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Compassionate and Cognitively Diverse: Why Kantian Virtue is More Generous Than You Think

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Abstract

People have often thought that Kant left no room for compassion in the virtuous life, because virtue for him is about doing the right thing when you don't feel like it. However, compassion is an important virtue in Kantian ethics, where it is understood as a form of moral cognition grounded in a commitment to act for the good of others. Though this means that the Kantian virtue of compassion is primarily intellectual in nature, contrary to what people have thought, the virtuous person can experience great feelings of compassion, affection and pleasure. And yet, these feelings are not strictly necessary for someone to have the virtue. For this reason, some, for example neurodiverse, agents who would not qualify as virtuous on the Aristotelian picture do qualify as virtuous on the Kantian picture. This expands the traditional virtue label in a good way.

If you were sick and in the hospital, and your friend came to visit, what would you think if they told you they didn't feel like visiting you but did it because it was the right thing to do? Sounds odd, right? Most of us would probably prefer that a friend visit us because they care about *us*, and not simply about doing the right thing. This is what Michael Stocker argued in a now classic essay on modern moral theories in *The Journal of Philosophy*. We might also prefer that in these circumstances they have some *feeling* of care or compassion towards us, rather than a cold commitment to mere duty as such (we probably imagine someone like this saying, 'I don't feel like seeing you but I'm here anyway' and that doesn't sound pleasant). When we frame it this way it's easy to think that compassionate feelings are an important part of what motivates us to do good for others, and that anyone who denies this must be strange or misinformed. This is what has often been thought about the philosopher Immanuel Kant. He held that feelings, including feelings of compassion, weren't all that important for morality and he often spoke favourably of those who did the right thing when they didn't want to. Other philosophers have thought that his idea of morality is missing something, because he believed feelings and attachments like these shouldn't affect how we evaluate the moral status of a person or their actions. Somewhat controversially, I want to argue that he was right – these things shouldn't affect how we evaluate the moral status of a person or their actions. And, contrary to the way

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the example above might lead us to think, the Kantian position is more consistent with our deeper intuitions about what makes a person good. I argue that this has a positive consequence that hasn't been considered before: it allows us to extend the label of 'virtuous' to people whom traditional accounts of virtue would exclude, namely those whose brain wiring is atypical and could be described as neurodiverse. But, before I get to that I will discuss what the virtue of compassion is, why it has less to do with feeling than we might think, and how it fits into the bigger picture of ethics that Kant and those who generally agree with him (i.e. Kantians) provide.

Kantian Compassion

In a short, hastily written and famous book referred to as the *Groundwork*, Kant describes someone who is by temperament cold and indifferent to the suffering of others. Despite this emotional indifference, this person understands the worth of other people and that their well-being matters, and they perform great acts of kindness towards them. Kant says that these circumstances bring out the moral worth of this person's character, because they understand and are committed to the good of others, regardless of how they feel about it. In other words, they aren't doing good for others because it makes them feel good, but because it's the right thing to do. They don't do it for the sake of their own happiness, but for the other's. This and other examples in his texts led people to believe that Kant somehow thought that feelings should be excluded from a person's motivations for their action to have moral worth. If moral worth is the heart of virtue, it would then seem that Kant is excluding positive feelings (e.g. feelings of pleasure, affection or empathy – and what I'm calling compassion) from his account of virtue. In a sense this is true, because Kant held that positive feelings aren't necessary for virtuous action and character. This is part of his point: a person can act virtuously without feeling sympathetic (or compassionate) towards others. What is more important is that they

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understand the worth of others and contribute towards their well-being. If a person does this consistently and demonstrates a commitment to living this way, it makes sense to say that they're a virtuous person.

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In this way, duty and reason are high priorities in Kantian ethics. Taking a step back and looking at things more generally, Kantian ethics begins with the idea there are certain bedrock values that must always be preserved and never violated. The most basic value is the dignity of all beings with the capacity for rationality. This includes all human beings, though it could also include extraterrestrial beings (aliens) if they were (are?) capable of thought. Bringing this point down to earth, Kant's basic idea is that human beings have intrinsic worth, and that worth should in all circumstances be respected. We should each be treated as an end in ourselves and never used as a mere means to an end. For example, being honest with someone is a way to respect them and treat them as an end in themselves, because it allows them to make an informed choice. Whereas misleading someone so that they say 'yes' to something they otherwise wouldn't if you told them the truth treats them as a mere means to an end: it undermines their ability to make an informed choice, bypassing their consent and in an important sense *using* them.

