

Kantian Ethics

In this book, Allen W. Wood investigates Kant's conception of ethical theory, using it to develop a viable approach to the rights and moral duties of human beings. By remaining closer to Kant's own view of the aims of ethics, Wood's understanding of Kantian ethics differs from the received "constructivist" interpretation, especially on such matters as the ground and function of ethical principles, the nature of ethical reasoning, and autonomy as the ground of ethics. Wood does not hesitate to criticize and modify Kant's conclusions when they seem inconsistent with his basic principles or fail to make the best use of the resources that Kantian principles make available. Of special interest are the book's treatment of such topics as freedom of the will, the state's role in securing economic justice, sexual morality, the justification of punishment, and the prohibition on lying.

Allen W. Wood is Ward W. and Pricilla B. Woods Professor at Stanford University. He was a John S. Guggenheim Fellow at the Free University in Berlin and a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow at the University of Bonn. He developed parts of this book in the 2005 Isaiah Berlin Lectures at Oxford University. Along with Paul Guyer, Professor Wood is co-editor of the *Cambridge Edition of The Works of Immanuel Kant* and translator of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. He is the author or editor of numerous writings, mainly on Kant, Fichte, Hegel, and Karl Marx.

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Allen W. Wood
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*To the memory of
Terence Moore,
My editor and friend*

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ALLEN W. WOOD

Stanford University



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Preface

This book attempts to sketch an ethical theory based on the principles found in the writings of Immanuel Kant. It is not primarily a study of those writings but an attempt to develop out of Kant's thought the most defensible theory possible on that basis. Thus I will not refrain from criticizing Kant – at times, quite roundly – when I think his moral opinions or conclusions do not follow from or cohere well with his fundamental principles, or when I think a more defensible approach to some topic involves correcting or revising what Kant thought and wrote.

The idea of writing the present book was suggested to me by the late Terence Moore of Cambridge University Press. The basic reading of Kant represented here was presented in my 1999 book *Kant's Ethical Thought*. But Moore thought it would be a good thing if I provided a briefer, less scholarly, and more approachable version of Kantian ethics. The present book, however, is only a partial fulfillment of his request. Though shorter than my earlier book, it is probably longer (and no doubt less popular) than he had in mind. Its primary focus is on Kantian ethics rather than on Kant scholarship. This book fulfills a promise of the earlier book by developing Kant's conception of virtue and his theory of duties in greater detail than was done there. In the course of doing these things, it also discusses a number of specific topics in ethics that were not discussed in the earlier book.

In addition to that, whole chapters offer thoughts on the Kantian approach to further ethical topics that were much more briefly discussed, or not covered at all, in *Kant's Ethical Thought*, such as virtue, conscience, social justice, sex, punishment, lying, consequentialism, the personhood of persons, and the moral status of nonrational animals. In the past seven years, however, I think I have been able to sharpen parts of my interpretation as compared with the earlier book, especially regarding the aims of ethical theory and the Kantian conception of autonomy. I have even changed my mind about a few things. My reading of Kant is now even further from traditional

interpretations of Kant than it was before, but I believe it is closer to the truth.

The general enterprise in which I am engaged here is one that has attracted the efforts of a number of able moral philosophers in recent years, chiefly through the influence of John Rawls and his many talented students. The study of ethics in the analytical tradition owes a great deal to Rawls and his followers. In some respects, it could even be called chiefly their product. Until well after the mid-twentieth century, the subject of ethics in the analytical tradition was preoccupied with metaethical reflections, the dominant position even encouraging the hopelessly nihilistic thought that ethics is not a fit subject for rational discourse at all, but only for the expression of attitudes, or at most for rhetorical exhortation and the nonrational manipulation of other people's emotions so as to bring them into line with your own. Theoretical reflection on ethics was further discouraged by the fact that of those who still thought it could be reasoned about, most took it for granted that utilitarianism was the only possible basis for rational discussion, thus drastically narrowing the range of philosophical options it was thought worthwhile even to consider.

