

## Getting Kant's joke: a phenomenological defense of common moral experience

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### INTRODUCTION

*Kant's joke* – Kant wanted to prove, in a way that would dumbfound the whole world, that the whole world was right: that was the secret joke of this soul. He wrote against the scholars in favour of popular prejudice, but for scholars and not for the people.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, p. 140

Be a philosopher; but . . . be still a man!

David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 4

Nietzsche's thought here on Kant imputes an ironic intent to Kant's writings that I suspect is not true of Kant's project; but, like most any of Nietzsche's aphorisms, this one touches on something profoundly true about the philosopher he addresses. Here, there are two related seeds of truth. First, Kant *was* concerned to articulate a practical philosophy which depended upon, and articulated more clearly, what was always already in the practical consciousness of everyday people, and which avoided the most common failings of an overly academic, expert approach to it. Secondly, Kant's writing style is rather "scholar[ly]" in tone, making it difficult for "the people" to understand it. The tragedy of Kant scholarship in the past two hundred years since his death is that this first intention of his project – the defense of a common approach to ethics – has been lost, and he is instead left with a reputation for bringing an overly academic, expert approach to philosophy generally, and to practical philosophy particularly.

How to explain this tragic trajectory? One culprit, as in any real tragedy, is the protagonist himself: Kant's own writing, especially his

emphasis upon the purity and a priority of practical reason, does a lot to put off the common reader. Nietzsche is right, then, that Kant did not write “for the people.” But there is more to say: the emphasis in the interpretive literature over the centuries on an overly restrictive reading of Kant’s a priori morality, spearheaded by at times almost exclusive emphasis upon the First Formulation of the Categorical Imperative, has given the impression that Kant’s practical philosophy is exceedingly rationalistic, narrowly construed, and calculative in nature, thus requiring an expertise the common person lacks. What Kant intended as a simple test to help us avoid our self-deceiving tendencies toward rationalizing and complicating what was meant to be simple has, ironically, fallen victim to just those rationalizing and complicating tendencies. A test meant to secure the heart of a common practical moral consciousness has instead been its demise.

This is a tragedy, because wrapped in Kant’s copious discussions of practical philosophy is perhaps the most potent philosophical articulation of common practical moral consciousness in the history of philosophy. It is the intent of this book to articulate that common approach to understanding and grounding moral philosophy. I devote the rest of this introduction to a clarification of the contours of this project.

#### The common moral philosopher: admonishing the experts

Kant believed that moral philosophy must begin with the nonphilosophical and intensely personal moral task of coming to terms with a conflict at the basis of human existence. The conflict is between happiness and morality; a conflict made only more intense by our tendency to deceive ourselves about the true nature of morality’s demands. It is only when we identify, and work honestly to counteract, both this conflict and the self-deceptive tendency that is the most human response to it that both a moral life and moral philosophy can begin. Before that, we have not, as humans, come to terms with our moral state and, as philosophers, have no epistemic or moral warrant to engage in philosophical reflections upon morality.

Unfortunately, the business of moral philosophy in Kant’s – and our own – time tends toward an expert, scientifically minded bias that discourages the initiation of thought through appeal to personal, existential experience. The result is the disfigurement of practical philosophy: failure to engage the existential conflict at the basis of human existence turns any would-be practical philosophy into

something other than practical philosophy. At best, it becomes a theoretical, scientific, third-personal reflection upon human practical experience; at worst, it is an exercise in just that self-deception practical philosophy is meant to address.

Kant reserves his most derisive tones for those would-be practical philosophers who avoid the problem at the heart of practical philosophy: the dear self. When speaking in the *Critique of Practical Reason* about a practical point that he takes to be exquisitely clear from the common point of view – viz., that morality and happiness present essentially different, and frequently conflicting, grounds for action – Kant adds the following:

This conflict, however, is not merely logical . . . it is instead practical and would ruin morality altogether were not the voice of reason in reference to the will so distinct, so irrepressible, and so audible even to the most common human beings; thus it can maintain itself only in the perplexing speculations of the schools, which are brazen enough to shut their ears to that heavenly voice in order to support a theory they need not break their heads over.

(5:35/32)<sup>1</sup>

The conflict between happiness and morality – and the ultimate recognition of the priority of morality over happiness when the two come in conflict – is exquisitely clear to the common human understanding. The only way things get confused is when “speculations of the schools” introduce obscure distinctions that cloud this clarity and thus blunt the force of what is “so distinct,” “so irrepressible” to one’s common understanding. Furthermore, these obscure distinctions are inspired by a desire academic philosophers have to “support a theory they need not break their heads over.” That is, philosophers are more interested in staying true to their (perhaps already published?) theories than in doing the hard work of following what is in fact morally demanded, and what is in fact more difficult – not philosophically, but morally – to admit.