Kantians hold that this idea of respect implies, or is accompanied by, certain further values like equality, self-cultivation and a duty to support others. That Kantian ethics is rationalist in nature refers to the idea that these values are grounded in reason, rather than, for example, sentiments like sympathy that happen to be unique to human beings. The bedrock values of Kantian ethics operate like the law of non-contradiction in classical logic – they are axiomatic – and we are understood to grasp them directly. This is one reason why they are rational.

These values may be quite general, but they are clear enough. For example, consider two ideas, that all people should be treated with respect and that we each have a duty to help others. What that respect and help will look like might vary from one context to another, perhaps even considerably. There is some degree of variation in how these duties might be fulfilled, while the higher-order concepts of respect and benevolence remain constant. This is similar to an argument Paul Boghossian makes in support of moral realism (a shorter version of this argument can be found in the *New York Times*). The Kantian claim I'm making here is that respect and beneficence are among those non-relative moral principles that make up the moral fabric of our world. Kantians believe that throughout all contexts – historical, cultural or otherwise – respect and helping others is meaningful, because it is grounded in the intrinsic dignity of persons and that dignity doesn't change. This also means that some things are never permitted in any context because they are contrary to these values. Consider, for example, violently harming a child for fun. There is no context

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that can make this right. The Kantian claim is that there is no circumstance in which human beings lose their dignity or intrinsic worth, so there is no circumstance in which it is morally permissible to act in a way that violates this dignity. It can be added that these values are independent of us in the sense that, had we evolved differently, for example, not to feel sympathy or distress when we witness another person being harmed, these values and the principles of action that correspond to them would still apply. Though, arguably, if beings like us didn't exist, the idea of acting according to these values would be meaningless.

Leaving aside this more general perspective on Kantian values and focusing again on particular people and actions, we're now in a better position to understand how compassion functions as a kind of master virtue for Kant. He defines compassion (or sympathy, as translators render the German) as a capacity to understand what contributes to the suffering or well-being of others in combination with a commitment to act for their well-being. (If you're interested in a more detailed argument, read this article on Kantian sympathy in the *British Journal of the History of Philosophy*. I use the term *compassion* here, because its meaning aligns more closely with contemporary usage than sympathy does, though the definition of each of these terms is varied/contested.) This commitment involves both the intention to do good for others *and* following through on that intention with action. *Feelings* of compassion may or may not be a part of this picture: sometimes they help us to understand others' suffering and well-being, so they will be useful for showing us what is the right thing to do. But at other times they can mislead us. Because feelings and perhaps especially feelings of compassion, sympathy, empathy, and the like, can mislead us, Kant thinks they are not an essential part of virtue. They may have some moral value, insofar as they enable us to understand better the happiness and suffering of others, so that we can then act for their good. But that value is only ever conditional on this moral understanding and action.

To understand how these feelings can mislead, consider an example from the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Here, the courtroom and jurors are manipulated to believe that Tom Robinson, a black man falsely accused of assaulting a white woman, is guilty when the evidence doesn't support this. Their empathy for a perceived victim and their anger at a perceived wrong combine with racial prejudice and stereotypes about black men and white Christian women. This mess of feelings and misguided thoughts is projected onto the situation to terrible effect. They feel *for* Mayella (the alleged victim) and *against* Tom (the falsely accused perpetrator), and those feelings take over. The result is violent and disastrously unjust. The problem this highlights is that it's often much easier for us to have positive feelings towards people who look and speak and act like us, when it's the people who are different from us who deserve our moral attention.

For another example of why these feelings aren't important for morality, consider the sort of moral problems that don't engage our emotions at all, because they're too big and involve abstract numbers and people we've never met. This can include the many moral quandaries around climate change. It's hard to feel your way into these when the people most affected probably live far away or might not be alive at all, since they partly consist of future generations who haven't been born yet. Those who will be affected by our actions aren't near enough in space or time for us to *feel* compassion towards them. Yet how we address this problem will impact millions, even billions. Just as feelings can mislead us in some cases, like that of Tom Robinson, they seem to be silent in others. But in both cases a virtuous person can (and will) engage the problem thoughtfully on the basis of moral understanding and values like the ones above. Feelings need not be a part of that process.

