CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1. KANT'S LIFE: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Immanuel Kant was born on April 22, 1724 in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad), a major trading port on the Baltic Sea in what was then East Prussia. He was the fourth of nine children of a master harness-maker.[1] His parents were devout observers of the Protestant sect known as Pietism.[2] Although his mother died when he was only thirteen, she had a profound impact on his life. She recognized his special gifts early on and encouraged their development. As Kant wrote in a letter, she "awakened and broadened" his ideas, and "implanted and nurtured" in him the "first seed of the good."[3]

From the age of eight to sixteen years Kant attended the Collegium Fridericianum, a Pietist school dedicated to the instruction of mathematics, history, geometry, and, above all, Latin. Although he enjoyed studying Latin as well as Greek at the Collegium, he described his

[1] Manfred Kuehn. *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 28. Uwe Schultz claims that Kant was the fourth of eleven children, in *Immanuel Kant* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003), p. 7.

[2] Pietism was a Protestant movement founded in the mid-seventeenth century to protest the highly scholastic and creed-bound form of Lutheranism at that time in Germany. Pietists emphasized good works over worldly success, and the importance of one's personal devotional life over public displays of faith. For more on the Pietism of Kant's day and its influence on Kant, see Ernst Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought*, trans. James Haden (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 18; Theodore M. Greene, "The Historical Context and Religious Significance of Kant's Religion," in his translation of Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, pp. xxviii–xxx; Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography*, pp. 34–45.

[3] The passage in full: "I shall never forget my mother, for she implanted and nurtured the first seed of the good in me; she opened my heart to the influence of Nature; she awakened and broadened my ideas, and her teachings have had an enduring, beneficent effect on my life." Quoted in Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought*, p. 13.

experience there as that of "youthful slavery."[4] The school imposed upon its students a particularly zealous form of Pietism, and Kant resisted its insistence upon public displays of devotion. Already as a boy, he was drawn to the ideals of tolerance and freedom of conscience.

In 1740, the year Frederick the Great ascended the throne of Prussia, Kant matriculated at the University of Königsberg. Although his family was of modest means, he avoided pre-professional subjects such as law, medicine, and theology. Under the inspiration of his favorite teacher, Martin Knutzen, Kant immersed himself in the study of natural science and philosophy. It was Knutzen who introduced him to the writings of the two thinkers who had the greatest impact on his early intellectual development: Isaac Newton and Christian Wolff.

Kant's father died in 1746, leaving him without the financial means to continue his university studies. Kant earned an income for a number of years as a private tutor, then returned to the University of Königsberg in 1755 to write the essay required for completing his degree. In that essay he defended his own theory of atoms and their forces. For approximately the next fifteen years, he worked both at the Royal Palace Library and as a lecturer at the university, where he taught a wide range of subjects such as maths, natural science, logic, anthropology, geography, metaphysics, moral philosophy, and theology. It was not until 1770, when Kant was forty-six, that he was finally appointed Professor at the University of Königsberg.[5] His most important philosophical work, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, appeared in 1781. He taught at the University of Königsberg until 1797, seven years prior to his death.

Kant's predilection for regularity in his daily routine has been the subject of much commentary. He was up every morning at 5 a.m. to prepare his lectures, and in bed every night at 10 p.m.[6] Apparently, he was so punctual in taking his evening constitutional that the housewives of Königsberg could set their clocks by it. (He is

[4] J. M. Greene, "The Historical Context and Religious Significance of Kant's Religion" p. xxviii.
[5] Kant was appointed "Ordinary Professorship in Logic and Metaphysics." This was an appointment at the highest rank.
[6] U. Schultz, *Immanuel Kant*, p. 25.

said to have missed his daily walk only once, when he received a copy of Rousseau's *Émile* in the post.) Although he permitted himself few frivolities and governed his life by the principles of hard work and self-discipline, he is reported to have had a convivial and even playful nature.[7] As a young man, he was an avid billiards player. Even before he was a famous author, he was one of the most sought-after guests of Königsberg. He frequently entertained friends for the midday meal, and looked forward to these occasions as breaks from the hard labors of philosophy. He seems to have most enjoyed the company not of family or university colleagues, but of town merchants and businessmen.[8]

Kant died of natural causes at the age of seventy-nine years and ten months on February 12, 1804.

