

Groundwork I

PHIL 4/871

1 A Metaphysics of Morals

- Morality is the science of the will and its laws¹
 - Morality possess both a “pure” and an “empirical” part with the pure part providing a justification and explanatory base for the empirical²
- We need a metaphysics of morals, just as we did a metaphysics of nature
 - Explain universality & necessity: if there are moral laws they hold universally and with necessity, and for that reason must be a priori³
 - Buttress and guide existing moral practice⁴

1.1 Aim of the Groundwork

- Open an “entirely new field” of study concerning the nature of a *pure* will and the capacity to motivated by reason alone⁵
- *Not* aiming to provide a metaphysics of morals
 - The content of the *Groundwork* is largely in abstraction from whatever concrete demands morality may make of us
- Aims to :
 1. Articulate the “supreme principle of morality” (4:392)
 - “analytic” vs. “synthetic” method⁶
 2. Show that this principle is indeed the most basic and general of all moral principles

1.2 Structure of the Groundwork

- First section: “Transition from common rational to philosophic moral cognition.”
 - Regression from “common concept” – viz. <duty> to its constituents
 - First articulation of the moral law
- Second section: “Transition from popular moral philosophy to metaphysics of morals.”
 - Disqualification of the “popular” conception of morality
 - * Return to analysis of the “common concept”

¹ 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. (Preface, 4:387)

² all moral philosophy is based entirely on its pure part; and when it is applied to the human being it does not borrow the least thing from acquaintance with him (from anthropology) but gives to him, as a rational being, laws a priori... (Preface, 4:389)

³ 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 (4:389)

⁴ 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 law, but it must also be done *for its sake*; if not, that conformity is only very contingent and precarious... (Preface, 4:390)

⁵ let it not be thought that what is here called for already exists...and that we do not therefore have to open up an entirely new field. ... 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.

⁶ [The analytic method requires that we begin with] something already known to be dependable, from which we can go forward with confidence and ascend to the sources which are not yet known, and whose discovery not only will explain what is known already, but will also exhibit an area with many cognitions that all arise from these same sources. (*Prolegomena* §4, 4:275; cf. §5, 4:276)

- Analysis of maxims and imperatives
- Analysis of the moral law as a “categorical” imperative
 - * The moral law is a priori
 - * The possibility of moral obligation depends on the possibility of a will that is “autonomous” or free
- Third section: “Final step from metaphysics of morals to the critique of pure practical reason.”
 - Break from “analytic” method of previous sections
 - * Argument from the conditions of autonomy (freedom) to the fact that we are free and autonomous
 - * Analysis of the concepts <duty> and <rational will> cannot demonstrate that human beings are *in fact* autonomous
 - “Proof” of the status of human beings as possessing free and rational will

1.3 Structure of Groundwork I

- The good will is the only unconditional good (4:393-4)
- The “natural purpose” of reason is a morally good will, not happiness (4:394-6)
- The analysis of the concept <duty> (4:397-401)
- Conformity to a law, as such, is the condition of a will that is good in itself (4:402-3)
- Common & philosophical cognition of morality & the dialectic of practical reason (4:403-5)

2 The Good Will

- The only unconditionally good thing is a “good will”⁷
 - A good will is good because of what motivates it, not because of what it does or accomplishes⁸
 - Nothing bad can result from a good will, if it does then this is the result of poor judgment (or stupidity)

3 The Analysis of <duty>

- Three propositions
 - Proposition 1: an action is morally good if and only if it is done from duty
 - Proposition 2: the moral worth of a dutiful act lies in the quality of its maxim
 - Proposition 3: duty is the necessity of an action from respect for the law

⁷ It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will. (4:393)

⁸ 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 favour of some inclination, and indeed, if you will, the sum of all inclinations. Even if by some particular disfavour 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 . . . 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. (4:394)

3.1 *Inclination & Duty – The Four Examples*

Distinguish between:

1. Actions (merely) coinciding with duty that are performed as a means to satisfying a higher-order inclination directed at some other object.
 2. Actions (merely) coinciding with duty, performed from an immediate inclination towards some object.
 3. Actions that (coincide with duty and) are performed solely for the sake of duty.
 4. Actions that are done contrary to duty because of some other immediate or higher-order inclination.
- Kant's four cases are specifically illustrations of the second point above:
 - The shopkeeper (4:397)
 - Preserving one's life (4:397-8)
 - Beneficent action (4:398)
 - Caring for one's happiness (4:399)
 - Avoid an easy misconception based on these cases: Kant is *not* arguing that morally valuable dutiful acts *require* that one fail to enjoy or otherwise identify with the action they perform, as one might think is the case with a virtuous person
 - Duty is not a *purpose*, it is the (moral) ground for adopting a purpose⁹

⁹ See (Korsgaard 1989, 324–6; Wood 2008, ch. 2).

