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# THE FEELING OF RESPECT AND MORALITY FOR THE FINITE RATIONAL BEING

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## abstract

*This paper aims to show the significance of respect in revealing the normative structure of Kant's ethics to the agent as a finite rational being. I argue that understanding the moral law as a fact of reason is insufficient for fully recognizing its absolute value and the normative consequences it entails. Indeed, the finiteness of the human agent requires the experience of the feeling of respect, which not only has a motivational role but also an epistemic one. I thus start by clarifying the nature of feeling for Kant in a way that highlights its complex structure. Then, I show how respect – as a particular kind of feeling – gives the agent a deeper understanding of her relationship with the moral law, thereby allowing the unveiling of Kant's normative theory.*

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## keywords

*Kant, respect, moral feeling, fact of reason, philosophy of emotion*

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**1. Introduction** In this paper, I show the role that the feeling of respect plays in revealing the normative structure of Kant's ethics to the moral agent as a finite rational being.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant claims that the moral law imposes itself on the agent as a *fact of reason*, as an axiom whose existence is unquestionable. Consequently, the feeling of respect seems to have no role on the epistemic level—we are already aware of the moral law—but it does on the motivational level.

However, I initially argue that the fact of reason is only a partial experience of the moral law, insufficient for a finite rational human being to fully uncover the normative structure of Kant's ethics (§1). Contrary to purely motivational interpretations of respect, I believe that it also has epistemic value for the agent.

Understanding the experience of respect requires first clarifying the nature of feeling for Kant (§2). Different interpretations given by Kant scholars focus on different aspects of feeling: from its cognitive dimension (DeWitt, 2018) to the affective one (Cohen, 2020). My interpretation of feeling highlights its complex structure. It has cognitive and affective elements, that participate to define it as such. Together, they motivate the agent to act in a particular way.

Through such a reconstruction of the nature of feeling, I show how the experience of respect (a feeling, albeit of a particular type) gives the agent a better *understanding* of her relationship to the fundamental law of pure practical reason, allowing the latter to impose itself as a determining motive over other motives (§3). This allows the structuring of Kant's normative ethics, giving practical content to the concepts of autonomy and duty and making the moral law, with its various formulations, the categorical imperative (§4).

**2. The Fact of Reason: A Partial Recognition of the Moral Law** How is it possible to know the moral law? This is the question Kant asks himself in the two works that ground his moral theoretical framework, namely, the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. However, since Kant's approaches to the question in the two works differ, so do the answers. In particular, what changes is “the relationship between the principle of morality and the freedom of the will, as far as the procedure of justification is concerned” (Landucci, 2013, p. 83).

In the *Groundwork*, Kant concluded the reality of the principle of morality from the possibility of the freedom of the will. However, in the second *Critique*, Kant does not consider it possible to follow this path and, therefore, takes the opposite direction—that is, from the knowledge of the reality of the moral law to the inference of the freedom of the will. He states:

I ask [...] from what our cognition of the unconditionally practical starts, whether from freedom or from the practical law. It cannot start from freedom, for we can neither be immediately conscious of this, since the first concept of it is negative, nor can we conclude to it from experience [...] It is therefore the moral law (KpV, 5: 29).

Kant seems to believe that the path he took in the *Groundwork* turned out to be wrong or, at the very least, unsuitable for coming from stating the freedom of the human being to a strong position on the reality of the categorical imperative. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argued that freedom was indeed possible, but nevertheless problematic, i.e., merely possible (noncontradictory).<sup>1</sup> To maintain consistency, Kant also argued in the *Groundwork* for the mere possibility of freedom and the derivation from it of the (mere) possibility of the principle of morality.

In the second *Critique*, Kant switches strategy and decides to start precisely from the practical principle, arguing that no real foundation for it is possible. He believes that “we become immediately conscious” of the moral law (KpV, 5: 29). Then, Kant enunciates the fundamental law of pure practical reason (KpV, 5: 30) and argues that knowledge of this is possible in the same way that we become immediately aware of theoretical pure principles. It is the knowledge of a postulate:

Pure geometry has postulates as practical propositions which, however, contain nothing further than the presupposition that one could do something if it were required that one should do it [...] Here, however, the rule says: one ought absolutely to proceed in a certain way [...] For, pure reason, practical of itself, is here immediately lawgiving (KpV, 5: 31).

