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Kant

The Metaphysics of Morals

Edited by
Mary Gregor
Introduction by
Roger J Sullivan

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IMMANUEL KANT
The Metaphysics of Morals

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HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

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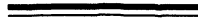
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IMMANUEL KANT



The Metaphysics of Morals

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY
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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo,
Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521562171

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First published 1996
18th printing 2013

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by the MPG Books Group

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Kant, Immanuel, 1724–1804.

[*Metaphysik der Sitten*. English]

The metaphysics of morals/Immanuel Kant; translated and edited by Mary Gregor;
with an introduction by Roger J. Sullivan.

p. cm. – (Cambridge texts in the history of philosophy)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Ethics. – Early works to 1800. 2. Duty – Early works to 1800.

3. Virtue – Early works to 1800. 1. Gregor, Mary. II. Title. III. Series.

B2785.E5G7413 1996

170–dc20 95–44890 CIP

ISBN 978–0–521–56217–1 hardback

ISBN 978–0–521–56673–5 paperback

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Introduction

A sketch of Immanuel Kant's life takes very little space. Except for a conflict with the royal censor over his writings on religion, he led the quiet life of a faculty member within a small eighteenth-century European university. He was born in Königsberg, East Prussia, 22 April 1724, and he died there 12 February 1804, never having left the Königsberg area, where he taught first as a private tutor and then, for some twenty-five years, served as Professor of Logic and Metaphysics. So influential have been his publications, however, that, like Plato before him, no one after him could do philosophy without taking him into account. Even today his remains the premier moral theory. Although his political philosophy has not had the same impact as his ethical doctrines, it did anticipate the classical liberalism underlying republican forms of government today.

Kant had written about morality in several of his earlier works, but *The Groundwork* (or *Foundations*) of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, published in 1785, was his first book devoted exclusively to ethical theory. As its title indicates and as Kant also stated in its preface, this book was intended to provide the foundations or groundwork for a future work entitled *The Metaphysics of Morals*. He had claimed to be writing a book on that topic as early as 1768, but he did not actually publish this volume until 1797. (The *Critique of Practical Reason* was published in 1788 and the *Critique of Judgment* in 1790.) Given the time he had to think about its contents and the fact that he waited until near the end of his professional life to issue it, presumably *The Metaphysics of Morals* reflects his most mature views on the topics discussed in it. Strangely enough, however, most people interested in Kant's moral theory have tended to neglect *The Metaphysics of Morals* and have devoted themselves instead to analyzing the volume meant only to be its introduction. They have thought that the first half of the later volume, the "Doctrine of Right," does not fit in at all with his moral theory, and they also have rejected everything in the second half, the "Doctrine of Virtue," that does not agree with the ways in which they had already interpreted the *Groundwork*.

By itself, the *Groundwork* has proved to be a very difficult work to understand.

Because Kant wrote it with other eighteenth-century philosophers and thinkers in mind, it is common for contemporary scholars to disagree about what he was trying to say and why he said it. Many of these disagreements, particularly about how the categorical imperative should be used, can be cleared up by a careful reading of *The Metaphysics of Morals*. This is not to say that this book is always easy to understand, either. There are serious problems with the original German edition, especially in sections dealing with “The Right of a State.”¹ Moreover, putting things precisely requires a technical vocabulary and a formal style that makes it highly unlikely that the ideas discussed can be put in a form suitable for popular consumption. Nonetheless, when those who read *The Metaphysics of Morals* with an open mind return to the *Groundwork*, they then tend to find themselves reading a different book, one with doctrines clearly set out that earlier had inexplicably eluded them, and with this new reading many of their former objections also tend to disappear.

Kant’s terminology

To try to achieve clarity and accuracy, Kant developed his own technical vocabulary. The title of *The Metaphysics of Morals* already confronts us with two of those terms, namely, “metaphysics” and “morals.”

