

# The Fate of Overdetermined Actions in Barbara Herman's Analysis of the Kantian Doctrine of Moral Worth

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In this paper I will investigate the problem of the moral worth of overdetermined actions within Kant's moral theory as it is presented in the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (hereafter cited as the *Grounding*). To accomplish this I will analyze and critique Barbara Herman's attempted solution to this problem as presented in her article "On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty." I will argue that her conclusion that Kant *does* attribute moral worth to overdetermined actions is flawed for the principal reason that it is too narrow. Overdetermined actions can be understood in two ways, and Herman's solution applies only to the weaker sense, leaving the difficulties associated with the stronger sense unresolved.

I will proceed by first providing a description of the problem of overdetermined actions within Kant's doctrine. I will then present an analysis of Herman's proposed solution to the problem, showing how she employs the weaker sense of overdetermined actions in this solution. This will be followed by an explanation of the counterintuitive difficulties that still remain with the stronger sense of overdetermined actions.

Overdetermined actions are dutiful actions in which the agent has nonmoral interests. They can be understood in two ways. First, they can be understood in the stronger sense as dutiful acts motivated by more than one motive, only one of which is the moral motive of duty, the other(s) nonmoral. Second, they can be understood in the weaker sense as dutiful actions motivated by the moral motive in the presence of supporting inclinations. The difference between motives and inclinations is important to Herman's proposed solution to the problem of overdetermined actions and will be explained later.

Kant does not deal specifically with the moral worth of overdetermined actions in either sense in the *Grounding*. Thus, he leaves his readers with a

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puzzle: What is the status of overdetermined actions within Kant's moral theory? Specifically, do they or do they not have moral worth? The answer to this question is important to the overall acceptance of Kant's theory. If overdetermined actions cannot have moral worth, Kant's moral theory fails the test of intuitive correctness. It seems wrong, intuitively, that a dutiful act motivated by respect for the moral law, and in which the agent happens to have nonmoral interests, should not be attributed with moral worth. While intuitive difficulties are not necessarily a damning conviction for a moral theory, it is dangerous for Kant's, relying as it does, at least initially, on "ordinary moral knowledge."<sup>1</sup>

The counterintuitive problem is a result of the combination of Kant's doctrine of moral worth and the nature of overdetermined actions. Concerning the former, it appears that Kant's theory gives moral worth only to actions done solely from the motive of duty. The apparent support for what I call the "sole moral motive" doctrine of moral worth can be drawn from the example of the beneficent man.<sup>2</sup> This man, in situation one, has a strong inclination to treat everyone well. When he does treat people beneficently, he does so solely from this inclination, consequently, not from the motive of duty. His actions at this time do not have moral worth, because his inclination towards beneficence cannot produce morally right actions reliably. That is to say, it is conceivable that at some time his beneficence could entail a morally wrong act.<sup>3</sup> In a second situation, circumstances have caused this same man to become subject to competing inclinations that overwhelm his ability to act from the inclination of beneficence. However, while he no longer has the inclination of beneficence to inform his actions, he nevertheless continues to treat everyone with respect, because he considers it a duty. In Kant's words, it is only in the second situation, when he acts "solely from duty – then for

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Herman, "On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty," *The Practice of Moral Judgement*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals," *Classics of Western Philosophy* 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. Stephen M. Cahn, ed., Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1995, 398.

<sup>3</sup> Thus, Herman offers the example of the beneficent person helping a person stealing art from a museum. p. 4.



the first time his action has genuine moral worth.”<sup>4</sup> Barbara Herman points out that it is traditional to generate from this statement the “sole moral motive” doctrine, i.e., only when one acts from duty alone, without any cooperative inclination, does one’s act have moral worth.<sup>5</sup>

Combining the sole moral motive doctrine with the nature of overdetermined actions (in the general sense) as dutiful actions in which the agent has nonmoral interests, it can be seen how Kant appears to deny moral worth to these actions. Overdetermined actions do not appear to be done solely from duty, as the agent has nonmoral motives (stronger sense) or inclinations (weaker sense) supporting the discharge of the dutiful act.

This conclusion becomes problematic when one considers the following example: Kant’s theory will give moral worth to the dutiful act of treating one’s customers fairly in the presence of an opposing inclination such as profit, while it will not give moral worth to the dutiful act of treating one’s customer fairly in the presence of a supporting inclination such as beneficence. This example could be extended: It is possible that the greedy person’s actions (providing her actions are always motivated solely by duty) are always morally worthy, while the beneficent person’s actions are never so. At the level of moral intuition, this seems wrong.

