

CVSP 203 Common Lecture: Kant's Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals

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I. Introduction: Kant's Life and Works

II. Some Key Features of Kant's Moral Theory Broadly Stated

- According to Kant Morality (i.e. our sense of right and wrong, good and bad) is Rooted in Common Human Reason. (It is in fact often known better by the uneducated than by so-called specialists in moral philosophy.)
- Freedom and Determinism

“One can therefore grant that ... we could calculate a human being's conduct for the future with as much certainty as a lunar or solar eclipse *and could nevertheless maintain that the human being's conduct is free.*” (5:99)

- Freedom and Responsibility
- The Moral Quality of an Action Depends Entirely on One's Motive, *not* on the Consequence
- Morality = Doing the Good Absolutely and Entirely Because it is Good
- Genuine Morality is Autonomy or Self-Rule (not Heteronomy, i.e. Rule by Another)
- *Kant Thinks the Content of Morality (i.e. what is good, what we should do, what we should take as the end of our actions) can be Derived Exclusively from a Consideration of the Moral Motives*

III. The Goal and Method of the Groundwork

Goal: “The present groundwork is, however, nothing more than the search for and establishment of the *supreme principle of morality ...*” (4:392)

Method: “I have adopted in this work the method ... to proceed *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 the common cognition in which it we find it used.” (4:392)

Section I: Here Kant moves by analysis, i.e. by conceptual dissection and separation, from “common moral cognition,” i.e. the moral views of the man on the street, to a clear and distinct idea of its basic principle, i.e. the principle by use of which common people determine if a given action is right or wrong, good or bad. Kant also says this is a transition from common moral cognition to “philosophic moral cognition.”

Section II: In this section Kant provides a *purely conceptual* clarification of the supreme principle isolated in Section I. This means he clarifies the basic moral principle *without any reference* to the specific character of human beings that we can only learn empirically in sciences like anthropology, psychology, biology, history, etc. He is able to do this because the moral principle does not concern what is or actually happens in the world, but what *ought to happen* even if it never does.

Note 1: Such a pure conceptual explanation of the moral principle and of the moral agent that could follow it is what Kant calls metaphysical knowledge. So Section II is said to be *a transition from philosophic moral cognition to the metaphysics of morals*.

Note 2. We can see from this that the “search for” the principle is contained in Section I, and that Section II only clarifies this principle. Both parts together fulfill the analytical task described in the second quote above.

Note 3. All that Kant believes himself to be assuming as the basis for these first two sections is common moral cognition. Thus everything that he says, no matter how complicated, is supposed to be contained – though in a confused way – in every normal person’s conscience.

Section III: It is here, the heart of the book, that Kant first attempts the “establishment” of this supreme principle. This means that until this point Kant has entirely avoided the question of whether this supreme principle is genuine and how it is possible for the human being to have such a law. This transition goes in the opposite direction of analysis, i.e. from the basic part and its justification back to common moral cognition, and its method is the opposite of one that separates; it is one that combines back into a whole. This is called *synthesis*.

Note: Such an investigation into the sources and possibility of a metaphysical principle is what Kant calls “critique.” So the last section is a transition from the metaphysics of morals to a critique of the moral principle. Moreover, since Kant holds that the supreme principle is in fact nothing but the expression of reason insofar as it determines our actions purely through itself, i.e. can be practically determining, he terms this a *transition from the metaphysics of morals to the critique of pure practical reason*.

IV. The Argument of Section I

Step 1: To find the one thing that is absolutely and independently good, and is the condition of all other goods.

Step 2: To further illuminate the somewhat strange idea of something that would be good in itself.

Step 3: To further illuminate the idea of the good will by consideration of the related concept of duty.

Step 4: To arrive at a first formulation of the supreme principle of morality. (4:402)

The Key Insight: “Since I have deprived the will of every impulse that could arise for it from obeying any particular law, nothing is left but the conformity of actions as such with universal law, which alone is to serve the will as its principle, that is, *I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.*” (4:402)

V. The Argument of Section II

Step 1: To note that the idea of morality and of the moral agent is the idea not of what is, but of what ought to be, and consequently that we need not consult the special sciences to discover the structure of the moral agent. It can be determined entirely by reference to the kind of principle it is to follow, i.e. the supreme principle of morality.

Note: Kant often says that this metaphysics of morality is “a priori” by which he is only pointing out that it does not depend in any way on any empirical knowledge or experience of the human being.

Step 2: To explain the structure of the “will” or what is also called practical reason, i.e. reason insofar as it determines what we do.

Step 3. To further explain what kind of principle the moral law is, i.e. that it is a categorical imperative.

Step 4. To further fill out the idea of the supreme principle through alternative formulations (see next slide).

Step 5. To explain that all willing is either autonomous or heteronomous and to show that *autonomous willing is equivalent to willing according to a categorical imperative.* (4:432)

VI. Formulations of the Supreme Principle or Law of Morality, i.e. the Categorical Imperative (following Allen Wood’s classification in Kant’s Ethical Thought)

Formula of Universal Law: “I ought never act except in a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.” (4:402) [Also: “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.” (4:421)]

Formula of the Law of Nature: “Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature.” (4:421)

Formula of Humanity as an End in Itself: “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.” (4:439)

Formula of Autonomy: “Choose only in such a way that the maxims of your choice are also included as universal law in the same volition.” (4:439)

Formula of the Kingdom of Ends: “Act in accordance with the maxims of a member giving universal laws for a purely possible kingdom of ends.” (4:439)

Note: Kant claims the first formulation is the central one, but that *they are all equivalent* such that any one of the formulations contains within itself the others.

VII. Brief Summary of the Main Flow of the Argument of Sections I and II

The morality of the man on the street rests on the idea of a good will, and on the idea that the moral worth of an action depends entirely upon the extent to which it is done out of respect for duty.

The only possible unconditional principle or law of duty is this: To only perform actions thorough which I can at the same time regard myself as giving universal law. (Reason: Because only this is entirely unconditioned by particular desires or ends or in other words it is the only law that can be willed entirely for its own sake [good for its own sake, etc.] .)

This principle has the form of what is called a *categorical imperative*, and indeed the only possible categorical imperative is this law; therefore, the moral law is logically equivalent to the categorical imperative. Thus the different formulations are really equivalent.

The only law suitable to a being willing autonomously is the categorical imperative, and a being that would follow the categorical imperative would for that reason alone be autonomous; therefore, autonomy is logically equivalent to willing according to the supreme principle of morality.