

**Marianne Talbot Student Essay Competition**  
**Trinity Term 2022**  
**SECOND PRIZE: SAM LIVY**

**Discuss critically Kant's arguments for his claims that the good will has unconditional value and that only actions motivated by duty have moral worth**

By Sam Livy

Kant's argument for the unconditional value of the good will follows from his proposition: "It is impossible to think of anything in the world, or indeed even outside it, that can be taken to be good without qualification, except a good will" (§1¶1s1/393-1), a proposition Kant suggests is self-evident.

"Something has conditional value if its value depends on whether certain conditions hold ... a thing has unconditional value if it has value in itself and has it under all conditions" (Korsgaard, 1996, p.16). We may, if fortunate, says Kant, be endowed with "talents of the mind such as understanding, wit and judgement, and qualities of temperament such as courage, determination, and tenacity, which "are doubtless ... good and desirable", but can only ever be qualified goods – contingent upon being put to good ends – and can be used for malevolence if the directing will is bad (§1¶1s2/393-1). "They have no unconditional inner worth ... and always presuppose a good will, [meaning] the highest esteem in which they are otherwise rightly held is qualified ... it is impermissible to treat them as absolutely good" (§1¶2s2/393-2).

Contrastingly, the good will is "good without qualification" (§1¶1s1/393-1) – not contingent upon "what it ... accomplishes, [or] through its effectiveness in attaining some intended end" (§1¶3s1/393-2). The will can be good even if our intentions are frustrated "by some simple twist of fate" or "it completely lack[s] the capacity to carry out its purpose" (§1¶3s4/393-2). The good will has value in and of itself and "although this cannot be the only and complete good, it must yet be the highest good, and the condition of everything else" (§1¶7s5/396-1).

How is this claim supported when Kant concedes, "There is something so strange in this idea of the absolute worth of a mere will, which is not evaluated on the basis of any usefulness ... a suspicion must ... arise that perhaps it is covertly grounded on high-flown fantasy" (§1¶4s1/393-3)? And exactly what is the precise nature of the will? Is it subject or object? Above Kant seems to present the will as 'subject' directing the 'objects' of our talents and qualities? This sets up confusion later.

To the layman 'will' is simply the mental faculty employed when choosing and committing to a course of action; for Kant, it is a more complex, abstract concept. His is a will distinct from everyday "activities and conditions of human willing in general, which are for the most part drawn from psychology" and based upon "empirical motivating grounds" (P¶9s1/390-1). His is one "determined completely by a priori principles devoid of empirical motivating grounds" (P¶9s2/390-1). By 'a priori' is meant "reasons for thinking a proposition is true that come from merely understanding, or thinking about, that proposition" (Russell, 2020).

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Should this sound challenging – that we can come to know moral laws simply by thinking about them – Kant concedes, “This of course still requires a power of judgement sharpened by experience, partly to distinguish in what cases they apply ... partly to open up the will to these laws and give them the potency needed for compliance” (¶7s2/389-2). That we are equipped to abstract away from the empirical is due to nature’s endowment of the faculty of reason. Whereas “everything in nature works according to laws ... only a rational being has the capacity to act according to the representation of laws, i.e. according to principles, and so only such a being has a will ... since reason is required for deriving actions from laws, the will is nothing other than practical reason” (§2¶12s1-3/412-2).

Again, the precise nature of Kant’s ‘will’, and here its relationship to reason, is obscure, since whilst above he conflates the two – “the will is nothing other than practical reason” (§2¶12s3/412-2) – in the following sentence he depicts them as relational – subject and object – as “a will that is unfailingly determined by reason” – where reason (subject) determines the will (object) (§2¶12s4/412-2). So, is the will acting (doing the directing) as we saw previously, or is the will acted upon (directed by) reason, as here? Mostly, Kant conceptualises the two as separate but in a symbiotic relationship whereby the will is guided to right action by reason, but this lack of consistency impedes comprehension.

