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Elements in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant

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KANT ON THE RATIONALITY OF MORALITY

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Kant on the Rationality of Morality

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Abstract: Kant claims that the fundamental principle of morality is given by pure reason itself. Many have interpreted Kant to derive this principle from a conception of pure practical reason (as opposed to merely prudential reasoning about the most effective means to empirically given ends). But Kant maintained that there is only one faculty of reason, although with both theoretical and practical applications. This Element shows how Kant attempted to derive the fundamental principle and goal of morality from the general principles of reason as such. To achieve this, it takes reason as Kant himself conceived of it, namely, as defined above all by the two fundamental principles of noncontradiction and sufficient reason, with a third principle of systematicity attached to the second of these. Its main argument is that Kant attempted to derive the fundamental principle of morality in its several formulations by applying the principle of noncontradiction to the fact that human beings are agents with their own wills, and the complete object of morality, the highest good, from the principle of sufficient reason. Further, Kant supposed both that the application of the fundamental principle of morality must be systematic, thus yielding a system of duties, and also that morality itself must be part of a complete system of both theoretical and practical cognition, or more precisely part of the ideal of such a complete system of cognition. Kant also held that pure reason is practical, in the sense of being able to motivate human beings to action; the Element will also consider his theoretical justification of this claim and its empirical consequences.

Keywords: Kant, duty, freedom, fundamental principle of morality, highest good, humanity, principle of noncontradiction, practical reason, principle of sufficient reason, systematicity, the unconditioned

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