In line with this, psychologists nowadays helpfully distinguish between two forms of empathy: one that primarily involves feeling (affective empathy) and one that primarily involves thought (cognitive empathy). Paul Bloom, for example, draws this distinction and builds an argument for rational compassion in his 2016 book *Against Empathy*. Affective empathy is a matter of feeling with or for another person

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Think of the common expression, 'I feel for you', or 'I really feel for people in that position.' Cognitive empathy is about putting yourself in another person's shoes, to use another common expression, and imagining what they are going through. Cognitive empathy arguably takes more energy and commitment, but it's less likely to mislead than mere feelings of empathy. The virtue of Kantian compassion makes sense of this distinction from within a moral framework. Kantian compassion is a lot like cognitive empathy, but it's grounded in the further values discussed above, most importantly the dignity of persons. It is therefore quite robust. It involves reflection, an ability to understand the well-being of others, an intention to do good for others, and action that follows through on that intention. Because it is grounded in these values and requires both reflection and understanding, those who possess this virtue will be less likely to be misled by emotion and feelings of partiality. Strictly speaking, those who possess this virtue need not experience some feelings – for example, feelings of compassion – at all.

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Friendship and Feeling

Does this mean that those who possess this virtue can't or shouldn't experience these feelings? No. The point is that these feelings aren't strictly necessary to virtue. They can still be a part of the virtuous person's life; they just don't need to be present for a person to be virtuous as such. Does this mean that virtuous people can't have friends, or that our friends can't be virtuous when they do things because they care about us? No, because having feelings of care or compassion for someone *and* doing good for them are compatible, although – and this might be controversial to some – the Kantian view holds that for a friend's action to be virtuous, it must be grounded in commitment to moral principles. What about the friend who visits us in the hospital because it's the right thing to do? If that were the only reason they were visiting us that would certainly be odd. As mentioned above, we want our friends to care about *us* and we prefer that care be made known in their feelings towards us. But what happens if those feelings disappear for a while, the friendship becomes less enjoyable than it used to be, or care becomes burdensome? These things tend to happen in difficult circumstances, as when someone is hospitalized and terminally ill. In these circumstances it's sometimes our commitment to doing the right thing that pulls us through. We show up for others even when we don't feel like it, and sometimes this is the precondition for deeper friendship, connection and joy. It doesn't mean our life or friendships are drab and joyless, committed to duty alone.

Here, the line between care for a friend and commitment to principles blurs. Care can be a manifestation of a more general moral commitment, for example, to provide for those in need, combined with an understanding that one is in a better position than others to provide for one's friend or family member. And it's often because of our proximity to people, like friends and loved ones, that we can appreciate their intrinsic (moral) value – their dignity – in a much fuller sense. The Kantian view holds that you can't separate the moral principles from the act of caring for another, insofar as that care is to count as virtuous. I suggest that once we think about it carefully, this sounds a lot less odd than it might at first and resonates with some of our deeper intuitions about what it means to be virtuous.

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It's worth emphasizing (again) that none of this means that feelings of pleasure or compassion, or care for our friends as such need be excluded from the life of the virtuous person. I'm sure we would prefer that they remain. Indeed, something would be missing from our personal relationships if they didn't involve great feeling or care for the other as such. The highest degree of affection, compassion, connection and joy is compatible with Kantian virtue. I believe these things are necessary for living a maximally fulfilling human life and without them our lives are in some sense impoverished. But the impoverishment is not a moral one.

