

Accessing the Moral Law through Feeling

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Abstract

In this article I offer a critical commentary on Jeanine Grenberg's claim that, by the time of the second *Critique*, Kant was committed to the view that we only access the moral law's validity through the feeling of respect. The issue turns on how we understand Kant's assertion that our consciousness of the moral law is a 'fact of reason'. Grenberg argues that all facts must be forced, and anything forced must be felt. I defend an alternative interpretation, according to which the fact of reason refers to the actuality of our moral consciousness.

Keywords: Kant, Grenberg, fact of reason, feeling of respect, moral justification

Kant's Defense of Common Moral Experience (Grenberg 2013) is a rich and captivating book. Jeanine Grenberg has without a doubt offered us a groundbreaking contribution to Kant scholarship. There is much in it I agree with; but I also have my criticisms. In what follows I will focus mainly on the latter. By way of conclusion, I will say where I think Grenberg and I are of one mind.¹

Grenberg argues, like many other scholars, that the second *Critique's* fact of reason refers to our everyday experience of moral obligation. Where she breaks new ground is in claiming that our experience of moral obligation is accessible only in the mode of *feeling*. The fact of reason, in her view, is an affect, 'a felt, given phenomenological experience of categorical obligation' (2013: 206).² For convenience, I will call this the *Affect of Reason interpretation*.³ How does Grenberg support this claim? In outline, her argument is this:

- (1) Facts force themselves upon us.
- (2) What is forced upon us is accessible only in our receptive faculty, i.e. in sensibility.

- (3) The fact of reason forces itself upon us.
- (4) Therefore, the fact of reason is accessible only in sensibility (through the feeling of respect).

The Affect of Reason interpretation links to one of Grenberg's further claims: her view that feeling plays a 'grounding' role in Kant's ethics (2013: 69, 137, 166, 263, 283). On her account, only the feeling of respect reveals the moral law to us in a way that confirms its validity as a categorical imperative. Without a proper analysis of this feeling, then, Kant would not be able to *justify* the authority of the moral law or our status as beings with freedom of will. To my mind, this is one of the most original and controversial claims of Grenberg's book. I will refer to it simply as the *Feeling Thesis*.⁴

While I am sympathetic to the view that feeling plays a positive role in Kant's ethics (cf. Ware 2010, 2014a), my question is whether the Affect of Reason interpretation is correct. I will argue here that it is not. Kant did not claim that we access the moral law's validity through the feeling of respect. In saying this, however, I do not think that we must reject or downplay the significance of feeling in Kant's ethics. There is an alternative way to appreciate this significance, I think, one that avoids the pitfalls Grenberg finds in standard accounts of how the 'fact' (*Faktum*) relates to 'respect' (*Achtung*). After providing my critique of Grenberg's view in sections 1 and 2, I will say more to clarify this alternative account in section 3.

1

Let us start with the first premise of Grenberg's argument.

- (1) Facts force themselves upon us.

This is obviously true of empirical facts. 'When I encounter something in my empirical experience of objects', Grenberg writes, 'things are indeed given to me in this way: I cannot choose whether to perceive whatever happens to be in my range of sensible perception' (2013: 193). The coffee cup I see on my desk, for example, is a fact in this sense. It appears to me in such a way that I cannot randomly decide its shape, colour, texture, and so forth. Moreover, I do not arrive at my knowledge of the coffee cup through a process of inferential or deductive reasoning. It presents itself to me, and in this respect it has a *forceful* character in my experience.

