

# Does Empathy Offer a Good Alternative to the Concept of Self-Love in Kant and Nietzsche's Views? A Reply to Saunders

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**Abstract.** Recent discussions on the views of self-love in Kant and Nietzsche (Owen 2017, 2019; Saunders, 2023) suggest a conflict between this concept and our duties to others and, how we should pursue and implement such responsibilities at individual and social level. If Kant is correct, our self-love should be subordinated to the moral law or practical reason; otherwise, self-love could influence the will and compromise free choice. On the other hand, as Owen has pointed out, Nietzsche offers an alternative approach to channelling self-love. In this Nietzschean view, self-love becomes the cornerstone of our moral and social development. Saunders argues that empathy, as a third alternative, can help us escape this dichotomy. However, I contend that empathy, while important, is not sufficient, as it may be a fleeting emotion that fails to convey dignity and respect to others. I will argue that a Nietzschean perspective on self-love, combined with Kant's doctrine of virtues, helps us understand the current debate. My view is that if a bridge, between the Duties of Love and the Duties of Virtue toward other human beings in a Kantian framework with the channelling strategy of Nietzsche can be created, then we can keep the concepts of dignity and respect and over empathy. Once this bridge is established, the Duties of Virtue toward other human beings can effectively be utilized to pursue personal and collective development within the Nietzschean position, this approach aligns with a political and ethical view aimed at elevating morality via dignity and respect to the highest possible virtue for all.

**Keywords:** moral, empathy, universal law, self-love, duties, respect, dignity, Kant, Nietzsche, virtue, love, happiness.

In recent days (October 2023), the border between Colombia and Panama, particularly the region known as the Darien Gap, has been in the centre of the news as thousands of migrants – fathers, mothers, children, and whole families – make a hazardous trek through the Darien Jungle trying to reach the United States of America. Such a barbaric picture could suggest a total breakdown of the principles of humanity, such as religious, political, cultural, social, and economics, that are supposed to be at the centre of the inception of our modern societies – or at least, should be. In such a state of total helplessness, perhaps our first reaction is a feeling of empathy. But it is also true that when we see people in such a state of despair, we could think about the inequalities, the political, economic, and relational dominations that ignite such a massive exodus of people. Hence, may be worth review the ideas of Nietzsche regarding autonomy and self-love, to find a path to elevate our individual and collective moral development. However, even if this is a departing point, this is not enough. It Could be necessary to explore a path where feelings like empathy could serve not only as a motivation to discover the true value of others, but also to empower them, as Kant suggests could be done via dignity and respect (duties of virtue toward other human beings) and promote real change in the lives of people. This reply to Joe Saunders and

its views on empathy will explore (I) the standpoint of self-love in Kant, Nietzsche, and the interpretation of Owen. In (II), we will discuss the role of empathy, as presented by Joe Saunders, but I suggest only as the starting engine of the duties of virtue toward other human beings, in (III) I will outline the idea that dignity and respect is a bridge that work as empowerment tools to channel self-love.

## I. SELF-LOVE AND COMMUNITY

The central concept in Aristotle's "Politics" is that of community (*κοινωνία*), the notion that human beings come together in social organizations with a vision of some common good (1252a) as the goal of such social structures. However, as humans, these communities are formed by individuals with emotions, feelings, and diverse interests and predispositions<sup>1</sup>, how can these differences be set aside to pursue this common good? In his work "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim," Kant introduces the idea of "unsocial sociability" (*ungesellige Geselligkeit*) as a fundamental characteristic of human beings (Owen, 2017). In other words, as Kant suggests, this concept of unsociability includes a "trait that predisposes them to want to direct everything only to their own ends." (8: 21). However, if this predisposition to pursue one's own ends is fundamentally rooted in self-love, and if self-love can potentially compromise our will and hinder our ability to choose freely in alignment with universal moral laws, then the only viable option according to Kant, as Owen proposes, "is to find a way to integrate a form of self-love that is subject to the guidance of practical reason" (Owen, 2017). However, it is also worth considering that the concept of self-love can be examined from a more constructive perspective. In other words, even if practical reason can regulate the predisposition of self-love, the idea of unsocial sociability implies more complex relationships that involve inequality and domination, demanding a deeper analysis. I may agree with Owen, who claims that Kant may not be well-suited to address the broader forms of domination, which Nietzsche highlights concerning economic and social forms of radical dependency (Owen, 2017) that can arise in our community life. Nonetheless, as I am attempting to argue, this Nietzschean account could be useful as we recognize the value of the duties of virtue in general terms, as outlined by Kant, which can serve as a bridge to connect with Nietzsche's more empowering ideas.

