

A Critical Analysis of Ross's Critique of Kant's View of Moral Worth

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Moral worth, or creditworthiness, is important for judging both action and character, and, as a topic, brings together both action theory and ethics. Immanuel Kant's view of moral worth has been influential in debates about this issue, with Kant holding that "An action from duty has its moral worth...in the maxim according to which it is resolved upon" (Kant 1785 p. 15). W.D. Ross, a 19th and 20th century intuitionist, offered the clearest articulation of his critique of Kant's view of moral worth in his 1929 lecture, "The Nature of Morally Good Action." Sections of Ross's 1930 book, *The Right and the Good*, offer a nearly identical critique. This essay presents a critical study of W.D. Ross's critique of Kant's view of moral worth as it appears in his 1929 lecture and *The Right and the Good*. More specifically, the essay argues that Ross misinterprets Kant's view of the moral worth of actions motivated by 'mixed motives' in order to frame his own view of moral worth as a favorable alternative.

First, the essay does interpretive work to establish that Ross's 1929 subject is indeed what other theorists would call the issue of moral worth. Second, it reconstructs the interpretation of Kant's view that Ross offers in his 1929 lecture and explains the points of disagreement with Kant that Ross states in that work. Third, it explains what Kant and Ross mean by the term 'duty.' Fourth, it uses textual evidence from Kant's *Groundwork* to assess whether Ross's criticisms of Kant are accurate. The conclusion offers an independent judgment as to whether Ross's view of moral worth represents a favorable alternative to Kant's view, apart from Ross's own specific arguments for this claim in the 1929 lecture.

I. Ross's 1929 subject is moral worth, which he assumes is a kind of moral value

To begin, it may be helpful to establish that the subject of Ross's lecture, "The Nature of Morally Good Action," is moral worth.

Many contemporary theorists understand moral worth to be a property that an action has when the agent who does it is deserving of moral credit or moral praise for doing it. Importantly, moral worth is supposed to be distinct from moral rightness. Finally, there seems to be a consensus among historical and contemporary theorists working on the issue that whether or not an action has moral worth is centrally related to whether or not the agent's motive in doing the action is morally good. That is, all actions with moral worth are thought to be such that they are done from morally good motives. There remains, however, disagreement over which motives for action count as morally

good motives of the kind that actions with moral worth are supposed, necessarily, to have.

Which motives are morally good is a central topic of Ross's 1929 lecture, "The Nature of Morally Good Action." This feature of his discussion there is what indicates that Ross is concerned with what other theorists, including Kant, would call the issue of moral worth. Ross, however, frames the issue in terms of the "nature of morally good action" and "the morally good," without ever directly using the term "moral worth."

But what is a morally good action? It is, we have said, the doing of something from a good motive. What motives, then, are good? We may start with Kant's view that the only morally good motive is the sense of duty. (Ross 1929 p. 252)

In this passage, Ross explains that what he means by "a morally good action" is "the doing of something from a good motive." Ross echoes this stance in *The Right and the Good* where he writes that "the moral goodness of morally good actions arises from... 'a certain kind of motivation'" (Ross 1930 p. 157). By the term 'motive,' generally, Ross seems to mean something like 'the agent's subjective reason for doing an action' (Ross 1929 p. 252). He then introduces "Kant's view that the only morally good motive is the sense of duty," which establishes that by talking about 'morally good actions,' Ross is talking about what Kant means by 'actions with moral worth.'

We can see that Ross's morally good actions are Kant's actions with moral worth by considering that Kant holds that "it is not until [the subjective representation of the moral law determines one's will that one's] conduct has actual moral worth" (Kant 1785 p. 15). This line says that an action's having been done from duty, or "respect for the law" (p. 16), is necessary and sufficient for its having moral worth. Taking Ross's statement that morally good action is action done from a morally good motive, we also get in Kant's terminology that what Ross means by 'morally good action' is action done from a good will (i.e. motive), which for Kant, is just action from duty; Kant says that "the concept of duty...contains that of a good will" (Kant 1785 p. 12). Since Kant holds that an action's having been done from duty is necessary and sufficient for its possession of moral worth and would consider what Ross calls 'morally good actions' to be those actions that are done from duty, it is clear that an action's 'moral goodness,' in Ross's terminology, is necessary and sufficient for its possession of what Kant would call 'moral worth.'