Of course when Kant introduces the fact of reason in the second *Critique*, he states that it ‘forces (*aufdringt*) itself upon us of itself as a *synthetic a priori* proposition’ (*KpV* 5: 31; emphasis added). Whatever this ‘fact’ is, then, we know that it is not an ordinary fact like the coffee cup I see on my desk. Since my cognition of the cup occurs in experience, it has an *a posteriori* status. Yet the fact of reason cannot belong to empirical experience in this way; it cannot be something I can grasp through sense perception. Aware of the risk of confusion here, Kant qualifies his remark by adding:

However, in order to avoid misrepresentation in regarding this law as a *given* (*gegeben*), it must be noted carefully that it is not an empirical fact but the sole fact of pure reason which, by it, announces itself as originally lawgiving. (*KpV* 5: 31)

Grenberg is aware of this important qualification. The fact of reason, she writes, is a ‘synthetic a priori’ proposition, the source of which I can never apprehend through sense perception (2013: 193). Yet Grenberg still thinks that the forceful quality of empirical facts – the way they are given to consciousness – sheds light on the fact of reason. In particular, she claims, their forceful quality directs us to the only faculty that *could* make the moral law accessible to us.

This brings us to the second step of Grenberg’s argument:

(2) What is forced upon us is accessible only in our receptive faculty, i.e. in sensibility.

This means a ‘forced fact *has* to be a felt fact’ (2013: 143; emphasis in original). As Grenberg puts it: ‘when we have something forced upon us, we are passive or receptive in relation to that which is doing the forcing. As such, explanation of how we take in this forced fact must involve some aspect of ourselves capable of being passive or receptive. But such a capacity is our capacity for sensibility’ (2013: 143; cf. 193). Now if step (2) is correct, the rest of Grenberg’s argument follows. Once we acknowledge (3), that the fact of reason ‘forces itself upon us’, we must admit that we are subject to something unavoidably *given* in our consciousness. We must admit (4), that our experience of categorical obligation is accessible to us only via *feeling*.

I do not think we must accept (4), though, since I do not think that (2) is true. Notice, first, that for the Affect of Reason interpretation to work, we

must justify the claim that whatever is given to us – our perception of coffee cups, our experience of categorical demands – can only appear via sensibility. But this claim strikes me as false. I think Kant would say that many representations have a forceful quality without necessarily linking to our sensible faculty.⁵ In the first *Critique*, for example, Kant uses language nearly identical to his characterization of the fact of reason when he explains how concepts like substance ‘force themselves’ upon us. Here too Kant says we can display the pure use of our cognitive faculty as a ‘fact’, and to illustrate this he has us perform the following thought experiment:

If you remove from your empirical concept of every object, whether corporeal or incorporeal, all those properties of which experience teaches you, you could still not take from it that by means of which you think of it as a substance or as dependent on a substance.

He then concludes:

Thus convinced by the necessity with which this concept forces [again: *aufdringt*] itself on you, you must concede that it has its seat in your faculty of cognition a priori. (B6; translation modified)

Now if we accept Grenberg’s claim that forceful cognitions are accessible only through our receptive faculty, we would be led to conclude from this thought experiment that the ‘necessity’ attaching to the concept of substance is accessible to us only in sensibility. Yet there is no indication that Kant holds this view – nor is it clear this would make sense within the context of the first *Critique*.⁶

To make progress here, consider again Kant’s warning in the second *Critique*: ‘in order to avoid misrepresentation in regarding this law as a *given*, it must be noted carefully that it is not an empirical fact’ (*KpV* 5: 31). Grenberg cites this passage, as we have seen, but she interprets Kant’s word of caution to mean only that the fact of reason does not ground ‘synthetic a posteriori knowledge claims’ (2013: 193). What Grenberg tries to preserve from the analogy to empirical facts, in turn, is the sense in which we receive them passively. Yet in light of what Kant says in the first *Critique*, it seems clear that by speaking of a ‘fact’ he means only to register the unique modal status of certain cognitions. On this reading, what we should take away from the analogy is not that

empirical facts are *received*, but that they are *actual*. The point of Kant's thought experiment is to show that, when we try to remove every quality from an object, we realize that we cannot remove the concept of substance (B6). We must then concede, as he says, that our consciousness of necessity must have come from a pure faculty of cognition, for no *empirical* faculty could have generated it within us.

