

The Moral Law

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Immanuel

Kant

The Moral Law

Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals

Translated by H. J. Paton

With a preface, commentary and analysis by

H. J. Paton



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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Commentary and Analysis of the Argument

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- 1 The approach to moral philosophy
- 2 Outline of a metaphysic of morals
- 3 Outline of a critique of practical reason

Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals

Preface

- 1 Passage from ordinary rational knowledge of morality to philosophical
- 2 Passage from popular moral philosophy to a metaphysic of morals
- 3 Passage from a metaphysic of morals to a critique of pure practical reason

NOTES

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In spite of its horrifying title Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* is one of the small books which are truly great: it has exercised on human thought an influence almost ludicrously disproportionate to its size. In moral philosophy it ranks with the *Republic* of Plato and the *Ethics* of Aristotle; and perhaps—partly no doubt through the spread of Christian ideals and through the long experience of the human race during the last two thousand years—it shows in some respects a deeper insight even than these. Its main topic—the supreme principle of morality—is of the utmost importance to all who are not indifferent to the struggle of good against evil. Written, as it was, towards the end of the eighteenth century, it is couched in terms other than those that would be used today; but its message was never more needed than it is at present, when a somewhat arid empiricism is the prevailing fashion in philosophy. An exclusively empirical philosophy, as Kant himself argues, can have nothing to say about morality: it can only encourage us to be guided by our emotions, or at the best by an enlightened self-love, at the very time when the abyss between unregulated impulse and undiluted self-interest and moral principles has been so tragically displayed in practice. In the face of all this Kant offers us a defence of reasonableness in action: he reminds us that, however much the applications of morality may vary with varying circumstances, a good man is one who acts on the supposition that there is an unconditioned and objective moral standard holding for all men in virtue of their rationality as human beings. His claim to establish this is worth the serious consideration of all who are not content to regard themselves as victims of instinctive movements over which they have no intelligent control. Even if they do not agree with his doctrine, there is no doubt that they will see more in it the more they study it.

Unfortunately most readers in this country—and I fear even many teachers of philosophy—feel insufficiently at home in German to read this work most easily in the original. Kant has on the whole not been so fortunate in his translators as Hegel, and his English students may easily get the impression that he was a fumbler. He is very far indeed from being a fumbler, though he does expect too much from his readers: for example, he expects them to recognise at once in his long sentences the particular noun to which his excessive number of pronouns refer. I have kept in the main the structure of his sentences, which are, as it were, hewn out of the rock, but I have made no attempt to give a word for word translation. Every translation must to some extent be a veil, but it need not be an unbecomingly so. I have striven to make his thought move in an English dress with some ease and even—if it were possible—with some elegance. Contrary to the usual opinion, what has struck me most in the course of my undertaking is how well he can write. And it is my hope that through this English rendering there may loom at least something of his liveliness of mind, his suppressed intellectual excitement, his moral earnestness, his pleasure in words, and even, it may be, something of his peculiar brand of humour, which is so dry that it might have come directly out of Scotland itself.

I have prefaced my translation by an analysis of the argument, and I have also added some notes. All this, I hope, may be of help to the inexperienced reader beginning the study of moral philosophy, and I trust that those who are more advanced will forgive me if at times I appear to underline the obvious. For more serious difficulties connected with the Critical Philosophy as a whole, I must refer readers to my commentary, *The Categorical Imperative*, and also—on the purely theoretical side of Kant's philosophy—to *Kant's Metaphysic of Experience*.

For ease of reference and in order to facilitate grasp of the structure of the argument I have inserted into the text some cross-headings. These, in distinction from Kant's own headings, are contained

square brackets. It should also be noted that Kant's own parentheses are in brackets. Passages between dashes have been made parentheses by me in order to make the main line of the argument easier to follow.

In the margin the numbers from i to xiv and from 1 to 128 give the pages of the *second* edition which is the best published in Kant's lifetime, and I use these everywhere in my references. Unfortunately I did not use them in *The Categorical Imperative*, and, as they are not yet commonly accessible (though they ought to be), I have also given in the margin the pages of the edition issued by the Royal Prussian Academy in Berlin. The numbering of these pages begins with 387 so that there is no danger of confusion.

The only abbreviations I have used are *T.C.I.* and *K.M.E.* for my two books on Kant already mentioned.

I must in conclusion express my thanks to the many friends and pupils whom I have bothered on small points of translation, but especially to Dr H. W. Cassirer for assuring me that my version is—at least was—free from howlers; to Mr W. H. Walsh for reading the proofs; and to Miss M. J. Leveton whose fierce sense of English usage has saved me from some of the Teutonisms into which a translator from the German can so easily fall. Above all I must thank my wife for typing the whole of my manuscript in these difficult days by an almost super-human effort which must surely have been inspired by the motive of duty for duty's sake.

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August 1947

For some of the changes made in later editions I am indebted to criticisms from Principal T. M. Knox, Professor C. C. J. Webb, Dr Dieter Henrich, and Mr J. Kemp. I would add that the second and later editions of *The Categorical Imperative* give page references to the second German edition of Kant's work and so can be used more easily with the present translation.

H.J.

October 1958

Preface

Pages i–iii—The Different Branches of Philosophy

The three main branches of philosophy are logic, physics, and ethics. Of these *logic* is formal: it abstracts from all differences in the objects (or matter) about which we think and considers only the necessary laws (or forms) of thinking as such. Since it borrows nothing from our sensuous experience of objects, it must be regarded as a wholly non-empirical or *a priori* science. *Physics* deals with the laws of nature, and ethics with the laws of free moral action. These two philosophical sciences deal therefore with objects of thought which are sharply distinguished from one another.