Since he does seem to be talking about what others would call 'actions with moral worth' in talking about morally good actions, Ross assumes in his discussion of

morally good action that moral worth is a form of moral value. In another text, *The Right and the Good*, Ross calls the term 'good' "the universal adjective of value" (Ross 1930 p. 106). Thus, in calling actions with moral worth, or those done from morally good motives, "morally good actions," Ross seems to be attributing a value property to the actions he is talking about that other actions do not possess. Leaving aside the issue of whether or not this view is correct, it seems clear enough that it is fair to call what others have labeled under the heading of 'moral worth' the subject of Ross's 1929 lecture. Furthermore, by calling actions with moral worth "morally good actions," Ross implies that moral worth is a kind of moral value.

II. Reconstructing Ross's critique of Kant's view of moral worth

This section aims to summarize the positions Ross takes against what he would call Kant's view of 'morally good actions,' which I have just argued are equivalent to what Kant might call 'actions with moral worth.' Both 'morally good actions' and 'actions with moral worth' are just supposed by their respective theorists to be actions done from 'morally good motives,' which, for Kant, might also be called actions from duty, or, elsewhere in Kant's work, 'free actions.'

Ross's first point of contention with Kant's account of 'morally good motives for action' is that there are more morally good motives than just the motive of duty. After noting that the question of "whether any motive other than sense of duty is morally good at all" can only be answered by "direct appreciation" (Ross 1929 p. 254), Ross states the following view as preferential to Kant's view:

Is any motive other than sense of duty and love morally good? Love, if we take it widely enough so as to include any direct interest in the well-being of another person or other persons, will cover most of the ground...But we must also recognize as morally good the motives that lie at the basis of courage and self-restraint...When a man sets himself to master his fears or his passions, from a direct wish to do so, not from the sense of duty, he is exhibiting a quality which we admire for its own sake, and which has a goodness that only action can have; and this may fairly be called moral goodness. (Ross 1929 p. 254)

Although Ross says, here, that there are other morally good motives than the sense of duty, he grants to Kant that "the sense of duty is the morally *best* motive" (Ross 1929 p. 252), and concludes that the motives referenced in the quoted passage are "less good than sense of duty and yet good with a goodness that only motives to

action can have” (Ross 1929 p. 255). Similar passages from *The Right and the Good* elaborate the same points, where Ross says:

[I]t seems clear that the desire to do one’s duty is the morally best motive. (Ross 1930 p. 164)

Suppose, now, that love and sense of duty incline us to the *same* act. Will our action be morally better if we act from the first motive or from the second? It seems clear that since the sense of duty is recognized as the better motive when the two are in conflict, it is still the better when they are in agreement. (Ross 1930 p. 164)

[W]e can, while agreeing with Kant that the sense of duty is the best motive, justify the generally entertained preference for actions in which some more instinctive generous impulse is present as well. And experience suggests that the presence and effectiveness of instinctive generous emotions are by no means adverse to the operation of the sense of duty. It is *not* the case that men in whom the sense of duty is strong are usually less affected by the generous emotions than those in whom it is weak. And it is possible, as we have tried to show, to value highly the presence and operation of warm personal feeling, without disparaging, as it has so often been thought necessary to do, the supreme moral value of the sense of duty. (Ross 1930 p. 172-173)

What Ross takes to be his second main point of disagreement with Kant in the 1929 lecture concerns the “moral value” of actions “done from a mixture of two or more motives” (Ross 1929 p. 255). The following passage evidences Ross’s position that cases involving such actions are possible.