On page 6:216 of the German edition of *The Metaphysics of Morals* Kant defines metaphysics as “a system of *a priori* cognition from concepts alone” (see p. 10 of this edition).² This, of course, is not very helpful unless we know what “*a priori* cognition” is. According to Kant there are just two fundamental sources of cognition or knowledge – our own reason and experience, that is, what comes to us through our senses. Kant describes the latter, empirical knowledge, as learned in an “*a posteriori*” way, that is, from or *after* experience. By contrast, knowledge originating just in the activity of the mind gives us the conceptual framework that enables us to have experience. For that reason we become aware of it in the course of our experiences even though it is not drawn from any sensory experiences we have. Kant calls this “*a priori* cognition” or knowledge originating in an *a priori* way, that is, *before* experience, and making experience possible.

¹ Today it is generally agreed what were paragraphs 4–8 of §6 of “Private Right” do not belong where they were printed, and they have been put in a footnote; the sections of the “Introduction to the Metaphysics of Morals” have also been moved and renumbered. On this, see also “Translator’s note on the text.” The two subsections §§43 and 44 of “The Right of a State,” probably should be placed immediately following §42, and the subsections probably should be arranged as follows: §§45, 48, 46, 49, 47, 51, 52, “General Remark,” 50; but our translation follows the original printing. How could the text get so scrambled? One plausible explanation might be that Kant’s manuscript pages were mixed up at the printers. The “Doctrine of Virtue” did not suffer the same fate because it was published later. On these problems see Bernd Ludwig, “‘The Right of a State’ in Immanuel Kant’s *Doctrine of Right*” (full publication information is given in “Further reading”).

² Unless otherwise identified, all page numbers given both in the text and in the notes refer to the pagination of the *The Metaphysics of Morals*, vol. 6 in the Berlin Academy edition (“AK”). These numbers and volume number are given in the margin (in square brackets) of this translation. Each number marks the beginning of the corresponding Academy page.

There are two kinds of a priori knowledge – “pure” and “mixed.” *Pure* a priori knowledge, which is found mainly in logic, consists of the formal manipulation of symbols according to the requirements of reason alone. (Logic, then, is presupposed in all our other thinking.) *Mixed* a priori knowledge contains not only the form given by reason but also “matter,” that is, concepts referring to objects encountered in experience, whether empirical or moral. It is this kind of “material” that forms the data for our everyday and scientific knowledge of the world as well as for our moral decisions about how to act. As Kant wrote in the preface to the *Groundwork*, the foundation of the study of *human* morality obviously must include some commonly known information about what it is to be and live as a human being.

What is specifically a priori in *The Metaphysics of Morals* is the fundamental principle of morality, the categorical imperative, that Kant identified and defended in the *Groundwork*. The “first principles” to which Kant refers in his titles for the two parts of *The Metaphysics of Morals* (and which he calls “axioms” elsewhere) are the maxims that follow analytically from the definition of the categorical imperative. Since they too are given by reason, they are all a priori propositions. They articulate natural, that is, pre-political and non-statutory, rights, and they ground the right of the state to enact its laws. Because they are applied to topics such as the nature of human beings that we learn only from experience, they also are mixed a priori propositions. The fundamental norms pertaining, say, to property and its acquisition, then, are not extracted from a sociological survey of the laws of existing states. Rather, they are norms given by reason to determine whether such statutes are correct.³

If we are to avoid a common misunderstanding, we need to be clear from the beginning that Kant did not hold or teach that we need to appeal to the categorical imperative every time we act or are faced with a difficult decision. The function of the categorical imperative is to help us generate *maxims* – general rules or policies – not actions. This is similar to the procedure of rule utilitarians, who apply the Greatest Happiness Principle to generate rules or policies on which to act. Once adopted by a person, an appeal to the appropriate maxim is an essential part of the deliberation preceding and concluding in an action. In other words, Kant believed that his ethical theory would contribute what in the *Groundwork* he called a moral “compass” that can point us in the right moral direction (6:404). But, like any other compass, it will not tell us exactly what steps to take to act rightly. That is the role and responsibility of judgment. As a consequence, as we shall see, *The Metaphysics of Morals* focuses on principles, with only a limited number of remarks about their application and those mainly in Kant’s case presentations.