Unlike logic, both physics and ethics must have an *empirical* part (one based on sensuous experience) as well as a non-empirical or *a priori* part (one not so based); for physical laws must apply to nature as an object of experience, and ethical laws must apply to human wills as affected by desires and instincts which can be known only by experience.

A philosopher of today would have to argue that these sciences have an *a priori* part rather than that they have an empirical part; and indeed many philosophers would deny the first possibility altogether. Nevertheless, if we take physics in a wide sense as the philosophy of nature, it appears to proceed in accordance with certain principles which are more than mere generalisations based on such data as are given to our senses. The task of formulating and, if possible, justifying these principles Kant regarded as the *a priori* or pure part of physics (or as *a metaphysic of nature*). Among these principles he includes, for example, the principle that every event must have a cause, and this can never be proved (though it may be confirmed) by experience. He holds that it states a condition without which the experience of nature, and so physical science itself, would be impossible.

It should be obvious that from experience of what men in fact do we are unable to prove what they ought to do; for we must admit that they often do what they ought not to do—provided we allow that there is such a thing as a moral ‘ought’ or a moral duty. Hence if there are moral principles in accordance with which men ought to act, knowledge of these principles must be *a priori* knowledge: it cannot be based on sensuous experience. The *a priori* or pure part of ethics is concerned with the *formulation* and *justification* of moral principles—with such terms as ‘ought’, ‘duty’, ‘good’ and ‘evil’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. This *a priori* part of ethics may be called *a metaphysic of morals* (though at other times ‘justification’—as opposed to ‘formulation’—is reserved by Kant for *a critique of practical reason*). For detailed knowledge of particular human duties we require experience of human nature (and indeed of many other things). This belongs to the empirical part of ethics and is called by Kant ‘*practical anthropology*’, though his use of the term is not altogether clear.

Kant’s doctrine of *a priori* knowledge rests mainly on the assumption that mind—or reason, as he calls it—functions actively in accordance with principles which it can know and understand. He holds that such rational principles can be manifested, not only in thinking as such (which is studied in logic), but also in scientific knowledge and in moral action. We can separate out these rational principles, and we can understand how they are necessary for any rational being so far as he seeks to think rationally about the world and to act rationally in the world. If we believe that reason has its own activity and no principles of its own and that mind is merely a bundle of sensations and desires, the

can be for us no *a priori* knowledge; but we are hardly entitled to assert this without considering the arguments on the other side.

Pages iii–ix—The Need for Pure Ethics

If the distinction between *a priori* and empirical ethics is sound, it is desirable to treat each part separately. The result of mixing them up is bound to be intellectual confusion, but it is also likely to lead to moral degeneration. If actions are to be morally good, they must be done for the sake of duty and only the *a priori* or pure part of ethics can show us what the nature of duty is. By mixing up the different parts of ethics we may easily begin to confuse duty with self-interest, and this is bound to have disastrous effects in practice.

Pages ix–xi—The Philosophy of Willing as Such

The *a priori* part of ethics is not to be confused with a philosophy of willing *as such*, since it deals, not with all willing, but with a particular *kind* of willing—namely, with willing that is morally good.

Pages xi–xiii—The Aim of the *Groundwork*

The aim of the *Groundwork* is not to give us a complete exposition of the *a priori* part of ethics—this is, a complete metaphysic of morals. Its aim is rather to lay the *foundations* for such a metaphysic of morals, and so to separate out the really difficult part. Even as regards these foundations the *Groundwork* does not pretend to be complete: we require a full ‘critique of practical reason’ for this purpose. The need for such a critique of reason is, however, less pressing in practical matters than in theoretical, since ordinary human reason is a far safer guide in morals than it is in speculation; and Kant is anxious to avoid the complications of a full critique.

The essential point in all this is that the *Groundwork* has the limited, and yet all-important, aim of establishing the *supreme principle of morality*. It excludes all questions concerned with the *application* of this principle (although it occasionally gives illustrations of the way in which such applications may be made). Hence we should not expect from this book any detailed account of the application of moral principles, nor should we blame Kant for failing to supply it—still less should we invent theories of what he must have thought on this subject. If we want to know how he applied his supreme principle, we must read his neglected *Metaphysic of Morals*. In the *Groundwork* itself the only question to be considered is whether Kant has succeeded or failed in establishing the supreme principle of morality.

Page xiv—The Method of the *Groundwork*

Kant’s method is to start with the provisional assumption that our ordinary moral judgements may legitimately claim to be true. He then asks what are the *conditions* which must hold if these claims are to be justified. This is what he calls an *analytic* (or regressive) argument, and by it he hopes to discover a series of conditions till he comes to the ultimate condition of all moral judgements—the supreme principle of morality. He attempts to do this in [Chapters 1](#) and [2](#). In [Chapter 3](#) his method is different. There he starts with the insight of reason into its own activity and attempts to derive from this the supreme principle of morality. This is what he calls a *synthetic* (or progressive) argument. If it were successful, we could reverse the direction of the argument in the first two chapters: beginning

with the insight of reason into the principle of its own activity we could pass to the supreme principle of morality and from this to the ordinary moral judgements with which we started. In this way we should be able to justify our provisional assumption that ordinary moral judgements may legitimately claim to be true.

