

# Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*

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## The Division of Philosophical Labor

- Kant generally endorses the ancient Greek division of philosophy into three branches:
  - Physics (Natural philosophy),
  - Ethics (Moral philosophy),
  - Logic.
- Logic is concerned only with the forms of thinking.
- Physics and ethics are concerned with objects and the laws to which those objects are subject:
  - Laws of nature (physics),
  - Laws of freedom (ethics).
- Both physics and ethics have empirical and “pure,” *a priori* components.
- Pure moral philosophy “is wholly cleared of anything which can only be empirical” (389).

## Pure Moral Philosophy

- Kant argues from “the common idea of duty and of moral laws” that moral laws must originate *a priori* in reason.
  1. If a law is morally valid, then it holds for all rational beings without exception.
  2. If a law holds for all rational beings without exception, then its origin cannot be found in any feature of one kind rational being which is not shared with all other rational beings.
  3. If the origin of a law cannot be found in any feature of one kind of rational being which is not shared with all other rational beings, then it lies *a priori* in reason itself.
  4. So, if a law is morally valid, then its origin lies *a priori* in reason itself.

- Pure moral philosophy shows what the moral laws are, and how they originate *a priori* in reason.
- It is “indispensably necessary” because knowledge of moral laws is required for moral goodness:
  - What is morally good both conforms to moral laws and is done for the sake of moral laws.

### **The Good in Itself**

- Ancient ethicists claimed that the good for the human being is happiness (*eudaimonia*), however that is to be understood.
- They claimed that “virtues” and external goods are what is conducive to human happiness.
- Kant notes that both the “virtues” and external goods can help us to do bad things.
- Even happiness can lead to bad states such as pride and arrogance.
- If virtue or happiness go badly, it is because the person has a “bad will.”
- The only way that we can avoid bad actions and bad states is through the exercise of a “good will.”
- Kant concludes that a good will is the only thing which is good without qualification, or in itself.
  - Happiness is good only insofar as one is worthy of it, and one is worthy of happiness only by possessing a good will.

### **Moral Worth**

- A good will is a will that acts purely on the basis of duty.
- Only such acts have moral worth.
  - An act that conforms to one’s duty but which is performed for some other reason has no moral value.
  - A merchant charges a fair price because it will build a loyal clientele.
- Sometimes one’s duties conflict with one’s inclinations or selfish purposes.
  - I help a person I do not like, and who may even do me harm at some later time.
- Acts performed for duty and against inclination and selfish purpose have the highest moral worth.
- Even promoting happiness has moral worth only insofar as it done out of duty.

### **Acting from Duty**

- An action that is done out of duty is an action which is done out of respect for the law.
- A dutiful action, like all other rational actions, proceeds according to a “maxim.”
- Most maxims that motivate actions show us how to attain our ends.
  - When I my house is unhealthfully unclean, and I want to maintain my health, I act on the maxim “Clean the house.”
- The maxim of a dutiful action is:
  - Follow the law, even if my inclinations are thereby thwarted.
- So, an action which has moral worth will performed solely in order to follow the law.

### **Following the Law**

- To sum up:
  - The only unqualified good is a good will,
  - A good will acts only from duty,
  - Acting from duty is acting in order to follow the law.
- But what is the law which a good will strives to follow?
- Since the law in dutiful actions is indifferent to any of its effects, it will be purely formal in character.
- The fundamental formal character of law is its universal application.
- So, to “follow the law” is to act in such a way that one is willing to allow the maxim of acting to be applicable to all rational beings.
- A good will is a will which acts in a way that it would have every other will act.

### **An Example**

- I am in distress, and one way to get out of my dire situation is to make a promise that I intend to break.
- I might then act according to the following maxim:
  - “If there is no other way to get out of trouble, make a false promise.”
- Acting from such a maxim “follows the law” only if I am willing to allow this maxim to be applicable universally.

- But I cannot will the universal adoption of the maxim.
- For then the maxim would be self-defeating, because it would result in a general breakdown in trust, in which case either:
  - My present lie would not be believed, and hence of no help to me, or
  - It would be believed, but people would be entitled to lie to me in return.

### **Why We Need Moral Philosophy**

- The preceding account of goodness is taken from nothing more than “the moral cognition of ordinary human reason.”
- Ordinary use of reason is sufficient to determine what one ought to do and is available to everyone.
- So it might be thought that the everyday use of reason, in its “happy simplicity,” is therefore sufficient for the purposes of morals.
- But a problem lies in the power of our needs and inclination, which push us away from strict devotion to duty.
- There results a “dialectic,” in which the demands of duty are met with arguments in favor of the satisfaction of our needs and inclinations—in favor of “happiness.”
- To secure their moral principles against these arguments, ordinary people must turn to philosophy.