Herman attempts to resolve this difficulty for Kant by rejecting the traditional reading of his doctrine that has generated the conclusion that Kant *cannot* attribute moral worth to overdetermined actions. This rejection is facilitated by the adoption of the weaker sense of overdetermined actions, i.e., the sense in which they are dutiful actions done from the motive of duty in the presence of nonmoral inclinations. However, I will show that the adoption of the weaker sense of overdetermined actions leaves Kant’s theory vulnerable to a more serious charge than counterintuitiveness, and that Herman’s solution leaves the problem of overdetermined actions in the stronger sense unresolved.

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<sup>4</sup> Kant, 399.

<sup>5</sup> Herman, p. 7.

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Herman begins the discussion of overdetermined actions with an acknowledgement of the traditional interpretation of Kant's response to the problem. As described above, Kant's claim that only when the beneficent man acts solely from duty does his action have moral worth<sup>6</sup> is taken by many to signify Kant's belief that "the mere presence of the nonmoral motive signifies a lack of moral worth."<sup>7</sup> Hence, on this reading, overdetermined actions cannot have moral worth.

Herman then analyses one attempt to respond to this problem in Kant as a way of highlighting important features of Kant's doctrine. Richard Henson's two-model solution argues that two different (non-contradictory) doctrines of moral worth can be found in Kant.<sup>8</sup> The first, called the "fitness-report" model (drawn from the *Metaphysics of Morals*), rescues Kant from the uncomfortable position of not being able to attribute moral worth to overdetermined actions. On this model, a dutiful act has moral worth provided that the motive of duty is present and would have sufficed in itself to produce the right action, even though, (as in overdetermined cases) other motives were present and might themselves have sufficed. The doctrine of moral worth found in the *Grounding* Henson calls the "battle-citation" model, in which moral worth is only attributed to dutiful actions done in the presence of indifferent or opposing motives. Thus, Henson argues that overdetermined actions *can* have moral worth in Kant's theory without doing damage to the moral worth theory put forward in the *Grounding*.

By deducing from the fitness model two senses in which the moral motive's being *sufficient in itself* could be meant Herman reduces the fitness model to the battle-citation model. This leaves us with only the original Kantian premise to work with, i.e., that only actions done solely from the motive of duty have moral worth.<sup>9</sup> However, the failure of Henson's solution highlights two conditions that any solution must include: First, the performance of a dutiful action must be the nonaccidental effect of the

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<sup>6</sup> Kant, 399.

<sup>7</sup> Herman, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Henson, "What Kant Might Have Said: Moral Worth and the Overdetermination of Dutiful Action," *Philosophical Review* 88 (1979), pp. 45-50.

<sup>9</sup> Herman, p. 9.



agent's concern for duty. Second, the moral worth of an action in one set of circumstances is not affected by the failure of the agent to discharge the dutiful act in altered circumstances.<sup>10</sup>

Herman proposes an alternate way of understanding Kant's doctrine of moral worth that preserves the two conditions elucidated above. In agreement with the sole moral motive theory, moral worth is the result of "a configuration of moral and nonmoral motives such that in acting dutifully it is the moral motive itself on which the agent acted."<sup>11</sup> Condition one is met by the fact that in discharging the dutiful act, it was solely the agent's concern to act in accord with that duty that motivated the act, i.e., the commission of the dutiful act was not the accidental effect of motives and circumstance. Condition two is met by the proposition that if in altered circumstances the dutiful act is not discharged, this can be explained by a different configuration of moral and nonmoral motives such that it was not the moral motive on which the agent acted. Hence, the moral worth of the original act is not discredited.

Herman cites support for this alternative in Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, where Kant is shown to deny any necessary opposition between moral and nonmoral motives (in the discharge of a morally worthy act).<sup>12</sup> For example, it is not necessary for one to have an opposing inclination such as profit for one's dutiful act of treating customers fairly to have moral worth, contrary to the traditional reading of Kant's examples in the *Grounding*. He requires only that we not allow nonmoral motives to move us to act in situations in which we have a duty.

The obvious question at this point is how one can have a motive while not having that motive move one to act in any way. For an answer to this, Herman investigates Kant's particular definition of "motive." A motive, for Kant, is an incentive that has been deemed a reason for acting and as such has been included in an agent's maxim.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Herman, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Herman, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Herman, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Herman, p. 11.

For a clearer picture of what this entails, I describe the process of dutiful action for Kant as the following. At any one time an agent has a variety of incentives that may or may not be considered by the agent as reasons for acting, such as concern for the moral law, self-interest, or beneficence. Before performing a dutiful act, the agent creates a maxim based on an incentive that has been chosen as a reason for acting. Depending on the incentive taken up into the maxim, that maxim may or may not have moral content. If the incentive taken up into the maxim that informs the dutiful act is a moral one, then the maxim has moral content, and the resulting act has moral worth. Conversely, if the incentive taken up into the maxim that informs the dutiful act is not a moral one, then the maxim does not have moral content, and hence, while the act itself is morally correct, it does not have moral worth.

