

# In defense of an ordinary life Kantian view on the scope of moral requirement

Zihan Chen\*

George School, Pennsylvania, USA

chenzihanwc@gmail.com

**Abstract.** This paper examines Kant's line of argumentation for the establishment of the highest principles of morality against the background of ethical naturalism. The primary problem of moral philosophy is to understand in what sense we speak of the concept of 'morality'. Whereas the ordinary understanding of morality is that it comes from nature, Kant argues that morality comes from reason, or that it is a rational norm. Having established the highest principles and norms of morality, Kantian moral philosophy then proceeds to argue that these highest principles and norms are binding on our reality as human beings. This argument is systematically necessary for Kantian moralists. Norms are norms in the sense that they are binding in practice, and therefore the highest moral norms have to be binding in the sense that they are most necessarily binding on practical action, otherwise this would be contrary to the meaning of the highest norms themselves.

**Keywords:** Ethical naturalism, Kantian, moral sources.

## 1. Introduction

It's not strange for the average internet user to be bombarded with claims of moral requirement - look at that United Nations advertisement with a child staring at you. The user is being asked to donate a sum that is insignificant relative to the suffering it relieves; this kind of help falls generally under the scope of beneficence, the action of helping others[1].

The question then comes to the extent that we should give and what counts as a relatively insignificant amount. In the (perhaps) epicenter of modern moral discussion, Peter Singer asks firmly that you donate all money that doesn't go towards basic needs to the children of afar. Singer's argument gives the biggest consideration to suffering: everything one gives to reduce suffering is relatively little to the suffering that can be relieved. Then geographic location and personal relations make no difference; if one is to choose from giving one's lightly hurt child or a dangerously wounded child from a war zone, one ought to choose the latter over your own. What Singer proposes is a duty of beneficence: that one has a duty to always help to the fullest extent[2].

## 2. Kantian view on the scope of moral requirement

One intuitive response to this argument may be: "we are not obligated to always act to the extreme extent of beneficence, because we lead a life that has non-moral values that can only be sustained by not completely committing to altruism". This response is pulled from Todd May's book, *An Ordinary Life*, where he discusses practical approaches to partially incorporating ethical practices in our day-to-day lives[3]. The view for extra-moral values reflects the common favoring of a sense of ordinality: to lead a life characterized by moral mediocrity, where we balance between morality and our own inclinations or interests[4]. This view states that in any meaningful life, we have projects and goals aside from moral aspiration, thus we should lead life considering both extra-moral and moral values[5].

May's argument for moral mediocrity involves a realistic consideration that puts normative ethical frameworks in perspective. The idea of a normative framework is a guide to moral thought and action that we may achieve through our agency; in this argument, the applied nature of normative framework is challenged. When everyday life is considered as a whole, the mass amount of effort on non-moral or extra-moral activities show that following ethical frameworks is rather a marginal part of life, and that moral value is one value amongst many. It then follows that we are not obligated to fully commit

to ethical practices, and should consider moral frameworks among other factors. This poses a challenge to demanding moral frameworks, but does not exhaustively prove that morality cannot get right what matters in our lives; this will be a consideration in my demonstration.

Another more extreme response asks for abandonment: “If morality asks so much of us, then I will not act upon it”. Indeed, when morality asks a lot of us, then for many that could become too much to live with. However, this would defeat the practicality of a moral framework, and is also not logically sound - we can live our ordinary lives precisely because others choose to follow morality to some extent. Thus the contradiction is that one gives up Singer’s sense of morality to not be asked to deviate so much from one’s current life, but the sustaining of such a life would be no longer possible since it’s built on everyone’s following of moral requirements.

This essay attempts to show that the duty of beneficence may be non-arbitrarily understood and acted upon. This duty is considered with the goal of rational agency and embedded in an ordinary life by considering a Kantian view of obligatory ends. This provides contrast to both Singer’s argument for extreme altruism and May’s view for moral mediocrity, in that it differs from Singer’s reasoning and May’s conclusion.

