

## Kierkegaard and the tackling of Moral Apathy

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### Abstract

This paper aims at experimenting with a possible idea of how Kierkegaard would response to moral apathy prevailing over our so-called contemporary society. In doing so, since it is of experimental nature, I would take my liberty to deal with Kierkegaard's ideas from his book "Works of Love," and other related writings in a less Christian manner- also, not conclusive. I argue that his idea of "love your neighbors" could help tackle the phenomenon of moral apathy fundamentally originated from "calculative" or "strategic" thinking. Also I would point out that the problem of moral apathy does not necessary come from the lack of morals in our contemporary society. Lastly, I would point out why the Kantian concept of the good fails to sufficiently address the problem.

**Key words :** *Moral Apathy, Immanuel Kant, Soren Kierkegaard, Reason, Passion*

### บทคัดย่อ

งานเขียนชิ้นนี้เป็นความพยายามที่จะทดลองกับแนวคิดที่เป็นไปได้ของคิร์เคอร์เกอ์ดว่าเขาจะตอบสนองต่อสถานการณ์ความเฉยชาทางศีล

ธรรมในโลกปัจจุบันเช่นไร และเนื่องจากงานเขียนชิ้นนี้เป็นงานทดลองในการตอบคำถามนั้นผู้เขียนได้นำแนวคิดซึ่งปรากฏอยู่ในงาน "Works of Love" และงานอื่นๆ ที่เกี่ยวข้องในรูปแบบที่เป็นคริสเตียนให้หน่อยที่สุด ผู้เขียนมีข้ออภิปรายว่าแนวคิดในเรื่องของ "จงรักเพื่อนบ้าน" นั้นสามารถใช้ในการตอบสนองต่อปรากฏการณ์ความเฉยชาทางศีลธรรมซึ่งในตัวมันเองนั้นเกิดขึ้นจากวิถีคิดซึ่งอยู่บนฐานของ "การคำนวณ" และ "การวางยุทธศาสตร์" และนอกจากนั้นแล้วปัญหาในเรื่องความเฉยชาทางศีลธรรมซึ่งมีอยู่ในสังคมปัจจุบันนั้นไม่จำเป็นที่จะต้องเกิดมาจากการขาดหลักศีลธรรม และในท้ายที่สุดผู้เขียนจะทำการบ่งชี้ว่าทำไมแนวคิดในเรื่องความดีของด้านที่จึงไม่เพียงพอที่จะตอบสนองต่อการแก้ปัญหา

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### 1. Introduction

Arguably, we live in the age of moral apathy. To set the ball rolling, the following example, which is one amongst millions of examples exhibiting symptoms of an attitude of moral apathy, will make our case clear:

"A recent example from China is that of a two-year-old girl in the city of Foshan in Guangdong province who was hit by a two vehicles after wandering onto the road. The girl lay unconscious and bleeding on the ground for six minutes as over a dozen people passed her body, none of whom stopped to check on her or help. The incident was captured by a surveillance camera, and has sparked an outcry from Chinese media

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and netizens alike, decrying **the lack of morals of a society** that would pass by an individual in need, a child no less, without attempting to help in some way.”( Yvonne Brill. 2011 : online)

Moral Apathy or Moral indifference is a symptom of (modern) civilized society. It is an attitude of indifference to the well-being or the state of the being of others when circumstances demand moral agents to take action or to intervene.

For Immanuel Kant what is understood as "moral apathy" is to be indifferent and uninfluenced by feelings because of respect for the Moral Law has far greater influence. In this sense, moral indifference is moral strength of the sort required by virtue. However, understood as a lack of moral vigor, or a lack of power in one's respect for the Moral Law, then indifference is moral weakness. It is a requirement of virtue, for Kant, not merely to be morally apathetic which can not to be governed by feelings and inclinations, but also to bring all of our passions, affects and inclinations under the control of reason

Is it truly the case that it is due to the lacks of morals of a society that leads to moral apathy, which apparently is the case in our contemporary? Is it possible that an established society that has been through the process of social experiment and evolution eventually resulting in a civilized society like the above mentioned would lack morals or a kind of moral rules that govern or dictate our relationship towards others? Or it is, as Kant suggests, lack of moral vigor or a lack of power in one's respect for Moral Law, which is responsible for our apathy towards morality?