We are familiar, I think, with cases in which conscience alone or self-interest alone would not have induced someone to do some difficult act, but the two together have induced him to do it. The activities of most statesmen are probably correctly attributed to the co-operation of ambition, party feeling, and patriotism, in varying proportions; and it does not seem as if we can always say, “This act was due to ambition and that to party feeling and that to patriotism”; in many of their acts it seems that two, or perhaps all three, of these motives are at work. (Ross 1929 p. 255)

An exact copy of this passage appears in the chapter called "Moral Goodness" in *The Right and the Good* (Ross 1930 p. 169). Ross describes his disagreement with Kant on the same subject in the 1929 lecture where he writes:

Where, however, a higher and a lower motive do cooperate in inducing us to act, what degree of moral worth has the action—more, or less, than if it had been done from the higher motive only? Kant assumes that its worth will be less, since it will no longer be “pure” (Ross 1929 p. 256)

Once again, *The Right and the Good* contains a corresponding (verbatim) passage (Ross 1930 p. 170). In this passage, Ross attributes to Kant the view that actions done from more than one motive, where the motives involved differ in their moral status as good or not, always have less moral worth than actions done from duty alone. Ross’s proposed alternative view, which he defends against Kant’s view, is the following:

It is, however, possible to take quite a different view; to hold that, for instance, so long as sense of duty is effectively present, the addition of a morally indifferent motive does not lessen the value of the action, and the addition of a good, though less good, motive increases it. (Ross 1929 p. 257-258; Ross 1930 p. 171)

This proposed Rossian alternative view says that so long as the motive of duty is present as one of the motives for which an action is done and the rest of the motives for which the action is done are not bad motives, the moral worth of the action is not reduced by the fact that the agent who performed it did so from more motives than just the motive of duty.

III. Duty in Ross and Kant

We have seen that Kant holds that actions with moral worth are actions done from duty and that Ross agrees with Kant that the so-called ‘motive of duty’ is the morally best motive. It may be helpful to include a section that elaborates in more detail what Ross and Kant consider duty, or the ‘sense of duty’ to be.

Kant defines duty in the *Groundwork* where he says “*duty is the necessity of an action from respect for the law*” (Kant 1785 p. 16). Kant’s proximate remarks on what he calls ‘respect’ suggest that he envisions ‘respect’ to be a mental-state-type. In particular, Kant’s description of ‘respect’ as having an object suggests the interpretation of

‘respect’ as the kind of motivating mental state whose object is the moral law. He writes that only “the mere law by itself, can be an object of respect and thus a command” (Kant 1785 p. 16).

That ‘respect’ is used by Kant to refer to the kind of motivating mental state that has a particular kind of object has implications for what Kant could mean when he says that *duty is the necessity of an action from respect for the law*.” This definition seems to say that duty is what it is called when the kind of state called respect makes a particular action necessary. If we consider what it could mean for ‘respect’ to make an action ‘necessary,’ we see that the sense of necessity involved in the definition of duty is plausibly causal. It seems like Kant is saying that an action from duty is a necessary causal consequence of an agent’s possession of a particular kind of mental state, whose object is the moral law.

There is further evidence that indicates that, on Kant’s view, ‘respect’ is a cognitive rather than noncognitive state. That is, the state called ‘respect’ is not one that would be classified as a desire state or an affective state, and must therefore be a kind of representational state in the same family as belief states. That ‘respect’ is a type of cognitive mental state is suggested by Kant’s distinction of ‘respect’ from a kind of state he calls ‘inclination’ and his statement that the influence of ‘respect’ qua representation of the moral law proceeds “by the route of reason alone.” He writes:

[T]he pure representation of duty, and in general of the moral law, mixed with no alien addition of empirical stimuli, has by the route of reason alone...an influence on the human heart so much more powerful than all other incentives one can summon from the empirical field... (Kant 1785 p. 25)

Elsewhere, Kant talks of “grounds of reason” determining the will when agents act from duty (Kant 1785 p. 27), which further supports the point that Kant conceives of ‘respect’ as a cognitive motivating state.