[Chapter 1](#) attempts to lead us by an analytic argument from ordinary moral judgement to philosophical statement of the first principle of morality. [Chapter 2](#), after dismissing the confusions of a 'popular' philosophy which works with examples and mixes the empirical with the *a priori*, proceeds (still by an analytic argument) to *formulate* the first principle of morality in different way, it belongs to a metaphysic of morals. [Chapter 3](#) attempts (in a synthetic argument) to *justify* the first principle of morality by deriving it from its source in pure practical reason: it belongs to a critique of pure practical reason.

The Approach to Moral Philosophy

Pages 1–3—The Good Will

The only thing that is good without qualification or restriction is a good will. That is to say, a good will alone is good *in all circumstances* and in that sense is an absolute or unconditioned good. We may also describe it as the only thing that is good *in itself*, good independently of its relation to other things.

This does not mean that a good will is the only good. On the contrary, there are plenty of things which are good in many respects. These, however, are not good in all circumstances, and they may also be thoroughly bad when they are used by a bad will. They are therefore only conditioned goods—things which are good under certain conditions, not good absolutely or in themselves.

Pages 3–4—The Good Will and its Results

The goodness of a good will is not derived from the goodness of the results which it produces. The conditioned goodness of its product cannot be the source of the unconditioned goodness which belongs to a good will alone. Besides, a good will continues to have its own unique goodness even where, by some misfortune, it is unable to produce the results at which it aims.

There is nothing in this to suggest that for Kant a good will does not aim at producing results. He holds, on the contrary, that a good will, and indeed any kind of will, must aim at producing results.

Pages 4–8—The Function of Reason

Ordinary moral consciousness supports the view that a good will alone is an unconditioned good. Indeed, this is the presupposition (or condition) of all our ordinary moral judgements. Nevertheless, the claim may seem to be fantastic, and we must seek further corroboration by considering the function of reason in action.

In order to do this we have to presuppose that in organic life every organ has a purpose or function to which it is well adapted. This applies also to mental life; and in human beings reason is, as it were, the organ which controls action, just as instinct is the organ which controls action in animals. If the function of reason in action were merely to attain happiness, this is a purpose for which instinct would have been a very much better guide. Hence if we assume that reason, like other organs, must be well adapted to its purpose, its purpose cannot be merely to produce a will which is good as a means to happiness, but rather to produce a will which is good in itself.

Such a purposive (or teleological) view of nature is not readily accepted today. We need only note that Kant does hold this belief (though by no means in a simple form) and that it is very much more fundamental to his ethics than is commonly supposed. In particular we should note that reason in action has for him two main functions, the first of which has to be subordinated to the second. The first function is to secure the individual's own happiness (a conditioned good), while the second is to manifest a will good in itself (an unconditioned good).

Page 8—The Good Will and Duty

Under human conditions, where we have to struggle against unruly impulses and desires, a good will is manifested in acting *for the sake of duty*. Hence if we are to understand human goodness, we must examine the concept of duty. Human goodness is most conspicuous in struggling against the obstacles placed in its way by unruly impulses, but it must not be thought that goodness as such consists in overcoming obstacles. On the contrary, a perfectly good will would have no obstacles to overcome and the concept of duty (which involves the overcoming of obstacles) would not apply to such a perfect will.

Pages 8–13—The Motive of Duty

A human action is morally good, not because it is done from immediate inclination—still less because it is done from self-interest—but because it is done for the sake of duty. This is Kant's first proposition about duty, though he does not state it in this general form.

An action—even if it accords with duty and is in that sense right—is not commonly regarded as morally good if it is done solely out of self-interest. We may, however, be inclined to attribute moral goodness to right actions done solely from some immediate inclination—for example, from a direct impulse of sympathy or generosity. In order to test this we must *isolate* our motives: we must consider first an action done solely out of inclination and *not* out of duty, and then an action done solely out of duty and *not* out of inclination. If we do this, then, we shall find—to take the case most favourable to an immediate inclination—that an action done solely out of natural sympathy may be right and praiseworthy, but that nevertheless it has no distinctively moral worth. The same kind of action done solely out of duty does have distinctively moral worth. The goodness shown in helping others is all the more conspicuous if a man does this for the sake of duty at a time when he is fully occupied with his own troubles and when he is not impelled to do so by his natural inclinations.

Kant's doctrine would be absurd if it meant that the presence of a natural inclination to good actions (or even of a feeling of satisfaction in doing them) detracted from their moral worth. The ambiguity of his language lends some colour to this interpretation, which is almost universally accepted. Thus he says that a man shows moral worth if he does good, not from inclination, but from duty. But we must remember that he is here contrasting two motives taken in *isolation* in order to find out which of them is the source of moral worth. He would have avoided the ambiguity if he had said that a man shows moral worth, not in doing good from inclination, but in doing it for the sake of duty. It is the motive of duty, not the motive of inclination, that gives moral worth to an action.

Whether these two kinds of motive can be present in the same moral action and whether one can support the other is a question which is not even raised in this passage nor is it discussed at all in the *Groundwork*. Kant's assumption on this subject is that if an action is to be morally good, the motive of duty, while it may be present *at the same time* as other motives, must by itself be sufficient to determine the action. Furthermore, he never wavers in the belief that generous inclinations are a help in doing good actions, that for this reason it is a duty to cultivate them, and that without them a great moral adornment would be absent from the world.

It should also be observed that, so far from decrying happiness, Kant holds that we have at least an indirect duty to seek our own happiness.

Pages 13–14—The Formal Principle of Duty

Kant's second proposition is this: *An action done from duty has its moral worth, not from the results*

attains or seeks to attain, but from a formal principle or maxim—the principle of doing one's duty whatever that may be.