## 2. Moral apathy and its possible causes

Before we manage to answer the above questions, let's move back to the basics by having a cursory look as to what the term “Moral” or “Morality” could possibly mean. The term “moral” comes from Latin (Mores), deriving its meaning from the idea of “custom.” Louis P. Pojman use morality generally to refer to “certain customs, precepts, and practices of people.”(Louis P. Pojman, 1999 : 2)

Therefore, put it simply, to answer the questions above, according to the meaning given above, it is not necessarily due to the lack of morals that is responsible for the symptom of moral apathy because the word “moral” itself is a socially-oriented entity; and it is unimaginable that any established society having been through a vicissitude of time would be so immature that it has forgotten to create or invent its own sets of moral rules, precepts, or moral conducts. To blame the lack of morals as a cause of moral apathy is to overlook the fact that morality is a given and a founding principle of any established society. In order for any society to be integrated into a single entity it is important that there is a law governing relationship among an individual in that particular society and the law is inevitably based upon a moral or social fact of the society, or else, it would risk the dangers of social instability, disorder, violence, upheaval, and, worst of all, civil war. In a newly-formed society where the process of social evolution is in a budding state, it is not too difficult to imagine that the phenomenon of moral apathy is unlikely to take place because it is in a struggling state, and does not have a luxury of ignoring the plight

of others– when it comes to their own self–interest they are all ready to get rid of one another for their own survival. Therefore, it is possible to imagine a society in this stage; people are ready to do away with one another due to the lack of morals since the lack of morals only take place in a society devoid of established codes of morality, precepts, or conducts. Hence, ignoring others difficulties is a symptom of an established society where rules of morals and codes of conducts are already established, and what were once obligations have become choices.

Seen in this light, the lack of morals could only happen in an unestablished society where instability, chaos, disorder are the order of the day. In this state people are struggling only for survival and do not have the luxury to choose whether to act morally or to choose which moral precepts to hold on to or which ones to be discarded. Therefore, it is clearly be seen that moral apathy is the phenomenon of an established society where people have moral options to choose, and the lack of morals is of an unestablished one where the lack of morality leads to social chaos, not a luxurious moral apathy.

However, there is still another sense relating to morality apart from being the rules governing relationship between people, precepts, or the practices of people in society. Morality could mean adhering to conventionally accepted standards of conduct based on a sense of right and wrong according to conscience: moral courage, moral law. In this way, the lack of morals could possibly mean the lack of moral sense or consciousness. This is a step closer or a better version when one claims that moral apathy

is caused by the lack of morals. However, since one’s consciousness is formed by society. Social interaction naturally – or even unconsciously– brings about the inheritance of social skills – which, in turn, morality included – it is dubious as to why any established society equipped with its own established moral codes would bring about the lack of moral sense or moral consciousness, which, in turn, leads to moral apathy. Therefore, it is unlikely to be the case that the lack of morals in society is responsible for people having apathetic attitude toward others, because our conscious being is partly shaped by society; people are, in some respect, a product of their own society and epoch. Therefore, in this way, moral codes are immanent in any individual in the society– especially the established society with its own moral codes. The lack of moral consciousness does not lead to moral apathy but rather to social instability, and the claim that the lack of morals in society – in the sense of the lack of moral consciousness– leads to moral apathy cannot do full justice to the phenomena of moral apathy.

### **3. The inadequacy of Kant to fully address and tackle moral apathy**

Moving on to the Kantian claim that the cause of moral apathy is due to “a lack of moral vigor, or a lack of power in one’s respect for the Moral Law.” This is the higher and better version of a suggestion to a cause of moral apathy. According to this claim, the focus is not on the social factor of any moral act but rather on the individual will. Kant proposes the idea as follows:

Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called without qualification, except the Good Will. Intelligence, wit, judgment, other talents of the mind, however they may be named, or courage, resolution, perseverance, as qualities of temperament, as undoubtedly good and desirable in many respects; but this gift of nature may also become extremely bad and mischievous if the will which is to make use of them, and which, therefore constitutes what is called character is not good....Even if it should happen that, owing special disfavor of fortune, or the stingy provision of a step-motherly nature, this good will should lack power to accomplish its purpose, if with greatest effort it should yet achieve nothing, and there should remain only the Good Will,... then, like a jewel, it would still shine by its own light, as a thing which has its whole value in itself. Its usefulness or fruitfulness can neither add to nor take away anything from this value (Louis P. Pojman, 1999 : 137)

According to this view, the only thing that is absolutely good is the good will. The good will is good in itself and without qualification. And the good will belong to the individual as individual, not as a social being.