What Kant calls ‘respect’ for the law appears to be what Ross means by the ‘sense of duty,’ if actions done from duty on Kant’s account are motivated by respect for the law and actions done from duty on Ross’s account are motivated by the sense of duty, and if Ross and Kant are talking about the same thing when they talk about actions done from duty. Ross says that “what is properly meant by the sense of duty is the thought that one *ought* to act in a certain way” (Ross 1929 p. 253).

One's 'duty' by itself, for Ross, in a given situation (as opposed to 'the sense of duty'), is the thing that one ought to do in that situation. Ross claims in Chapter One of *The Right and the Good* that acting from the sense of duty as a motive cannot belong to the content of a duty thus conceived, first because ought implies can and we do not have voluntary control over the motives we have, and second because this would lead to regress (Ross 1930 p. 5).

Unlike Kant, it does not seem like Ross holds that when an agent acts from (the sense of) duty, she is motivated by a cognitive state. In one place in the 1929 lecture, Ross is critical and revisionary of Kant's view that the sense of duty is "something distinct from desire of any kind" (Ross 1929 p. 260). He concludes this critical passage by suggesting that when agents act from the sense of duty, they are motivated an "emotion connected with the awareness of obligation" (Ross 1929 p. 262). Ross initially frames his criticism of Kant's view of the motivating state associated with actions from duty this way:

Regarding the sense of duty as an operation of reason distinct from any form of desire, and accepting the *general* truth of Aristotle's dictum that thought alone sets nothing going, Kant found one of his greatest puzzles to lie in the fact that pure reason can become practical, that the mere thought of an act as one's duty can by itself induce us to do the act. In comparison with this, actions from desire seemed easily intelligible. What he fails to see is that there is no more mystery in the fact that the thought of an act as one's duty should arouse an impulse to do it, than in the fact the thought of an act as pleasant, or as leading to pleasure, should arouse an impulse to do it. (Ross 1929 p. 260-261)

Then, Ross provides his own explanation of how the thought that an act is one's duty motivates one, which is explicitly revisionary of Kant's view that acting from duty involves being motivated by a cognitive state of 'respect' for the law.

Thought alone sets nothing going, but thought never is alone. It takes place in one and the same being which feels emotion, and it is an elementary fact of our nature that thought (perhaps any thought, certainly thought about topics closely related to action) arouses emotion; why then should the thought that an act is our duty not do so?...when we reflect that the thought of an act as being our duty is the only fully sufficient reason for doing it, the sense of duty is seen to be so closely related to action that it would be strange if it did *not* arouse emotion, and emotion strong enough, in many cases, to induce us to act.

(Ross 1929 p. 261)

Although Kant and Ross apparently differ in their views of how agents are motivated when they act from duty, this does not have major implications for Ross's critique of Kant's view of moral worth, which the next section examines in more detail.

IV. A critical analysis of Ross's argument against Kant's view of the moral worth of actions done from mixed motives, where the motive of duty is one of the motives involved

This section reconstructs Ross's more detailed argument for his favored view of the moral worth of actions done from mixed motives, where the motive of duty is one of the motives involved, and argues that it is based on a faulty interpretation of Kant. As a reminder, Ross holds that actions can be effectively motivated by multiple so-called 'motives,' which are supposed to be subjective reasons for action (like Kantian maxims) and, moreover, that actions done from mixed motives, none of which are morally bad, may have as much moral worth as actions done from duty alone, so long as the sense of duty is among the mixture of motives involved. Kant, as he is understood (so far correctly) by Ross, on the other hand, holds that if any motive other than the motive of duty makes a contribution to an agent's effective motivation in acting, the moral worth of the resulting action is diminished.

In order to argue for his favored position, Ross proposes to "assign definite numerical amounts...to the value" of several motives. "Let us suppose...that in the scale of values sense of duty is represented by 10, love by 5, desire of an innocent sensuous pleasure by 0, malice by -5; and let us suppose a case in which two of these motives co-operate with equal strength in producing an act," (Ross 1929 p. 257) he writes. In the version of the same thought experiment as it appears in *The Right and the Good*, the only alteration to this quotation from the 1929 lecture is that love and malice are assigned numerical values of 8 and -8, respectively (Ross 1930 p. 170).