Therefore, the awareness of the fundamental law of pure practical reason is “a fact of reason, because one cannot reason it out from antecedent data of reason [...] and because it instead forces itself upon us” (KpV, 5: 31). As a fact of reason that requires no further justification, the moral agent knows the fundamental law of pure practical reason, i.e., the law of the self-legislation of the will—that is, the possibility of the will determining itself independent of the influence of natural laws and their relationship (law of causality).

By recognizing the moral law in this way, the feeling of respect takes on only a motivational role. Therefore, “the conception of the feeling for the moral law presented by Kant should not be understood as an epistemological thesis, i.e., a thesis aimed at explaining how subjects know moral principles” (Bacin, 2022, p. 117). The epistemic dimension is exhausted with the knowledge of the moral law as a fact of reason. What remains is how this moral law can motivate the agent. This is the role of respect as the only true moral incentive [*Triebfeder*] to action.

However, I believe that this interpretation of the role of respect rests on two problematic theses. The first is the idea that a conceptual knowledge of the law of self-legislation of the will is sufficient to recognize this law as the moral law and categorical imperative,<sup>2</sup> and therefore its priority and absolute authority over empirical motives. On this issue, I agree with the interpretation of the *Faktum der Vernunft* that Kleingeld (2010) proposes, which distinguishes

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1 See KrV, A 445 / B 473.

2 For instance, Ware argues: “We are [...] actually conscious that moral laws provide us with immediate determining grounds of choice, and for that reason we do not need to ask whether our moral consciousness is possible” (2021, p. 55).

the consciousness of the fundamental law of pure practical reason from moral consciousness. Kleingeld (2010) writes:

It is striking and significant that the argument of the first chapter of the Critique of Practical Reason proceeds not in terms of morality and the moral law, but in terms of practical reason and the fundamental practical law [...] It is the consciousness of the fundamental law of pure practical reason that is called a fact of reason (p. 66).

The fact of reason allows the agent to be aware of a rational principle, namely, the fundamental law of pure practical reason. However, something more is required for the human agent, the finite rational being, to understand that principle as a moral principle with absolute authority over principles derived from inclinations to which, precisely because of our finiteness, we also accord value and recognize as (subjectively) good reasons to act.

The second problematic thesis concerns the underlying conception of feeling in Kant as a mere brute force, devoid of any cognitive content and, consequently, incapable of making something known to the moral agent.

Contrary to this interpretation, I hold that the experience of the feeling of respect, which does not follow the conceptual recognition of the moral law but occurs simultaneously with it,<sup>3</sup> is fundamental for the finite rational being to acknowledge the authority of this law over inclinations and, thus, to fully understand the meaning of the concepts of autonomy, duty, and imperative. Accounting for some of Kant's statements in the *Metaphysics of Morals* requires all of this. There, while discussing moral feeling, Kant argues that "any consciousness of obligation depends upon moral feeling to make us aware of the constraint present in the thought of duty" (MS, 6: 399). This means that truly understanding the concept of duty requires moral feeling. Similarly, Kant points out that the human being "must have respect for the law within himself in order to even think of any duty whatsoever" (MS, 6: 403).

It seems that for the moral agent as a finite rational being, i.e., "an animal endowed with reason" (MS, 6: 456), a conceptual knowledge of the moral law is not sufficient to understand the priority of morality; a concomitant sentimental knowledge of it is also necessary.

However, to better understand this epistemic role of respect (and the link with its motivational role) first requires clarifying generally the nature of feeling for Kant. The feeling of respect will then be a particular type of feeling that differs from other non-moral feelings.

