

**A New Discussion on the Moral Value of "Sympathy" in Kant's " *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* " based on the Perspective of Confucian Moral Philosophy**

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**Abstract.** In Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant abstracts his moral philosophy from the world of experience and practice, and wants to build a completely pure metaphysics of morals. But in his action to draw a line between the real world and metaphysical world, Kant excluded the behaviors stimulated from sympathy out of the moral behavior, and held the idea that this kind of behavior is not a moral behavior, but an action just out of hobbies. Based on the comparison with Mencius' (孟子) construction of the metaphysics of morals, the author in this paper held the idea that we should reconsider the significance of sympathy in people's mind. Kant's discard to sympathy maybe the root of paradox that "moral behavior is inconsistent with happiness".

Both Kant's moral philosophy and the Chinese Confucian moral philosophy have a common trend that regarding the sympathy as a very important element that cannot be avoided. But the difference is that Kant's moral philosophy treats sympathy and the behavior stimulating from sympathy as moral illusion with no moral significance; while the Chinese Confucian moral philosophy makes the sympathy(惻隱之心) an axis that can link the metaphysical world and figurative world, what's more, it fully approves the moral attributes of "sympathy" in Kant's moral philosophy.

In Kant's book *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, the ink specifically for "sympathy" is not so much. But the "sympathy" is settled at a negative role to play the moral illusion. Kant holds the idea that only the behavior stimulated from "obligation

(duty)"that has the real moral value, and he holds that the "obligation" has the "Good will" in it. But when discussing the "sympathy", Kant expresses his doubts :“To be beneficial where one can is a duty, and besides this there are some souls so sympathetically attuned that, even without any other motive of vanity or utility to self, taking an inner gratification in spreading joy around them, and can take delight in the contentment of others insofar as it is their own work. But I assert that in such a case the

action, however it may conform to duty and however amiable it is, nevertheless has no true moral worth, but is on the same footing as other inclinations.....”<sup>1</sup>

Sense, Kant's skepticism is understandable. Because he wants to make a clean break with the world of experience and to build a completely pure metaphysics of morals, thus he must clear away all the factors that could be obstacles. While in this situation, “sympathy” can be an obstacle that can't be avoided, he must clean it up before his construction of metaphysics of morals. Only after excluding the big disturbance" gentle sympathy", can the moral philosophy walk thorough and come out from the world of experience completely.

Then Kant gives another example to confirm his idea that the action stimulated from sympathy has no moral value. It goes like that: “thus supposing the mind of that same friend of humanity were clouded over with his own grief, extinguishing all his sympathetic participation in the fate of others; he still has the resources to be beneficent to those suffering distress, but the distress of others does not touch him because he is sufficiently busy with his own; and now, where no inclination any longer stimulates him to it, he tears himself out of this deadly insensibility and does the action without any inclination, solely from duty; only then does it for the first time have its authentic moral worth.”<sup>2</sup>

From the passage above, Kant wants to illustrate that the behavior stimulated from sympathy is just a kind of hobby for oneself. But when the time he makes his choice to place the behavior stimulated from sympathy under the “hobby”, he has changed the inner character of the concept “sympathy”: firstly, this kind of behavior may not come from moral motivation, just because someone likes to do that; secondly, if someone did nothing after he or she seeing something miserable even though his or her sympathy was stimulated out, he or she would feel guilty and ashamed, so if he or she indeed has done something for this, maybe the behavior is just used for a kind of emotional needs. Walking along this logic, no obligation is in someone's sympathy, what's more ,the behavior stimulated from sympathy even has a little selfishness in it.

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<sup>1</sup>See(DE) Kant. Translated by Yang Yunfei. Proofread by Deng Xiaowang . Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals[M]. people's publishing house,.2013.7:18. “也有一些灵魂如此容易为同情心所打动，以致他们不带虚荣或利己的其他动因而对于在周围播撒欢乐而感到由衷的愉快，并且他们能够对别人的满足感到高兴，只要这种满足是他们造成的。但我认为，在这种情形下的这类行为，无论多么合乎义务，多么值得爱戴，却仍然没有任何真正的道德价值，而是和其他的爱好同一层次的……”

<sup>2</sup>See(DE) Kant. Translated by Yang Yunfei. Proofread by Deng Xiaowang . Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals[M]. people's publishing house,.2013.7:19. “那么假设那位爱人类者的内心笼罩着这自己忧伤的阴云，这种忧伤熄灭了它对别人命运的一切同情……而现在，由于再也没有什么爱好来诱惑他，但他却是自己从这死一般的麻木中挣扎出来，不是出于任何爱好，仅仅是出于义务而做出了这一行动，这时他的行动才首次具有了自己真正的道德价值。”