John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) changed everything. It showed not only that ethical theory could be treated with analytical sophistication and applied to issues of vital social concern but also that Kantian ideas were indispensable to doing this in the right way. Rawls's thought never stagnated, however. He continued reflecting on how the Kantian liberal tradition can best be articulated in the late twentieth century. In the 1980 Dewey Lectures at Columbia University, he developed an approach to ethical theory he called "Kantian constructivism," and then responded to later cultural and political developments in *Political Liberalism* (1993) and *The Law of Peoples* (1999). He also inspired a number of brilliant students, who became both able Kant scholars and original ethical theorists who followed out, in various ways, the "constructivist" approach to Kantian ethics. Rawls and these students are responsible both for returning Kantian ethics to its rightful place at the center of ethical reflection among philosophers and also for the way Kantian ethics has come to be understood by contemporary analytical philosophers.

My own studies in Kantian ethics would have been impossible without this tradition. My understanding of Kant's ethical thought has been decisively shaped in many respects by Rawls and some of his followers and students, among whom I should mention especially Christine Korsgaard, Onora O'Neill, Thomas Hill, Barbara Herman, Andrews Reath, and Tamar Schapiro. This book, however, will understand "Kantian ethics" in a way that differs significantly in several respects from this Rawlsian tradition.

Over the years I have come to realize (somewhat too haltingly and reluctantly, I must now admit) that I simply cannot accept the "constructivist" reading of Kant. I have especial trouble with the elements in it that are most familiar to and taken for granted by moral philosophers – I mean especially

the overemphasis on, and misconstrual of, the Formula of Universal Law. But the constructivist reading also seems mistaken in the metaethical conclusions it wants to draw from Kant's conception of autonomy, and perhaps most of all its basic conception of the aims and methods of ethical theory – all of which seem to me deeply at odds both with what Kant himself actually thought about these matters and also with the best way Kant's thinking about ethics can be appropriated by us today. Though my primary focus is on developing Kantian ethics for its own sake in a manner that remains faithful to Kant, I will have occasion along the way to criticize the Rawlsian "constructivist" interpretation of Kantian ethics at several points, chiefly in Chapters 3 through 6. My version of *Kantian* ethics will be much closer to *Kant's* ethics than I think the Rawlsians' are, or were intended to be. Whether this is an advantage or a disadvantage must be left to each individual reader to decide.

My interpretation of Kant, as I have said, is also at odds with a lot of what has been traditionally thought about his moral philosophy. I reject the reading of the early pages of the *Groundwork* that takes Kant to be dividing the heart from the head and placing moral value only in actions that we do without desire. More generally, I reject the reading of Kant that understands his moral psychology as involving a sharp separation or "dualism" between "nature" and "freedom." This interpretation receives considerable support from the *Groundwork*, I admit, and no doubt that is why prevails among those whose understanding of Kant's ethics is based exclusively on that work; but it is incompatible with his later ethical writings, which in my judgment represent a superior position in moral psychology.

In discussing Kant's formulations of the moral law, I do my best to sever the nerve that, in most readers of Kant, connects the stimulus "Kantian ethics" with the reflexive reaction "Universalize your maxims." In Chapter 3, I argue that Kantian ethics conceives the aims of ethical theory in a fundamentally different way from what is now fashionable, representing an older alternative model that Kant shares with other great moral philosophers, notably John Stuart Mill. In Chapter 4, I claim that Kant's formulations of the moral law are by no means "equivalent" but constitute a developmental progression, of which the Formula of Universal Law is only the first (hence the poorest and most provisional) stage. Chapter 5 explores the other two main formulas, which I take to be more adequate and useful expressions of the principle. In Chapter 6, I offer a reading of Kant's conception of autonomy of the will that puts this doctrine at odds with much that its later reception (including the current "constructivist" interpretation) has found appealing about it. Chapter 7 attempts a sympathetic presentation of Kant's attempt to rest morality on freedom of the will – as a theoretical claim that cannot be theoretically established but must nevertheless be presupposed by us as rational agents. The second half of the book (Chapters 8–15) deals with a variety of topics in moral philosophy that were of explicit concern

to Kant. In them I try to say what Kantian ethics ought to say about these topics, whether or not it agrees with what Kant himself said. On most topics, I think Kant's views, when correctly understood, are more defensible than they are often given credit for. But on some topics, such as suicide, sex, and punishment, I conclude that a consistent and defensible Kantian ethics must come to conclusions quite different from Kant's own.