2. THE SUBJECT MATTER OF THE *GROUNDWORK*

2.1 *The* Groundwork *is a treatise in practical philosophy*

In the most general terms, practical philosophy is concerned with the norms or rules of human conduct. It considers how we *ought* to treat one another and ourselves. For Kant, the task of the practical philosopher is that of determining, on the one hand, what it is to be a good or virtuous person. As he sometimes puts it, practical philosophy seeks to discover the conditions under which we are worthy of happiness.[9] But practical philosophy, on Kant's conception, also investigates the nature and limits of political power. What laws ought a state to enforce? What institutions should it promote, and what rights should it guarantee?

Written in 1785, the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* is the first of Kant's three major works in practical philosophy. He published the *Critique of Practical Reason* in 1788, and the two parts of the *Metaphysics of Morals* in 1797 and 1798. Kant did not, however, confine his attention to the area of practical philosophy. He made important contributions to metaphysics, the philosophy of science,

[7] E. Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought*, p. 24. [8] U. Schultz, *Immanuel Kant*, p. 49.
[9] See, for example, Kant's discussion beginning at A 805/B 833 of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The question "What should I do?" belongs to the domain of "practical" or "moral" philosophy. The answer to this practical question, in his words, is: "Do that through which you will become worthy to be happy."

aesthetics, and the philosophy of religion as well. As a systematic philosopher, he sought to demonstrate the interconnection of these various domains of inquiry as parts of an overarching whole. One consequence of this insistence upon systematic unity is that his works in practical philosophy cannot be adequately appreciated in isolation from his other philosophical writings. This feature of Kant's approach will become apparent in our study of the *Groundwork*, since he often relies in that text on claims he has argued for elsewhere. The idea of human freedom he defends in Section III, for example, depends for its justification on his account of the conditions of human experience articulated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

2.2 *The* Groundwork *is a not a text in applied ethics*

We might expect from a treatise on practical philosophy a compendium of dos and don'ts, a guide to how we should conduct ourselves in particular situations. Although Kant intended his theory to have relevance for everyday life, the *Groundwork* is nothing like a guidebook. For one thing, it contains very little discussion of concrete cases. On the rare occasion in which Kant considers an example of a particular moral problem, his treatment is highly abstract. He seems to have had no interest in analyzing cases in detail.

It would be a mistake to conclude from the abstract character of Kant's discussion in the *Groundwork*, however, that he had no concern whatsoever to articulate or defend practical rules in that text. On the contrary, he devotes a great deal of attention to one rule in particular, the rule he calls the "categorical imperative." He identifies this rule as the most basic principle by means of which we measure moral value. On his account, it is this rule that ultimately determines what we ought to do in specific cases. The *Groundwork* is nonetheless not a work in applied ethics. Rather than provide a case-by-case analysis of concrete moral problems, it is concerned with a different task. That task is suggested in the work's title. The German word for "groundwork" is "*Grundlegung*," which literally translates as "laying the ground." The *Groundwork* lays the ground for practical philosophy in this sense: it provides philosophical support or justification for the supreme rule upon which all practical philosophy is based. As Kant writes in his Preface:

The present groundwork is . . . nothing more than the search for and establishment of the *supreme principle of morality*. (392)

For Kant, the project of laying the ground is not just different from but also *prior to* that of identifying and applying specific practical rules. We can illustrate this priority by means of an example. Suppose you are considering whether to be dishonest in a particular situation. You ask a friend for advice, and she supplies a rule: "One ought to never be dishonest in cases like that." You might respond simply by accepting your friend's rule and conforming your behavior to it. Alternatively, you could demand that she justify her judgment. If you chose the latter course, you would be inquiring into the rule's ground; you would be searching for the principle upon which the rule was based. You would be requiring an argument establishing its legitimacy.