1 In referring to Kant’s works, I will first note the Akademie pagination (Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Hrsg. bd. 1–22, Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften; bd. 23, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin; bd. 24, Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen. Berlin 1900ff.), and then the pagination of the translations, a full list of which can be found in the Bibliography below. When referring to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, pagination for both the A and B editions of the Akademie edition will be noted, followed by the pagination of the corresponding English translation. Finally, references will largely be provided within the main text of each chapter.

Kant makes a similar point in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Here, he speaks of those “who are accustomed merely to explanations by natural sciences,” and who “band together in a general call to arms, as it were, to defend the omnipotence of theoretical reason” (6:378/143). Such persons simply will never understand morality and virtue: “People who are accustomed merely to explanations by natural sciences . . . [moral] laws proceed dictatorially, even though they feel themselves compelled irresistibly by it” (6:378/143). Feeling oneself categorically obligated can hit them over the head like a baseball bat, but these obsessively theoretically minded philosophers will turn such a practical encounter into a “proud claim” (6:378/143) of “speculative” or “theoretical” reason (6:378/143), misunderstanding its import entirely. That is, instead of taking on this encounter with an imperative first-personally, such philosophers turn the task of making sense of moral demands into a theoretical observation, making “obligation” (6:378/143) a sort of distant object to be assessed third-personally and scientifically.

But in order for the seeds of our practical lives to bear fruit, we must think of ourselves not simply as knowers or explainers, but as living rational actors encountering moral demands. Kant's point is that taking on the practical point of view isn't just a philosophical move; it is a moral one. Taking on the practical point of view involves a willingness to view oneself clearly as an obligated actor. Normal people, uninfected by the enthusiasms of the academy, have less trouble looking at themselves this way; but academic philosophers or scientists are often more interested simply in continuing their theorizing than in looking at themselves. They are the only ones who could fail to see clearly what is painfully obvious from the common point of view. One might paraphrase Kant's point here by appeal to a rough paraphrase of the Gospels: “Philosopher, know thyself!”

This is not to say that Kant abandons all philosophy in making sense of morality. Quite to the contrary, his practical philosophy engages the philosopher with the human, the expert with the common person trying to make sense of her moral life. It is only in the combination of the common point of view with commonly oriented philosophical reflection that the task of moral philosophy is accomplished. Kant's conviction is that we all really do know what is involved in being a moral person; it is just that we all aren't really good at, or perhaps interested in, articulating in exquisitely clear language what is at the center of our moral consciousness: *that* is the philosopher's job.

It makes sense that the common perspective, on its own, would lack philosophical precision. The common perspective is an inherently nonphilosophical perspective on obligation, giving primacy to practical tasks over thought. This does not mean the common point of view is irrational or repugnant to the articulation of reasons. It is just that the person taking the common perspective is busy determining her choice and acting on her reasons instead of working out the fine points of their defense. As philosophers, we *are* interested in the articulation and defense of reasons, and that is just as it should be. The danger for the practical philosopher, though, is to seek such articulation in the absence of proper guidance by the true object of her concern: the common experience of being an obligated agent. We philosophers are all too good at, and all too invested in, our reason-giving, and this capacity for and attachment to reasons threatens to allow practical philosophy to spin away from its proper realm, turning more into theoretical, third-person reflections on practical experience instead of an engaged, first-personal, but now philosophical encounter with that experience. Kant's dream for practical philosophy is that it can be truly practical, that is, truly grounded in our common experience.

#### The development of the practical problem

It is, however, hard to envision how Kant could be entitled to robust, common, practical knowledge claims about morality when he admits both that we cannot know things beyond phenomenal experience, and that moral philosophy – especially its central concept of freedom – depends upon things beyond that phenomenal experience. Such was his dilemma: how to engage in a practical philosophy that respects the limits of reason, yet issues not in probabilistic claims but instead in practical certainty about its conclusions, at least enough certainty to assure continued moral practices.

It is to resolve this dilemma that Kant introduces the common perspective in moral philosophy. Some would say that a common perspective cannot take us beyond phenomenal experience. But Kant asserts exactly the opposite: we gain confidence about superphenomenal things in the practical realm not from theoretical philosophical argument, but from attentive reflection upon the contents of the common person's moral consciousness. Such a move in fact makes *prima facie* sense: the nonphilosophically inclined person is, after all, unmoved by the dire claims of philosophers who assure her that causal

determinism undermines her freedom. She knows her obligations, and even her tendency to try to avoid them; but she keeps acting anyway, recognizing the unrelenting authority of the demands imposed upon her and trusting that she can decide when and how to deal with them! It is the philosophically innocent perspective of this common person that Kant embraces as a new source of a now thoroughly practical knowledge.