### 3. The Nature of Feeling

In recent years, several authors have attempted to analyze the nature of feeling [*Gefühl*] in Kant.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Cohen (2020) proposes a non-cognitivist theory of feeling as *valenced appraisal*,<sup>5</sup> where the feeling has a derived intentionality. With the notion of derived intentionality, Cohen seeks to acknowledge, but at the same time not fully embrace, the non-intentionalist reading of feeling in Kant proposed by Guyer (1979); indeed, according to Cohen, the agent can understand the aboutness and directionality of feeling through reflective judgment.<sup>6</sup> Before such reflection, the feeling is a mere force moving the agent in a certain direction and can only be analyzed in terms of quantity. Contrary to this non-cognitivist reading of feeling in Kant is the cognitivist one that DeWitt (2018) proposes, defining feeling

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3 "What I recognize immediately as a law for myself I recognize it with respect" (GMS, 4: 402).

4 For a detailed review of the debate on the nature of feeling in Kant, see Cohen (2017).

5 "Feelings function as appraisals, but rather than conveying their appraisals through representational content, as judgment does, they convey it through their valence—either pleasurable or painful" (Cohen, 2020, p. 437).

6 "[Feelings] have intentionality, but an intentionality that is 'derived' [...] feelings need to be reflectively interpreted by judgment in order to acquire intentionality" (Cohen, 2020, p. 435).

as an *action-initiating evaluative judgment* of the goodness of an object that also provides reasons to act.<sup>7</sup> The affective element is not necessary to understand a feeling as such. In the interpretation I present, I tend to agree with DeWitt, who, unlike Cohen, argues that feeling has a cognitive content and, therefore, an intrinsic intentionality. However, unlike DeWitt, I hold that the affective element is necessary to define a feeling as such, distinguishing it from “cold” practical judgment.<sup>8</sup>

In general, I define feeling in Kant as a state of mind concerning the relationship between an object and the agent, with an affective quality and the ability to motivate the agent by informing the faculty of desire.

The first feature is the cognitive content. Kant defines the feeling of pleasure [*Gefühl der Lust*] as “the representation [*Vorstellung*] of the agreement [*Übereinstimmung*] of an object or of an action with the subjective conditions of life” (KpV, 5: 9n). The feeling is directed toward something, and Kant thinks that the agent is aware of this directionality when he defines the feeling of pleasure also as “the consciousness of the agreement of an object with the productive power of imagination of our soul” (LM, 29: 891). As Allison argues, the feeling is therefore not a “raw feel” (2001, p. 122); on the contrary, the agent has an “intentional awareness” (2001, p. 54). Thus, the feeling has an intentional character, a form of “aboutness.” In particular, the agent becomes aware of the relationship between an object and the agent’s subjective conditions of life. Consequently, the feeling makes us know something, but not the object itself since it is not an objective perception that gives us knowledge of the world in the same way the cognitive faculty does. For this very reason, it “does not contribute anything to cognition” (KU, 5: 204). However, the fact that “feelings are not about objective properties we perceive with our senses [...] does not preclude them from being about something else” (Eran 2021b, p. 376), namely, the relationship between an object and a particular agent. Moreover, Kant refers to the representation of the *agreement*, particularly, “the relation of agreeable fit” (Holberg 2020, p. 376) between the object and the agent’s subjective conditions of life. The latter are about her desiring dimension and, in general, her happiness, understood as “the entire well-being and contentment with one condition” (GMS, 4: 393).

The agent becomes aware of this agreement, that is, of this harmony (or disharmony, in the case of the feeling of displeasure) between the object and herself. Then, in addition to this cognitive dimension, the feeling also displays an affective quality; the agent “feels [...] how he is affected by the representation” (KU 5: 204). The agent is affected by this representation in a certain way. In the case of the feeling of pleasure, for instance, a pleasurable experience results from the harmony between the representation and the entire power of the mind: “[I]f a representation harmonizes with the entire power of the mind, with the principle of life, then this is pleasure” (LM, 28: 247). Described in this way, with a cognitive and affective component, the feeling is for Kant a sort of evaluating state or a “very special power of discriminating and judging” (KU, 5: 204). Now, precisely because the relationship judged is between the object and the agent’s desiring dimension, the judgment of the feeling will always be a subjective one. It distinguishes between what is good or bad but that good and bad have only relative and not absolute value. Kant says indeed that the good of the judgment by feelings is not «good absolutely, but only with reference to our sensibility» (KpV, 5: 62). He makes this point clear by distinguishing between the German terms *das Gute* and *das Wohl* and *das Böse* and *das Übel*.