This re-states the first proposition in a more technical way. We have already seen that a good will cannot derive its unconditioned goodness from the conditioned goodness of the *results* at which it aims, and this is true also of the morally good actions in which a good will acting for the sake of duty is manifested. What we have to do now is to state our doctrine in terms of what Kant calls 'maxims'

A maxim is a principle upon which we act. It is a purely personal principle—not a copy-book maxim—and it may be good or it may be bad. Kant calls it a 'subjective' principle, meaning by this a principle on which a rational agent (or subject of action) *does* act—a principle manifested in actions which are in fact performed. An 'objective' principle, on the other hand, is one on which every rational agent *would necessarily* act if reason had full control over his actions, and therefore one on which he *ought* to act if he is so irrational as to be tempted to act otherwise. Only when we act on objective principles do they become *also* subjective, but they continue to be objective whether we act on them or not.

We need not formulate in words the maxim of our action, but if we know what we are doing and will our action as an action of a particular *kind*, then our action has a maxim or subjective principle. A maxim is thus always some sort of *general* principle under which we will a particular action. Thus if I decide to commit suicide in order to avoid unhappiness, I may be said to act on the principle or maxim 'I will kill myself *whenever* life offers more pain than pleasure'.

All such maxims are *material* maxims: they generalise a particular action with its particular motives and its intended result. Since the moral goodness of an action cannot be derived from its intended results, it manifestly cannot be derived from a material maxim of this kind.

The maxim which gives moral worth to actions is the maxim or principle of doing one's duty whatever one's duty may be. Such a maxim is empty of any particular matter: it is not a maxim of satisfying particular desires or attaining particular results. In Kant's language it is a *formal* maxim. To act for the sake of duty is to act on a formal maxim 'irrespective of all objects of the faculty of desire'. A good man adopts or rejects the material maxim of any proposed action according as it harmonises or conflicts with the controlling and formal maxim of doing his duty for its own sake. Only such 'dutiful' actions can be morally good.

Pages 14–17—Reverence for the Law

A third proposition is alleged to follow from the first two. It is this: *Duty is the necessity to act out of reverence for the law.*

This proposition cannot be derived from the first two unless we can read into them a good deal more than has been explicitly stated: both 'reverence' and 'the law' appear to be terms which we have not met in the premises. Furthermore the proposition itself is not altogether clear. Perhaps it would be better to say that to act on the maxim of doing one's duty for its own sake is to act out of reverence for the law.

It is not altogether easy to follow Kant's argument. He appears to hold that if the maxim of a morally good action is a *formal* maxim (not a material maxim of satisfying one's desires), it must be a maxim of acting reasonably—that is, of acting on a law valid for all rational beings as such, independently of their particular desires. Because of our human frailty such a law must appear to us as a law of duty, a law which commands or compels obedience. Such a law, considered as *imposed* upon us, must excite a feeling analogous to fear. Considered, on the other hand, as self-imposed (since it is imposed by our own rational nature), it must excite a feeling analogous to inclination or attraction. This complex feeling is *reverence* (or respect)—a unique feeling which is due, not to any stimulus

the senses, but to the thought that my will is subordinated to such a universal law independently of any influence of sense. So far as the motive of a good action is to be found in feeling, we must say that a morally good action is one which is done out of reverence for the law, and that this is what gives it its unique and unconditioned value.

Pages 17–20—The Categorical Imperative

It may seem to be a very strange kind of law which the good man is supposed to reverence and obey. It is a law which does not depend on our desire for particular consequences and does not in itself even prescribe any particular actions: all it imposes on us is law-abidingness for its own sake—‘the conformity of actions to universal law as such’. To many this conception must seem empty, if not revolting, and we have certainly passed from ordinary moral judgements to the very highest pitch of philosophical abstraction—to the *form* common to all genuine morality, whatever its matter may be. Yet is not Kant merely saying the minimum that can and must be said about morality? A man is morally good, not as seeking to satisfy his own desires or to attain his own happiness (though he may do both these things), but as seeking to obey a law valid for *all* men and to follow an objective standard not determined by his own desires.

Because of the obstacles due to our impulses and desires, this law appears to us as a law that we *ought* to obey for its own sake, and so as what Kant calls a categorical imperative. We are here given the first statement of the categorical imperative (though in a negative form): ‘I ought never to act except in such a way *that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law*’. This is the first formulation of the supreme principle of morality—the ultimate condition of all particular moral laws and all ordinary moral judgements. From this all moral laws must be ‘*derived*’—in the sense that it is ‘original’, while they are ‘derivative’ or dependent. Yet, as the formula itself shows, there is no question of *deducing* particular moral laws from the empty form of law as such. On the contrary, what we have to do is to examine the *material* maxims of our contemplated actions and to accept or reject them according as they can or cannot be willed as universal laws—that is, as laws valid for all men and not as special privileges of our own.

From the example Kant gives in applying this method to the contemplated action of telling a lie it is obvious that he believed the application of his principle to be easier than it in fact is. Nevertheless he has stated the supreme condition of moral actions, and his sharp distinction between moral action and merely prudential or impulsive action is fundamentally sound.

Pages 20–22—Ordinary Practical Reason

The ordinary good man does not formulate this moral principle in abstraction, but he does use the principle in making particular moral judgements. Indeed in practical affairs (though not in speculation) ordinary human reason is almost a better guide than philosophy. Might it not then be advisable to leave moral questions to the ordinary man and to regard moral philosophy as the occupation (or the game) of the philosophical specialist?