Although this move makes sense, it is also a dangerous move to make: it would be uncritical to welcome the contents of human consciousness as given without providing some transcendental deduction of them. It would be naive and lacking in philosophical rigor to depend upon a merely common perspective for philosophical assertions. And yet, with flickers of his Pietist past emerging in philosophical form, Kant takes on these critics in the name of his commitment to a common notion of morality he knew in his own heart.

But although Kant does turn to common experiences to orient practical philosophy, he does not thereby abandon traditional philosophical concern for knowledge or cognition; instead, he seeks a new sort of cognition that is both genuinely common and genuinely practical. The common, nonphilosophical person's experience is a starting point for genuinely philosophical reflection culminating in knowledge, or cognition. There is a shift here, though. When we set aside theoretical modes of pursuing knowledge and turn instead to our practical experiences, we are no longer *simply* interested in knowing something; we are, more centrally, interested in that knowledge which will secure our status and efficacy as agents. Indeed, it is only by reflecting upon ourselves *as* agents that we find the very possibility of expanding our knowledge beyond the limits asserted in theoretical philosophy.

There is a more precise Kantian way of making the same point: it is only as agents that we find a new goal for the sake of which reason can apply itself and in virtue of which concepts can be determined. A concept like freedom "is not capable of being determined so as to represent a determinate object for the sake of theoretical cognition, yet for the sake of something else (the practical perhaps) it *could* be capable of being determined for its application" (5:54/47, emphases removed and added). A concept can be determined not by that empirical intuition that would be most appropriate to affirming that concept as realized in an empirical object. Instead, it is determined via appeal to "something else" we find in our practical experience, an end that inspires new epistemic routes for the determination of concepts. The

practical is a “source of cognition” (Bxxviii; 115n): by some sort of appeal to it as yet to be determined, we give birth to new determinations of concepts – that is, to cognitions – that were impossible when our end was theoretical knowledge. It is by altering the goal or end of reason that its realm expands, and new epistemic possibilities are born.

We thus need to connect concepts like freedom with an end, goal or purpose that will give them direction, content and significance in a way that has been lacking for them via pursuit of theoretical knowledge. What results is, most decidedly, not knowledge for knowledge's sake; rather, it is knowledge for the sake of our practical lives. Nonetheless, it will indeed still be knowledge, or cognition. But this move to the practical realm can approach the knowing question – as, for example, knowing the objective reality of freedom – only obliquely. This is because the purpose we find by appeal to the practical is not itself an end of knowing something, but rather the end of what Kant will eventually call “determining the will” (5:46/41), a determination oriented toward doing, producing, or acting. Any questions of knowing are thus oriented by that end of making sense of this doing, producing, or acting. To know something beyond theoretical knowledge, we thus seek an end that is not itself an epistemic end, but which grounds the possibility of further epistemic investigations, now understood, in virtue of their goal, as specifically *practical* epistemic investigations.

#### Reassertion of the common point of view

This is, however, a good point at which to caution the excited, newly minted practical philosopher: yes, your new philosophical questions do arise when we think of ourselves as agents; it therefore makes sense to investigate a specifically practical cognition. But do not thereby turn the practical into a thoroughly philosophical – and a thoroughly theoretical – exercise! To summarize Kant's point here, now through a rough paraphrase of Hume: “Be a practical philosopher, but be still a human being!” More precisely: be a philosopher concerned about cognitions related to acting, but do not thereby lose your appreciation of being still a person with a common, nonphilosophical perspective on your life as an obligated agent. Resolve philosophical questions, but do so while maintaining a firm connection to your practical, common experiences. When you lose your connection to these common experiences, you lose your life source – indeed, your very justification – as a practical philosopher. Because of the route through which practical

philosophy is born – our common, nonphilosophical experience of ourselves as obligated agents – the practical philosopher must, simultaneously, be a common, nonphilosophical human being.

We can, for the present, speak only in general terms of what such admonitions mean for the pursuit of practical philosophy; a fuller account is, indeed, simply the story of this book. What we shall see as this book unfolds, though, is that embracing a practical mode of cognition means embracing both common human moral experience and a phenomenological method for exploring it. Practical cognition is surely, as our newly born practical philosopher has just pointed out, a cognition that can be accomplished only when one looks at oneself as an agent. But looking at oneself as “an agent” has more common twists and turns than our all too recently theoretical philosopher might have initially imagined, and appeal to common, agential doings to orient cognition yields a method of practical philosophy unimaginable to the theoretical philosopher. The common person, thinking about herself as an agent, is very far removed from the theoretical concerns of causal determinism versus freedom. Yet she does not enter the world of action cleanly, as if she had never previously been an agent. To the contrary, she discovers herself already deeply enmeshed in pursuing the hopes of her “dear self.” That is, she discovers herself as a person who – when moral demands present themselves as in conflict with but as more authoritative than her hopes for happiness – is tempted to try through rationalization and self-deception to get away with what she can, in the name of that happiness. *This* is the experience of agency present in and internal to “common human reason” (4:405/18). We all encounter this conflict and temptation toward rationalization, says Kant; indeed, we are all painfully and intimately familiar with it.

