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## **ON PURITY OF MORAL KNOWLEDGE: ROSS'S OBJECTION TO KANT**

### ***Abstract***

*This paper examines David Ross's objection to the "purity" of moral knowledge in Kant's ethics, as presented in his commentary on the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals. Ross, while accepting the a priori status of moral law, argues that it is not pure, drawing an analogy to the category of causality in natural science, which he considers a priori but empirically dependent. This study aims to clarify Kant's position on the purity of moral law and to assess the validity of Ross's analogy. The paper applies conceptual and textual analysis of Kant's Groundwork and Critique of Practical Reason, focusing on the distinction between pure and impure a priori judgments, the noumenal nature of the moral agent, and Kant's view on moral law as a "fact of pure reason." The analysis reveals that Kant's moral law, as embodied in the Categorical Imperative, is grounded in pure (non-empirical) causality and freedom, thereby leaving no room for empirical*

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*intrusion. The conclusion compares moral law to pure a priori propositions in mathematics, suggesting that moral judgments can share the same independence from experience. The findings indicate that Ross's "impurity" objection fails and that Kant's moral law retains its status as a pure a priori principle.*

**Key words:** *Kant, Ross, moral knowledge, purity, causality, Categorical Imperative, a priori, ethics.*

**JEL classification:** A13, B40, D63, Z13

## **1. Introduction: morality as a priori knowledge**

Although already renowned for his own intuitionistic ethical theory, the British philosopher David Ross did not hesitate to engage in close, almost scholastic interpretations of Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* late in his career. This fact speaks not only to the general significance of Kant's moral philosophy but also to the importance Ross himself attached to it. Ross views both his own philosophy and Kant's as forms of ethical intuitionism, the view that moral knowledge is obtained without the mediation of sensory experience. It is, in his words, part of our "common moral knowledge" [6, p. 392; 8, p. 2].<sup>†</sup> Both Kant and Ross agree that "right," in the form of "duty," is the proper subject of moral knowledge [8, p. 156], and both hold that such knowledge is a priori. However, Ross contends that Kant fails to recognize that moral knowledge is not *pure* a priori. This

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<sup>†</sup> In this paper, references to Kant's works follow the universally used Akademie edition [4] (Kant's *gesammelte Schriften*, KGS), edited by the Deutsche/Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter et al., 1902ff). Local paginations in the translations listed in the Bibliography are not used. References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* distinguish between the first (A) and second (B) editions.

disagreement over the “purity” of moral knowledge sets the stage for further analysis.

## **2. On the purity of moral knowledge**

Kant maintains that although all our cognition begins with experience, it therefore does not arise solely from experience [5, B 1]. His epistemological position allows for a priori knowledge that is non-analytical. Necessity and strict universality are “secure indications” of a priori cognition [5, B4]. However, not all a priori knowledge is equally pure. By *impure a priori knowledge* (*unreine Erkenntnis a priori*), Kant refers to a priori judgments that nonetheless contain empirical elements. His well-known example is the law of causality: “Every alteration has a cause” [5, B 2–3]. This judgment is impure because the concept of alteration is empirical; concepts that depend on experience form part of impure a priori judgments. In ethics, however, Kant insists that the moral law must be both a priori and pure, entirely free from the influence of sensibility or incentives [6, p. 404]. Only then can the moral imperative be categorical, since experience alone cannot guarantee the necessity of a moral command embedded in the form of duty. Ross questions this purity by comparing the a priori, yet impure, notion of causality with the a priori and, for Kant, wholly pure moral law, as expressed in the Categorical Imperative. According to Ross, Kant’s moral judgments are indeed a priori—they are not derived from experience and are self-evident, necessary truths—but they are not pure, because they depend on empirical content arising from the particular circumstances of action [10, p. 2]. More generally, Ross holds that all moral judgments must be impure in the same way as causal propositions, since both rely on empirical concepts. With these insights, we can proceed to examine whether Ross’s analogy can withstand scrutiny.