Pages 22–24—The Need for Philosophy

The ordinary man needs philosophy because the claims of pleasure tempt him to become a self-deceiver and to argue sophistically against what appear to be the harsh demands of morality. This gives rise to what Kant calls a natural *dialectic*—a tendency to indulge in plausible arguments which

contradict one another, and in this way to undermine the claims of duty. This may be disastrous to morality in practice, so disastrous that in the end ordinary human reason is impelled to seek for some solution of its difficulties. This solution is to be found only in philosophy, and in particular in the critique of practical reason, which will trace our moral principle to its source in reason itself.

Outline of a Metaphysic of Morals

Pages 25–30—The Use of Examples

Although we have extracted the supreme principle of morality from ordinary moral judgements, this does not mean that we have arrived at it by generalising from examples of morally good actions given to us in experience. Such an empirical method would be characteristic of a ‘popular’ philosophy which depends on examples and illustrations. In actual fact we can never be sure that there are any examples of ‘dutiful’ actions (actions whose determining motive is that of duty). What we are discussing is not what men in fact do, but what they ought to do.

Even if we had experience of dutiful actions, this would not be enough for our purposes. What we have to show is that there is a moral law valid for all rational beings as such and for all men in virtue of their rationality—a law which rational beings as such ought to follow if they are tempted to do otherwise. This could never be established by any experience of actual human behaviour.

Furthermore, examples of morally good action can never be a substitute for moral principles nor can they supply a ground on which moral principles can be based. It is only if we already possess moral principles that we can judge an action to be an example of moral goodness.

Morality is not a matter of blind imitation, and the most that examples can do is to encourage us to do our duty: they can show that right action is possible, and they can bring it more vividly before our minds.

Pages 30–34—Popular Philosophy

Popular philosophy, instead of separating sharply the *a priori* and empirical parts of ethics, offers us a disgusting hotch-potch in which *a priori* and empirical elements are hopelessly intermingled. Moral principles are confused with principles of self-interest, and this has the effect of weakening the claim of morality in a misguided effort to strengthen them.

Pages 34–36—Review of Conclusions

Moral principles must be grasped entirely *a priori*. To mix them up with empirical considerations of self-interest and the like is not merely a confusion of thought but an obstacle in the way of moral progress. Hence before we attempt to apply moral principles we must endeavour to formulate them precisely in a pure metaphysic of morals from which empirical considerations are excluded.

Pages 36–39—Imperatives in General

We must now try to explain what is meant by words like ‘good’ and ‘ought’, and in particular what is meant by an ‘imperative’. There are different kinds of imperative, but we have to deal first with imperatives *in general* (or what is common to all kinds of imperative): we are not concerned merely with the moral imperative (though we may have this particularly in mind). This is a source

difficulty on a first reading, especially as the word 'good' has different senses when used in connection with different kinds of imperative.

We begin with the conception of a rational agent. A rational agent is one who has the power to act in accordance with his idea of laws—that is, to act in accordance with *principles*. This is what we mean when we say that he has a will. 'Practical reason' is another term for such a will.

We have already seen that the actions of rational agents have a *subjective* principle or maxim, and that in beings who are only imperfectly rational such subjective principles must be distinguished from *objective* principles—that is, from principles on which a rational agent would necessarily act if reason had full control over passion. So far as an agent acts on objective principles, his will and his action may be described as *in some sense* 'good'.

Imperfectly rational beings like men do not always act on objective principles: they may do so or they may not. This is expressed more technically by saying that for men actions which are objectively necessary are subjectively contingent.

To imperfectly rational beings objective principles seem almost to *constrain* or (in Kant's technical language) to *necessitate* the will—that is, they seem to be imposed upon the will from without instead of being its *necessary* manifestation (as they would be in the case of a wholly rational agent). There is in this respect a sharp difference between being *necessary*, and being *necessitating*, for a rational will.

Where an objective principle is conceived as *necessitating* (and not merely as necessary), it may be described as a *command*. The formula of such a command may be called an *imperative* (though Kant does not in practice distinguish sharply between a command and an imperative).

All imperatives (not merely moral ones) are expressed by the words 'I ought'. 'I ought' may be said to express from the side of the subject the relation of *necessitation* which holds between a principle recognised as objective and an imperfectly rational will. When I say that 'I ought' to do something, I mean that I recognise an action of this kind to be imposed or necessitated by an objective principle valid for any rational agent as such.

Since imperatives are objective principles considered as necessitating, and since action in accordance with objective principles is good action (in some sense), all imperatives command us to do *good* actions (not merely—as some philosophers hold—actions that are obligatory or right).

A perfectly rational and wholly good agent would *necessarily* act on the same objective principles which for us are imperatives, and so would manifest a kind of goodness just as we do when we obey these imperatives. But for him such objective principles would not be imperatives: they would be necessary but not necessitating, and the will which followed them could be described as a 'holy' will. Where we say 'I ought', an agent of this kind would say 'I will'. He would have no duties nor would he feel reverence for the moral law (but something more akin to love).

In an important footnote Kant explains, if somewhat obscurely, what he means by such terms as 'inclination' and 'interest', and he distinguishes between 'pathological' (or sensuous) interest and 'practical' (or moral) interest. For this see the analysis of pages 121–123.

Pages 39–44—Classification of Imperatives

There are three different kinds of imperatives. Since imperatives are objective principles considered as necessitating, there must equally be three corresponding kinds of objective principle and three corresponding kinds (or senses) of 'good'.

Some objective principles are *conditioned* by a will for some end—that is to say, they would necessarily be followed by a fully rational agent *if* he willed the end. These principles give rise to *hypothetical* imperatives, which have the general form 'If I will this end, I ought to do such and such'. They bid us do actions which are *good as means* to an end that we already will (or might will).