Applying this new analogy to the fact of reason is rather straightforward.⁷ After Kant explains that our consciousness of freedom comes from the moral law, he turns to ask the next logical question: 'But how is consciousness of that *moral law* possible?' (*KpV* 5: 30). In reply, he writes:

We can become aware of pure practical laws *just as we are aware of pure theoretical principles*, by paying attention to the necessity with which reason prescribes them to us and to the setting aside of all empirical conditions to which reason directs us. The concept of a pure will arises from the first, as consciousness of a pure understanding arises from the latter. (*KpV* 5: 30; emphasis added)

Reading this passage alongside the thought experiment in the first *Critique* is illuminating. In the theoretical sphere, Kant is saying, we can show that our faculty of cognition has a pure use by attending to the necessity of concepts such as 'substance'. Our actual consciousness of this necessity is sufficient to show that our cognitive faculty is not empirically conditioned all the way down. In the passage at *KpV* 5: 30, Kant is saying we can show that our faculty of desire has a pure use in the same way, i.e. by attending to the necessity of moral laws. Our consciousness of this necessity is also something actual – a 'fact' – and that is sufficient to show that our faculty of desire too is not completely empirical.

Interestingly, Grenberg cites the remark from *KpV* 5: 30 twice:

[W]hat we need to do with this consciousness of the moral law is *pay attention* to it: 'we can become aware of pure practical laws ... by attending to the necessity with which reason prescribes them to us'. (2013: 161)

In order to have 'immediate consciousness' of the moral law, we have to *pay attention*: 'we become aware of pure practical laws ... by *attending* to the necessity with which reason prescribes them to us'. (2013: 179)

Curiously, the ellipses in these passages hide Kant's comparison to the theoretical sphere, where he says we can become aware of pure practical laws 'just as we are aware of pure theoretical principles' (*KpV* 5: 30).⁸ Without this comparison, the idea that Kant wants us to reflect attentively on a felt experience looks plausible. But once we bring this comparison to light the passage from *KpV* 5: 30 takes on a different meaning. I understand Kant's point to be that moral laws, like pure theoretical principles, have a unique modal status (they express strict necessity), and in both cases we are actually conscious of their necessity. In the practical sphere, he is saying, we are actually conscious of the necessity of moral laws, and that is sufficient to show that *pure* reason is practical within us.

To sum up: when Kant says that our consciousness of the moral law 'forces itself' upon us, we need not take him to mean this consciousness is felt. Nor must we assume that our consciousness of the moral law operates via sensibility because it is something 'given'. If we follow the parallel Kant wants us to draw to the theoretical sphere, it is clear that the givenness of moral consciousness refers to its modal status. At least this is an interpretative possibility that Grenberg has not closed off. We can take Kant to mean that we are actually conscious of necessity in moral laws, in the same way that we are actually conscious of necessity in pure theoretical principles. Calling these cognitions 'facts' means only that they are real, not that our grasp of them operates via feeling, as Grenberg supposes.

2

What other support might we find for the Affect of Reason interpretation? There is one passage from the second *Critique* that I think deserves special attention. Kant writes that the 'justification of moral principles as principles of a pure reason could also be carried out very well and with sufficient certainty by a mere appeal to the judgement of common human understanding' (*KpV* 5: 90). To explain this he adds the following remark:

[A]nything empirical that might slip into our maxims as a determining ground of the will *makes itself known* at once by the feeling of gratification or pain that necessarily attaches to it insofar as it arouses desire, whereas pure practical reason directly *opposes* taking this feeling into its principle as a condition. The dissimilarity of determining grounds [of the will] (empirical and rational) is made known by [the] resistance of a

practically lawgiving reason to every meddling inclination, by a special kind of *feeling*. (*KpV* 5: 91–2)

Grenberg cites this passage by way of criticizing scholars – like Henry Allison (1990) – who ‘find feeling important for making sense of the incentive or interest we have to act in accordance with moral principles’ but maintain that ‘proof of the authority that those principles have over us must be accomplished entirely independently of appeal to feeling’ (2013: 140). It seems clear from what Kant says that the moral law’s validity is only revealed to us in a felt experience of conflict between empirical and rational grounds of choice, making Kant’s analysis of ‘respect’ central to his project of justification in the second *Critique*. This is what I am calling the Feeling Thesis.

