

### **'Getting what we Deserve' in Kant's Ethical Theory**

In ethical philosophy, the concept of 'desert' pertains to the deserved recompense based on the moral content of our actions. That is, whether we deserve to be rewarded in return for morally 'good' actions, and whether we deserve to be punished in return for 'bad' actions. Traditionally, Kant has been interpreted as espousing a retributive justice and reward system from his writings in the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

This interpretation, however, seems potentially incongruous with respect to Kant's *Groundwork*. We know that a moral action is one that is done for the sake of duty; the word 'duty' asserts an obligation to act as such. We expect individuals to act morally in accordance with their obligations, but fulfilling an obligation does not seem particularly laudable or worthy of reward. With respect to punishment, Kant's theory considers moral agents as being fundamentally self-legislating, and retributive punishment implies legislation from a source remote to oneself.

Alternatively, we may find Kant's alleged retributivism to be justified, given the fact that Kant's ethics apply to rational beings, who have a dignity insofar as they are capable authoring universal law. When one acts immorally, they may forfeit this dignity.

For the purposes of this essay, I would like to explore the concept of desert in Kant's writing, through a close comparative reading of his *Metaphysics of Morals* and *Groundwork*. I would like to focus on the following two questions:

- i. Whether or not Kant espouses a moral retributivist position, and
- ii. Whether this is justified and internally commensurable with the rest of his moral theory.

#### **Preliminary Bibliography:**

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