Here, though, is the crucial point: it is this painfully intimate and common experience of conflict that thrusts us into the world of practical *philosophy*. To be entitled to the pursuit of cognitions beyond the limits of theoretical reason, the philosopher must enter the common experience of herself as an agent. And that means that the theoretical philosopher must set aside her arguments, her deductions and her worries about causal determinism, and turn instead to phenomenological reflection on this existential conflict at the basis of her existence as a human agent. As agents, we humans find ourselves in an inherently unstable state, facing two conflicting practical demands and a temptation to resolve the conflict by lying to ourselves. This state *demands* attentive reflection and resolution, and cannot stand happily as it is.

Attentive reflection on this existential experience, once properly conceived, will be the very birth of practical philosophy.

To state the point more succinctly, and more urgently: one becomes a moral *philosopher* only by taking the first steps in becoming a moral *person*. The philosopher will find her new purpose or end to replace the thoroughly epistemic theoretical one only if and when she takes up and is attentive to her common experience of herself as a moral being. The need to resolve the conflict between happiness and morality provides the new purpose that grounds, guides, and promises significance for our new task of moral philosophy. As such, we will find ultimately that whenever Kant says that the “objective reality” of something is proved, “but only for practical purposes,” we can replace “only for practical purposes” with “only for the purposes of making sense of and resolving that conflict discovered in our practical experiences.” Becoming a good practical philosopher means becoming a better moral person. The true concerns of the moral person are discovered only in attentive reflection upon this intensely intimate, felt, common, first-personal phenomenological experience of the conflict between happiness and morality.

What emerges from all these twists and turns is a new method of Kantian practical philosophy. Practical philosophy – and, with it, the very process of becoming a moral person – proceeds according to a phenomenological method of attentive reflection upon a common, felt, first-personal experience at the ground of human agency: the conflict between happiness and morality, and the temptation to resolve that conflict via self-deception.

The picture that emerges of Kant's moral theory thus has some unexpected features. Most crucially, according to this method, Kant prioritizes openness to what is already given in moral consciousness over deductive philosophical argument. He also prioritizes this openness and attentiveness to experience over actively willing to produce things in the world. It is not that activity of the choosing will is abandoned; it is, however, contextualized within the more crucial, first, orienting step of becoming a moral person, that step in which we *pay attention* to ourselves and discover what is already given within one's own sensibly affected and therefore felt rational moral consciousness.

We will therefore devote much of this study to exploring the notion of attentiveness, Kantian style, envisioning various of its exercises (some successful, others not so successful), so as to appreciate this “activity” so central to the moral person. We will also seek to reveal

that, in this phenomenological approach to common moral experience, feeling – as the proper object of our attentive reflection – plays a particularly important enabling epistemic role in Kant's moral philosophy, a role not adequately appreciated by current interpreters of his work. When we appeal to attentive reflection on felt experience, we will not take feeling simply as a wishy-washy and indistinct appeal to what cannot be articulated rationally. To the contrary, we will affirm that the limits of reason demand of us that we put our active and rational deliberation on hold so as to first be truly receptive to what is present in our felt moral consciousness. Only in so doing will Kant, and Kantians, be able to appreciate deep metaphysical truths about one's rational self that are otherwise inaccessible to merely sensibly affected rational beings.

#### Chapter summary

The book is in three parts. In Part I, I present in general, schematic terms, Kant's method of attentiveness to common, felt, phenomenological experience as the proper method for both articulating and grounding the most basic claims of practical philosophy (Chapter 1). I then spend the rest of the first part addressing immediate worries about attributing this sort of approach to Kant's a priori moral philosophy. Worries that we can appeal neither to experience (Chapter 2) nor to feeling (Chapter 3) to ground the claims of practical philosophy are dismissed. First, once Kant admits a practical experience of necessity, an attentive appeal to phenomenological experience (as opposed to an inductive appeal to empirical experience) can indeed point us toward the ultimate rational ground of synthetic a priori practical claims; felt experience will play an enabling, but not evidential, role in the grounding of these claims. Second, once Kant admits a necessarily felt feeling not caught up in the calculus of achieving happiness, this attentive appeal to the enabling role of felt experience in the grounding of the most basic claims of moral philosophy does not reduce illicitly to moral sense theory.

I then turn to discovery and analysis of this method of attentiveness in Kant's two central texts in practical philosophy, the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Part II is devoted to an analysis of Kant's failed effort in the *Groundwork* to appeal to this common method of attentiveness to felt experience in the grounding of claims of freedom and moral obligation. In Chapter 4,