Virtue and Cognitive Diversity

A criticism of this view is that it identifies virtue with what Aristotle called continence, which amounts to having strong self-control, so that one will do the right thing even if a part of one doesn't desire to do the right thing or desires to do the wrong thing. The key point according to the Aristotelian view is that the virtuous person should *only* desire to do the right thing (as well as do it). Their desires, and this will include their feelings, should line up with what is good: so, to say that someone is continent isn't enough to say that they are virtuous in the full sense. But, as we've seen, the Kantian view holds that it is enough, because it's not strictly necessary that someone have the 'right' sort of feelings to be virtuous. A person whose feelings don't fully align with the good can still have virtue, as can a person who *lacks* feelings that align with the good. In an important way, this widens the category of virtue because, if this is true, it means that some groups of people can be virtuous who would not meet the more restrictive standard set by Aristotle. After all, it seems as though things like feelings are hardly under our control. Is it fair to make the label of 'virtuous' depend on something that's not up to us and can often be a matter of luck?

As you might suspect, I think it isn't. There might be a few reasons for this. First, it doesn't make sense to make virtue depend on things that are too far out of our control, since virtue is an evaluation of moral agents and moral agency is largely about understanding, choice and the things that we *do*. Second, it might be that having the right feelings and desires depends too much on having the right sort of upbringing, that is, being educated to desire the right thing over time and from a young age. This would make virtue depend on a form of privilege and therefore inegalitarian when perhaps virtue should be an equal opportunity sort of thing, open to anyone who earnestly pursues the good and the right as they are able to. Or, third, maybe the number of people who have got their feelings right are so few that it means virtue is next to impossible for most well-intentioned people to attain. What we need, it could be argued, is an understanding of virtue that, while setting a high standard, is fit for human beings, not gods, heroes or the highly privileged. Human beings have imperfections and wayward feelings, but if any of us consistently overcomes these to do good for others that should be celebrated, even when those flaws or feelings don't entirely disappear. To summarize this, we might say that virtue should be more psychologically realistic.

To develop one aspect of this point, what if someone is *incapable* of desiring the right thing, or forming the sort of feelings and affections that often move people to perform acts of kindness? People with autism spectrum disorder, for example, have a reduced ability to share emotions with others and to develop and maintain personal relationships, according to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Fifth Edition)*. It's therefore impossible for people with autism to qualify as virtuous on the Aristotelian view above. But this doesn't seem right to me. People in this position can still understand, for example, that others have dignity and deserve respect the same as oneself, that self-cultivation is valuable, and that we have a duty to help others; and they can follow through on that understanding with action. This, and not necessarily one's ability to *feel* with or for others, constitutes the Kantian virtue of compassion. Therefore, it is possible in these conditions to have the Kantian virtue of compassion and to be fully virtuous in the Kantian sense. As a result, this view extends the label of 'virtuous' to

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categories of people otherwise passed over on the traditional Aristotelian definition.

Taking this one step further, it may even be the case that a high degree of attention to detail and an increased ability to disassemble complex information into its component parts, both characteristic of autism spectrum disorder, may enable one to improve the well-being of others in difficult situations. This could include, for example, directing the flow of resources as a field coordinator at a refugee shelter, or performing technically complex life-saving surgery as a physician. If someone can respond to these situations effectively by recognizing the bedrock value of the dignity of persons, understanding what contributes to the well-being of others, and following through on that with action, then this person can be described as virtuous in the Kantian sense. This is what makes Kantian virtue more psychologically realistic than its Aristotelian counterpart and appropriately generous, because it applies to a more (appropriately) diverse group of people. That is, diverse in non-moral ways while unified in the right, moral ways. On this picture, virtuous agents may be cognitively diverse because they are unified in having good motivation, compassionate understanding, and a commitment to following through on that with action. To me it seems that these are the things that really matter to being virtuous.

Feelings of affection, care and compassion are desirable for many reasons, and it may be true that to lack them is to lack something of value. But the value we would be lacking is not necessarily a moral one. People thought that Kant left no room for compassion, because his idea of virtue somehow excludes feelings of compassion and connection with others. But his point is only that virtue doesn't *require* them. Compassion and connection, and the best forms of friendship and love, should all be part of the virtuous person's life. But if a person struggles to have these things, especially through no fault of their own, that doesn't mean they can't be virtuous. This makes Kantian virtue more psychologically realistic and appropriately generous than its traditional alternative. So, surprisingly perhaps, Aristotelian virtue turns out to be more demanding in this sense, while Kantian virtue is a better fit for the imperfection, as well as the diversity, of human life.

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