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Morality, the Good Life, and the Cold-Hearted Benefactor

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I. Introduction

Some spurn Kant's moral philosophy as cold and incapable of accounting for the moral significance of feelings. Karen Stohr, in "Virtue Ethics and Kant's Cold-Hearted Benefactor," points to the example of the cold-hearted benefactor as damning evidence of Kant's failure in this respect: morality, or virtue,[1] demands that the so called generosity of the benefactor be motivated not only because it is right, but also because it follows from appropriate feelings. These feelings are exactly what the cold-hearted benefactor lacks—he has no feelings at all. Whereas Kant believes the cold-hearted benefactor to be a paragon of morality, Stohr argues that his lack of feelings represents a genuine moral deficiency (Stohr 202). However, despite the intuitive force her criticism carries, her argument ultimately fails because she misunderstands the relationship between feelings and morality. This is because she fails to make a critical distinction between the good life and the moral life. This distinction is crucial, for what the good life requires goes beyond the scope of morality, and what the moral life demands may exact deep personal sacrifice.

[1] Throughout her paper, Stohr uses "morality" and "virtue" largely interchangeably. For the sake of clarity I will use only "morality" and use the appropriate modifier (i.e., "Kantian" or "Aristotelian") where appropriate.

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Furthermore, understanding the difference and relationship between the good life and the moral life accounts for the deficiency that Stohr and others find so bothersome. What the cold-hearted benefactor lacks is not a moral good, but an essential human good. Ultimately, he suffers from a human deficiency rather than a moral one.

II. The Problem of the Cold-Hearted Benefactor

According to Stohr, the cold-hearted benefactor exposes a severe shortcoming in Kant's ethical philosophy: Kant simply cannot account for the moral significance that we intuitively attach to feelings. At first blush this doesn't really seem to be a problem; after all, the whole reason that Kant gives the example of the cold-hearted benefactor in the first place is to show that feelings are not only insufficient for moral action, but *unnecessary* (*Groundwork* 54). If morality requires feelings, then any moral action without them cannot be considered moral. However, the cold-hearted benefactor, despite possessing a heart chilled by nature, is able to "still find in himself a source from which he might draw a worth far higher than any that a good natured temperament can have"; that is, he is motivated by duty (54). Therefore, duty—and nothing else—is what gives any action moral worth. Feelings of sympathy are nice, but the cold-hearted benefactor remains a pillar of morality even without them. Can this be right? Stohr thinks not: intuitively, sympathetic inclinations are obviously *morally* desirable for a philanthropist. Stohr claims that it is intuitively true that it would be morally better if he were motivated by sympathetic feelings in addition to duty (189–90). If this is true, the cold-hearted benefactor suffers from a genuine moral deficiency.

To defend the claim that being fully moral requires feelings, Stohr develops three major obstacles for the Kantian conception of morality. First, feelings are necessary for an action to be fully moral. Second, feelings are necessary for a person to be fully moral, i.e. that a moral person must actually possess certain feelings, not simply *try* to develop them. And third, feelings are essential human goods and that their value is not dependent on any kind of moral utility. These directly challenge the Kantian ideas that fully moral acts and persons require nothing more than to be motivated by duty and that the primary value of feelings is to facilitate moral behavior.

First, Stohr purports to show that some actions must be motivated by appropriate feelings in order to be considered fully moral. She does this by borrowing an example from Michael Stocker that asks us to imagine a person who visits a friend in a hospital. In this scenario, there would seem to be something troubling and morally wrong if the friend visited merely

out of duty, totally bereft of all feelings of sympathy, love, and concern. Again, Stohr claims, it is morally better to visit because one has these feelings in addition to acting from duty. This is true because we not only desire, but expect friends to do more than simply fulfill the dispassionate requirements of duty: we expect them to *care*, not just act as if they do (191). This means that there are cases that require the presence of these feelings if an action is to have full moral worth—duty alone is not always sufficient to make actions fully moral. Stohr anticipates that the Kantian may object and claim that it is misguided to focus on the moral status of actions and that genuine morality occurs on the level of the agent. In response, Stohr makes use of another example.