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1] In accordance with Kant's terminology, the difference between predisposition (*Anlage*) and propension (*Hang*) is significant. Kant defines predispositions as follows: "By the predispositions of a being, we understand not only its constituent elements, which are necessary to it, but also the forms of their combination, by which the being is what it is. They are original if they are necessarily involved in the possibility of such a being, but contingent if it is possible for the being to exist without them." In contrast, Kant defines propension by stating: "By propensity (*propensio*), I understand the subjective ground of the possibility of an inclination" (RGV 46-47).

This distinction holds importance because if we consider empathy as a form of propension legislated in terms of moral law, then according to Kant, it is "regarded as having been acquired (if it is good)" (RGV 47-48). It is worth noting that empathy is indeed considered a virtue.

Empathy can form the foundation but should not be considered the sole structural support for the concept of community and our social relations.

## II. JOE SAUNDERS' VIEWS ON EMPATHY

Joe Saunders' motivation (2023) for presenting an alternative perspective to Kant and Nietzsche on self-love stems from the idea that self-love is not inherently good or bad in human beings. Instead, the actions we take are contextually grounded. Thus, self-love cannot be considered the sole or primary motivator for our decisions. As Saunders suggests, we may sometimes act in seemingly selfish ways to help and protect others. Therefore, according to Saunders, empathy, as he correctly points out, can motivate us to act based on our consideration of the thoughts and feelings of others (Saunders, 2023).

Saunders' idea revolves around recognizing our interdependence and vulnerabilities in others, which is undoubtedly a noble perspective. However, empathy it may not be sufficient to address and rectify the asymmetrical relations that emerge within communities, since empathy is a 'local attitude,' its focus of attention is consequently limited. To illustrate this point, let's revisit the example I used earlier – the people crossing the Darien jungle. It is unquestionable that their actions result from forms of radical dependency arising from social, economic, and cultural factors in their home countries. In the first place, one could suggest that these people act out of self-love as they attempt to protect themselves and their loved ones. However, in doing so, they expose themselves to the dangers and challenges of crossing a jungle. Our empathy for them, as a feeling that arises when we witness such news, is a natural response. But as Kant suggests in the *Metaphysics of Morals*:

In fact, when another suffers, and though I cannot help him, I let myself be affected by his pain (through my imagination), then two of us suffer, even though the trouble only affects one. But there cannot possibly be a duty to increase the ills in the world and do good out of compassion (6: 457).

In other words, empathy is a feeling that should underpin our social interactions, but it may not directly solve the problems faced by the person who is suffering, they need some sort of empowerment<sup>2</sup>. As Nietzsche suggests, we need to empower ourselves through the creative force of resentment, a natural force (Owen, 2017). This concept of empowerment is crucial to understanding how empathy may or may not work, but most importantly to work in relation to others, otherwise, we could end with a view of Adam Smith:

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<sup>2</sup>] It is necessary to clarify the concept of 'empowerment' beyond common speech. In the context of forced migrants, empathy alone proves insufficient; rather, a transfer of power is essential. This transfer allows them to overcome, even partially, the conditions of impoverishment that force them to leave their countries. From a political perspective, 'empowering' entails redistributing resources and promoting capabilities.

Man is assigned a role that is much humbler but also much more suitable to the limited nature of his powers and his intellect – namely the care of his own happiness and of the happiness of his family, his friends, his country. (Smith, p 215)

So, empathy could have a limited scope in terms of people and time; therefore, it is necessary to explore the functional basis of empathy as a foundation to empower people.