We also need to note that, for Kant, there is a difference between “morality” or practical philosophy, and “morals.” Practical philosophy has two parts. One consists in the systematic study of practical metaphysics, that is, the a priori foundations of morally right conduct, as done in the *Groundwork*. The other

³ See 6:229–30, 291, 297 (pp. 23, 73, 78).

involves what Kant called “moral anthropology,” that is, an empirical examination of those features of the human condition that promote or impair how humans respond to their moral duties. By contrast, morals contains those maxims conforming to the ultimate moral norm and enunciating human moral obligations in very general “material” terms. That is Kant’s program in *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Once adopted, these maxims can also be thought of as indicating qualities of a person’s character. For example, the maxim of not telling lies typifies the virtue of honesty. (But since we cannot see a person’s maxims, we cannot be sure of our inferences about his or her character.)

When faced with a difficult decision, a person will already have adopted a number of these very general rules, and his or her decision about how to act will then be a problem for judgment – for deciding which rule is most relevant in this particular case and exactly how to follow it. Finally, it is the role of character also to motivate a person actually to act on that judgment of what is the right thing to do. Just knowing the categorical imperative and the right moral principles will not make a person virtuous. Good character depends both on an initial commitment to obeying those norms and a conscientious adherence to that commitment.

In the matter of terminology, there are special problems with translating the German word “Recht.” Like the Latin “ius,” it can mean law or justice or right. Translated here by the noun “right,” it can refer to the ultimate moral law, or to a system of laws following from it, or to one of the parts of such a system. As an adjective “right” describes behavior that accords with morally correct civil law and that may be coerced legitimately by legal authority. The sense generally is clear from the context.⁴

Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Right

Preface and Introduction to the Metaphysics of Morals

Rather than immediately introducing the Doctrine of Right, Kant reviews many of the most critical and fundamental doctrines underlying both parts of the *The Metaphysics of Morals*. He had earlier discussed them in greater detail in the *Groundwork* and *The Critique of Practical Reason*.

In the Preface to the *Groundwork* Kant had severely criticized earlier philosophers who, because they had based their analyses of morality on an empirical psychological account of human agency, contended that human choice must always be preceded by a desire for or aversion to something or other. We always act out the motive of desire, they claimed. But if this is the case, then morality, as

⁴ It should be noted that Professor Mary Gregor (d. 1994), who did the translation from which the present text has been edited, expressed a strong preference for capitalizing “right” when it referred to the substantive norm of conduct. See below, “Translator’s note on the text.” However, in order to maintain consistency with the general format of the Cambridge Edition of Kant (in English), this practice has not been retained here.

something distinct from the pursuit of pleasure, disappears; it is merely a high species of prudence. To avoid this error, Kant tried to avoid using question-begging psychological notions. Eventually he realized that he simply could not do without all psychological terms. In the general "Introduction" to *The Metaphysics of Morals* Kant finally faced up to this lacuna in his moral theory, and on pages 6:211–14, he offers an analysis of psychological terms that leaves open the possibility of specifically moral agency.

This account is preceded (in the Preface) and followed by a discussion of the notion of and need for a metaphysics of morals (see "Kant's terminology" above). Kant then turns to the rationale underlying the distinction he wished to make between "right" and "virtue." He begins by pointing out that the moral law issues a double command: that we (1) act rightly and (2) do so *because* it is the right action. He then distinguishes between the two by the kind of constraint possible to each. Right conduct can be legislated and enforced by outside agencies like the state, and so Kant calls these "juridical obligations," and the outward conformity of an action to the moral law is its "legality" or lawfulness. By contrast, the motivation for acting (and the end intended) can only be self-chosen and self-legislated, and that is why the kind of incentive a person adopts determines that person's personal values, his ethical character, morality, or virtue.

The "Doctrine of Right," then, is concerned only with "duties of outer freedom" – the manner in which one person's behavior affects others, as in the fulfillment of contracts. These duties the state coerces by using punitive prudential incentives. Right behaviors are also moral duties that should all be done from an ethical motive. Because incentives always belong to internal lawgiving, Kant defines the "Doctrine of Virtue" or "ethics," strictly speaking, as "the science of how one is under obligation [even to fulfill external duties like beneficence from the motive of duty] without regard for any possible external lawgiving." These special duties that relate to one's ends Kant calls "duties of virtue." With respect to one's motives, there is but one virtuous disposition, but since we can have many different goals, there are many duties of virtue.⁵

Preliminary Concepts of the Metaphysics of Morals

Kant begins with the notion of freedom and proceeds through the categories of practical modality (commanded, prohibited, permitted) to a restatement of the categorical imperative on 6:225 (p. 17). Perhaps the most striking feature of this section is his discussion, not found elsewhere in his writings, of conflicts of rules (that should not be interpreted as also conflicts between duties). Here he also distinguishes between the will (*Wille*), the faculty that legislates the ultimate moral law, and free choice (*Willkür*), our capacity to obey that law.