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7 “Feelings [...] are determinations of value, and it is in virtue of this that they motivate. That is, they are action-initiating evaluative judgments” (DeWitt, 2018, p. 74).

8 This is a critique that the contemporary debate in philosophy of emotions raises to cognitivist theories (Solomon, 1983; Nussbaum, 2012). For instance, see Ben-Ze’ev (2004).

*Wohl* and *Übel* refer «to our state of agreeableness or disagreeableness» (KpV, 5: 60) and have relative value, while *Gute* and *Böse* have absolute value.

Finally, the judgment of the feeling also has a motivational output, generating in the agent a practical interest in preserving a certain state, or in leaving that state through a specific activity. In this regard, Kant distinguishes between “contemplative pleasure or inactive delight,” the aesthetic feeling that prompts the agent to remain in that specific state, and “practical pleasure” [*praktische Lust*] that motivates the agent to act by causing a desire: “[A]s for practical pleasure, the determination of the faculty of desire which is caused and therefore necessarily preceded by such pleasure is called *desire*” (MS, 6: 612). There is a kind of double cross-reference between feeling and desire. Indeed, feeling bases its judgment on the comparison between the object and the agent’s desiderative faculty, but through the same judgment it ends up informing and giving content to that same faculty, the true causal force of human action: “A judgment of an object by which its agreeableness is affirmed [...] provokes a desire for similar objects” (KU, 5: 207)” The point is that, as Holberg explains, the judgment of feeling “is more than mere liking. The agent desires the existence of the represented agreeable object in relation to herself” (2020, 375). That is what Kant thinks when he writes that there is a “connection between the subject and the existence of the object. It is not merely the object, but also its existence, that pleases” (KU, 5: 209).

In conclusion, the role of feeling in Kant is not only motivational but also epistemic. Although feeling does not make the agent know the object itself, it does make her know the relationship between her and the object, the worth that object has *for her*.

#### 4. Respect as a Particular Feeling

For Kant, respect is a feeling, although of a particular kind. Indeed “even though respect [*Achtung*] is a feeling [*Gefühl*], it is not one received by influence, but one self-wrought by a rational concept and therefore specifically different from all feelings of the former kind” (GMS, 4: 401n). It is the only moral feeling and, in particular, is “the consciousness of the subordination of my will to a law” (GMS, 4: 401n). The feeling of respect differs from non-moral feelings in two essential ways.

The first difference is that the object of respect is not external to the agent but internal. It is the moral law, the fundamental law of pure practical reason<sup>9</sup> that can determine alone the agent’s will. Therefore, the evaluative content of the feeling of respect concerns the relationship between the moral law and the subject. In the latter’s conception resides the second characteristic that distinguishes respect from non-moral feelings. In the non-moral feeling, the relation at hand is that between the external object and the subjective conditions of life (the agent understood as “happiness seeker”). In respect, the relation is between an internal object (the moral law) and the subject understood as both happiness seeker and rational being. Consequently, the feeling of respect conveys a double relationship and a double evaluation. On the one hand, the agent and her willingness to realize her desires and inclinations, i.e., habitual desires, are considered: “All inclinations together (which can be brought into a tolerable system and the satisfaction of which is then called one’s own happiness) constitute regard for oneself” (KpV, 5: 73). On the other hand, the agent is regarded as a subject who can determine herself only through that fundamental law of pure practical reason, independently of any individual desire or need.

Respect represents to the agent the disagreement in the relationship between the moral law and the desiring subject; “the moral law [...] infringes without end upon *self-conceit*” (KpV,

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<sup>9</sup> Kant argues that “the object of respect is therefore solely the law.” Even respect for persons is “actually only respect for the law (of righteousness, etc.) of which he gives us the example” (GMS, 4: 402).