Thus, “doing something good” maybe just a temptation for someone, with no moral value. "sympathy" in Confucian moral philosophy

On the contrary, Mencius, who represents Chinese Confucianism, states the other opinion on sympathy. Mencius held the theory of original goodness of human nature, that is to say, human nature as the metaphysical matter obtains good a priority. Thus this metaphysical “good human nature” has become the source and basis of virtues of the empirical world, functions as Kant’s “good will”. Mencius and other Chinese Confucians try to find the hinge which links real empirical world and metaphysical world of morality. This hinge is in the heart of four terminals (heart of sympathy, 惻隱之心 heart of shame 羞惡之心, heart of modesty 恭敬之心, and heart of judge 是非之心) represented by the heart of sympathy. This, however, has difference with Kant’s theory, which wants to cut off the relationship between sense of sympathy and empirical world.

Mencius gives some examples in his book *Menzi*. He says: “Why do I say all human beings have a heart which cannot stand to see the suffering of others? Even nowadays, if an infant were about to fall into a well, anyone would be upset and concerned. This concern would not be due to the fact that the person wanted to get on well with the baby's parents, or because she wanted to improve his or her reputation among the community or among his or her circle of friends. Nor would it be because he or she was afraid of the criticism that might resulted from a show of non-concern.”<sup>3</sup>.

This quotation can clearly express Mencius’ thought.

In other words, one’s heart of compassion is not associated with the utilitarian purposes. I save the infant is not for external benefits or reputation, nor to stop his cry. The heart of compassion functioned in that moment, just before any of the utilitarian calculus fulfilled my mind. The function is natural revelation, which was guided by the principles existing in human mind necessarily and a priority. This is a strong proof in proving the doctrine of good human nature.

Going down this theory, Mencius says:

“People who has no heart of sympathy can’t be called human beings; people who has no heart of shame can’t be called human being; people who has no heart of modesty can’t be called human being; people who has no heart of judge can’t be called human beings. Heart of sympathy——is the terminal to the benevolence; heart of shame——is the terminal to the justice; heart of modesty——is the

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<sup>3</sup> See Chinese ancient book *Mongzi*(孟子·公孙丑上):所以谓人皆有不忍人之心者, 今人乍见孺子将入于井, 皆有怵惕惻隱之心。非所以内交于孺子之父母也, 非所以要誉于乡党朋友也, 非恶其声而然也

terminal to the propriety; heart of judge—is the terminal to the wisdom. People’s having this four terminals, just likes people’s having hands and legs.”<sup>4</sup>

The heart of four terminals, as the hinge in Mencius’s demonstration has directly linked to the real world and metaphysical world of morality, where is the ontological source of human morals. After finding this source, the morals of benevolence, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom can be deduced through the heart of four terminals and good nature of human. This process links the dimensions of metaphysical and physical world. It is estimable because the process of linking endowed the reality gist to the metaphysics of morals without ignoring empirical world, nor producing new problems in the world of metaphysical morals, either.

A comparative perspective: rethinking about the moral value of “sympathy”.

There is something necessary to point out that the paths chosen by Kant and Mencius are different, through which can reach the metaphysical world from the real world. There is no right or wrong in this comparison, but from the way and attitude they treating “sympathy”, we can discover the terminals of their differences. From the comparison, we get the idea that Kant’s non-recognition to “sympathy” makes his moral philosophy completely pure, but can’t avoid being divorced from real world. Thus his metaphysics of morals may become the “Castles in the Air” without foundation bed. We can find support from the examples given by him.

Let’s focus on this passage which Kant used to prove that the behavior stimulated from “sympathy” is not the moral act: “Thus suppose the mind of that same friend of humanity were clouded over with his own grief, extinguishing all his sympathetic participation in the fate of others.....without any inclination, solely from duty; only then does it for the first time have its authentic moral worth.”<sup>5</sup> Kant means that, if there is a man who has lost all his sympathy, being despairing about the life of others and his own, can be driven by the “obligation” and do something good, then his behavior has the real moral worth “for the first time”. However, the readers may come into being a doubt: if only in this extremely harsh condition can the behavior of real moral worth happen, then how can this kind of purely moral behavior happen in the real world? We know the fact that Kant wants to construct a pure metaphysics of morals, after all, his example is still in the world of experience, so it is necessary to review the possibility of Kant’s example in real world.