This example attempts to go beyond the rightness or wrongness of individual actions and instead focuses on Stohr's second concern: the morality of the agent. Stohr attempts to demonstrate that it is morally better for a person to actually possess appropriate feelings than to simply try to have them. She does this by presenting a hypothetical case of a recovering racist named Jim. Jim was raised from birth in an environment that ingrained within him a deep-set bigotry and hatred of African Americans. Fortunately, Jim recognizes that his racist beliefs and feelings are wrong and has done his best over the course of his adult life to change his attitudes to the point that he has largely uprooted them. However, despite his laudable effort, Jim still secretly finds racist jokes amusing, although he feels shame for this fact and always make a point of expressing disapproval whenever they are told (197–98). Assuming that this amusement is beyond his control, a Kantian would say that Jim has no moral deficiency and that, morally speaking, he is in good standing. Stohr takes issue with this evaluation, pointing out that while we would certainly not *blame* Jim for laughing, we would still judge that he should not feel as he does—he should not find such jokes funny at all (198). The fact that the Kantian is unable to recognize this indicates a significant problem.

Stohr's third criticism is that the Kantian conception of feelings makes them morally valuable only insofar as they facilitate actions from duty. Such an instrumental view is problematic because it is not only unclear whether or not feelings do in fact aid us in carrying out moral action, but also it is certain that, in many instances, feelings of love and sympathy make acting from duty more difficult (200–01). Further, she argues that this instrumental view of feelings has an extremely counterintuitive implication: since sympathetic feelings have only instrumental value, an agent who is committed to duty such that he or she will always act from duty does not need feelings and can do away with them completely while still retaining the benefit of being fully moral (201). This implication flies in the face of intuitions that say we would think less of a man who feels no

emotional pangs at turning away from his injured wife to attend to a dying stranger. Intuitively, we think, the man *should* be torn. On the other hand, Stohr claims that, as with the cold-hearted benefactor, the Kantian would approve of the husband's icy, unhindered commitment to duty (200). If this is true, then Kant clearly misconceives human morality.

Thus Stohr's argument against Kant's conception of morality can be generally summarized as the following:

1. Any good ethical theory must be able to account for a fully moral person.
2. A person can be fully moral only if they have appropriate feelings.
3. A Kantian evaluation of the cold-hearted benefactor says that he is fully moral.
4. The cold-hearted benefactor lacks appropriate sympathetic feelings. Therefore,
5. Kant's ethical theory is inadequate to account for a fully moral person.

Premises (1), (3), and (4), I take to be uncontroversial. The challenge then, is to show that (2) fails. From this point, I will attempt to show that premise (2) is false by arguing that the problem of lacking feelings falls outside the scope of morality.

III. Is the Cold-Hearted Benefactor's Deficiency a Moral One?

I agree that there is a deficiency—the cold-hearted benefactor certainly lacks *something*. However, it seems wrong to say that the deficiency is a *moral* one. This is because Kant's point that "ought" implies "can" rings intuitively true: there is something genuinely distressing about being told to do something over which one has absolutely no control (Stohr 192). Stohr accepts this point inconsistently. She says we cannot blame Jim for feeling amused at racist jokes since there is nothing he can do to stop himself, yet she also claims that we think—that is, it is appropriate to think and even say—that he *ought not* laugh (198). This is supposed to be a kind of intuitive, *prima facie* argument against Kant, but it is one that I think fails.

It is unclear what it means to say to someone that they ought to do or be something over which they have no control. For instance, imagine that I see a quadriplegic friend who is sitting alone at the top of a flight of stairs. Upon reaching him, I find him helplessly staring down in horror at his attendant who has fallen down them and lies still at the bottom

bleeding from a head injury. Imagine, too, that this friend has screamed for help for hours, has lost his voice, and has no reasonable options left to him by which he could help. Moreover, while the attendant was at first only knocked unconscious, he has since expired from his injuries. In this case we certainly would not blame my friend for the preventable death of his attendant. But neither would we think nor say that he ought to have reached out to catch the attendant, nor that he should have gone down the stairs to administer first aid, nor that he should have left the area to retrieve help. To do so would be more than insensitive—it would be *irrational*.

The reason for this should be clear: he could not have possibly done any of those things. One does not tell a person having a seizure that they ought to stop flailing about and pick up the vase of flowers that they have knocked over, neither does one tell a person with clinical depression to simply buck up and be happy. In fact, we would consider any person that does think or say such things to be wrong in doing so. Intuitively it seems plain that one ought not say or think such things and that it is wrong to claim that the quadriplegic, the epileptic, or the depressed that they are somehow *morally* deficient. This is true even though we also believe that it would be better if they could help, stop seizing, or be happy respectively. Similarly, insofar as it is true that Jim genuinely has no power to change the fact that he feels amusement at inappropriate jokes despite his earnest efforts to do so, intuitions that it would be better for him to not have such feelings can't be moral ones. It is the same for the cold-hearted benefactor: nature has made it impossible for him to feel sympathy for those whom he helps. Yes, it would be better if he had sympathetic feelings, but he cannot be morally deficient for his lack of them. But if the deficiency is not a moral one, we must ask what kind of deficiency it is and if Kant can account for it.