The following quotation from Ross's 1929 lecture contains the basis for his rejection of Kant's view of the moral worth of actions done from mixed motives, where the motives involved include the motive of duty:

Kant, in insisting that the worth of an action is degraded by the presence in it of any motive lower than the sense of duty, is really assuming that its value must then be the value half-way between that which it would have had if done wholly from sense of duty, and that which it would have had if done wholly from the lower motive; *i.e.*, an act done from sense of duty +

desire of an innocent sensuous pleasure will have the value $10+0/2$. An action done from sense of duty + malice will have the value $10-5/2$. And since Kant assigns no value, positive or negative, to 'pathological' love, an action done from sense of duty + love will have the value $10+0/2$. If we amend his view, as we have seen reason to do, by assigning a positive value (say 5) to love, an action done from sense of duty + love will have the value $10+5/2$. (Ross 1929 p. 257; Ross 1930 p. 170-171 with substitution)

One key issue with this interpretation of Kant is that it is not clear how Ross reaches the view that Kant holds the moral worth of actions done from mixed motives that include the motive of duty "must...be the value half-way between that which [the action] would have had if done wholly from sense of duty, and that which it would have had if done wholly from the lower motive." In fact, Kant may not even hold that it is possible for an action to be motivated both by the sense of duty and by additional motives, as he states in the *Groundwork* that the maxim involved in an action from duty "excludes [inclination] entirely from calculations when we make a choice" (Kant 1785 p. 16). In the same passage, Kant writes:

[A]n action from duty is to separate off entirely the influence of inclination, and with it every object of the will; thus nothing remains for the will that could determine it except, objectively, the law and, subjectively, pure respect for this practical law, and hence the maxim of complying with such a law, even if it infringes on all my inclinations. (Kant 1785 p. 16)

This quotation suggests that Kant would deny that the motive of duty could be effective in motivating an action done from multiple motives, even if he were to grant that such actions are possible (i.e. where the sense of duty is not among the mixture of motives involved).

The point that Kant would deny that the motive of duty could be effective in motivating an action done from multiple motives also undercuts what could be interpreted as a key argument Ross makes for the comparative superiority of his view of moral worth to Kant's. Ross claims that unlike Kant's view, his own view that the moral worth of an action motivated by mixed motives is just the sum of the values of the motives involved does not have the paradoxical consequence that someone who forms a habit of dutiful action acts with progressively less moral worth as the habit becomes established. Ross explains this argument in the following passage:

[W]hen dutiful action is thought of as necessarily involving a resistance to desire, the paradoxical consequence follows that the forming of a good

habit, since it leads to less and less resistance to adverse desires being necessary, has to be held to involve that we act less and less from a sense of duty as the habit grows stronger, so that to form a good habit is to become less good. If the habit becomes so automatic that its action ceases to be done from the thought that it is right, there will certainly be less moral worth in the doing of it (Ross 1929 p. 262-263)

This passage contains Ross's explanation of how Kant's view of moral worth, according to his interpretation of it, would imply that the doing of one's duty once one had already formed a habit of dutiful activity would have less moral worth than the doing of one's duty while one were in the process of forming the habit. The explanation implicit in the passage is that once one had already formed a habit of dutiful action, the action involved would "be...so automatic that it...[would] cease...to be done from the thought that it is right."

That is, Ross holds that acting according to a habit one has already formed involves some motive in addition to the motive of duty. The quotation does not specify what this additional motive is, but suggests that it is somehow related to the automaticity of performing the action once doing so has become a stable habit. This view implies that it is only possible to do a dutiful action from duty alone if one has not already formed a habit of doing it.

If, as Ross believes Kant holds, the presence of any motive other than the motive of duty in effectively motivating an agent's action reduces the moral worth of the action relative to what it would be if it were done from the sense of duty alone, then even if the motive of duty were present in addition to some further, morally indifferent motive in acting out a stable habit, Kant's view would imply that the doing of the habitual action would have less moral worth than the doing of the same action from the sense of duty alone prior to the agent's formation of the habit of doing it. For Ross, this is a paradoxical consequence of Kant's view that his own view of moral worth avoids by allowing that "so long as sense of duty is effectively present, the addition of a morally indifferent motive does not lessen the value of the action, and the addition of a good, though less good, motive increases it" (Ross 1929 p. 257-258).