Quite contrary to the claim by Yvonne Brill given above that the problem of moral apathy is due to the lack of morals in society, this problem, according to Kant, belongs to the individual in his lack of moral vigor, or a lack of power in one's respect for the Moral Law. So he proposes the deontological idea of “one must perform moral duty solely for its own sake” and the kind of imperative that fits Kantian scheme as a product of reason is one that universalizes principles of conduct or, what he calls, the categorical imperative. It goes on as follow:

“Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it would become a universal law”( Louis P. Pojman, 1999 : 139)

As it is clearly seen, according to Kant, the problem of moral apathy is not due to the society's lack of morals, but the weakness of individual will. Therefore to correct a course of action coming out of the attitude of moral apathy, one must resort to universal reason in order to will that what one does will be universally morally right and unconditional. This begs the question as to what one should do if one is to face the situation given in the second paragraph. Should one stop and think as to whether one should help the poor boy out of his plight? Or should one alert the authority due to his lack of skill of first aid? Or should one...? The question of how to react to the emergency case above might come up in a gazillion form if one resort to reason in order to will the good thing. The problem I see in Kantian idea of tackling moral apathy is that it lacks “spontaneity.” Kant's categorical imperative is an attempt to base what he perceives as the Good Will on pure reason. In doing so, he does not take an emotive state of a human being into consideration since he believes that reason alone has the impartial and universal quality. Some emotive attributes, such as love or courage, are good, but they are partial and individual. Their values are not intrinsic and depend on something outside of themselves.

Reason is a calculative or a strategic act of mind. It is too impersonal and could not penetrate into the heart of the (urgent! I would say) matter. Even though the Good Will is a laudable quality of moral agent, the Good

Will is ignorant of the spontaneity factor due to its absolute dependency on the authority of pure reason, which is in itself impersonal and formal. Will it be able to tackle the problem of moral apathy taking place in a highly formal and impersonal, or even mechanical society? In the earlier argument, I have pointed out that phenomenon of moral apathy is not likely to take place in an unestablished society, where the lack of morality or moral consciousness is likely to bring about the dangers of chaos and moral disaster rather than the indifferent attitude towards morality. In doing so, I have argued that the phenomenon of moral apathy is the symptom of an (highly) established society where everyone's life episode has been enframed (to borrow Heidegger's terminology) into one single entity dictated by the presence of an uncountable rules of morality and a multiplicity of forms of a moral consciousness rather than the lack of them. Does the mechanical nature of reason – which is based upon causality – tackle the problem that is itself based upon mechanical patterns of highly established society? It might be argued that Kant's categorical imperative can be distinguished into two kinds of imperatives, namely, hypothetical and categorical. According to him, the formula for a hypothetical imperative is: "if you want A then do B." (Louis P. Pojman, 1999 : 138) Applying this formula to the case of poor girl given above, according to this formula, one would say that "Ok! Guys, if you want to be recognized as a moral person, just help the boy." This is a highly calculative and strategic. One could think of applying this formula to the same episode but in the opposite way: "Well! Let's do nothing, because, perhaps, our lack of first aid skills

might make the matter worse, and we might be condemned by taking action." Either way, the problem arising out of the calculative nature of reason, and that makes it conditional and not absolute. Does morality come from this mechanism of calculation? The problem that comes from applying this formula to deal with a moral situation is clearly and easily be seen as insufficient and, perhaps, disastrous since choosing to abstain from taking action is also an option in the calculative act. Then we move on the next formula, which is, that of categorical imperative. It goes simply as follows: "Do B!" (Louis P. Pojman, 1999 : 138) Prima facie, this formula seems to be an improvement of the hypothetical one thanks to the absolute tone of the command. According to this imperative, one does what reason discloses to be the intrinsically right thing to do. Unlike hypothetical imperative, the categorical imperative is unqualified, and, Kant would argue, absolute. For Kant, this is the right kind of imperative for it shows proper recognition of the imperial and impersonal status of moral obligations. Moreover, such imperatives are intuitive, immediate, absolute injunctions that all rational agents understand by virtue of their rationality (Louis P. Pojman, 1999 : 138). The categorical imperative is based upon his separation of the phenomenal and noumenal world – the world as it appears to us and the world as it is in itself – and the categorical imperative is believed to belong to the latter (and this paper does not intend to explore this thesis in details.) Since we cannot know anything apart from our experience (and applying our 12 mental categories upon it) of it, we can only have knowledge of the phenomena, which is in itself dictated by causality. His

introduction of noumena is an attempt to preserve freedom and autonomy of rational being. Since noumenal world is the world of the unknown – unlike casual world of the phenomena – there are plenty of rooms for freedom undisturbed by nature, which is in itself of highly mechanical and dominated by causes and effects. Pure reason, Kant claims, belongs to the realm of noumena (thing in itself), therefore, it is intrinsically good. If we agree with his claim that the more we have of an intrinsically good thing, the better (Louis P. Pojman, 1999 : 148).