Kant's view is that, as rational creatures, we should not follow moral rules uncritically. We should satisfy ourselves that the principles governing our conduct are well grounded or justified. His *Groundwork* is intended to meet this need for justification. As he indicates in the above-quoted passage, the task of the *Groundwork* is to search for the supreme principle of morality and demonstrate that this principle is warranted as the only possible supreme moral law. Kant concedes that specific applications of the law would be useful in illustrating its adequacy, but he provides very little by way of applications in the text (392).[10]

2.3 *Relation of the* Groundwork *to the* Metaphysics of Morals

In his Preface, Kant asserts that the *Groundwork* is a preparatory work. It is preliminary, he says, to a "metaphysics of morals," a text he says he intends to publish someday (391). The text he says he will someday

[10] Strictly speaking, none of Kant's other major works in practical philosophy are texts in applied practical philosophy either. He provides a far more extensive discussion of particular duties in his *Metaphysics of Morals* than in the *Groundwork* or the *Critique of Practical Reason*. But his level of discussion in the *Metaphysics of Morals* is still quite abstract. He considers duties that apply generally to human nature, but he does not specify on a case-by-case basis the duties that obligate us in particular situations. Kant tells us in Section 45 of the *MM II* that a complete account of duties would require an appendix to that text in which applications of the moral law are modified to fit varying circumstances (469). He never provides such an appendix, however. Mary Gregor provides an informative account of Kant's various levels of discussion in the Introduction to her 1964 translation of Kant's *Doctrine of Virtue*, PA, pp. xvii–xix.

publish is the two-volume work that appeared in 1797 and 1798, the *Metaphysics of Morals*. As we will see in a moment, the *Groundwork* supplies and justifies the principle that provides the foundation for that later work. We can better appreciate Kant's task in the *Groundwork* if we first consider what he has in mind by a "metaphysics of morals."

i. On the two divisions of Kant's Metaphysics of Morals

Kant writes in the Preface to the *Metaphysics of Morals* of his aim to provide the "metaphysical first principles" of a "doctrine of right" and a "doctrine of virtue" (*MM* 205). The *Metaphysics of Morals* is thus comprised of two parts or divisions: *The Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Right* (1797) and *The Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue* (1798).[11] Both the *Doctrine of Right* and the *Doctrine of Virtue* specify duties; both, that is, supply rules of conduct we are obligated to obey. Each *Doctrine*, however, specifies a different class of duties.

Kant writes in the Introduction to his *Metaphysics of Morals* that all practical lawgiving can be distinguished "with respect to the incentives" (*MM* 218). By this he means that we can distinguish the two classes of duties with regard to the way in which each requires us to act. In the case of the class of duties Kant sometimes identifies as "ethical" – the class he discusses in his *Doctrine of Virtue* – the motivation derives from the idea of duty alone. These duties command that we cultivate in ourselves certain dispositions. Duty obligates us, for example, to cultivate in ourselves the dispositions to be kind to our neighbor and to perfect our talents. These duties bind us even though we cannot be externally coerced into performing them. We cannot be externally coerced for two reasons. First, ethical duties or duties of virtue imply no correlative right. Because we violate no one's rights if we fail to answer the command of these duties, the state has no right to punish us. Second, even if the state did have the right to compel us, it could not in fact do so. This is because duties of virtue require of us something that is not susceptible to external

[11] The German word for what is usually translated as "morals" in Kant's title is "*Sitten*." Kant remarks in his Introduction to the *MM* that "*Sitten*" refers to "manners and customs" (216). The translation of "*Sittlichkeit*" as "morals" in the title *MM* is not a mistake because Kant himself uses the terms "*Sitten*" or "*Sittlichkeit*" and "*Moralität*" interchangeably, for example, at (219).

coercion – namely, dispositions. In Kant's view, dispositions can no more be externally compelled than beliefs or opinions.

