

Discussing Normative Ethical Reasons and Moral Realism with Kant: A Meta-Ethical Perspective

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Abstract: This chapter aims to provide a brief but thorough view of the central ideas of moral realism regarding ethical normative reasons. Moral realism contains the concept of discovery of normative moral reasons and, along with antirealism, serves a prominent role in the contemporary philosophical debate on normative ethics. This essay will follow a metaethical interpretation of explaining ethical normative propositions. It will mainly be based on Immanuel Kant's critical theories and will aim to comprehend the foundations of the generally accepted normative reasons of wider scope, such as respect for human beings. Such fundamental reasons constitute of an ontological unit that is not affected by the psycho-physiological conditions of the rational ethical actor and thus perceived as having a regulative and objective status. This objectivity signifies the existence of a transcendental place different and beyond the empirical experience. This is an a priori way of moral Reason's functioning; it transcends individuality and selfish dispositions, having a form of law, namely the Ethical Law. If external experience ultimately determines the ethical decision, then the reasonable will of the actor will be dependent on passions such as personal interests. It is emphasized that moral agents need to function under the spontaneity of logical reasoning to naturally act in an ethical manner and not on the basis of various exogenous factors.

Keywords: normative; reason; ethical; metaethics; rational; transcendental; moral realism; antirealism

I. Introduction

This chapter aspires to provide a brief and comprehensive analysis of the structure and essence of ethical normative reasons, i.e., principal reasons that determine the wrongness or rightness of moral facts. In particular, the main concept of *discovery* of normative moral rea-

sons derives from moral realism. At the same time, it remains in a constant and productive dialogue with antirealism, in which the central argument is that of the *construction* of ethical reasons. These viewpoints serve a prominent role in the contemporary philosophical debate on normative ethics and its applications. Therefore, this chapter will attempt to combine features and parameters from both of these theories. The answer to whether normative ethical reasons' existence corresponds to a transcendent state of mind or is perceived as such due to the moral freedom of rational beings that we are called upon to discover, is not absolute and needs constant investigation.

This essay follows a metaethical approach to explaining ethical normative propositions and is mainly based on Immanuel Kant's critical theories.¹ Specifically, the first level of analysis for moral truths and ethical criteria was, traditionally, the normative level that presented rules of actions, thoughts, and knowledge of moral status with direct practical implications. Following modernity and *contemporaneity*, the second level of analysis, the metaethical, completes the deontic² character of the first with a hermeneutical approach. As Scanlon³ explains about the metaethical approach, it begins with questions about the logical structure and the semantics of logical ethical reasons that define the proper motive of each rational action, as a duty to do what is right and was directly related to the field of

¹ Immanuel Kant's work in the fields of epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics had immense influence on those who followed. In this essay Kant's thought is interpreted in a realistic way, based on the works of his critical period of writing (see his *Critique of Pure Reason*, also the *Critique of Practical Reason* etc.). Kant attempted to establish morality and practical Reason through the concept of categorical imperative, that is, of the unifying principle which describes the rational ethical act in a necessary, pure and categorical way.

² Stelios Virvidakis, "Dimensions and Perspectives of Modern Ethical Philosophy," in *The Return of Ethics: Old and New Questions* (Athens: Artos Zois, 2013), 405-437, 405-408 [in Greek].

³ Thomas M. Scanlon, *Being Realistic About Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

Ethics *par excellence* [*Moral*], as it is called in the work of Immanuel Kant.⁴ The latter defined as *Moral* the field of rational acts that bears an ethical content, and falls within the broader field of Ethical Science [*Ethik*]. Later, metaethics was transformed into a more demanding field, showing great development in understanding moral judgments, being enriched with questions of ontological conception, interpretive and epistemological indications of moral reasoning.⁵ The method to be used in this chapter will be systematic, without following historical or spatio-temporal order but considering the relevant considerations in a non-chronological way.

Before the main analysis, it is necessary to further explain some of the central concepts that will be mentioned:

- i. *Reason (ratio)* in this text concerns the Logical causal relations between acts and their subjects and serves to answer why subject A must do action B whether he/she wants it or not,⁶ namely the governing principle of the world.
- ii. *Normativity*⁷ can be perceived as the derivative of the most fundamental ethical normative reasons, in the context of Reason (the rational mental capacity of the ethical actor).
- iii. *Ethical reason* indicates an obligation.⁸ This obligation indicates a moral life within a framework, subject to limitations,⁹ which defines fundamental duties of the rational being that bears respect for him/herself and other beings.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, transl. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4:388.