This analysis of Kantian motives allows Herman to present Kant's doctrine of moral worth in a way that allows a literal reading of Kant in the *Grounding* while removing the counterintuitive difficulties that traditionally accompany a literal reading. Our dutiful acts done in the presence of nonmoral inclinations *can* have moral worth on the condition that these nonmoral inclinations maintain their "incentive" status, i.e., they do not become "true" motives.

What are the implications of this new Kantian theory of moral worth on overdetermined actions? Herman argues that under this interpretation, Kant's doctrine of moral worth "can accept the overdetermination of actions with respect to incentives, not motives."<sup>14</sup> Implicit in this statement is the weaker sense of overdetermined actions as those actions in which the sole motive of the dutiful act is the motive of duty, while other (nonmoral) incentives are present but not taken up into the maxim as a reason for acting. As for whether or not maxims containing both moral and nonmoral incentives can produce morally worthy actions, as in the case of strongly overdetermined actions, Herman states simply: "the presence of a nonmoral motive in [a] maxim is disqualifying."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Herman, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Herman, p. 12.



Has the question of the moral worth of overdetermined actions in fact been solved? I will argue that while Herman's reinterpretation of Kant's doctrine of moral worth solves *a* problem, it is not the one principally connected with overdetermined actions.

Employing the weaker sense of overdetermined actions and supposing that Kant's theory *doesn't* attribute moral worth to these actions leaves his theory vulnerable to the more serious charge of contingency. As explained above, the traditional "sole moral motive" reading of Kant's doctrine in the *Grounding* causes many commentators to suppose that the mere presence of a nonmoral inclination precludes the possibility of an agent's dutiful act having moral worth. This reading leaves Kant open to the charge of contingency for the reason that, as Kant himself points out, inclinations cannot be commanded.<sup>16</sup> That is to say, not only are our inclinations products of circumstance ("empirical," to use Kantian terminology), they are not within our will to change.

The sole moral motive theory of moral worth combined with the fact of our contingent inclinations generates a dangerous conclusion: Only dutiful acts done from the motive of duty and in the (lucky) absence of nonmoral inclinations have moral worth. Hence, the attribution of moral worth depends on the empirical state of the agent. Such a charge is especially damaging to Kant's theory, based as it is on the idea that moral demands are not dependent in any way on facts about the world. When one acts on these *a priori* demands of rationality, one's actions have moral worth. This is in clear opposition to the contingently based system of moral worth implied above.

Fortunately, Herman's analysis of motives within Kant's theory of dutiful action solves this difficulty: An act's having moral worth does not depend on the sole moral motive *and* the contingent absence of nonmoral inclinations; it merely requires that those nonmoral inclinations not be considered in the formation of the maxim behind the dutiful action.

However, the question of the moral worth of strongly overdetermined actions remains. Rejecting the weaker definition of overdetermined actions supplied above, what are strongly overdetermined actions within the analysis of Kant's theory of dutiful action? They are dutiful acts such that the maxim

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<sup>16</sup> Kant, 399.

behind them includes incentives, both moral and nonmoral, that are evaluated as reasons for doing the dutiful act.

There does not appear to be support for the inclusion of strongly overdetermined actions within Kant's theory of moral worth. The derivative inclinations for the nonmoral motives within the maxim of an overdetermined action is purely contingent, i.e., the development and presence of the nonmoral inclinations of a particular agent are matters of circumstance. This contingency "pollutes" the maxim by making the performance of the dutiful act an accidental effect of the combination of motives and circumstances, and as a result removes any possibility of the maxim having moral content in the sense required by Kant's theory. An act informed by a maxim without moral content may be morally correct, but it can never have moral worth.

Hence, the counterintuitive difficulties of Kant's doctrine of moral worth remain. Under this theory, dutiful actions performed by an agent with nonmoral motives accompanying the motive of duty will not have moral worth. Dutiful actions performed by an agent with inclinations that oppose the action will have moral worth. Thus, the greedy but fair shopkeeper's actions will be morally worthy while the beneficent shopkeeper's actions will not. In effect, Kant will attribute moral worth to a dutiful act done grudgingly and will not attribute it to the dutiful act of a person whose motives incline her towards the act independently of, but in addition to, the moral motive.

In summary, while Herman's analysis of Kant's doctrine of moral worth succeeds in defending Kant's theory against the serious charge of contingency, it fails to answer the charge that the theory is in opposition to ordinary judgement. By investigating Kant's conception of motive within his theory of dutiful action, Herman effectively removes the misconception that Kant's theory holds that a nonmoral inclination present during the discharge of a dutiful act from the motive of duty prevents that act from having moral worth. Herman attempts to extend this solution to the problem of overdetermined actions by focussing on their weaker sense. However, her solution cannot be extended to strongly overdetermined actions, thereby leaving Kant's theory vulnerable to the original suspicion that it yields counterintuitive conclusions.



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