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978-1-107-00851-9 - Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals

Immanuel Kant

Excerpt

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Preface

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Ancient Greek philosophy was divided into three sciences: **physics**, **ethics**, and **logic**.¹ This division is perfectly suitable to the nature of the matter, and there is no need to amend it, except perhaps just to add its principle, partly so as to assure oneself in this way of its completeness, partly to be able to determine correctly the necessary subdivisions.

All rational cognition is either *material* and considers some object, or *formal* and occupied merely with the form of the understanding and of reason itself, and with the universal rules of thinking as such, regardless of differences among its objects. Formal philosophy is called **logic**, whereas material philosophy, which has to do with determinate objects and the laws to which they are subject, is once again twofold. For these laws are either laws of *nature*, or of *freedom*. The science of the first is called **physics**, that of the other is **ethics**; the former is also called doctrine of nature, the latter doctrine of morals.

Logic can have no empirical part, i.e. one in which the universal and necessary laws of thinking would rest on grounds taken from experience; for in that case it would not be logic, i.e. a canon for the understanding, or for reason, that holds and must be demonstrated in all thinking. By contrast, natural as well as moral philosophy can each have its empirical part, since the former must determine the laws for nature, as an object of experience, the latter for the human being's will, in so far as it is affected by nature, the first as laws according to which everything happens, the second as those 4:388 according to which everything ought to happen, while still taking into consideration the conditions under which quite often it does not happen.

All philosophy in so far as it is based on grounds of experience can be called *empirical*, that which presents its doctrines solely from a priori

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principles *pure* philosophy. The latter, if it is merely formal, is called *logic*; but if it is limited to determinate objects of the understanding it is called *metaphysics*.

In this way there arises the idea of a twofold metaphysics, a *metaphysics of nature* and a *metaphysics of morals*. Physics will thus have its empirical, but also a rational part; so too will ethics, though here the empirical part might in particular be called *practical anthropology*, the rational part actually *moral science*.^a

All professions, crafts, and arts have gained by the distribution of labor, namely when one person does not do everything, but each limits himself to a certain task that differs noticeably from others in the way it is carried out, so as to be able to accomplish it most perfectly and with greater ease.² Where labor is not differentiated and distributed like that, where everyone is a jack-of-all-trades, professions still remain in a most barbarous state. It would by itself be an object not unworthy of consideration to ask: whether pure philosophy in all its parts might not require its own specialist, and whether the learned profession as a whole might not be better off if those who, conforming to the taste of their public, are in the habit of peddling the empirical mixed with the rational in all sorts of proportions unknown to themselves – who call themselves independent thinkers, but others, who prepare the merely rational part, ponderers – were warned not to pursue two occupations at once that are very dissimilar in the way they are to be carried out, for each of which a special talent is perhaps required, and which united in one person produce only bunglers. But here I just ask whether the nature of the science might not require that the empirical part always be carefully separated from the rational, and that actual (empirical) physics be prefaced by a metaphysics of nature, and practical anthropology by a metaphysics of morals, which would have to be carefully cleansed of everything empirical; so that we may know how much pure reason can accomplish in both cases, and from what sources it draws by itself this peculiar a priori instruction, whether the latter business be pursued by all teachers of morals (whose name is legion) or only by some, who feel a calling to it.

Since here my purpose is actually directed towards moral philosophy, I limit the question presented just to this: is it not thought to be of the utmost necessity to work out for once a pure moral philosophy,

^a *Moral*, a word used in the eighteenth century for the systematic study of morality, not for morality itself (*Sittlichkeit*, *Moralität*) or morals (*Sitten*).

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completely cleansed of everything that might be in some way empirical and belongs to anthropology? For that there must be such is of itself clear from the common idea of duty and of moral laws. Everyone must admit that a law, if it is to hold morally, i.e. as the ground of an obligation, must carry with it absolute necessity; that the command: thou shalt not lie, does not just hold for human beings only, as if other rational beings did not have to heed it; and so with all remaining actual moral laws; hence that the ground of the obligation here must not be sought in the nature of the human being, or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but a priori solely in concepts of pure reason, and that any other prescription that is founded on principles of mere experience – and even a prescription that is in some certain respect universal, in so far as it relies in the least part on empirical grounds, perhaps just for a motivating ground – can indeed be called a practical rule, but never a moral law.

Thus not only do moral laws, along with their principles, differ essentially in practical cognition from all the rest, in which there is something empirical,^b but all moral philosophy rests entirely on its pure part and, applied to the human being, it does not borrow the least thing from our acquaintance with him (anthropology), but gives him, as a rational being, laws a priori; which of course still require a power of judgment sharpened by experience, partly to distinguish in what cases they are applicable, partly to obtain for them access^c to the will of a human being and momentum for performance, since he, as himself affected by so many inclinations, is indeed capable of the idea of a practical pure reason, but not so easily able to make it effective in concreto^d in the conduct of his life.