### III. THE STRUCTURAL BASE OF EMPATHY TO EMPOWER THE OTHERS WITH DIGNITY AND RESPECT AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN KANT AND NIETZSCHE

While looking for an alternative to move away from self-love, as Saunders suggests, can be a compelling argument, it is also important not to multiply the causes or beings. Empathy is undoubtedly at the foundation of our social relations. As human beings, we are, as Saunders has explained, motivated by the thoughts and feelings of others<sup>3</sup>. However, there are times when empathy alone may not suffice to help them. In such situations, it might be more beneficial to organize other members of the community. For example, historically, charity has been considered a form of justice, as was common in the 19th century. But even this did not seem to provide a complete solution to the problem at its core. So, what philosophical tools can we employ to chart a better course?

Kant presents the concept of the duties of virtue towards others. When we help others, they retain “their respect for themselves” (6: 449). It seems to me that this is the key point. A person may act in a selfish way when they lose their dignity and respect, feeling abandoned by the members of the community<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, duties of dignity and respect towards other human beings serve as tools to empower those who are suffering or distressed, because other feelings may not work, in *The Metaphysics of Moral*, Kant suggests that,

Humanity itself is a dignity; for a human being cannot be used merely as a means by any human being (either by others or even by himself) but must always be used at the same time as an end... Hence, there rests on him a duty regarding the respect that must be shown to every other human being (6: 463).

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3] Note for example the idea of empathy sketched by Marcus Aurelius: “Acquire the habit of attending carefully to what is being said by another, and of entering, so far as possible, into the mind of the speaker” (6.53). If we could explore this idea, at the core is the view that by listen and understand the other feelings, we could improve our social relations, hence, a path to socially elevate our moral feelings to the highest virtue possible in the community.

4] This feeling of dignity in my view is what we lack in the state of nature. It could be explored that at the core of the concept of “unsocial sociability” as elucidated by Kant is the idea that what underlies our actions based on self-love is the logical absence of the concept of dignity (humanity). Consequently, we act based on our most basic instincts, hence on our own ends. However, once we in community, are recognized in terms of dignity and respect, which essentially signifies recognizing each other’s humanity, we can curb our self-love interests. By sharing feelings, thoughts, and cognitive capacities, we can act empathically. This empathic stems from the fact that all of us are experiencing ourselves as free agents, but in Nietzschean terms.

But how can the ideas of dignity and respect empower people? I suggest that this empowerment must occur through a force that “becomes creative and ordains values.” In other words, as Owen has pointed out, people need to experience themselves as agents. This can be achieved through the empowerment of dignity and respect that we project onto them. Therefore, this re-evaluation of the duties of virtue towards other human beings through the empowerment of their “ressentiment forces” by the feelings of dignity and respect can help them maintain their dignity. In this way, they will experience themselves as free agents and can overcome the asymmetrical relations of domination. Hence, there is no need to invoke a principle of empathy as the sole motivating force; it is only the foundational force that moves us through an empowerment process. Returning to the earlier example of people crossing the Darien jungle, we could be of more assistance by showing them dignity and respect<sup>5</sup> than by merely experiencing a sense of empathy.

In summary, while empathy can serve as the foundation for understanding the needs of others, it is insufficient on its own. The virtues of duty towards others, particularly dignity and respect, have the potential to empower individuals to reclaim their dignity, reassess themselves as free agents, and overcome social and economic asymmetrical relations. This internal reorganization of strength enables them to act as empowered agents, fostering a sense of independence within the community. However, this is contingent on a political commitment and a clear moral structure at both the individual and collective levels.

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[5] As long as ‘dignity and respect’ are expressed in political terms, it is essential to imbue classical notions that seek to establish morality with tangible content. In simpler terms, when a political entity declares that it recognizes the dignity and respects the lives of forced migrants (or other vulnerable populations), it implies a commitment to transfer power in the form of asylum, housing, health, and so forth.

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