⁵ Scanlon, 1, and Virvidakis, 1.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, transl. Mary Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 6:375.

⁷ The term *normativity* is here used in its ethical sense.

⁸ Scanlon, 10.

⁹ Stelios Virvidakis, *The Texture of Moral Reality* (Athens: Leader Books, 2009), 251 [in Greek].

iv. Ethics illustrate the practice of the *actors*, i.e., the actors of the purposeful action that brings a result to the empirical world.

II. Examining the nature of normative ethical reasons

a. The transcendental *topos*

Aiming to discern the foundations of the generally accepted normative reasons of wider scope,¹⁰ such as respect for human beings, this paper argues that it would be implicit that there must be a state of normative (objective) reasons different from the subjective inclinations of humans. Essentially, the existence of such reasons constitutes an ontological unit, which is not affected by the psycho-physiological conditions of the rational ethical actor. The recognition of the authority of that objective state of reasons is a trait of human nature and close to the Platonic *Idea*,¹¹ which implies a transcendental *topos*¹² different from the empirical experience and beyond it.¹³ Interestingly, Immanuel Kant¹⁴ believed that the foundation of normative ethical principles is Reason, which is not preconstructed by other reasons and understood as the actor's ability to act rationally, an ability that is beyond his/her propensities.

This meta-empirical functional system¹⁵ highlights the truth of the moral facts despite of experience, in a discovery of a transcendental world of intellect. Within this world, Reason and

¹⁰ Paul Formosa, "Is Kant a Moral Constructivist or a Moral Realist?" *European Journal of Philosophy* 21, no. 2 (2011): 170-196, 177.

¹¹ See Plato's Theory of Forms (or Ideas), in which Plato stands for the *per se* existence of ideas in relation to the tangible objects.

¹² The word *topos* in this essay indicates a transcendental *place*; it is used as the Greek root *topo-* is being used. And, according to Pelegrinis, 630, Ainesedimus used the term *topos* to refer to the cognitive ways of forming arguments and notions.

¹³ Vassilios Karasmanis, "Plato's Philosophy," *Denkalion* 34, nos. 1-2 (2020): 5-37, 5-7 [in Greek].

¹⁴ Costas Androulidakis, *Kantian Ethics, Fundamental Issues and Perspectives* (Athens: Smili, 2018), 37 [in Greek].

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

rationality reveal their supersensible existence, in a way that the moral agent (for example a rational mature person) follows¹⁶ their invincible rules in a categorical way, without questioning their validity. This world can be trespassed through mentality and intellect and consists of the representations and reflections of the human experiences which are being assessed through the symbolic mental consciousness of Moral. The transcendental character of this inner knowledge and ethical judgment actually entails the potentials of realising the tangible and non-tangible ethical facts and reasons. It can be interpreted as ways of a conceptual elaboration of the normative concepts of intellect pure from personal interests and as rational forms of supervision of the phenomena of experience or thoughts of the moral subject, who is going to decide on what is right to do and what feels right to do.

b. Considering the aprioristic nature of normative ethical reasons Being obvious that moral normative reasons act in a substantial place, where moral judgments are accountable to Logic while transcending the human senses, one can remember what Plato asked in the *Republic*: "... and it will not ever be actually finished, that regime which we are shaping like a fairytale with our Reason?"¹⁷ In this citation, Plato perceived the ideal State, which included the fundamental moral qualities of justice, as concerning an area beyond the perceived empirical stimuli. This way of conceiving entities, facts and reasons, namely as existing also in a place beyond vision, is completely different from the material world but is realistically true and can be felt or realised. Consequently, any normative ethical principle upon which the Ethical Law can be established is perceived as such if the moral subject has that ethical freedom of thought that antirealism

¹⁶ Evangelos D. Protopapadakis, "Could I Wish to Be a Courtier?" in *The Courtier Philosopher*, ed. G. Arabatzis, 65-76 (Athens: National and Kapodistrian University of Athens Press, 2017), 70 [in Greek].