### **3. Ross: (The laws of) causality and morality require prior experience**

Ross's central analogy compares Kant's "moral dictum" to the category of causality in natural science. On the one hand, the law of causality states, "Every alteration has a cause" [5, B 2–3]. On the other hand, stripped of technical language, the moral law effectively says, "Duties should be universally respected." Ross's objection draws on Kant's own example in the *Groundwork* [6, p. 421], where a man has never been empirically acquainted with the concept of duty. Ross sees this as parallel to causality: to grasp the category of causality, one must first have empirical experience of alteration; sensory awareness of change enables comprehension of the a priori concept of causality. By analogy, Ross claims, to understand the universal moral requirement to respect the moral law—the Categorical Imperative—the moral agent must have prior experience of some duty.

Kant's position is sharply different. He accepts that "alteration" cannot be understood without prior observation of some physical change [5, B 2], but denies that morality requires such empirical preparation. In his example, a moral agent faces a dilemma: whether to honor the duty not to lie for personal gain [6, pp. 390–391]. Here, the duty appears as an immediate prohibition, without the need for "previous experiences of duties." It presents itself categorically and invites reflection: "Why not obey what duty obviously commands?" This question arises independently of any prior experience. Later, Kant would describe morality's demand as the command of pure reason [7, p. 30]. This contrast between Ross's analogy and Kant's account leads directly to the question of whether the analogy between causality and morality is, in fact, sustainable.

#### **4. Empirical causality and moral law: false analogy?**

The analogy between the category of causality that belongs to the “power of understanding” and grasping the moral law does not withstand closer examination. Causality depends on empirical (sensory) awareness of concrete physical changes. Such observations reveal a temporal sequence of phenomena, but they do not establish the necessity of their connection. Only the category of causality, when applied to this sequence, yields the “necessity of connection” [5, B 4].

Kant’s example in the *Groundwork*, which Ross invokes, is not truly analogous. In Kant’s account, duty itself does not arise from prior experience [6, p. 404]. The moral agent is depicted as encountering a moral dilemma for the first time, without any previous “experiences of duty” from which to infer the moral law. Moreover, even Ross’s claim that the universal principle of causality cannot be considered pure is questionable. Twentieth-century commentators have noted the distinction between the universal principle of causality—that every event B has a cause A—and particular causal laws, which are empirical instantiations of that principle [3, p. 164]. Given Kant’s consistent insistence on the purity of the categories of understanding, including causality, it is more plausible to regard the principle of causality as pure. If so, Ross’s analogy collapses entirely: *causality*, as an a priori form of understanding and “power of principles,” is absolutely pure, with only its particular empirical applications affected by experience. Therefore, empirical “impurity” is unlikely to compromise morality, which is even more removed from sensory intuition than causality in natural laws. This reasoning leads to the following question: What is the role of empirical elements in applying the moral law to concrete situations—the so-called “world situation”?

### **5. Causality and morality in “world situation”**

Applying the moral law to particular situations inevitably involves empirical elements, such as the agent’s awareness of the “world situation,” but this does not compromise its purity. While the moral law itself is free from experience, its application to specific cases is not. Nevertheless, this application constitutes a distinct kind of knowledge and cannot serve as the basis for Ross’s objection. In Kant’s framework, applying pure concepts to experience does not require prior empirical acquaintance with them; it requires only the possibility of such application. Kant’s favorite example is geometry: one can apply the pure concept of a triangle to empirical figures without having first encountered a triangle in experience. Likewise, the moral law, embodied in the Categorical Imperative, can be applied to empirical circumstances without deriving its validity from them. Recognizing this distinction between the source of the moral law and its empirical application prepares the ground for the next step: showing that morality itself can be understood as a form of pure causality, thereby undermining Ross’s “impurity” objection.