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<sup>4</sup> See Chinese ancient book *Mongzi*(孟子·公孙丑上): “由是观之, 无恻隐之心, 非人也; 无羞恶之心, 非人也; 无辞让之心, 非人也; 无是非之心, 非人也。恻隐之心, 仁之端也; 羞恶之心, 义之端也; 辞让之心, 礼之端也; 是非之心, 智之端也。人之有是四端也, 犹其有四体也。”

<sup>5</sup> The same to 3

In the world of experience, a person needs at least a motivation to drive a behavior of moral character. We can't image how can a person who has lost all his sympathy and been in the clouds of hopelessness, comes into being a motivation to driving a purely moral behavior. It just likes a beggar's giving one penny to a millionaire(they know each other's identity, and the millionaire is not in trouble), this kind of behavior won't happen. Maybe we can assume the behavior really happens in real world, a new doubt may come out: how to judge its moral attribute? It's the fact that the moral behavior's happening has directivity in it, so it must be situational too: somebody can get a higher happiness or relieve his suffering after someone-else's execution of a behavior. Image a situation: "I" have seen a people dragging his broken leg and crawling in the street, but my sympathy is not stimulated out, so "I" don't think he is miserable and needs my help, as a result, the Kantian behavior won't happen. And there won't be a situation that "I" have given my assistance being driven by a pure "obligation", because "I" don't think he is miserable and needs my help in my mind, so "I" really don't have any awareness about what I can do and what I should do in this condition. Step back, even if "I" has done something helpful being driven by the "obligation" just as Kant's example, it just means that I have "helped" a person who does not need any help in my mind. It's meaningless on earth.

Therefore, when the time Kant was harshly aspiring after the purity of moral behavior, eagerly making a break between the real world and the metaphysics world, carefully avoiding the confusion between real moral behavior and moral illusion, he could not avoid treating the real moral behavior as the moral illusion. In other words, he has "thrown away the baby when pouring out the dirty water".

In fact, when Kant puts the behavior stimulated from "sympathy" under the concept of "hubby", looking as if he has exposed a moral illusion, instead he has unjustly treated the moral behavior as the moral illusion dramatically. Because the behavior stimulated from sympathy is not the behavior that being used for acquiring other's return of money、 property and good reputation, it means unconditional and unidirectional giving and sacrifice, there must be the obligation in it. What's more, the "sympathy" is not such a complex psychological-mechanism as Kant's image, it's just a pure psychological-tendency, if there is any selfishness in it, it's not enough to be called "sympathy". So we really can't believe that there is a people who likes doing something convicted of no moral worth by Kant, just for meeting his strange hubby——with the selfishness in it——because of the flood of sympathy! The irony is that this kind of "hubby" just means giving and sacrifice, and don't bring any objective benefits(except for the return-thanksgiving in latter time, because it's not what he wants in

his subjective will) for the goodmen, being with no moral worth in it, but facing a possibility being blamed “selfishness” ! How can it be a “hubby”?

Dr. Yang Yunfei analyzed two kind of “purpose” proposed by Kant in his article: “objective purpose” and “subjective purpose”. “The subjective purpose comes from the emotional driving.....the objective purpose purely comes from rationality.....The subjective purpose often depends on what we desire.....while the objective purpose has the inevitability. Because it does not desire external objects and won’t be trapped by external objects. It just comes from self regulation of rationality, and reflects the rationalists’ desire of self-realization.”<sup>6</sup> According to this kind of comprehension, Kant thinks that the “sympathy” is a kind of subjective emotion, so it belongs to the “subjective purpose”. However, if restudying the character of “objective purpose”, we will discover that the “sympathy” itself is also an order that “does not desire external objects and won’t be trapped by external objects”. A further studying on where the “sympathy” comes from will push the “sympathy” to the congenital “rationality” but not the “emotion”, because the real “sympathy” itself implies a force that cannot be transferred by anything subjective. Therefore, Kant’s putting “sympathy” under the concept of “hubby” is not a convincing choice. The “sympathy” has its own “purity”.

However, in perspective of Confucian moral philosophy, a witness who has ignored others’ suffering experience will be blamed, even though the witness himself maybe a miserable person. The origin of the difference between Kant’s philosophy and Confucian philosophy maybe lies in the different attitude towards “sympathy”. Confucian hold the idea that people’s sympathy is innate and comes with birth, has nothing to do with the world of experience. Even if the most heinous criminal, being not a mental patient, must has the “four terminals” in his character. When he facing a miserable situation, his heart of sympathy will starts in an instant, even though he may choose to do something bad at last because of some subsequent thinking. That is to say, the heart of four terminals represented by “sympathy” come from a congenital command, not the emotion acquired, it cannot only be the channel to the metaphysics world, but also be the source of moral reality.