When the end is merely one that we might will, the imperatives are *problematic* or *technical*. They may be called imperatives of skill, and the actions they enjoin are good in the sense of being ‘skillful’ or ‘useful’.

Where the end is one that every rational agent wills by his very nature, the imperatives are *assertoric* or *pragmatic*. The end which every rational agent wills by his very nature is his own happiness, and the actions enjoined by a pragmatic imperative are good in the sense of being ‘prudent’.

Some objective principles are *unconditioned*: they would necessarily be followed by a fully rational agent but are not based on the previous willing of some further end. These principles give rise to *categorical* imperatives, which have the general form ‘I ought to do such and such’ (without any ‘if’ as a prior condition). They may also be called ‘apodeictic’—that is, necessary in the sense of being unconditioned and absolute. These are the unconditioned imperatives of morality, and the actions they enjoin are *morally good*—good in themselves and not merely good as a means to some further end.

The different kinds of imperative exercise a different kind of *necessitation*. This difference may be marked by describing them as rules of skill, *counsels* of prudence, *commands* (or *laws*) of morality. Only commands or laws are absolutely binding.

Pages 44–50—How are Imperatives Possible?

We have now to consider how these imperatives are ‘possible’—that is, how they can be *justified*. To justify them is to show that the principles on which they bid us act are *objective* in the sense of being valid for any rational being as such. Kant always assumes that a principle on which a fully rational agent as such would *necessarily* act is also one on which an imperfectly rational agent *ought* to act if he is tempted to do otherwise.

In order to understand the argument we must grasp the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions.

In an *analytic* proposition the predicate is contained in the subject-concept and can be derived by analysis of the subject-concept. Thus ‘Every *effect* must have a cause’ is an analytic proposition; for it is impossible to conceive an effect without conceiving it as having a cause. Hence in order to justify an analytic proposition we do not need to go beyond the concept of the subject. In a *synthetic* proposition the predicate is *not* contained in the subject-concept and cannot be derived by analysis of the subject-concept. Thus ‘Every *event* must have a cause’ is a synthetic proposition; for it is possible to conceive an event without conceiving that it has a cause. In order to justify any synthetic proposition we have to go beyond the concept of the subject and discover some ‘third term’ which will entitle us to attribute the predicate to the subject.

Any fully rational agent who wills an end necessarily wills the means to the end. This is an analytic proposition; for to will (and not merely to wish) an end is to will the action which is a means to that end. Hence any rational agent who wills an end *ought* to will the means to this end if he is irrational enough to be tempted to do otherwise. There is thus no difficulty in justifying *imperatives of skill*.

It should be noted that in finding out what are in fact the means to our ends we make use of synthetic propositions: we have to discover what causes will produce certain desired effects, and it is impossible to discover the cause of any effect by a mere analysis of the concept of the effect by itself. These synthetic propositions, however, are theoretical only: when we know what cause will produce the desired effect, the principle determining our will as rational beings is the analytic proposition that any fully rational agent who wills an end necessarily wills the known means to that end.

When we come to consider *imperatives of prudence*, we meet a special difficulty. Although happiness is an end which we all in fact seek, our concept of it is unfortunately vague and

indeterminate: we do not know clearly what our end is. At times Kant himself speaks as if the pursuit of happiness were merely a search for the means to the maximum possible amount of pleasant feeling throughout the whole course of life. At other times he recognises that it involves the choice and harmonising of ends as well as of the means to them. Apart from these difficulties, however, imperatives of prudence are justified in the same way as imperatives of skill. They rest on the analytic proposition that any fully rational agent who wills an end must necessarily will the known means to that end.

This kind of justification is not possible in the case of *moral or categorical imperatives*; for when we recognise a moral duty by saying 'I ought to do such and such', this does not rest on the presupposition that some further end is already willed. To justify a categorical imperative we have to show that a fully rational agent would necessarily act in a certain way—not if he happens to want something else, but simply and solely as a rational agent. A predicate of this kind, however, is not contained in the concept 'rational agent' and cannot be derived by analysis of this concept. The proposition is not analytic but synthetic, and yet it is an assertion of what a rational agent as such would *necessarily* do. Such an assertion can never be justified by experience of examples nor, as we have seen, can we be sure that we have any such experience. The proposition is not merely synthetic but also *a priori*, and the difficulty of justifying such a proposition is likely to be very great. This task must be postponed till later.

Pages 51–52—The Formula of Universal Law

Our first problem is to *formulate* the categorical imperative—that is, to state what it commands and enjoins. This topic is pursued ostensibly for its own sake, and we are given a succession of formulae but in all this the analytic argument to the supreme principle of morality (the principle of autonomy) is still being carried on; and we shall find later that it is the principle of autonomy which enables us to connect morality with the Idea of freedom as expounded in the final chapter.

A categorical imperative, as we have already seen, merely bids us act in accordance with universal law as such—that is, it bids us act on a principle valid for all rational beings as such, and not merely on one that is valid *if* we happen to want some further end. Hence it bids us accept or reject the *material* maxim of a contemplated action according as it can or cannot be willed also as a universal law. We may express this in the formula '*Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law*'.

There is thus only one categorical imperative. We may also more loosely describe as categorical imperatives the various particular moral laws in which the one general categorical imperative is applied—as, for example, the law 'Thou shalt not kill'. Such laws are all 'derived' from the one categorical imperative as their principle. In the *Groundwork* Kant appears to think that they can be derived from this formula by itself, but in the *Critique of Practical Reason* he holds that for this purpose we require to make use of the formula which immediately follows.