¹⁷ Plato, *Republic*, transl. M. Skouteropoulos (Athens: Polis, 2002), 501e 4-5 [translation mine]. Original sentence in ancient Greek: "πολιτεία ἢν μυθολογοῦμεν λόγῳ ἔργῳ τέλος λήψεται."

stands for, and which makes him/her susceptible to those reasons.¹⁸ The authority of these reasons is inevitably recognized whether or not the rational ethical actor confirms it.¹⁹ One such principle is the principle of equal respect, which Kant considers in his work as the cornerstone of the teleological moral claim of humans.²⁰

Specifically, Kant argues that, if the subject's inclinations can control the will, then the rational subject of the reasons is not independent and capable of following the imperative laws of Reason. Kant states clearly that "... man finds within himself a capacity to understand his intellect and the normative laws by which his sensual representations are defined."²¹ It can be concluded that, the fundamental ethical normative principles are those which can determine other principles' value²² and render human mind capable of understanding moral categorical imperatives, as if they preexisted in the place of noesis.²³ As Virvidakis characteristically mentions in *The Texture of Moral Reality*,²⁴ Kant argues for the preexistence of that *topos* of human Reason, where the ethical subject can realise the concepts of normativity without having it preconceived. Nonetheless, according to the Platonic theory of cognitive power that comes through the perceptual power of empirical vision,²⁵ it is extracted that the *a priori* way of reaching normative ethical judgments can combine its ethical qualities with the moral principles through the

¹⁸ Charles Larmore, and Alain Renaut, *Debate on Ethics: Idealism or Realism*, transl. Mich. Pagkalos (Athens: Polis, 2004), 8 [in Greek].

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁰ Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:439; this opinion is usually taken as antirealistic, but in this paper, I discuss it realistically.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4:108.

²² Spyros I. Ragkos, "The Dual Metaphysics of the First Principles in Plato: Written Dialogues and Oral Teaching," *Denkalion* 34, nos. 1-2 (2020): 38-74, 47 [in Greek].

²³ Noesis means mental understanding, intelligence; see Pelegrinis, 446. It is the opposite of *sense*.

²⁴ Virvidakis, *The Texture*, 249.

²⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 508e 1-6.

ethical imperatives that already exist in the transcendental place. It is thus understood that there are such ethical principles, independent of the ethical being and able to act as foundational ones;²⁶ rational beings can approach those principles through their Moral.²⁷

Similarly, Plato in the *Republic* mentions that, the approach of principles such as the geometric ones²⁸ which constitute an ontological spatial unit, are only accessible through the intellect and can be perceived by rational actors only through mental processes. Respectively, the Greek philosopher implies in *Menon*²⁹ the *a priori* existence of the perfect mathematical principles.³⁰ Furthermore, Peacocke argues that for every moral principle known to humans, it must be accepted that they are either aprioristic in their content or follow aprioristic moral principles.³¹ And, as stated by Virvidakis, purely antirealistic views, due to their fear of Platonism, fall short of proving the truth of their reasoning, because they cannot explain the foundations of normative moral principles necessary to justify the general normative reasons.³²

c. The connection between ethical freedom and normative reasons
The ethical criteria for the purposeful moral action and explanation of moral reasoning can be found in Kant's theory of the different formulations of the categorical imperative, namely the normative ethical laws that should determine the will, decision and action of rational beings. According to these, humans must act in such a way that their act can apply as a universal law to

²⁶ Larmore, and Renaut, *Debate on Ethics*, 91.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 89-91; in this passage Larmore mentions the objectivity of the normativity of the place of Reason's realisation and the independent validity of its existence.

²⁸ Karasmanis, 18.

²⁹ In *Menon* (or *On Virtue*) Socrates and Menon seek the definition of virtue and examine whether it can be taught.

³⁰ Karasmanis, 30.

³¹ Virvidakis, *The Texture*, 342.

³² Virvidakis, *ibid.*, 365.

all rational beings³³ and treat other agents with unquestioning respect for their personalities. Humans should always “see humanity in the face of others, see it as an end-in-itself,³⁴ namely to act with self-legislation towards the exercise of rational thought and ethical action. If the moral agent is not self-legislated, he/she ceases to belong to this “...State³⁵ of free ethical actors...” who bear the ethical freedom to choose the path to Reason.