According to the analysis above, Kant’s attitude towards sympathy is too harsh to make his purely-moral behavior a reality. As a result, he deconstructs the moral worth of “moral” behavior in real world; and makes his metaphysics of morals a rootless mirage in the sky. In fact, before Kant’s

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<sup>6</sup>See Yang Yunfei. The formula of Kant's human nature. [J]. Wuhan University Journal (Humanity Sciences). July 2010. “主观目的来自感性的驱动,即理性存在者为了满足自己的感性爱好而为自己设立的目的; 客观目的则单纯由理性给出,是理性存在者基于其理性的本性而必定会设立的目的。主观目的往往取决于我们所欲求的对象……客观目的则具有必然性,因其并不欲求外在的对象,不为外物所牵绊,而是仅仅出自理性的自我规定,体现了理性存在者自我实现的要求。”

regarding the behavior stimulated from sympathy as moral illusion, he has even declared that the behavior stimulated from sympathy maybe “conform to duty” and “amiable” . This phenomenon illustrates that Kant himself does not dare to negate the “sympathy” lightly. In all, the moral worth and significance of “sympathy” has already come out in the comparison and analysis above. The “sympathy” should have been given a more reasonable position.

“sympathy” and Kant’s paradox “moral is in conflict with happiness”

Because of the formation of divorce between real world and metaphysics world, Kant’s decision to abandon the “sympathy” maybe the main cause of his paradox that “moral is in conflict with happiness”. We can know this from three points:

Firstly, Kant does not recognize the moral worth of the behavior stimulated from “sympathy”, he only recognize the behavior from “obligation”, which has the “good will” in it. But it’s hardly to be a possibility that the behavior declared with “real moral worth” by Kant will really happen in the world of experience. So Kant’s metaphysics of morals is disconnected with moral practice in real world. Pro. Mou Zongsan has also pointed out this phenomenon from another perspective about this.<sup>7</sup> As a result, Kant’s contradiction is exposed.

Secondly, there has been a terminal of paradox in Kant’s example about the behavior of “real moral worth”. In his description, Kant indeed has declared that the behavior stimulated from sympathy maybe “conform to duty” and “amiable”<sup>8</sup>, on the other hand, Kant believes that only the behavior stimulated from “duty” has the real moral worth. Following Kant’s logic, the behavior stimulated from “sympathy” also has the possibility to have “real moral worth”. But Kant denies it immediately in following text. This phenomena indicates that Kant may have violated his own logic.

Thirdly, both in Chinese and Western tradition, there is a common understanding-color about “sympathy”: a substitution feeling. That is to say, a person can feel other’s feeling just like the role of this men himself. So the good-behavior-executor may have the same feeling as the people being helped: the previous suffering and the happiness after the help. As a result, even though the good-behaviour-executor may has sacrificed his money、 materials、 physical labor and emotion, he can harvest a sense of fullness in moral worth and the spiritual happiness! One of Kant’s rule goes that: “there still remains a law, namely to promote his happiness not from inclination but from duty,

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<sup>7</sup>Mou Zongsan .Perfect Theory.[M].Taipei student Bookstore.1985.see his main Discussion in chapter six

<sup>8</sup> The same to 2

and then his conduct has for the first time its authentic moral worth.”<sup>9</sup>In such a situation, and flowing this rule, Kant won’t get the paradox that “moral is in conflict with happiness” himself. The only pity is that, Kant has negated the moral worth of behaviour from “sympathy” at first. He has cut the source of people’s happiness from moral behavior too.

While in Confucian moral philosophy, which regard the “sympathy” as the “terminal” linked with metaphysics world and real world, won’t come into being the paradox “moral is in conflict with happiness”. The ancient book Zhongyong(《中庸》) goes that “the moral saints must gain his good position, must gain his paul, must gain his reputation, must gain his longevity”(大德必得其位，必得其禄，必得其名，必得其寿). Those words has fully affirmed and fully believed the happiness-return of moral-behaviour-executor. The new-Confucian scholar Mou Zongsan had also put forward his theory “The consistency of morality and happiness” in his book Perfect Theory.<sup>10</sup> The difference from comparison with Kant is closely related to the different attitudes towards the “sympathy”.

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<sup>9</sup> See(DE) Kant. Translated by Yang Yunfei. Proofread by Deng Xiaowang . Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals[M]. people's publishing house,.2013.7:18.”并非出自爱好而是出自义务去增进自己的幸福，并且正是这样，他的行为才首次具有了真正的道德价值。”

<sup>10</sup> Mou Zongsan .Perfect Theory.[M].Taipei student Bookstore.1985.