A metaphysics of morals is thus indispensably necessary, not merely on the grounds of speculation, for investigating the source of the practical principles^e that lie a priori in our reason, but because morals themselves remain subject to all sorts of corruption as long as we lack that guideline and supreme norm by which to judge them correctly. For in the case of what is to be morally good it is not enough that it *conform* with the moral

^b Here, as elsewhere, differences between German and English punctuation create difficulties. It is not altogether clear from the context whether the clause “in which . . . empirical” is restrictive or non-restrictive.

^c or “admission” (of laws, doctrines, or theories, to the will of an agent) by means of moral instruction

^d tangibly, palpably; not abstract

^e Kant does not consistently distinguish between *Grundsatz* and *Prinzip*. Both have been translated as “principle.”

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law, but it must also be done *for its sake*; if not, that conformity is only very contingent and precarious, because the immoral ground^f will indeed now and then produce actions that conform with the law, but in many cases actions that are contrary to it. But now the moral law in its purity and genuineness (which in practical matters is of the greatest significance) is to be sought nowhere else than in a pure philosophy; it (metaphysics) must thus come first, and without it there can be no moral philosophy at all; and that which mixes these pure principles in with empirical ones does not even deserve the name of a philosophy (which after all is distinguished from common rational cognition in that it presents in a separate science what the latter comprehends only as intermingled with other things), much less that of a moral philosophy, since it even infringes on the purity of morals themselves by this intermingling and proceeds contrary to its own end.

However, let it not be thought that what is here called for already exists in the guise of the propaedeutic^g of the famous *Wolff* for his moral philosophy, namely that which he called *Universal Practical Philosophy*, and that we do not therefore have to open up an entirely new field.³ Precisely because it was to be a universal practical philosophy it took into consideration not a will of any particular kind – such as one that is completely determined from a priori principles, without any empirical motivating grounds, and could be called a pure will – but rather willing generally, with all actions and conditions that belong to it in this general sense; and in that it differs from a metaphysics of morals, in just the way that general logic differs from transcendental philosophy, the first of which presents actions and rules of thinking *in general*, the latter the particular actions and rules of **pure** thinking, i.e. of that by which objects are cognized completely a priori. For the metaphysics of morals is to investigate the idea and the principles of a possible *pure* will, and not the actions and conditions of human willing in general, which are largely drawn from psychology. The

4:391 fact that (though contrary to all warrant) there is also talk of moral laws and duties in this universal practical philosophy constitutes no objection to my assertion. For the authors of that science remain true to their idea of it in this too: they do not distinguish motivating grounds that, as such, are represented completely a priori by reason alone and are actually moral, from empirical ones, which the understanding elevates to general concepts

^f *der unsittliche Grund*; “non-moral” is probably too weak ^g a preliminary or introductory work

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merely by comparing experiences, but they consider them, without attending to the difference of their sources, only in terms of their greater or lesser sum (as they are all viewed as being of the same kind), and thereby form their concept of *obligation*, which of course is anything but moral, but is still such as can only be demanded in a philosophy that never passes judgment on the *origin* of all possible practical concepts, whether they really take place a priori or merely a posteriori.

Intending, then, to publish some day a Metaphysics of Morals, I issue this Groundwork in advance.⁴ Indeed, there is actually no foundation for it other than the Critique of a *pure practical reason*,⁵ just as for metaphysics there is the Critique of pure speculative reason already published.⁶ But in part the former is not of such utmost necessity as the latter, since human reason, even in the commonest understanding, can easily be brought to a high measure of correctness and accuracy in moral matters, whereas in its theoretical but pure use it is totally and entirely dialectical; in part I require that the critique of a pure practical reason, if it is to be complete, also be able to present its unity with speculative reason^h in a common principle; because in the end there can be only one and the same reason, which must differ merely in its application. However, I could not yet bring it to such completeness here without introducing considerations of a wholly different kind and confusing the reader. On account of this I have availed myself of the label of a *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and not of a *Critique of Pure Practical Reason* instead.