### **Moral Concepts Are *A Priori***

- Experience cannot reveal a single instance of an action performed purely out of a strict devotion to duty.
- Nonetheless, reason commands such actions, and we should investigate the origin of that command even if it will never be carried out.
- The command to duty cannot arise from experience, because it holds for all rational beings.
- And moral worth cannot be determined from examples, since we must first know what is morally good before we can determine what is a proper example of it.
- Without an *a priori* moral philosophy, we are left with “a disgusting mishmash of patchwork observations and half-reasoned principles.”
- Showing the *a priori* origin of moral concepts confers dignity on action from duty, which motivates dutiful action.

## **Imperatives**

- When the human will acts for reasons, it does so by representing objective principles, which are called “commands.”
- The formula of a command is an “imperative,” and is expressed by an “ought.”
  - “Imperatives say that something would be good to do or to refrain from doing.”
- Imperatives imply only to human will, as a “holy will” would not act from anything but objective laws of the good.
- Imperatives command in two ways:
  - Hypothetically: one should do x, in order to accomplish end y,
  - Categorically: one should do x, period.
- Categorical imperatives alone are appropriate to morality.
- We cannot tell from experience whether they are ever obeyed, so they must be investigated *a priori*.

## **The Categorical Imperative**

- There is only one way to explain why one should perform an action without taking into account its end:
  - The action is one that conforms to a universal law.
  - I should do x because doing x conforms to law, and not because of any end it might promote.
- So a general form of a categorical imperative is this:
  - Act in such a way that the maxim of the action can serve as a universal law.
- Schematically, the categorical imperative functions in this way:
  - Should I do x?
  - Yes, if my reason for doing x can be a reason for everyone to do x.
- This principle for action is now known as a principle of “universalizability.”

### The Categorical Imperative and Duties

- The categorical imperative is a very abstract principle.
- If it is to serve as a moral law governing the actions of rational beings, the specific duties of those beings should be derivable from the imperative itself.
- Kant derives instances of four kinds of duties, which are arranged according to the way duties were understood in his time.

	<b>Perfect</b> (Permits no exceptions)	<b>Imperfect</b> (Permits exceptions)
<b>To ourselves</b>	Preserve my own life	Develop my talents
<b>To others</b>	Make honest promises	Help others

- In each case, a maxim allowing the violation of the duty cannot be universalized.

### An Example: Making Honest Promises

- Perhaps the most famous of these examples is that of a perfect duty to others to make only honest promises to them, an example that was examined in the First Section.
- Because the duty is said to be perfect, it should admit of no exceptions.
- Thus, it is forbidden to make a dishonest promise even if making that promise would help oneself (or someone else) escape from difficulty.
- A maxim allowing the making a dishonest promise is not universalizable, because if it were, all trust would be destroyed.
- If all trust is destroyed, then making the promise would not serve my interest.
- It is a standard objection to Kant that in some cases, such as that of preventing a murder, it is permissible to make a false promise.

### Justifying the Categorical Imperative

- At this point, Kant has explained two things:
  - How an imperative *could be* categorical,
  - How a categorical imperative *can* account for all possible kinds of duties.
- But he has yet to prove that there is a categorical imperative that applies to all rational beings.
- The proof cannot be based on experience, given the generality of its application.
- Yet it is tempting to appeal to empirical motives and laws, given the difficulty of:

- Justifying objective laws like the categorical imperative *a priori*,
- Deriving the authority of the categorical imperative to command from its *a priori* origin.
- The task will require “a step into metaphysics.”

### **The Ends of Action**

- Ends are what determine the will to action.
- There are two kinds of ends:
  - Objective ends, which depend on motives that are valid for all rational beings,
  - Subjective ends, which depend on desires that are relative to individuals.
- Objective ends are ends in themselves, while subjective ends are only means to other ends.
- Only objective ends could be the basis of a categorical imperative.
  - If there is a maxim that promotes an end which all rational beings have, such a maxim could be willed to be a universal law.

### **Man as an End in Itself**

- Kant maintains that every rational being exists as an end in itself.
  - “Rational beings are called persons inasmuch as their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves.”
- An end in itself is an end for every rational being.
- In the specific case of human beings, all humans are ends in themselves and thus ends for every human being.
- So I can universalize the following maxim:
  - Treat all other human beings as ends (and not as means to some end).
- My reason for treating all humans (including myself) as ends is a reason for all humans to treat all humans as ends.
- We can then explain the duty of honest promising, on the grounds that to promise dishonestly to another is to treat that other person as a means to my own ends.