The deficiency that characters like Jim and the cold-hearted benefactor demonstrate seems to be one of the "good life." Where the moral life concerns those things which are "right" and which we ought to do, the good life concerns those things that we consider worth pursuing—it is the life we want to live, and it encompasses all the goods of life that we as humans find valuable. This distinction between the good life and the moral life is discussed by Thomas Nagel in *The View from Nowhere* as he addresses a concern made by Bernard Williams that impersonal theories of morality such as utilitarianism and Kantianism require too much—they require that we give up goods necessary for living well. These goods include feelings of love and friendship that are essential to our capacity to live well (190–91). Stohr seems to recognize this point when she says that actually possessing sympathetic feelings, not just trying to obtain them, is essential to living the lives we want: "we do not generally want to befriend people who lack

sympathetic feelings, or work with them, or marry them" (197). Thus, sympathetic feelings, along with friendships and love, are all goods without which our lives seem deficient. Our lives are better for these goods, and a loss of or incapacity to obtain these goods would count sharply against the kind of the life we find most fulfilling. Given the prominence these goods have in our lives, it is no wonder that they are often set squarely within our normative theories, though sometimes with considerable variation. Historically, the relationship between the moral life and the good life has been conceived of differently from period to period, and delineating this relationship is critical for our understanding why Stohr sees Kant's ethical theory as problematic.

Part of the issue is that Stohr seems to lack the conceptual space for other kinds of deficiencies that are closely tied to, but removed from morality *per se*. This is due, in large part, to her Aristotelian commitments. Nagel summaries Aristotle's conception of the relationship between doing right and living well succinctly: whatever form the moral life takes, it must be defined in terms of the good life. Thus, "the test of moral principles," Nagel explains, "will be their contribution, either instrumental or constitutive, to the good life as a whole" (195). Since whatever is moral must contribute to good living, they must be consistent—from an Aristotelian view, it is logically impossible for the demands of morality to conflict with the necessities of living well (196). If this is true, then it is understandable why Stohr insists that the cold-hearted benefactor is morally deficient: neither actions done from duty alone, nor a good will committed only to trying to develop sympathetic feelings, are sufficient to deliver a good life—in fact, they aren't aimed at living well at all.

This view of the subservience of the moral life to the good is problematic, if not outright false. Life is not so pleasant as to allow us the consistency between right doing and good living that Aristotle envisions. The fact of the matter is that doing what is right may require us to make significant sacrifices. Consider, for example, an executive who has discovered that her car manufacturing company has long been ignoring safety concerns regarding their breaks despite the fact that the company advertises its cars by emphasizing that they pass the highest standards of auto-safety. Moreover, the executive knows that, given the economic climate, the fallout of publicizing this fact would be devastating: the company would not survive the cost of a massive recall, and even if it did, she would be publically humiliated and forced to resign. Clearly, doing the right thing would come at the cost of significant goods of life, including wealth, a satisfying career, and the accompanying social respect and position. There is a genuine conflict in this example that an Aristotelian view of morality and the good life simply doesn't allow. Nagel explains this by echoing Kant's claim that we must

treat all people as ends in themselves: insofar as morality is impartial and grounded in the claims of others, we cannot ignore those claims simply because they fail to contribute to the good of our individual lives (197). Thus, given its inability to account for possible conflict between the moral life and the good life, the Aristotelian view must be false.

Despite this there is a sense in which the alienation of the moral life from the good life is troubling. Our intuitive uneasiness when hearing of situations like those of Jim and the cold-hearted benefactor indicates the degree of intimacy we normally associate between doing right and living well. We tend to think of the two hand in hand: those who live morally should have good lives, and those who have good lives should live morally. To see the moral and the good as Kant does is to see the two as divorced, independent, and at times estranged—it is to recognize the uncomfortable fact that there are bad people who are awash in the goods of life while there are moral people who suffer, often bitterly, for morality's sake. Insofar as this is true, Stohr might argue, there seems to be some moral connection between the moral life and the good life—they cannot be wholly separated off. If Kant cannot adequately account for this connection, Stohr's criticisms may still pose a problem. However, Kant was sensitive to the unfair fact that, as Stohr points out, many of the goods of life are ours by accident and that those who deserve to be happy often aren't (Stohr 199). Thus in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant gives an account of what he considers to be the teleological end of rational human beings: the *highest good*.