5: 74)—that is when desire seeks to unconditionally make itself the determining ground of the will. At the same time, there is a relation of agreeable fit between the moral law and the rational nature of the agent, with the former able to stand as the determining ground of her will. The epistemic function of the feeling of respect is thereby to make the agent aware of the relationship between herself, as both a desiring and rational being, and the moral law. Then, the agent is also affected by this dual representation. Wellmon rightly claims, indeed, that here respect works analogously to the non-moral feelings and mimics “the pathology of sensibility” (2009, p. 566). The subject feels pain—*humiliation*—the moment she becomes aware of the disagreement between the moral law and her inclinations: “[T]he negative effect upon feeling (disagreeableness) is *pathological*” (KpV, 5: 75). At the same time, she lives a positive affective experience in being aware of the possibility of determining herself through that law autonomously. This positive affective experience is an “elevation of the moral [...] esteem for the law itself on the intellectual side” (KpV, 5: 79).

Thus, through its cognitive intake and consequent affective reaction, the feeling of respect judges such relationships and enables the agent to fully recognize the value of *personality*, that is, “freedom and independence from the mechanism of the whole of nature, regarded nevertheless as also a capacity of a being subject to special laws—namely pure practical laws given by his own reason” (KpV, 5: 87). The content of respect is therefore evaluative, making it “the representation of a *worth*” (GMS, 4: 402), that of the moral law.

Therefore, through the feeling of respect, the agent becomes fully aware of the moral value of the fundamental law of pure practical reason, especially of its superiority and therefore priority over individual inclinations and the principles that develop from them.

Finally, the feeling of respect also has a motivational dimension, making it “the sole and also the undoubted moral incentive” (KpV, 5: 78). Just as non-moral feelings can induce a practical interest in the agent to abandon her current state, respect can do the same and induce a moral interest by motivating the agent in the adoption of the moral law as the determining motive of the faculty of desire. Indeed, contrary to the interest created by the non-moral feeling toward the object, aiming to place the latter as the determining motive of the faculty of desire, the feeling of respect “produces an *interest* in compliance with the law which we call *moral interest*” (KpV, 5: 80). The desire for the object is thus subordinated to the authority of the moral law, which will evaluate the form of that desire. Thereby, through respect, the moral law imposes itself as the determining motive of the faculty of desire. Such is the reason why respect is “a crucial element in Kant’s new manifesto about the efficacy of reason” (Bagnoli, 2020, p. 145) for finite moral agents like human beings; practical reason is effective because of respect.

Having described the experience of respect in this way, how can it be consequently summarized in terms of its role within the agent’s moral deliberation? Some Kantian authors go so far as to support a thesis that overlaps the feeling of respect with the determination of the agent’s will, with what we might call moral judgment.

For instance, Berg maintains that “a coherent interpretation of Kant’s account of moral respect requires recognizing the *identity* of the conscious determination of the will and the feeling of moral respect” (Berg, 2021, p. 740). Berg defends this interpretation with passages in which Kant appears to affirm this identity, such as: “the immediate determination of the will by the law and the consciousness of this is called *respect*” (GMS, 4: 402). However, Kant clearly explains that the object of respect is only the moral law, and in the continuation of the sentence Berg quotes, he states that respect “is viewed as the effect of the law on the subject and not as its cause” (GMS, 4: 402). A more correct reading of this textual passage would show Kant’s concern to remind the reader that respect is a feeling in relation to a law of which it is

not the cause, a law that can determine the will of the agent without any mediation by other motives arising from inclinations.

Even though she ends with a different conception of the nature of feeling in Kant, Berg shares with DeWitt the identity between the feeling of respect and moral judgment. Indeed, DeWitt understands feeling in Kant as an action-initiating evaluative judgment. Having thus defined the nature of feeling in general, the feeling of respect evaluates the relation between an object and “the subject’s *spiritual or rational life*” (DeWitt, 2014, p. 47), to which the moral law is necessarily linked. The object of evaluation cannot be a physical object or empirically conditioned thing, since these relate to the agent’s desiderative and animal life, not the rational life. Consequently, “the objects of the higher feelings must be internal to the activity of the will—i.e., they must be general concepts of action” (DeWitt, 2014, p. 50). DeWitt takes into consideration the concept of truthfulness: “[W]hen truthfulness determines the will, it increases the will’s universal law-giving activity (by being an instance of that activity), and so furthers the subject’s spiritual life. As a result, truthfulness is judged to be morally good” (p. 51).