3.2 *Questions about Proposition 1*

- There is some controversy as to what the actual first proposition is – Kant does not explicitly state it¹⁰
- Options:
 1. There is nothing unconditionally good other than a good will
 - Fails to explain how (3) follows from (1) and (2)
 2. An action from duty is an action from respect for the moral law
 - Construes (1) as “subjective”, (2) as “objective” and (3) as their combination
 - Cannot account for the fact that discussion of respect and the notion of a “principle of the will” or practical law (4:400) occur *after* the first proposition is presumably introduced
 3. The concept of duty contains the concept of the good will “under certain subjective limitations and hindrances” (4:397) - Fails to explain how (3) follows from (1) and (2)

¹⁰ the standard view is that this unformulated proposition states that an action has moral worth if and only if it is performed from duty alone. This is the most natural reading, since this thesis seems to be the main import of the argument of the preceding paragraphs and it makes for a smooth transition to the introduction of the second proposition, which is concerned with the source of moral worth. Nevertheless, this reading has sometimes been called into question, usually on the grounds that it does not appear to be compatible with Kant's claim that the third proposition is a consequence of the first two. (Allison (2011), 122)

3.3 Questions about Proposition 2

- What is a “maxim”?¹¹
 - Designates an action to be performed in a type of situation and for some purpose because it is good (In C, I ought (may, etc.) to A, for P because it is G)
 - Distinguish between:
 1. I will knock Alex down, in order to remove him from the path of an oncoming bullet.
 2. I will knock Alex down, in order to relieve my temper.
 3. I will punch a punching bag, in order to relieve my temper.
 - (1) is (at least) permissible while (2) is wrong, but not simply because of the *action* undertaken in (1), understood as bodily behaviour
 - (3) is permissible, but not simply because of the *intention* rather than any bodily behavior
 - What matters is the *relation* between action and intention – viz. the “form” of the maxim

¹¹ A *maxim* is the subjective principle of willing; the objective principle (i.e., the one that would also subjectively serve all rational beings as the practical principle if reason had complete control over the desiderative faculty) is the practical *law*. (4:400, note)

3.4 Questions about Proposition 3

- The third proposition is supposed to follow from the first two, but how?
- What is *respect*? Is it a feeling?¹²
- If duty is an action from respect for the law, then isn't duty an action from feeling rather than reason?¹³

Intellectualism: respect is a purely intellectual recognition of the moral law sufficient for generating moral action

Affectivism: moral motivation arises from an intellectual recognition of the moral law which then generates a particular kind of *feeling* which is consequent to the initial intellectual recognition

¹² even though respect is a feeling, it is not one *received* by influence, but one *self-wrought* by a rational concept and therefore specifically different from all feelings of the former kind, which come down to inclination or fear. What I recognize immediately as a law for myself I recognize with respect, which signifies merely the consciousness of the *subordination* of my will to a law, without mediation of other influences on my sense. The immediate determination of the will by the law and the consciousness of this is called *respect*, so that it is viewed as the *effect* of the law on the subject and not as its *cause*. (4: 402, note)

4 Conformity to a Law: Potter's Analysis

1. A good will only has absolute worth.
 - (1a) Moral value always outweighs any other kind of value.
2. A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes. (G, 394)
3. A human action is morally good if and only if it is done from duty. (G, 397-399)
4. To act from duty is to act, not with regard to the purpose to be attained by our action, but with regard only to the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon.

¹³ Intellectualists hold that respect for the moral law is, or arises from, a purely intellectual recognition of the supreme authority of the moral law, and that this intellectual recognition is sufficient to generate moral action independently of any special motivating feelings or affections. Opposed to the intellectualist interpretation is what I shall call the affectivist view. Affectivists need not deny that Kantian moral motivation initially arises from an intellectual recognition of the moral law. Contrary to intellectualists, however, they maintain that it also depends on a peculiar moral feeling of respect for law, one consequent to the initial recognition or moral judgment the intellectualists emphasize exclusively. (McCarty (1993), 423)

- (4a) The moral value of an action derives from a quality of its *maxim*.
 - (4b) Action from duty is action done on the basis of a maxim which we have adopted, not because its adoption will fulfill desires of ours, but because of its form.
5. This formal principle of volition (i.e., the principle of the adoption of maxims in virtue of their form) is simply the requirement that my action conform to universal law as such.
 6. The essence of law is its universality.
 7. Hence the moral law commands nothing but that I always act in such a way that I can will my that maxim should become a universal law.
 8. To act for the sake of duty is to act only on that maxim which can at the same time be willed as a universal law.
 9. ∴ A good will is a will which always acts only on that maxim which can at the same time be willed as a universal law.

References & Further Reading

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