Seen in this light, Kant rightly point out that actions born of unfreedom is not capable of being considered as having moral value. Since moral action cannot be regarded as having moral value if moral agents are programmed or forced to do so by the force of nature, the repetition of circumstances, inclinations, habits, or even social pressure. Moral actions are about choosing or making decisions of what is right or what is wrong. Choices imply the freedom on the side of moral agents to resort to whatever action or making a decision as opposed to repetitive acts whereby moral agents merely act as a matter of course. In this manner, moral agents unconsciously follow regular patterns of behaving or thinking whereby those patterns are dictated by rules of causes and effects ad infinitum. Undoubtedly, it comes as no surprise why Kant choose to base his ethical ideas upon the noumena because it is in the transcendental realm unperturbed by the law of causes and effects by which, it belongs to the realm of true freedom. For Kant, what occurs in the phenomenal realm cannot be regarded as having an intrinsic value because it depends its own

value upon other precedent cause, which, in turn, depends it value upon a precedent cause, and ad infinitum. Therefore, only pure reason belongs to the realm of thing in itself has an intrinsic value and is uncaused.

However, when it comes to moral action – practical reason – Kant urges us all, with one of his famous maxims, to “act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it would become a universal law.” He further elaborates that: You must act “as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature,” analogous to the laws of physics (Louis P. Pojman, 1999 : 139). By “law” he means objective principle, a maxim that passes the test of universalizability (Louis P. Pojman, 1999) Here the problem lies in what I see as the “impersonality of moral laws” because what is universal excludes the particular and the individual. Any individual cases cannot be seen as of significance when positioning themselves against the universal; they fail to make their presence felt upon perceiving from the whole picture. In order to make it to the universal standard, moral agents must pass the test of universalizability. However, most of the time, as a finite and particular being, the frailties of moral agents (human, all too human!) always prevent us from achieving that universal moral tasks. To rub salts into the wound, when moral agents fail to make their marks in the universal moral standard, they become marginalized by the universal, and it is likely they become a-moral (not immoral, to be emphasized!) This is to be perceived as a dangerous trend, if one thinks that what one does would not matter in the perspective of the universal, one tends to abstain from moral actions

or decisions. In the same vein, when moral agents, who might possibly be tired of having to compromise with the universal standard, at the end of the day, feel that whatever they do does not matter neither makes the true impact, because they feel that what only matters is what is endorsed by the other (of course, the universal). Whether they choose to act or not, nothing truly changes. Whether they shun away from choosing or not, there are millions more people out there chosen by the universal capable of taking their place– everyone is disposable and capable of being replicable. Seen in this light, moral agents feel alienated from their own moral actions or decisions, and this is when the phenomenon of moral apathy takes place.

Furthermore, basing one's will upon reason means one has to compromise one's peculiarity with the universal, which is not rooted in oneself and therefore impersonal. In doing so, one must make a calculation if what one does or what one chooses to do can live up (or fails to do so) to the requirements of the universal. To deprive oneself of the burden of having to live up to the universal moral standard, one may resort to repetitive habits in order to please the universal (Kierkegaard would call it "the crowd"), which is mechanical in its nature. This pattern of hiding behind the universal fits well with the same pattern that makes the phenomenon of moral apathy possible – the mechanicality of an established society. The more sophisticated the social mechanism, the more impersonal the relationship between people.

To sum it up, the strategicality and calculativity of reason lead one to escape to the mechanicality of the rules of morality of an estab-

lished society. This process could lead to the sense of distanciality between people in the society because instead of forming a relationship, directly and personally, with others, they do so by resort to reason which is of impersonal and indifference in its nature, and that fits perfectly well with the pattern that generates the condition of the possibility of the phenomenon of moral apathy. If you agree with this analysis, then, the Good Will, based upon pure reason, proposed by Kant might not be able deal sufficiently with the problem of moral apathy – not to mention the tackling of it. As is the case with the general problem with impersonality, what the Good Will lacks is "spontaneity." Even if Kant claims that the Good Will is unconditional and intuitive, but the calculative and strategic nature of reason will always create the gap between the conditioned and the unconditioned. Therefore, the Good Will cannot bring about the spontaneity – spirit– which can be best brought to light by the notion of "faith."

#### **4. Kierkegaard and the tackling of moral apathy**

If all that is needed to tackle the problem of moral apathy is not the Good Will but, instead, the (Good) spontaneity, how can one gain such an intuition? Kierkegaard would say that we can receive it as the gift of God through "Works of love" or, one would say, by "being a Self through love."