As Grenberg notes, however, the text just prior to *KpV* 5: 91–2 is open to interpretation. Here Kant reflects on the organization of topics in the *Analytic*, observing that they proceed from ‘practical principles a priori’ (chapter I), to ‘concepts of simply good and evil’ (chapter II), and finally to ‘the relation of pure practical reason to sensibility’ (chapter III) (*KpV* 5: 90). He repeats this observation a few sentences later (in a passage that Grenberg does not cite), writing that:

the division of the *Analytic* of pure practical reason must turn out like that of a syllogism, proceeding from the universal in the *major premise* (the moral principle), through undertaking in a *minor premise* a subsumption of possible actions (as good or evil) under the former, to the *conclusion*, namely, the subjective determination of the will (an interest in the practically possible good and in the maxim based on it). (*KpV* 5: 90)

Having these two passages in view, we now find ourselves in a familiar interpretative quandary. There is textual evidence supporting Grenberg’s view that the fact of reason and the feeling of respect are identical.⁹ But there is also textual evidence supporting the opposite view – upheld by Allison – that the two are distinct. How then should we decide between them?

From an exegetical point of view, I think that the burden of proof lands on Grenberg’s side. I say this for two reasons. First, scholars like Allison only have to deal with *one* passage from the second *Critique* that seems to oppose their view, the passage where Kant links the justification of moral principles to the feeling of respect (at *KpV* 5: 90–1). Scholars like

Grenberg, on the other hand, are forced to adopt a revisionary interpretation of the *entire* Analytic, questioning Kant's division between the justification of moral principles in chapter I and the analysis of moral feeling in chapter III.¹⁰ Second, for her reading to work Grenberg needs to show that our access to the moral law is limited to a felt experience, but on closer inspection all that the passage from *KpV* 5: 91–2 states is that the 'dissimilarity' between empirical and rational grounds of action is revealed to us by 'respect'. This does not decisively show that Kant considers the fact of reason to be an affect.¹¹

Now Grenberg is aware of the passages that conflict with her view. Referring to *KpV* 5: 90, for instance, she says it is 'surprising' that Kant claims 'he has accessed "the possibility of practical principles a priori" without appeal to sensibility' (2013: 143). But when Grenberg turns to support her alternative, she does not refer us to additional textual evidence. Instead, on p. 143, she retreats to what I have called step (2), the claim that 'a forced fact *has* to be a felt fact', and she concludes this paragraph by saying: 'we *must* appeal to our capacity for receptivity in the sensible form of feeling when making sense of how finite rational beings access the Fact of Reason; there seems no other capacity by which sensibly affected beings *could* take something in as given' (2013: 143). Yet, as we have seen, Grenberg provides us with no further argument as to why the forcefulness of a cognition entails that our access to it is limited to sensibility. Without this claim I see no other way to support the Affect of Reason interpretation – and that is the substance of my worry here, since I am not convinced that step (2) is true.

3

The question I now want to raise is this. If we reject the Feeling Thesis, must we return to a position like Allison's, which denies that feeling plays any role in Kant's project of justification? Grenberg assumes that there is no way of giving feeling its due in Kant's ethics if we separate the fact of reason (as our consciousness of the moral law's authority) from the feeling of respect (as the effect this consciousness has on our sensibility). Yet I am not convinced that this assumption is founded. It seems open to us, as an interpretative possibility, to follow Allison in separating the 'fact' (*Faktum*) from 'respect' (*Achtung*) without endorsing his specific view of their relationship. Allison, for instance, claims that Kant's analysis of moral feeling in the second *Critique* carries no justificatory weight: in his view, it 'brackets' the moral law's validity (1990: 121). But it seems we can reject this specific claim without having to collapse the distinction between moral consciousness and moral feeling. We can

appreciate the justificatory weight of respect, in other words, without making it identical to the fact of reason.