In response to Ross's charge that his view of moral worth has the paradoxical consequence that "to form a good habit is to become less good" (Ross 1929 p. 263), Kant would probably challenge what Ross presupposes to be involved in 'forming a habit of dutiful action.' Kant could either accept or reject Ross's implied premise that all actions done from habit are done at least partly from some motive other than the motive of duty. If Kant were to accept this premise, he would be forced to deny that there is any

such thing as a habit of acting from duty, since this would amount to a contradiction in terms on Kant's view that it is only possible to act from duty when no other motives are present. If Kant were to reject Ross's presupposition, forming a habit of acting from duty would not imply any paradoxes, but would just involve acting from duty alone in the kind of repetitive pattern characteristic of habitual action.

Thus, if we recognize Kant's position that acting from duty necessarily excludes the possibility of acting from additional motives, the aforementioned Rossian argument that Kant's view of moral worth is inferior in virtue of having a paradoxical consequence dissolves.

V. Conclusion

So far, this essay established that the issue of moral worth is Ross's subject in the 1929 lecture "The Nature of Morally Good Action," summarized Ross's two main points of disagreement with Kant on this subject, and argued that if Kant is interpreted correctly, Ross's criticism of Kant's account of the moral worth of actions done from a mixture of motives that includes the motive of duty does not succeed. Ross disagrees with Kant on the following two points: (1) that the motive of duty is the only morally good motive and (2) that the moral worth of actions done from a mixture of motives that includes the motive of duty is always less than the moral worth of actions done from the motive of duty alone.

On the second point, there is textual evidence to suggest that Kant would not even give an account of the moral worth of actions done from a mixture of motives that includes the motive of duty because he holds that the motive of duty is always effective as a single motive to action and never as part of a mixture of motives. The essay also examined Ross's argument that Kant's view has the paradoxical implication that dutiful actions done from habit have less moral worth than the same actions done from duty alone before the associated habit of dutiful action has been formed. I argued that the argument is no longer convincing once Kant's position is acknowledged that the motive of duty is always effective alone.

There is an independent question about whether Kant is correct that the motive of duty is the only morally good motive. This commitment, when combined with Kant's view that the motive of duty is always and can only be effective by itself, certainly has counterintuitive implications. Psychopaths and sociopaths, for example, are generally thought to be incapable of doing actions that conform with duty from motives other than the thought that they are right, whereas those with affect would seem to sometimes do the right thing from duty and sometimes from a noncognitive motive. In virtue of its

commitments that the motive of duty is the only morally good motive and that it can only be effective by itself, Kant's view might therefore have the implication that a sociopath who always does the right thing acts with more moral worth, on balance, than a sentimental person who always does the right thing (but sometimes not from duty).

One could push back that a pathological person could also be motivated to do the right thing by fear of consequences or self-interest, and that this could lead to the always-right-sociopath and the always-right-non-sociopath, on balance, acting from the motive of duty the same percentage of the time. If we repeated the thought experiment, however, in a world without consequences for or incentives against morally bad behavior, we might still have the intuition that the sentimental person who always acts rightly acts with at least as much moral worth in general, if not more, than the sociopath who always acts rightly. Kant's account of moral worth is still counterintuitive with respect to its ability to accommodate that intuition.

This line of thought could suggest that Ross is correct on his first point of disagreement with Kant: that there are more morally good motives than just the motive of duty. Recall that Ross does not give an argument for this claim, but says that he knows of no other way to ascertain its truth than by "direct appreciation" (Ross 1929 p. 254). In any case, this essay sought to illuminate Ross's main disagreements with Kant on the issue of moral worth and to critically examine some of Ross's arguments contra Kant on the same issue.

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