According to Androulidakis, ethical freedom is aprioristic,³⁶ that is, it presupposes experience and needs experience to unfold,³⁷ but also exists before and beyond it; it is thought to be internal³⁸ and independent³⁹ from the empirical and embodied passions.⁴⁰ This *a priori* way of functioning of moral reasons is a quality that human brain uses *sponte*⁴¹ and transcends the individual dispositions.⁴² It has the form of the Ethical Law.⁴³ The latter is the pure practical Reason,⁴⁴ which is free from empirical stimuli. Its’ realisation⁴⁵ from the human mind⁴⁶ motivates the ethical actor through logical procedures,⁴⁷ in which this prin-

³³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, transl. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2002), 5:58.

³⁴ Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:420.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4:433.

³⁶ Androulidakis, *Kantian Ethics*, 68.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁸ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:407.

³⁹ Thomas Hill Jr, “Kantianism,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, ed. Hugh LaFollette, and Ingmar Persson, 311-331 (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 312.

⁴⁰ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:408.

⁴¹ Androulidakis, *Kantian Ethics*, 63.

⁴² Hill, 312.

⁴³ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:56, also in Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:403.

⁴⁴ To Kant ‘pure’ practical logic means independent of empirical stimuli.

⁴⁵ Stelios Virvidakis, “The Presence of Kant in Contemporary English Philosophy: The Transformation of the Transcendental Approach,” in *Tribute to Immanuel Kant*, 798-848 (Athens: Nea Estia, 2004), 794 [in Greek].

⁴⁶ Androulidakis, 63.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

principle is presented as “... decisive reason, of which no sensory term can prevail...”⁴⁸ Consequently, if experience and external conditions determine the normative choice of the rational actor, then his/her will is not going to stem from the categorical laws of Moral but from psychological or materialistic interests. Such interests are completely different from the *per se* nature of normative reasons that stand for all the other general ethical propositions as a stable intellectual ground.

III. Epilogue

In conclusion, this chapter briefly examined the nature of ethical normative reasoning, in an attempt to discuss moral realism with Immanuel Kant’s critical views, through an analysis situated in contemporary thought. The analysis followed a meta-ethical framework of explaining ethical normative propositions in hermeneutical way. The basic concept of ‘discovery’ of the normative laws of moral reasons defends the position that moral judgments and evaluations are captured in an *a priori* way,⁴⁹ as if they were a conceivable order of reasons and values not affected by the human psychological transitions, but determined from the rational actor’s state of mind (capacity of Reason and ethical reasoning).⁵⁰ Any normative principle that can act as a foundation for other principles of rational actions, such as the principle of equal respect for rational ethical actors however, can only be understood as such if the ethical subject has the moral freedom that gives him/her the capacity to recognize those reasons, regardless the person’s interests, feeling and being in absolute compliance with it.

⁴⁸ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:53.

⁴⁹ The term *a priori* is found in Kant’s work, denoting the *a priori* meaning and origin of the most fundamental moral rules. The expression comes from the Latin prior, comparative of primus (first) and literally means in advance. In this chapter means the knowledge that pre-exists without the need for proof or experience.

⁵⁰ Larmore, and Renaut, 79-81; on the pragmatic mild Platonism of Larmore see also Virvidakis, *The Texture*, 367.

The transcendental place of existence of pure Reason, where the fundamental principles exist and can be discovered through self-conscience and experience, pre-supposes the ethical freedom of the rational mind so that it can discover its qualities through an intra-subjective journey, regardless of the external stimuli of experience. However, if exogenous factors determine the choice of the rational actor, then the ethical subject ceases to choose with accountability to the Moral laws of Reason that are pure from empirical influences. Every motive of the rational being's action is Reason, which gives birth to the very idea of any action and its possibility. If external experience ultimately determines the ethical normative decision, the reasonable will of the actor will be dependent on *passions*.⁵¹ Overall, the moral agent needs to function under the spontaneity of his/her logical reasons towards what is right or not to do; in this way the actor will naturally act in an ethical manner. In this part of the normative ethical endeavor, respect for all rational beings and acceptance of limitations of human action play an essential role. The regulatory ideas of pure Reason, which direct the rational being to a continuous expansion of knowledge of the physical world and towards a reasonable orientation of thoughts, can vividly depict Moral in a graceful human life.

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⁵¹ Such as hunger, or lust, or personal interest.

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