Kantian ethics happens to be a fitting framework to evaluate both views: Singer’s demand and May’s halfhearted acceptance, since they share the common assumption of full agency. In *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant characterizes the agency of rational beings, even partially rational ones like us, as the feature that grants us autonomy and the ability to follow moral laws. Agency in this sense means that we are held responsible for what is morally required. The fact of human agency is also recognized in the Singer’s argument and May’s argument, from the presupposition that we are able to choose our actions, moral or not. Compared with the Kantian conception, there is also a clear element of recognizing inaction as a choice; this shows in Singer’s Basic Argument, where using “our power to prevent something bad from happening” is morally required, with no grounds for inaction. There is an important space to be explored between what we think we think we ought to do and what we in fact do, such as psychological factors or structural constraints that challenges the position of agency, but for the sake of this argument we will assume full agency when morality is concerned.

One significant difference that arises from Kant’s view is that agency should be used in a specific way - to set ends determined by rational consideration. All other uses of agency result in the moral consequence of our not being autonomous or coherent. This view restricts the normative focus of moral agency to the area of “acting from duty”. From Kant’s view, only actions where the deciding ground is duty can have genuine moral worth; other actions, though their moral contents may vary, are at least somewhat unsatisfactory. Rational agency is thus Kant’s moral end, and I will take it to be the Kantian consideration.

This contrasts from Singer’s view, which puts suffering as the most important consideration. This holds immense intuitive force, for everyone has suffered to some extent; empathy could then be extended to any suffering human or non-human. I find this view to be inconsistent with what we already accept to hold moral value. Take for example consent required in medical fields. Medical operations typically have a foreseeable health benefit that alleviates the suffering of patients, making them inherently good from Singer’s view. However, we see patient or family consent as a necessary condition prior to carrying out the operation. Then we have decided that rational agency matters in decisions; this essay builds on the value of rational agency.

Kant’s work on morality all concern rational agency, but the most read and considered is *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (*Groundwork*). This approach is not conclusive, but yet still worth consideration. The categorical imperative proposed in *Groundwork* judges if a reason for (maxim of) acting is willed universally and rationally. In his consideration, he rejects the maxim of never helping anyone. By this, Kant acknowledges that beneficence is at least sometimes required of us; and that the lack thereof negates itself. However, this remains a vague instruction as we have gained no more than knowing that we have to at least sometimes help others.

Another formula of the categorical imperative provides a global view. The formula of humanity forbids using rational beings as a means to an end, as we ought to have respect for the rational capacity

of others. In the past this may have meant that our direct actions ought not use others as means, but in a economy that incorporates labor from people oftentimes in poor working conditions, consumers of such products are factually using workers that are underpaid and underprotected as a means to their gain (insert statistics). This view asserts that we may be responsible to not consume products manufactured in this way, such as fast fashion, and look to ethically produced products. Though this does give us some guidance as to how to act, it fails to acknowledge the fact that suffering can happen without a clear artificial cause - natural disasters, hunger, disease. What is required is an account that requires us to act for others' suffering while considering the situation of moral acts.

Aside from Groundwork, Kant discusses benevolence in *Metaphysics of Morals* (*Metaphysics*), where he refers to two obligatory ends in particular: the perfection of oneself and the happiness of others. Compared to the principle he lays out in *Groundwork*, obligatory ends provide a clearer view on the specifics of moral requirement. I will not focus on the derivation of these ends, but rather illustrate their advantages and their implications in how we ought to live. One advantage that obligatory ends have is a focus on improving agency. We have established human agency as having moral value through the medical treatment example; what this obligatory end asks is the development of self-agency. This is a point of contrast with Singer's argument, which asks us to use our existing agency to seek immediate good. One implication of Singer's view is that the accumulated effect is only significant if the most influential individuals decides to devote themselves to his movement, risking the effectiveness of a consequentialist argument. By contrast, this obligatory end starts from the value of agency itself and seeks to expand the capacity of the agent. This happens to also provide justification for what Singer promotes, for example educating oneself on what charities are effective, or improving financial management skills.