### **6. Path to dismiss Ross’s objection: morality is a type of causality**

Ross’s remark on the impurity of moral knowledge, made in his commentary on Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* [10], overlooks Kant’s fuller account in the *Critique of Practical Reason* [7]. There, freedom and the moral law are presented as two sides of the same coin. Positive freedom, central in the *Groundwork* through the notion of autonomy, presupposes negative freedom, meaning freedom from empirical causality and from any “impure” experiential incentive. This reciprocal relationship between morality and freedom is decisive. In perhaps the most famous footnote in the history of ethics, Kant writes, “Lest anyone suppose that

he finds an *inconsistency* when I now call freedom the condition of the moral law and afterwards, in the treatise, maintain that the moral law is the condition under which we can first *become aware* of freedom, I want only to remark that whereas freedom is indeed the *ratio essendi* (ground of being) of the moral law, the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* (ground of knowing) of freedom. For, had not the moral law already been distinctly thought in our reason, we should never consider ourselves justified in *assuming* such a thing as freedom (even though it is not self-contradictory). But were there no freedom, the moral law would *not be encountered* at all in ourselves.” [7, n 4]

Now, it is evident that in Kant’s view, the moral law is not only a “fact of reason”; the *ratio essendi–ratio cognoscendi* structure leaves no conceptual space for empirical intrusion — and thus no “impurity.” In Kant’s framework, moral knowledge is grounded in the same pure causality that defines freedom itself, entirely independent of empirical conditions.

## **7. Conclusion: Can mathematical knowledge be a model for ethics?**

In conclusion, one final point may help to resolve Ross’s “non-purity” objection to Kant. Moral judgments can be compared to a priori synthetic propositions in mathematics. Ross does not deny the possibility of pure a priori propositions; he accepts that mathematical truths are self-evident and known independently of experience. Unlike a priori principles in natural science, which are tied to empirical evidence, mathematical principles require no connection with experience. For Kant, mathematics is the clearest “playground” for pure a priori knowledge.

The question then arises: why could moral judgments, at least the Categorical Imperative as a unitary moral principle, not be of the same kind? If mathematical truths can be both a

priori and pure, there is no reason, within Kant's framework, to deny this status to the moral law. This insight reinforces the argument that Ross's analogy to causality fails and that Kant's moral law retains its purity as an a priori principle. Thus, Kant's moral law, unlike Ross's analogy suggestion, stands alongside mathematics as a paradigm of pure a priori knowledge.

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## **O ČISTOTI MORALNOG ZNANJA: ROSOV PRIGOVOR KANTU**

### **Apstrakt**

*Ovaj rad razmatra primedbu Dejvida Rosa zasnovanu na sumnji u „čistotu“ moralnog znanja u Kantovoj etici, iznetu u njegovom komentaru Zasnivanja metafizike morala. Iako prihvata apriorni status moralnog zakona, Ros tvrdi da on nije čist jer mora imati i element iskustva, koristeći analogiju sa kategorijom kauzalnosti u prirodni naukama koju smatra apriornom ali empirijski zavisnom. Cilj ovog istraživanja je da razjasni Kantovo shvatanje čistote moralnog zakona i proceni valjanost Rosove analogije. Rad primenjuje pojmovnu i tekstualnu analizu Kantovog Zasnivanja i Kritike praktičkog uma, fokusirajući se na razliku između čistih i „nečistih“ apriornih sudova, noumenalnu prirodu moralnog delatnika i Kantovo viđenje moralnog zakona kao „činjenicu čistog uma“. Analiza pokazuje da je Kantov moralni zakon, oličen u kategoričkom imperativu, zasnovan na čistoj (neempirijskoj) kauzalnosti, tj. slobodi, bez prostora za uticaj iskustva. Zaključak poredi moralni zakon sa čistim apriornim iskazima u matematici, sugerišući da moralni sudovi načelno mogu imati istu nezavisnost od iskustva. Rezultati analize ukazuju na to da Rosova primedba o „nečistoti“ verovatno ne stoji, te da Kantov moralni zakon može zadržati status čistog apriornog principa.*

**Ključne reči:** *Kant, Ros, moralno znanje, čistota, kauzalnost, kategorički imperativ, a priori, etika.*

**JEL klasifikacija:** A13, B40, D63, Z13