According to Kierkegaard, God commands to us all: 'You shall love' (Murray Rae, 2010 : 133). Given the fact that Kierkegaard in his own lifetime, he devoted all his intellectual power to tackle what he perceived

as the collectivity and impersonality of Christendom by his “individualism,” one might wonder how could one expects his idea to be able to tackle the problem of moral apathy? Even though he confront the crowd with the requirement of individual responsibility before God, but he does not thereby deny that the self is formed through love one’s neighbor. In this way, one forms a relationship with others (neighbors) and constitutes a self with God as the “middle term.” His ultra-individualism has been criticized when he claims that “you have to do only with yourself before God,” (Soren Kierkegaard, 1995 : 3–4). It should not be interpreted as self-centered or antisocial. In M. Jamie Ferreira’s work *Love’s Grateful Striving*, he shows us that, when read in context, it is clear that Kierkegaard is concerned merely to emphasize that one should occupy oneself only with the fulfillment of one’s own responsibilities; “you are not responsible for ensuring that others do what they should” (Murray Rae, 2010 : 135). Seen in this light, everyone is seen as capable of moral imperfection, that is to say, everyone can make mistakes. Unlike the requirement of universal moral standard, no one is disposed as the irrelevant even if they fail to live up to the universal expectations. Everyone deserves to love and to be loved because “the one who loves is what he is only by being in you.” God’s love enables us to love, so it cannot ever be the case that our works of love stir God from inaction and prompt God to love us (Murray Rae, 2010 : 136). In this way, we are able to love because God love us first, and this could mean that our ability to love might come out spontaneously if we are grateful to life (gifted by God). When one feel grateful to life one accepts

whatever comes one’s way, and lives one’s life to the fullest because s/he considers that life is the precious Gift given by God (or in the less Christian version “the transcendent”). One feels loved by the creator, since there is no reason why one should be given a life and live that life. Therefore, it must be crystal clear to one’s mind that it is by virtue of God’s grace and love; one has one’s life to live in the world. For Kierkegaard, since one is loved by God, which, in turn, enables one to love, one has the obligation to “love the people we see.” He comments on the issue that “The Christian doctrine ... is to love the neighbor, to love the whole human race, all people, even the enemy, and not to make exceptions, neither of preference nor of aversion”( Soren Kierkegaard, 1995 : 13). We are commanded to love people just as we see them with all their imperfections and weakness. The argument given above makes the point even clearer that no one is abandoned or excluded, even if their imperfections and weakness prevent them from fulfilling their moral duties. For Kierkegaard, God equally love us all. Therefore, the basis for the non-partiality of “Love thy neighbor” is the equality of all before God. “The neighbor ... is your neighbor on the basis of equality with you before God, but unconditionally every person has this equality and has it unconditionally” (Soren Kierkegaard, 1995 : 60). On this basis, it should not be read that, since everyone is all equal before God, we should love everyone indiscriminately. The non-preferential love in this sense means that on the basis of worldly differences such as “in being king, beggar, rich man, poor man, male, females, etc., we are not like each other – therein we are indeed different. But in being the

neighbor we are all unconditionally like each other ... The neighbor is eternity's mark – on every human being”( Soren Kierkegaard, 1995 : 89). Humanly speaking, all people are equal in terms of their differences, but, on the basis of God's love, all people, in all their imperfections, are loved as they are in themselves equally – to be precise, everyone's life matters before God. When one feels that one's life matters, one feels that whatever one does, every moral action one takes, and every moral decision one makes are not in vain and, even are loved, one does not feel alienated from one's own moral actions and decisions. In this way, one does not refrain from taking and, even does so spontaneously out of love. This (I would name it) “will to love” serves as a wonderful antidote to tackling the problem of moral apathy because it deals directly with the heart of the problem – the absence of the (Good) spontaneity.

To make the point more concrete, the following example given in the book called “A Hero for Our Time” the book that celebrates the courage of Henry Albert Harper narrated by Ramond D. Boisvert might serve the purpose well. The narration goes as follows:

One day while he was going “out skating on the Ottawa, he saw a young woman fall into a patch of open water. He responded immediately, first by extending his walking stick, then plunging into the water himself. “What else can I do?” he replied when friends warned of the danger involved. Both he and the young woman died in the freezing currents (Raymond D. Boisvert. (2011).The Fall: Camus versus Sartre. International Philosophical Quarterly, 51(4), 466–482, p.468).

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