However, Berg and DeWitt seem to overlook the different passages in which Kant denies the possibility that respect can serve or coincide with moral judgment or deliberation. Indeed, in the second *Critique*, Kant points out the fact that respect “does not serve for appraising actions and certainly not for grounding the objective moral law itself” (KpV, 5: 76). Similarly, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he argues that “respect (*reverentia*) is, again, something merely subjective, a feeling of a special kind, not a judgment about an object that it would be a duty to bring about or promote” (MS, 6: 402). Consequently, these readings that tend to identify respect with deliberation or moral judgment fail to remain faithful to the Kantian text.

In conclusion, what does the agent achieve through respect? She acquires knowledge of a value, that of the moral law, and awareness of its authority over her. In fact, the agent is immediately aware of the fundamental law of pure practical reason by its being a fact of reason, but she becomes fully aware of its absolute value and authority through the feeling of respect, which acts on an epistemic-evaluative dimension—with the representation of the relationship between the law and the subject, which affects the subject—and on a consequent motivational dimension, making that moral law the only possible moral incentive.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the agent is aware that she is *overdetermined*—that is, exposed to several motives involved in the determination of her will. With the feeling of respect, the superiority of the motive of practical reason and the consequent subordination of selfish motives to it are added to this awareness.<sup>11</sup> Only with this experience do many of the concepts that participate in the normative structure of Kant’s ethics acquire meaning and authority for the moral agent as a finite rational being.

In the next paragraph, I show how this experience of the relation to the law and the consequent awareness of its value and authority unveils the normative structure of Kant’s ethics to the agent.

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<sup>10</sup> Without relying on a precise interpretation of the nature of feeling in general and, therefore, limiting himself to the analysis of respect alone, Walschots (2022) also acknowledges the presence of this dual dimension, cognitive and motivational. In fact, he defines respect as altogether a “cognitive attitude,” a form of recognition, and a “feeling” that “functions as a motive and incentive” (p. 263). However, it is not clear whether this cognitive dimension is also present in the nature of feeling in general, as I try to show in my interpretation.

<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive resume of the debate on the overdetermination of the will in Kant, see Borges (2019, pp. 8-13). I agree with Borges’ interpretation that sustains the possibility of multiple motives coexisting in the process of determination of the will. To have an action that has moral value, the moral law must be the determining motive—that is, the motive that subordinates all others and that alone would be able to determine the agent’s will entirely.

Having described the experience of respect, it is possible for us to understand how such an experience is necessary for the concept of duty itself to emerge. Indeed, as the first section mentioned, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant argues that the agent “must have respect for the law within himself in order to even think of any duty whatsoever” (MS, 6: 403). The feeling of respect seems to be a necessary condition for the concept of duty to become clear in its structure and, in turn, participate “to unravel the concept of a will to be highly esteemed in itself and good apart from any further purpose” (GMS, 4: 397). Kant goes so far as to define duty itself as “the necessity of an action from respect for the law” (GMS, 4: 400). Through respect, the subject becomes fully aware of the superiority of the moral law and the impossibility of attaining a will that is “good absolutely and without limitation” (GMS, 4: 402) by determining itself through motives coming from inclinations. In this way, what Kant in the second *Critique* calls the fundamental principle of pure practical reason appears for the first time in the *Groundwork*, in the form of duty and constraint, with the verbal form “ought”: “I ought never to proceed except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (GMS, 4: 402).