### **Legislating Universal Law**

- The moral law, as given in the categorical imperative, is not imposed on us from without.
- Instead, it is dictated by the rational will itself.
- So, given the universal scope of the categorical imperative, the rational will dictates universal law.
- This universal law is independent of any of our special interests.
- Because of its universal legislating activity, the will is called its “autonomous” (where “nomos” = “law”).
- A will which is subject to external laws is “heteronomous.”
- Autonomy of the rational will is the only way to explain the *a priori* origin of the moral law.

### **The Kingdom of Ends**

- The concept of an autonomous rational will gives rise to “another very fruitful concept,” that of a “kingdom of ends.”
- Kant claims that it is possible that there be a systematic union of rational beings under legislation that mandates treating each one as an end.
- Morality can then be understood in terms of a possible kingdom of ends:
  - A moral act is one that is based on legislation that makes a kingdom of ends possible.
- Potential membership in a kingdom of ends constitutes human dignity, which is intrinsic worth.
- Dignity is beyond all price, because what has a price can be replaced by something with an equivalent price.
- All the other virtues (skill at work, wit, etc.) give us only delight, which has a price but not intrinsic worth.

### **The Good Will**

- In Section One, Kant claimed that according to the common conception of morality, only a good will is good in itself.
- He now connects the concept of a good with the categorical imperative, which is the highest principle of morality.

- A will which is absolutely good is a will whose maxims can be universalized, i.e. a will which acts only on the basis of the categorical imperative.
- An absolutely good will therefore be a will that legislates in the kingdom of ends.
- Such a will is a “holy will,” which is the kind of will a supreme being would have.
- The dignity of the human will lies not in its being subject to the moral law, but in its being the source of its own law as an autonomous being.

### **Spurious Principles of Morality**

- All genuine moral principles presuppose the autonomy of the rational will.
- Spurious moral principles presuppose its heteronomy.
  - The law governing the will is sought in its objects, not in itself.
- Such laws can only be hypothetical imperatives.
- They may be based on either:
  - Experience, or
  - Pure reason.

### **Against Empiricism in Ethics**

- Empirical principles of morality promote happiness as an end.
- They may do so in one of two ways:
  - As private happiness,
  - As a “moral feeling” that is produced by a special “moral sense.”
- A principle that promotes private happiness does not distinguish between virtue and vice.
- If there is a “moral feeling,” promoting it would be superior to promoting private happiness.
- But feelings are variable among people and therefore cannot provide a universal standard for distinguishing right actions from wrong actions.

### **Against Rationalism in Ethics**

- Some moral philosophers try to derive moral principles analytically from a concept of perfection:
  - Divine perfection, or
  - Ontological perfection (maximal degree of reality).
- But a definite conception of divine perfection can only be constructed in two ways:
  - From ourselves, in which case we do not need to appeal to divine perfection,
  - From ideas of domination and vengeance, which have no place in morality.
- We have no definite conception of ontological perfection (maximal degree of reality).
- Because it is empty, ontological perfection at least does not conflict with morality, and so it is better.
- It is also better than any empirical concept, because it is not corrupted by a connection to experience.

### **Rational Man and Natural Man**

- In Section Three, Kant discusses the question of how the categorical imperative is related to human beings.
- *If* a human being has a rational will, it is autonomous and lays down the moral law for itself.
- But human beings exist in the natural world and act in that world according to their desires and inclinations.
- In order for it to be possible for humans to have an autonomous rational will, it must be possible to conceive of them as beings acting independently of their desires and inclinations.
- To do so, we must distinguish humans as appearances in nature and as things in themselves that are not subject to natural “springs” of action.
- Thus, our rational will, which is the basis of morality, must be conceived as a member of an intelligible world, in which we *would* do what in nature we *ought* to do.

## Compatibilism

- The doctrine of the necessity of all natural actions appears to threaten the freedom of the rational will that underlies reality.
- But there is a way to reconcile the two.
- A given human action may be regarded as the product of *both*:
  - Desire and inclination, and
  - The free exercise of the rational will.
- The compatibility is due to the fact that the human being can be regarded as appearance and as thing in itself.
- But although we must, for purposes of morality, think *that* we are free, we cannot comprehend *how* we are free.
- And because it is detached from all interests, we comprehend that the unconditional “ought” laid down by the categorical imperative is incomprehensible.