One advantage of this reading is that it makes sense of Kant's organization of topics in the *Analytic*. After showing that there is only one fundamental law of pure practical reason, and that we are actually conscious of this law (chapter I), Kant has two further tasks before him. He must show how the moral law can operate via our faculty of judgement (chapter II), and he must show how the moral law can operate via our faculty of feeling (chapter III). Here we can distinguish the fact of reason (as our consciousness of the moral law's authority) and the feeling of respect (as the effect this consciousness has on our sensibility), yet maintain that Kant's analysis of respect is central to his project of justification. On this reading, chapter III seeks to show how our consciousness of the moral law can exert an appropriate effect on sensibility, one that does not reduce to a pathological feeling of pleasure or pain. Further, this analysis is necessary to show how we can be moved to take up the moral law as our own maxim or principle of choice. On this interpretation, then, we can say that chapter III completes Kant's project of justification in the second *Critique*: it does so by showing how pure reason can be 'subjectively practical', i.e. an incentive for living one's life by its precepts.¹²

My main complaint is that the Feeling Thesis ends up trivializing this motivational account, since it already assumes what Kant is trying to show in chapter III: namely, that pure practical reason has a *necessary* connection to sensibility. If we read the second *Critique* as I am suggesting here, then every chapter of the *Analytic* has a justificatory role to play, and this coheres well with Kant's own description of the *Analytic* as a 'syllogism', proceeding from a major premise, to a minor premise, to a conclusion (*KpV* 5: 90). What this means, to return to my initial question, is that separating the fact of reason from the feeling of respect does not force us to reject Grenberg's claim that feeling plays a positive role in Kant's ethics. We can separate the 'fact' from 'respect', with Allison, yet still argue that chapter III of the second *Critique* is essential to Kant's larger project. Despite my criticisms, then, I believe that Grenberg and I agree on what is perhaps the most important point: her view that moral life has just as much to do with sensibility as it does with reason. This is, I think, where Grenberg and I are of one mind.¹³

Notes

- 1 I will cite the *Critique of Pure Reason* with pagination from the 1781 (A) and 1787 (B) edns, and all other texts by volume and page number from the Academy edn of *Kant's*

Gesammelte Schriften. Unless marked as ‘modified’, translation of the *Critique of Pure Reason* will be from (Kant 2009) and of the *Critique of Practical Reason (KpV)* and *Metaphysics of Morals (MS)* from (Kant 1999).