Page 52—The Formula of the Law of Nature

'*Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.*'

This formula, though subordinate to the previous one, is entirely distinct from it: it refers to a law of nature, not of freedom, and it is the formula which Kant himself uses in his illustrations. He gives no explanation of why he does so beyond saying—on page 81—that there is an *analogy* between the universal law of morality and the universal law of nature. The subject is a highly technical one and

expounded further in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, but for this I must refer to my book, *The Categorical Imperative*, especially pages 157–164.

A law of nature is primarily a law of cause and effect. Nevertheless, when Kant asks us to consider our maxims *as if* they were laws of nature, he treats them as purposive (or teleological) laws. He is already supposing that nature—or at least human nature—is teleological or is what he later calls the kingdom of nature and not a mere mechanism.

In spite of these difficulties and complications Kant's doctrine is simple. He holds that a man is morally good, not so far as he acts from passion or self-interest, but so far as he acts on an impersonal principle valid for others as well as for himself. This is the *essence* of morality; but if we wish to test the maxim of a proposed action we must ask whether, if universally adopted, it would further a systematic harmony of purposes in the individual and in the human race. Only if it would do this can we say that it is fit to be willed as a universal moral law.

The *application* of such a test is manifestly impossible without empirical knowledge of human nature, and Kant takes this for granted in his illustrations.

Pages 52–57—Illustrations

Duties may be divided into duties towards self and duties towards others, and again into perfect and imperfect duties. This gives us four main *types* of duty, and Kant gives us one illustration of each type in order to show that his formula can be applied to all four.

A perfect duty is one which admits of no exception in the interests of inclination. Under the heading the examples given are the ban on suicide and on making a false promise in order to receive a loan. We are not entitled to commit suicide because we have a strong inclination to do so, nor are we entitled to pay our debt to one man and not to another because we happen to like him better. In the case of imperfect duties the position is different: we are bound only to adopt the *maxim* of developing our talents and of helping others, and we are to some extent entitled to decide arbitrarily *which* talents we will develop and *which* persons we will help. There is here a certain 'latitude' or 'playroom' for mere inclination.

In the case of duties towards self Kant assumes that our various capacities have a natural function or purpose in life. It is a perfect duty *not* to thwart such purposes; and it is also a positive, but imperfect, duty to further such purposes.

In the case of duties towards others we have a perfect duty *not* to thwart the realisation of a possible systematic harmony of purposes among men; and we have a positive, but imperfect, duty to further the realisation of such a systematic harmony.

The qualifications to be attached to such principles are necessarily omitted in such a book as this *Groundwork*.

Pages 57–59—The Canon of Moral Judgement

The general canon of moral judgement is that we should be able to *will* that the maxim of our action should become a universal law (of *freedom*). When we consider our maxims as possible (teleological) laws of *nature*, we find that some of them cannot even be *conceived* as such laws: for example, a law that self-love (which considered as falling under a law of nature becomes something like a feeling—instinct—of self-preservation) should both further and destroy life is inconceivable. In such a case the maxim is opposed to perfect or strict duty. Other maxims, though not inconceivable as possible (teleological) laws of nature, yet cannot be consistently *willed* as such laws: there would be

inconsistency or inconsequence in willing, for example, that men should possess talents, and you should never use them. Maxims of this kind are opposed to imperfect duty.

Whatever may be thought of the details of Kant's argument—and the argument against suicide particularly weak—we have to ask ourselves whether a teleological view of human nature is necessary to ethics, just as some sort of teleological view of the human body is necessary to medicine. It should also be observed that on Kant's view moral questions are not merely questions of what we can *think* but of what we can *will*, and that bad action involves, not a theoretical contradiction, but a opposition (or antagonism) of inclination to a rational will supposed to be in some sense actually present in ourselves.

Pages 59–63—The Need for Pure Ethics

Kant re-emphasises his previous contentions on this subject.

Pages 63–67—The Formula of the End in Itself

Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.

This formula brings in a second aspect of all action; for all rational action, besides having principle, must also set before itself an end. Ends—like principles—may be merely *subjective*: they may be arbitrarily adopted by an individual. Subjective or relative ends which a particular agent seeks to produce are, as we have seen, the ground only of *hypothetical* imperatives, and their value is relative and conditioned. If there were also *objective* ends given to us by reason, ends which in all circumstances a fully rational agent would necessarily pursue, these would have an absolute and unconditioned value. They would also be ends which an imperfectly rational agent *ought* to pursue if he were irrational enough to be tempted to do otherwise.

Such ends could not be mere products of our actions, for—as we have seen all along—no mere product of our action can have an unconditioned and absolute value. They must be already existing ends; and their mere existence would impose on us the duty of pursuing them (so far as this was in our power). That is to say, they would be the *ground* of a *categorical* imperative in somewhat the same way as merely subjective ends are the ground of hypothetical imperatives. Such ends may be described as ends in themselves—not merely as ends relative to particular rational agents.

Only rational agents or *persons* can be ends in themselves. As they alone can have an unconditioned and absolute value, it is wrong to use them simply as means to an end whose value is only relative. Without such ends in themselves there would be no unconditioned good, no supreme principle of action, and so—for human beings—no categorical imperative. Thus, like our first formula, the Formula of the End in Itself follows from the very essence of the categorical imperative—provided we remember that all action must have an end as well as a principle.

Kant adds that every rational agent necessarily conceives his own existence in this way on grounds valid for every rational agent as such. The justification for this depends, however, on his account of the Idea of freedom, which is reserved till later.

