in a determinate situation. The possibility of cultivation of sympathy does not entail that this feeling can decide which is the right action to accomplish. This will always be the task of reason.