The moral law—when, thanks to the feeling of respect, it imposes itself as superior to other selfish motives nonetheless present in the process of determining will—appears as *command*—that is, as “the representation of an objective principle in so far as it is necessitating for a will” (GMS, 4: 413) and in the formula of the imperative expressed by an *ought*. The formulations of the categorical imperative have that content because the agent recognizes the absolute value and authority of the law present in herself and *every other agent*. Indeed, the feeling of respect does not have only a *vertical* dimension (i.e., recognition of an authority internal to the subject, the moral law) but also presents a consequent *horizontal* dimension that recognizes this value as something present in every finite rational being. This fundamental power, whose value we understand as finite rational beings through respect, is present in every human being.<sup>12</sup> Its awareness gives meaning to the content of the three formulations of the categorical imperative. In fact, the first formula—that of the universalizability of the maxim—can be interpreted as a formula for the communicability of reasons that requires “acknowledging the ‘practical space’ that belongs to the other” (Spinosi, 1998, p. 111), that is the recognition of the absolute value of the other person and the inferiority of selfish motives that might lead the agent to create an exception to the rule, just for herself. Even in the third formula, that of the kingdom of ends, the relational element is distinctly present in the value given to this “systematic union of various rational beings through common laws” (GMS, 4: 433). The second formula is the one that has the clearest connection with respect, so much so that it could be renamed the formula of *respect for humanity*. Obviously, there is no duty to respect people since Kant in the *Metaphysics of Morals* considers it impossible.<sup>13</sup> There is, however, a duty not to treat people as mere means, which derives from the absolute value we give to the person through the feeling of respect.

In general, the very concept of autonomy and its opposite, heteronomy, take on such a form only because of the recognition of this superiority of the moral law and the possibility of the agent determining herself through it, regardless of inclinations. Therefore, the autonomy of the will is “the characteristic of the will by which it is a law to itself [...]. The principle of autonomy is thus: not to choose in any other way than that the maxims of one’s choice are also comprised as universal law in the same willing” (GMS, 4: 440). Instead, if the relationship

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12 For an analysis of this relational recognition through the feeling of respect, see Mordacci (2024).

13 “There can be no duty to have moral feeling or to acquire it; instead every human being (as a moral being) has it in him originally” (MS, 6: 399).

between the motive of law and inclinations is reversed in favor of the latter, the agent's will is going to be heteronomous. Autonomy is nothing more than the agent's ability to determine a specific relationship with her own finiteness. As Bagnoli (2007) explains, "[A]utonomy is not a denial of our dependent and relational nature [...] It is a practical response to the many ways we are dependent, rooted, and situated" (p. 125). An awareness of the superiority of the moral law over inclinations and non-moral feelings guides this practical response.

In conclusion, the agent can fully understand the fundamental concepts of the normative structure of Kant's ethics only following the awareness of the authority, and consequent priority, of the moral law. However, the agent, as a human being—that is, a finite rational being—needs the experience of the feeling of respect to fully recognize this value over the other motives that she herself considers good. Only with respect is it possible for the human being to fully understand the superiority of the *good in itself* over the *good for something* (Cf. KpV, 5: 57-68).

### 6. Conclusions

Therefore, the experience of respect is crucial not only from the motivational point of view but also from the epistemic point of view. The two dimensions, cognitive-evaluative and motivational, are interrelated, due to the nature of feeling in Kant. Indeed, the feeling evaluates the relationship between an object and the agent's subjective life and motivates the agent to perpetrate in a certain state or to leave it. In the feeling of respect, the agent understands and feels the value of the moral law in relation to her desiring life and her rational life. Through this experience, the moral law imposes itself on her as the authority and sole moral determinant motive of her will.

As a result of this experience, normative concepts and the very idea of necessity take on practical meaning for the agent. The moral law imposes itself as duty, in the form of an imperative with its various formulations. The relationship of authority between moral law and the agent's desiring dimension also allows the concept of autonomy to present itself as the construction of a way of determining oneself, in which the agent sets moral law as the determining motive to which other motives are subordinate and aligned.

In this way, the relationship between the fact of reason and the passages in which Kant argues the impossibility of thinking about duty without first respecting the moral law becomes clearer. The same argument could also apply to the argument of the possibility of the categorical imperative that Kant provides in the third section of the *Groundwork*, then reverses in structure with the fact of reason in the second *Critique*. Kant says that "the moral ought is thus one's own necessary willing as a member of an intelligible world, and he [the person] thinks of it as an ought only in so far as he considers himself at the same time as a member of the world of senses" (GMS, 4: 454). The agent understands the value of the moral law only in relation to the dimension of the sensible world. Awareness of this law of freedom also immediately brings with it the feeling of respect that enables the subject to recognize its authority and to have a felt experience of it.

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