Consider, now, a second class of duties, the class Kant discusses in the *Doctrine of Right*. The incentive to obey these "juridical" duties is not just internal but also external. These duties, unlike duties of virtue, admit of external coercion. They admit of external coercion because they command actions rather than dispositions or intentions. If I trespass on your property, the state may rightfully punish me. The state has a right to punish me, because in trespassing, my action is incompatible with your right to express your outer freedom (*MM I* 250, *MM II* 381).

ii. Ambiguities in Kant's use of the terms "morality" and "ethics"

We use the terms "morality" and "ethics" in broad as well as narrow senses. The more typical use is perhaps the narrow one. In the narrow sense, the terms "morality" and "ethics" refer to duties that cannot be coerced by the state, duties whose incentive is internal (duties of virtue, as Kant calls them). Sometimes, however, we use the terms more broadly to refer to *all* practical obligations, including externally coercible obligations. We use the term "ethics" broadly, for instance, when we characterize the question of the state's right to impose the death penalty as an ethical one.

The reader should be prepared for the fact that Kant, too, uses the terms "morality" and "ethics" not merely in the narrow but also in the broad sense. For example, he classifies both duties of right and duties of virtue under the general heading of a "metaphysics of *morals*" (emphasis added). He writes in his Introduction to the *Metaphysics of Morals* that all duties, as duties, belong to "ethics" (*MM* 219). Early on in his Preface to the *Groundwork*, Kant identifies "ethics" or the "doctrine of morals" as the "science" of laws of freedom (387). He does not intend the terms "ethics" or the "doctrine of morals," in that context, to refer exclusively to what properly belongs within the sphere of the doctrine of virtue.

iii. Further clarification of the relation of the Groundwork *to the* Metaphysics of Morals

We now turn to the question of the relation of the two divisions of the *Metaphysics of Morals* to the *Groundwork*. As mentioned above, the *Groundwork* provides the foundational principle upon which both divisions of the *Metaphysics of Morals* rest. The *Metaphysics of Morals*

specifies the general duties (of virtue and of right) that human beings have to themselves and to one another. The *Groundwork* provides the principle that justifies these duties as duties. The *Groundwork* "searches for" and "establishes" the supreme practical principle, the principle that governs or grounds both classes of duties. That supreme principle is the categorical imperative.[12]

Given the fact that the task of the *Groundwork* is to provide the principle that ultimately justifies both duties of virtue and of right, we might expect that work to devote equal time to both kinds of duties. Oddly enough, this is not the case. The *Groundwork* contains virtually no mention of the role of the supreme principle in determining whether or not an action is in conformity with right. Instead, Kant's focus is the role of the supreme principle in determining whether our intentions or motives conform to virtue. The examples he discusses in the *Groundwork* to illustrate the application of the supreme law, that is, belong properly within the sphere of the *Doctrine of Virtue*.[13]

3. SOME DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF KANT'S APPROACH TO PRACTICAL PHILOSOPHY

3.1 The substantial doctrine

Kant argues that the categorical imperative is the fundamental law or principle by means of which we determine what is and is not practically required of us, what is and is not our duty. In our chapter

[12] Kant writes in the *MM* that the categorical imperative or supreme practical principle "affirms what obligation is" (225). Obligation or constraint can be merely internal (as in the case of duties of virtue) or external (as in the case of duties of right). In both cases, however, it is the categorical imperative that defines this constraint. For another passage in which Kant clearly identifies the categorical imperative as the supreme principle of both parts of the doctrine of morals [*Sittenlehre*], see his Introduction to *MM* (226). Manfred Baum explores the novelty of Kant's break with the natural rights tradition on the division of duties of right and of virtue in his "Recht und Ethik in Kants praktischer Philosophie," in Juergen Stolzenberg (ed.), *Kant in der Gegenwart* (Berlin/New York: Verlag Walter de Gruyter, forthcoming). See also Gregor's Introduction to her translation of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 7–10.