Throughout the book, I emphasize the crucial importance for Kantian ethics of Kant's empirical theory of human nature. This has usually been totally ignored, through the pernicious influence of a grossly fallacious inference from the true premise that Kant thought the principle of morality is *a priori* and independent of empirical human nature to the disastrously false conclusion that Kant gave no thought to the empirical nature of human beings or human history and regarded them as of no importance to morality.

In the course of presenting my reading of Kantian ethics, I have noticed one source of opposition to it that is especially worthy of mention. Many accept my view that Kant is a more appealing moral philosopher on my reading than on the traditional one. They may even reluctantly admit that it is better supported by the texts than they thought it could be. But they still resist, because they feel their philosophical world deprived of a significant inhabitant – namely, the stiff, inhuman, moralistic Prussian ogre everyone knows by the name Immanuel Kant. They may not like him, but he plays an important role in their moral world – if not as the villain in a cautionary tale, then at least as the personification of a one-sided truth that becomes dangerous if we go that far. Without him, they feel disoriented. If this Kant did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him. They therefore think it might be better to keep the traditional interpretation of his writings even if it is wrong – and even if the position it represents is unappealing – not despite, but even precisely because of that fact.

I must declare to such people that it is indeed my intention to deprive their world of the philosopher who they thought could play that role. For I think that if that Kant's position is unhealthy, then so is their negative reaction to it, and both should die the same death (like Professor Moriarty and Sherlock Holmes at the Reichenbach Falls, and without the unpersuasive later return of either character). I am trying to get them to rethink their options in moral philosophy – to realize that the very spot on the moral map that they always thought occupied by a rigoristic monster is a place they need to consider residing themselves, or at least visiting now and then. I do not believe in conversions on the road to Damascus, and it would be quixotic of me to think I could reconfigure the landscape of anyone's moral world. But rational reflection (usually over a period of time) can sometimes significantly change someone's attitude toward a philosophical option he or she earlier dismissed.

This book was written mainly in the United States, between 2004 and 2006. The history of this period is a disgraceful one. It feels as if we have been living under a malignant alien occupation. An unelected political regime, representing everything that is worst about American culture, compiled a record of injustice, corruption, and gross incompetence at home, and of numerous and aggravated war crimes abroad. Then it was confirmed in office by another election of dubious legitimacy so that it might continue unrelentingly its monstrous wrongfulness and stupidity. Those with the power to oppose its crimes instead acquiesced in them, or else resisted too late, and too feebly. The very ideas of democracy, community, and human rights are in the process of dying in our civilization – or they are being willfully murdered by those in power and by that segment of the population which supports this regime. All they give us in place of these ideas is the empty words (and plenty of those). People have now perhaps begun to awaken to the situation, but the historical roots of what has happened are sunk deep in political trends of the previous century, and I fear these trends will not be reversed soon or easily. There are references here and there in the book to this dismal history, usually to illustrate arrogance, lying, and egregious violations of right. A few readers of my earlier work have told me they think this sort of thing is inappropriate in a scholarly book. But my worries about appearing “unscholarly” pale next to my shame, which all Americans should feel at having failed to prevent the disastrous course of events.

A draft of roughly one-third of this book was presented in the form of the Isaiah Berlin Lectures at Oxford University in 2005. Some of it was also presented as a lecture series at Chengchi University, Taipei. One chapter or another was presented at several other places. I have benefited from all these discussions, as well as from interactions with colleagues and students at Stanford University. The individuals to whom I owe such thanks are too numerous to name.