The new formula, like the first one, must give rise to particular categorical imperatives which are applied to the special nature of man.

Pages 67–68—Illustrations

The same set of examples brings out even more clearly the teleological presuppositions necessary for any ~~test by which the categorical imperative can be applied~~. We have a perfect duty not to use ourselves or others *merely* as a means to the satisfaction of our inclinations. We have an imperfect but *positive*, duty to further the ends of nature in ourselves and in others—that is, to seek our own perfection and the happiness of others.

As Kant himself indicates in one passage, we are concerned only with very general *types* of duty. It would be quite unfair to complain that he does not deal with all the qualifications that might be necessary in dealing with special problems.

Pages 69–71—The Formula of Autonomy

So act that your will can regard itself at the same time as making universal law through its maxim.

This formula may seem at first sight to be a mere repetition of the Formula of Universal Law. It has, however, the advantage of making explicit the doctrine that the categorical imperative bids us not merely to follow universal law, but to follow a universal law which we ourselves make as rational agents and one which we ourselves particularise through our maxims. This is for Kant the most important formulation of the supreme principle of morality, since it leads straight to the Idea of freedom. We are subject to the moral law only because it is the necessary expression of our own nature as rational agents.

The Formula of Autonomy—though the argument is obscurely stated—is derived from combining the Formula of Universal Law and the Formula of the End in Itself. We have not only seen that we are bound to obey the law in virtue of its universality (its objective validity for all rational agents); we have also seen that rational agents as subjects are the *ground* of this categorical imperative. If this is so, the law which we are bound to obey must be the product of our own will (so far as we are rational agents)—that is to say, it rests on ‘the Idea of the will of every rational being as a will which makes universal law’.

Kant puts his point more simply later—page 83—when he says of a rational being ‘it is precisely the fitness of his maxims to make universal law that marks him out as an end in himself’. If a rational agent is truly an end in himself, he must be the author of the laws which he is bound to obey, and it is this which gives him his supreme value.

Pages 71–74—The Exclusion of Interest

A categorical imperative excludes interest: it says simply ‘I ought to do this’, and it does *not* say ‘I ought to do this if I happen to want that’. This was implicit in our previous formulae from the mere fact that they were formulae of an imperative recognised to be categorical. It is now made explicit in the Formula of Autonomy. A will may be subject to laws because of some interest (as we have seen in the case of hypothetical imperatives). A will which is not subject to law because of any interest can be subject only to laws which it itself makes. Only if we conceive the will as making its own laws can we understand how an imperative can exclude interest and so be categorical. The supreme merit of the Formula of Autonomy is this: by the express statement that a rational will makes the laws which it is bound to obey the essential character of the categorical imperative is for the first time made fully explicit. Hence the Formula of Autonomy follows directly from the character of the categorical imperative itself.

All philosophies which seek to explain moral obligation by any kind of interest make a categorical imperative inconceivable and deny morality altogether. They may all be said to propound a doctrine

heteronomy—that is, they portray the will as bound only by a law which has its origin in some object or end *other* than the will itself. Theories of this kind can give rise only to hypothetical, and so no moral, imperatives.

Pages 74–77—The Formula of the Kingdom of Ends

So act as if you were through your maxims a law-making member of a kingdom of ends.

This formula springs directly from the Formula of Autonomy. So far as rational agents are a subject to universal laws which they themselves make, they constitute a kingdom—that is, a State or commonwealth. So far as these laws bid them treat each other as ends in themselves, the kingdom so constituted is a kingdom of ends. These ends cover, not only persons as ends in themselves, but also the personal ends which each of these may set before himself in accordance with universal law. The concept of the kingdom of ends is connected with the Idea of an intelligible world in the final chapter.

We must distinguish between the *members* of such a kingdom (all finite rational agents) and its supreme *head* (an infinite rational agent). As law-making members of such a kingdom rational agents have what is called ‘dignity’—that is, an intrinsic, unconditioned, incomparable worth or worthiness.

Pages 77–79—The Dignity of Virtue

A thing has a *price* if any substitute or equivalent can be found for it. It has *dignity* or worthiness if it admits of no equivalent.

Morality or virtue—and humanity so far as it is capable of morality—alone has dignity. In this respect it cannot be compared with things that have economic value (a market price) or even with things that have an aesthetic value (a fancy price). The incomparable worth of a good man springs from his being a law-making member in a kingdom of ends.

Pages 79–81—Review of the Formulae

In the final review three formulae only are mentioned: (1) the Formula of the Law of Nature, (2) the Formula of the End in Itself, and (3) the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends. The first formula is said to be concerned with the form of a moral maxim—that is, with its universality; the second with its matter—that is, with its ends; while the third combines both form and matter. In addition, however, the Formula of Universal Law is mentioned as the strict test to apply (presumably because it is concerned primarily with the motive of moral action). The purpose of the others is to bring the Idea of duty closer to intuition (or imagination).

A new version is given for the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends. ‘*All maxims as proceeding from our own making of laws ought to harmonise with a possible kingdom of ends as a kingdom of nature*’. The kingdom of nature has not been mentioned before, and it seems to stand to the kingdom of ends in the same sort of relation as the universal law of nature stands to the universal law of freedom. Kant makes it perfectly clear that when he regards nature as offering an analogy for morality, nature is considered to be teleological.

The Formula of Autonomy is here amalgamated with the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends.

Pages 81–87—Review of the Whole Argument

The final review summarises the whole argument from beginning to end—from the concept of a good

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