In some ways, self-improvement is an inseparable part of moral agency. If we are to become better moral agents, acquaintance with our world is needed. This manifests in myriad ways: safety and stability, enough material to pursue happiness, knowledge of beauty, experiences of enjoyment, time and effort put into maintaining wellness and psychological well-being, education that allows us to comprehend the moral good in a situation. That is to say, the role of self-development in an epistemic sense and in a well-being sense can be productive towards moral projects. This is the portion of an ordinary life that we are keen to accept, namely that we are entitled to our own projects, development, and well-being that are not directly for the purpose of others.

The other obligatory end materializes what the categorical imperative has given us, that we ought to sometimes help others. Promoting the happiness of others is not expressed in a utilitarian way which states that somehow happiness is its own good. Rather, as we have discussed before, it is to help in the development of other's agency which we cannot directly promote. We can, however, help develop their moral well-being as a means to provide the conditions for greater agency. This does include others in disease, disasters, or poverty, whose agency is deprived. Unlike Singer, I will not point out a specific way to improve others' happiness, because the requirement of each situation is different, and requires the agent's moral judgment to determine the best course of action; in this sense the agent's development of agency is required.

The specificity of each situation does not posit that required actions are arbitrary. It acknowledges the different forms a moral life can take, and the considerations agents are capable of making. Someone who lives in the city would have more access to learning from experience how to help others in dangers prevalent to cities, and vice versa for those who live in the country. Thus the moral requirements for both are different, as someone from the city is much less likely to be faced with the situation of being attacked by large animals. It is then up to the agent to decide how to live their life, consequently what happens around them and what they may do in response. However, it does not hold that they may decide whether to help arbitrarily; responding to the needs of others is not part of the decisions of life, but at that point rather an obligation as a result of their choice.

The ordinary life that results from obligatory ends is then characterized by two features: sufficient self-development and consideration of others. This includes most of our lives into an ordinary life, especially if that includes commitment to helping others when obligated. Perhaps obviously, an

ordinary life does not include lives that spend time and resources on goals that are neither obligatory end; the life of luxury is one. High environmental or financial cost vacations for purposes other than recuperation cannot be justified, since morality is apparently not considered during its decision. However, periodic breaks and vacations that help combat burnout can be seen as a moral requirement if one is prone to burnout, as well-being is required for functioning moral judgments.

### 3. Summary

The Kantian view is neither definitive nor exclusive of how we ought to act on moral duties. In our lives, we are justified to view sleep, rest and some level of enjoyment and extra spending as non-luxuries, as they are required to have a functioning agent capable of good moral judgment. When we are asked to give to others until we are at the verge of needing help ourselves, we may not fully realize our rational agency; this point diverges from what Singer asks us to give. In fact, without developed agency it is hard to make a noticeable influence on the world.

We are required to help others, and must always consider that in moral judgment. The how-to and who-to are left to agents themselves as none of them is shown to be determinate; the consideration of others' agency serves as a factor for consideration. What limits beneficence in this sense is that it only serves to help particulars that have not benefited from their circumstances; it does not bring about structural change that addresses how we are embedded in our situation.

### References

- [1] Ji Ning. Kant's search for the highest moral principle [D]. Party School of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China,2017.DOI:CNKI:CDMD:1.1018.043441.
- [2] Equality. Amartya Sen:What kind of equality? [J]. [2024-05-25].
- [3] Steele. Reflections and revelations on Kant's 'De Foi Concordance' [J]. Newspaper and journal collection, 2018(2).
- [4] XU Xingyue. Analysing Kant's dichotomy between happiness and virtue[J]. Advances in Philosophy, 2022, 11(6):5. DOI:10.12677/ACPP.2022.116265.
- [5] Liu Zuo. How to Understand the Four Prior Concepts of Sensibility in Kant's Metaphysics of Morals? -- Based on the Scope List and Motivation Theory[J]. Journal of Anhui University: Philosophy and Social Science Edition, 2023, 47(2):1-9.