[13] At center stage of the *Groundwork* is the good will, and a good will is defined not with reference to its (externally coercible) actions, but rather with reference to its inner disposition or motives. For a helpful explanation for Kant's reasons for restricting his attention in the *Groundwork* to duties of virtue, see the beginning of Chapter II of M. J. Gregor *Laws of Freedom* (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1963).

devoted to Section II of the *Groundwork*, we will consider in some detail his various formulations of the law. For present purposes, however, the following rough representation of it will suffice. In essence, what the categorical imperative commands is that we respect the dignity of all rational natures. On Kant's account, dignity is something all rational natures have. A being has dignity, for Kant, not because of its socio-economic status, religious beliefs, sex, or race. A being has a dignity because of its practical rationality; it possesses the faculty Kant calls "practical reason." These are technical terms, and we will eventually have to consider them with care. At this point we need merely point out that Kant does not equate practical reason with intelligence or cleverness. The capacity of practical reason refers, rather, to the faculty of free will or self-determination. To say that the categorical imperative commands us to respect the dignity of all rational natures, then, is to say that it commands us to respect and promote the expression of practical rationality or freedom. For Kant, the source of all practical value is freedom.

3.2 The universality of the supreme practical law

The supreme practical law or categorical imperative is universal in two respects:

i. The supreme practical law is universal with respect to the scope of its application.

The categorical imperative itself as well as the specific duties that derive from it require us to respect and treat with dignity *all* rational nature. Otherwise put, respect for dignity, on Kant's account, applies impartially to rational nature. No rational being is unworthy of respect, and no rational being deserves more respect than any other. Not surprisingly, Kant concentrates his attention on the duties we have toward *human* rational natures. He nonetheless asserts repeatedly that *all* rational natures, without exception, are worthy of respect.

ii. The supreme practical law is universal with respect to the scope of its validity.

Kant argues that the practical law is valid for – that is, binding on – all rational nature. It is the standard, for all rational nature, by means of which it is possible to determine whether a disposition or will is good and whether an action is right. Although valid for all rational nature,

however, the law does not necessarily *command* all rational nature. Kant allows that there may be rational beings whose nature is in perfect conformity with duty and who therefore do not have to be commanded to respect duty. The supreme practical law must take the form of a command or imperative only for finite or imperfect rational natures such as human rational natures.[14]

3.3 The necessity of the supreme practical law

When the categorical imperative determines that we have a duty to perform some action, we are necessarily obligated to perform that action. It is not that we are only more or less obligated to perform it, or that we are obligated to perform it only if doing so strikes our fancy. Kant holds, for example, that we have a duty not to mutilate our bodies for pleasure or profit. Because we have this duty, we *necessarily* must comply. We are neither invited nor allowed to use our discretion in deciding whether we must comply. Although some may want to challenge the view that we have such a duty, the point about necessity is this: when something is determined to be a duty in a given case, it binds unconditionally, according to Kant.[15]

3.4 The rational grounding of practical philosophy

The precise implications of the rational grounding of Kant's practical philosophy are difficult to grasp and thus require more extensive introduction. Kant insists that his practical philosophy is grounded in (that is, justified by) reason. The supreme practical law or categorical imperative upon which his practical philosophy is based is itself a law of reason, in his view. As a law of reason (as a priori), it relies on experience neither for its origin nor for its justification.

[14] Kant discusses this point in Section II of the *Groundwork*, beginning at (413f.).

[15] Kant distinguishes the features of universality and necessity as I have done so here, but he does not always clearly distinguish them. When he insists upon the necessity of the supreme practical law at (389) of the *Groundwork*, for example, he goes on to characterize necessity in terms of universal validity. He distinguishes the two features, however, in his account of the forms of judgment in the *CPR* A 70/B 95. To characterize a judgment as universal is to specify its quantity; to characterize a judgment as necessary (or "apodictic") is to specify its modality. Earlier in the first *Critique*, Kant again claims that the two features are distinct, but he adds that they "belong together inseparably" (B 4).