- 2 It is not always clear whether Grenberg thinks that our *access* to the moral law in the fact of reason is limited to the feeling of respect, or whether the two are somehow *identical*. At times she appears to be making a stronger claim of identity. ‘[T]he Gallows Man’s felt experience is indeed the felt experience of the Fact of Reason itself’ (2013: 236). ‘Kant’s deduction of freedom finds its common starting point in the felt experience of the Fact of Reason we have discussed’ (2013: 261). ‘The beginning principle of the argument is, indeed, still the Fact of Reason, which is a felt, phenomenological fact’ (2013: 263). While I will sometimes speak in these terms, my criticism is aimed primarily at Grenberg’s weaker claim of access.
- 3 By ‘affect’ I mean what pertains to feeling and sensibility in general, not ‘affect’ in Kant’s technical sense of the word, i.e. a powerful and fleeting emotion (cf. *MS*, 6: 407–8).
- 4 Dieter Schönecker has independently arrived at a version of this thesis, claiming that ‘[i]t is through feelings that we recognize the validity of the moral law’ (2013: 2; emphasis in original). A version of the Feeling Thesis was also defended by Heidegger in his 1927 lectures on phenomenology. See especially Heidegger’s analysis of respect (1988: 131–7).
- 5 This is a problem for Grenberg, since (in addition to the passage at B6 cited above) there are places where Kant speaks of something ‘forcing itself’ upon us – using the same term as at *KpV*, 5: 31, ‘*aufdringt*’ – without the mediation of feeling or sensibility. In the first *Critique*, for example, Kant writes: ‘The transcendental attempts of pure reason, however, are all conducted within the real medium of dialectical illusion, i.e., the subjective which offers itself to or even forces itself [*aufdringt*] upon reason as objective in its premises’ (A792/B820). (Thanks to Steve Palmquist for this reference.) Textual evidence aside, the claim that a forced fact has to be a felt fact strikes me as counter-intuitive. In performing an exercise in logic, I may conclude that something cannot (by logical necessity) be both A and not-A. However, that does not mean that my access to the Principle of Non-Contradiction is felt or limited to sensibility. Thanks to Oliver Sensen for this example.
- 6 In a footnote Grenberg even admits that in the first *Critique* Kant appeals ‘to first-personal experiences’ (e.g. of watching the ship move from upstream to downstream in the Second Analogy: A192–3/B237–8). But these, she notes, are ‘not felt experiences; and, because Kant is concerned to refer them to empirical objects of experience, they cannot be felt experiences’ (2013: 123, n. 19). In saying this, however, Grenberg seems to be contradicting step (2), her claim that a ‘forced fact *has* to be a felt fact’ (2013: 143).
- 7 I defend this interpretation of Kant’s fact of reason in greater detail elsewhere (see Ware 2014b).
- 8 Schönecker does cite this stretch of text: ‘[2] But how is consciousness of that moral law possible? [3] [3.1] We can become aware of pure practical laws, [3.2] just as we are aware of pure theoretical principles, [3.3] by attending to the necessity with which reason prescribes them to us’ (cited in Schönecker 2013: 17; numbers in original). However, Schönecker proceeds to offer a detailed commentary on every numbered point *except* (3.2), where Kant draws a direct parallel to the theoretical sphere. Clearly, then, this parallel is an obstacle for proponents of the Affect of Reason interpretation.
- 9 See n. 2.
- 10 Grenberg may be willing to accept the revisionary interpretation, but doing so would come at a cost. One of the unifying claims of her book is that the argument of

Groundwork III suffered from a ‘phenomenological failure’, but that Kant overcame this failure in the second *Critique*. Grenberg would have to abandon this narrative if she opted for a revisionary reading.

- 11 The problem is two-fold. Even if we read Kant to be saying that the fact of reason is revealed to us via ‘respect’ (*Achtung*), nothing in this passage supports Grenberg’s view that respect is the only point of access we have to the moral law. On the other hand, we could also read Kant to be saying that respect reveals a ‘dissimilarity’ between rational and empirical grounds for action, yet maintain that the fact of reason only concerns our consciousness of the former (i.e. the ‘necessity’ of pure practical laws). Either option is problematic for Grenberg.
- 12 Support for this interpretation comes from what Kant says in the second paragraph of chapter III, that ‘nothing further remains than to determine carefully in what way the moral law becomes the incentive and, inasmuch as it is, what happens to the human faculty of desire as an effect of that determining ground upon it’ (*KpV* 5: 72). This is not a matter of attending to the moral law’s *necessity*, but of attending to the *effects* our consciousness of necessity must have on sensibility. See (Ware 2014a) for further discussion.
- 13 Thanks to students in my 2014 graduate seminar on Kant’s ethics for discussion of the material in this article. Thanks also to Patrick Frierson, Oliver Sensen and audience members at the 2014 meeting of the Pacific APA for providing me with helpful comments on an earlier version.

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