Abbreviations

Ak	<i>Immanuel Kants Schriften</i> . Ausgabe der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1902–). Unless otherwise footnoted, writings of Immanuel Kant will be cited by volume:page number in this edition.
Ca	<i>Cambridge Edition of the Writings of Immanuel Kant</i> (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992–) This edition provides marginal Ak volume:page citations. Specific works will be cited using the following system of abbreviations (works not abbreviated below will be cited simply as Ak volume:page).
ANG	<i>Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels</i> , Ak 1 <i>Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens</i> , Ca Writings on Natural Science
ED	<i>Das Ende Aller Dinge</i> , Ak 8 <i>The End of All Things</i> , Ca Writings on Religion and Natural Theology
EF	<i>Zum ewigen Frieden: Ein philosophischer Entwurf</i> (1795), Ak 8 <i>Toward perpetual peace: A philosophical project</i> , Ca Practical Philosophy
G	<i>Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten</i> (1785), Ak 4 <i>Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals</i> , Ca Practical Philosophy
I	<i>Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht</i> (1784), Ak 8 <i>Idea toward a universal history with a cosmopolitan aim</i> , Ca Anthropology History and Education
KrV	<i>Kritik der reinen Vernunft</i> (1781, 1787). Cited by A/B pagination. <i>Critique of pure reason</i> , Ca Critique of Pure Reason
KpV	<i>Kritik der praktischen Vernunft</i> (1788), Ak 5 <i>Critique of practical reason</i> , Ca Practical Philosophy
KU	<i>Kritik der Urteilkraft</i> (1790), Ak 5

- Critique of the power of judgment*, Ca Critique of the Power of Judgment
- MA *Mutmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte* (1786), Ak 8
Conjectural beginning of human history, Ca Anthropology History and Education
- MCP *De medicina corporis quae philosophorum est*, Ak 15
 On philosophers' medicine of the body, Ca Anthropology History and Education
- MS *Metaphysik der Sitten* (1797–8), Ak 6
Metaphysics of morals, Ca Practical Philosophy
- O *Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientieren?* (1786), Ak 8
What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking? Ca Religion and Rational Theology
- P *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik* (1783), Ak 4
Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, Ca Theoretical Philosophy after 1781
- R *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (1793–4), Ak 6
Religion within the boundaries of mere reason, Ca Religion and Rational Theology
- RS *Recension von Schulz's Versuch einer Anleitung zur Sittenlehre*, Ak 8
Review of Schulz's Attempt at an introduction to a doctrine of morals, Ca Practical Philosophy
- SF *Streit der Fakultäten* (1798), Ak 7
Conflict of the faculties, Ca Religion and Rational Theology
- TP *Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis* (1793), Ak 8
On the common saying: That may be correct in theory but it is of no use in practice, Ca Practical philosophy
- TPP *Über den Gebrauch teleologischer Prinzipien in der Philosophie*, Ak 8
On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy, Ca Anthropology History and Education
- VA *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (1798), Ak 7
Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view, Ca Anthropology, History and Education
Vorlesungen über Anthropologie, VA 25
Lectures on Anthropology, Ca Lectures on Anthropology
- VE *Vorlesungen über Ethik*, Ak 27, 29
Lectures on Ethics, Ca Lectures on Ethics
- VL *Vorlesungen über Logik*, Ak 9, 24
Lectures on Logic, Ca Lectures on Logic
- VM *Vorlesungen über Metaphysik*, AK 28, 29
Lectures on Metaphysics, Ca Lectures on Metaphysics
- VP *[Vorlesungen über] Pädagogik*, Ak 9
Lectures on Pedagogy, Ca Anthropology, History and Education

Abbreviations

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- VpR *Vorlesungen über die philosophische Religionslehre*, Ak 28
Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion, Ca Religion and
Rational Theology
- VRL *Über ein vermeintes Recht aus Menschenliebe zu lügen*, Ak 8
On a supposed right to lie from philanthropy, Ca Practical Philosophy
- WA *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* (1784), Ak 8
An answer to the question: What is enlightenment? Ca Practical Philosophy

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W. A. Suchting, and H. S. Harris. Indianapolis: Hackett,
1991. Cited by paragraph (§) number.
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- Hegel PR G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, tr. H. B.
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