But since, thirdly, a Metaphysics of Morals, regardless of its daunting title, is still capable of a great degree of popularity and suitability for the common understanding, I find it useful to separate from it this preparatory work of laying its foundation, so that I may omit the subtleties it unavoidably contains from more accessible doctrines in the future. 4:392

The present groundwork, however, is nothing more than the identification and corroboration of the *supreme principle of morality*, which by itself constitutes a business that is complete in its purpose and to be separated from every other moral investigation. My assertions – about this principal question, which is important and has until now been far from satisfactorily discussed – would indeed receive much light from the application of that principle to the entire system, and great confirmation from the adequacy that it exhibits everywhere; but I had to forgo this

^h or “unity with the critique of speculative reason,” as indicated by the first edition

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advantage, which would also fundamentally be more self-gratifying than in the general interest, since the ease with which a principle can be used and its apparent adequacy yields no wholly reliable proof of its correctness, but rather arouses a certain partiality against investigating and weighing it in all strictness by itself, regardless of the consequence.

In this work, I have adopted the method that is, I believe, most fitting if one wants to take one's route analytically from common cognition to the determination of its supreme principle and in turn synthetically from the examination of this principle and its sources back to common cognition, in which we find it used. That is why it is divided as follows:

1. *First section:* Transition from common to philosophical moral rational cognition.
2. *Second section:* Transition from popular moral philosophy to the metaphysics of morals.
3. *Third section:* Final step from the metaphysics of morals to the critique of pure practical reason.

First section

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Transition from common to philosophical moral rational cognition

It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be taken to be good without limitation, except a **good will**. Understanding, wit, judgment, and whatever else the *talents* of the mind may be called, or confidence, resolve, and persistency of intent, as qualities of *temperament*, are no doubt in many respects good and desirable; but they can also be extremely evil and harmful if the will that is to make use of these gifts of nature, and whose distinctive constitution is therefore called *character*, is not good. It is just the same with *gifts of fortune*. Power, riches, honor, even health, and the entire well-being and contentment with one's condition, under the name of *happiness*, inspire confidence and thereby quite often overconfidence as well, unless a good will is present to correct and make generally purposiveⁱ their influence on the mind, and with it also the whole principle for acting; not to mention that a rational impartial spectator can nevermore take any delight in the sight of the uninterrupted prosperity of a being adorned with no feature of a pure and good will, and that a good will thus appears to constitute the indispensable condition even of the worthiness to be happy.

Some qualities are even conducive to this good will itself and can make its work much easier; but regardless of this they have no inner unconditional worth, but always presuppose a good will, which limits the high esteem in which they are otherwise rightly held, and makes it impermissible

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ⁱ *allgemein-zweckmäßig*; alternatively “universally purposive,” a tricky expression not used elsewhere in the *Groundwork*

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to take them for good per se. Moderation in affects and passions, self-control and sober deliberation are not only good in many respects, they even appear to constitute part of the *inner* worth of a person; but they are far from deserving to be declared good without limitation (however unconditionally they were praised by the ancients). For without principles of a good will they can become most evil, and the cold blood of a scoundrel makes him not only far more dangerous, but also immediately more loathsome in our eyes than he would have been taken to be without it.

A good will is good not because of what it effects, or accomplishes, not because of its fitness to attain some intended end, but good just by its willing, i.e. in itself; and, considered by itself, it is to be esteemed beyond compare much higher than anything that could ever be brought about by it in favor of some inclination, and indeed, if you will, the sum of all inclinations. Even if by some particular disfavor of fate, or by the scanty endowment of a stepmotherly nature, this will should entirely lack the capacity to carry through its purpose; if despite its greatest striving it should still accomplish nothing, and only the good will were to remain (not, of course, as a mere wish, but as the summoning of all means that are within our control); then, like a jewel, it would still shine by itself, as something that has its full worth in itself. Usefulness or fruitlessness can neither add anything to this worth, nor take anything away from it. It would, as it were, be only the setting to enable us to handle it better in ordinary commerce, or to attract the attention of those who are not yet expert enough; but not to recommend it to experts, or to determine its worth.

Even so, in this idea of the absolute worth of a mere will, not taking into account any utility in its estimation, there is something so strange that, regardless of all the agreement with it even of common reason, a suspicion must yet arise that it might perhaps covertly be founded merely on some high-flown fantasticality, and that we may have misunderstood Nature's^j purpose in assigning Reason to our will as its ruler. We shall therefore submit this idea to examination from this point of view.

In the natural predispositions of an organized being, i.e. one arranged purposively^k for life, we assume as a principle that no organ will be found in

^j Nature, Reason, Philosophy, and Virtue are occasionally capitalized, and referred to with the feminine pronoun, to indicate that Kant is using these words allegorically. Allegorical and literal passages are not always easy to distinguish.

^k *Zweck* is translated as "end" except when it occurs as part of *zweckmäßig* ("purposive") or *zwecklos* ("purposeless").