Inconsistency again hinders our understanding when the will is good (or otherwise). A good will, says Kant, is one whose decisions are wholly determined by moral considerations – in its relation to the moral law. That the will is good can only be ascertained by our adherence to normative rules which in and of themselves provide the motive for acting. It is a determination to conform to moral law for the sake of the moral law – rather than self-interest or any results which may follow – which renders the will good. But if the will is good based on adherence to moral law, then surely it is contingent on that relationship, not good in and of itself as claimed?

Thus far it is unclear Kant that is successful in his claim for “a will that is estimable in itself and good apart from any further purpose,” nor that, “This concept already dwells in natural sound understanding and needs not so much to be taught as just brought to light” (§1¶8s1-2/397-1).

We come now to the second part of the question. To elucidate matters Kant introduces “the concept of duty, which contains that of the good will, but under certain subjective limitations and hindrances;” (§1¶8s4/397-1). But far from elucidation, this presents a further twist on his concept of the good will whereby it is now subsumed within duty, and further – subject (contingent) to limitations and hindrances.

In the concept of duty, Kant is concerned with reasons for acting rather than the act itself. That an act is compliant with moral law is not the measure of moral worth, for an act may be compliant by happenstance. We may be inclined towards courage – a

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quality "of temperament" often advantageous to the exercise of the good will and which can facilitate its work – but which "can also be evil and harmful ... if the will ... is not good" (§1¶1s2/393-1). Whether actions coincide with moral law is irrelevant, what is important is our reason for action.

Kant asserts an action has genuine moral worth only if the motive is that it be performed from duty – a determination to conform to moral law for the sake of moral law – not merely that an action towards which we may be inclined is in compliance with moral law. He cites beneficence – where beneficence where one can is a duty. Many people are inclined to be sympathetic to others – "without a motivation ground of vanity, or of self-interest, they find an inner gratification in spreading pleasure around them, and take delight in the pleasure of others—insofar as they have brought it about" (§1¶11s1/398-2). However, no matter how warm-hearted these actions they lack moral worth, for they are not performed from duty but from inclination which coincidentally conforms with duty.

Kant concedes the difference is obscure when an action conforming with duty is performed by a subject with a known inclination (§1¶9s4/397-2). If my friend is inclined towards beneficence, how should I judge their actions? Kant proposes we imagine my friend in mourning. They retain the means to care for others but their inclination to do so is extinguished by grief. Suppose then, despite grief and an inclination to tend to their own concerns, they tear themselves from sorrow to aid one in need of sympathy; now my friend acts not from inclination but from duty – from a determination to do right– an act attracting genuine moral worth (§1¶12s1-2/398-2). Is this claim justified?

We could object it is churlish denying the moral worth of actions performed from inclination when those inclinations are good, coinciding with duty. Kant seems to demand no other motive be present before conferring moral worth. Even action deemed honourable – which he concedes "deserves praise and encouragement" – if performed by one with an inclination for honour, is unworthy "of high esteem. For the maxim lacks moral content" (§1¶11s3/398-1).

But Kant's project is not to determine praiseworthy actions, nor withhold praise where deserved, but rather to instruct us in how we should know the right action in any given situation. When deliberating, inclination is not reliable in the way conforming to moral law is. By accepting and acting upon an obligation to moral law – by acting from duty – we act, always, upon a maxim of moral content.

It is that which guides our actions which is of import. If we accept Kant's definition of duty as an obligation to conform to moral law for the sake of moral law, and let duty be our guide; and if we accept Kant's proposition that it is in the guidance where morality rests rather than the act, then we must accept his proposition that only actions motivated by duty have moral worth.

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In conclusion Kant's second claim – only actions motivated by duty have moral worth – succeeds rather better than his first – that only the good will has unconditional value. He does not successfully bind his two arguments; they appear disparate, where the first is an argument from reason and the second from duty with little cohesion. His argument for the claim that only the good will has unconditional value is plagued by inconsistency and obscurity and whilst we may not wish to dismiss this claim outright, it is at best unconvincing and shrouded in reasonable doubt.

**Bibliography**

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