IV. The Highest Good and Human Deficiency

The highest good should not be confused with the supreme good. The supreme good is morality or the moral life—living one's life in accordance with and out of respect for duty. Of all the goods, there is no good greater than the moral life (*Critique* 228). Despite this, Kant is careful to point out that the supreme good is not the only or complete good. The complete good requires happiness, and insofar as happiness entails that a person lives the kind of life in which "everything goes according to his wish and will," it is a life that includes goods such as those feelings and relationships necessary for good living (240). In other words, happiness is the good life, and the moral life is what makes us worthy to have it. The complete, or highest good, then, is the perfect unity of the moral life and the good life. Moreover, Kant argues that the highest good is the object at which rational human life is aimed: "for, to need happiness, to also be worthy of it, and yet not to participate in it cannot be consistent with the perfect volition of a rational being that would at the same time have all power, even if we

think of such a being only for the sake of the experiment" (228). Thus we *ought* to obtain the highest good—to not do so would be inconsistent with our natures as rational human beings. It should now be evident why the deficiency of the cold-hearted benefactor seems so problematic: his nature precludes him from attaining the highest good.

The account of the cold-hearted benefactor is troubling precisely because his actions fail, in a sense, to contribute to the highest good in a way that they normally would for another person. It seems plausible that generous actions performed out of genuine sympathetic feelings are essential for developing relationships that provide goods of love and friendship. This means charitable actions play a double role: they contribute both to the moral life and the good life. Moreover, if part of what it means to be a rational human being is to pursue our own happiness—the good life—within the bounds of morality, and charitable actions performed from sympathetic feelings are necessary for achieving this happiness, then a person who performs charitable actions without those feelings is essentially misusing the action and may be failing to act in a way that is consistent with his or her humanity. Thus, the cold-hearted benefactor is deficient in an important way: it is not that he has failed to act morally, but that he has failed to act like a human being in the most general sense. This, of course, should not be surprising since by nature he has none of the natural sympathies that we tie so closely to our understanding of humanity. In modern vernacular we might label the cold-hearted benefactor a kind of high functioning sociopath— it is his humanity, not his rationality or morality that is at issue.

We can now respond to Stohr's first two criticisms. First she claims that some fully moral action must be done from sympathetic feelings. Her second concern is that a fully moral person must actually possess sympathetic feelings, not just try to obtain them. Both of these criticisms fail because morality concerns what we are obligated to do, and we are obligated to do only what we are capable of doing. Since we are not capable of spontaneously controlling our emotions, a lack of sympathetic feelings cannot be a moral deficiency on the part of an action nor on the part of an agent. However, because the highest good is our objective end as rational human beings, and because sympathetic feelings are essential goods that necessarily form part of the highest good, a lack of sympathetic feelings is in fact a genuine human deficiency.

Understanding the highest good also helps us to address Stohr's third criticism that Kant sees feelings as only instrumentally valuable. Insofar as sympathetic feelings such as love and sympathy are essential to our happiness, and insofar as our happiness is essential to the highest good, those feelings are goods in themselves. That is, they ought to be

sought because they contribute to our complete and highest good. Insofar as this is the case, Kant would recommend that we pursue them as best we can. But this goes beyond the scope of morality. Kant's concern with feelings is explicitly limited to their relationship to morality. In the face of traditions in which the good life and the moral life were not adequately distinguished, Kant desired to prevent the former from contaminating the latter. Where morality alone is concerned, the only value sympathetic feelings can possess is an instrumental one, but clearly it is inaccurate to say that sympathetic feelings have only instrumental value *in general* (*Critique* 230). Thus it seems that Stohr's criticisms stem from the ambiguity between the moral life and the good life that Kant forewarned, "if not attended to, can occasion needless disputes" (228).

V. Conclusion

The crux of Stohr's argument is that Kant is fundamentally incapable of adequately explaining the deficiency present in the case of the cold-hearted benefactor. This is false. As we have seen above, Kant's ethical theory is more than capable of identifying and explaining the cold-hearted benefactor's deficiency. It is a human deficiency—an incapacity to effectively perform actions that are necessary for good living. Because the objective end of all rational humans is the highest good, and insofar as the highest good encompasses the good life, the cold-hearted benefactor fails to act consistently with his own humanity. This is no small deficiency—surely there are few of us who would want to befriend someone with the cold-hearted benefactor's austere disposition, much less be like or use him as a model to emulate. The reason that Stohr is unable to identify this is because her Aristotelian conception of the relationship between the good life and the moral life makes it impossible for the two to conflict. This represents a deep inadequacy in her moral theory, for to say that one is humanly flawed is not equivalent to saying that they are morally flawed. Insofar as Kant is able to account, not only for different kinds of deficiency, but for a more complete picture of what it is to be human, his moral theory stands on far sturdier ground than Stohr is able to recognize.

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