⁵ See 6:394–5, 406, 410 (pp. 156–7, 165, 167–8).

Introduction to the Doctrine of Right

There are two aspects of Kant's discussion that are particularly critical to understanding the importance of this part of *The Metaphysics of Morals*.

First, it was not just by accident that Kant placed the "Doctrine of Right" as the first part of his moral philosophy. The categorical imperative determines which maxims are acceptable moral principles by their ability to serve as practical norms of conduct for everyone, that is, as laws within a civil community. Moral norms for conduct, therefore, are preeminently *public* laws, characterized by the universality of the obligations they impose, especially the obligation of reciprocity. It is important to state this clearly, because today so many people tend to think of morality as concerned mainly or only with one's private standards.

Secondly, throughout *The Metaphysics of Morals* Kant judges conduct by that formula of the categorical imperative that he presented first in the *Groundwork*, the Formula of Universal Law: "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."⁶ In the "Doctrine of Right," however, he restricts its application to external behavior between people, and in this form he refers to it as the universal or supreme principle of right. It states that conduct is right which is consistent with itself if its maxim is also made into a universal law, or, alternatively, if its maxim can "coexist with the freedom of everyone in accordance with a universal law" of freedom.⁷ That this is a new variation of the categorical imperative is clear from his describing it as the "principle of all maxims."⁸ In his second *Critique* he had in effect asked, what if everyone acted similarly? (5:69). Would this be a society of which I could will to be part, that would be peaceful rather than filled with strife, harmonious rather than chaotic? Note that this is a purely formal test of universality. Put positively, it requires that maxims apply equally to everyone. Put negatively, because it is a pure a priori proposition, that is, an analytically true norm, it requires only that acceptable maxims not violate the principle of noncontradiction. For Kant's purposes here, *the two tests – positive and negative – are not distinct*. In both parts of *The Metaphysics of Morals* Kant often appeals to the principle of noncontradiction to show that maxims are unacceptable which generate contradictions.⁹

There remains this problem. If the state is to respect and protect its citizens' freedom, how can it ever be justified in using coercion against them? On 6:231–2 (pp. 24–5) Kant's answer is (1) that whoever hinders another's exercise of freedom does that person wrong; (2) whatever counteracts the hindering of an effect promotes this effect and is consistent with it; so that (3) an appeal to the principle of noncontradiction shows that coercion is legitimate that protects and promotes

⁶ 4:421; see 6:376 (p. 141).

⁷ 6:246, 230, 380 (pp. 41, 24, 146).

⁸ 6:231 (p. 24).

⁹ See, e.g., 6:231, 246, 250, 254, 255, 381–2, 386, 393, 396, 401, 451–3 (pp. 25, 41, 39, 43, 44, 146–7, 150, 156, 157–8, 161, 200–1). Particularly in the "Doctrine of Right" Kant abbreviates this argument with expressions like "in accord with right."

freedom. He concludes that the concept of “right” in its strict sense denotes the legitimate use of coercion by the state to counteract the illegitimate use of coercion by individuals.

Private Right

Today legal experts point out that the notion of private ownership now so often involves intangibles such as stocks and bonds that theories of contemporary capitalism might do without the term “property.” But since Kant represented classical liberalism and its attack on what remained of feudalism from the late medieval world, he stressed mainly the ownership by individual persons of property, particularly of real estate. Feudalism, of course, had been characterized by a complex and hierarchical system of land tenure under feudal lords, and to the new bourgeoisie, the appropriation and control of landed property symbolized emancipation from serfdom and the guarantee of personal freedom and dignity. It was against this historical background that Kant held there is an integral relationship between the possession of private landed property and the exercise of that free choice which is necessary if morality is to flourish.

Since the moral law requires us to act morally rightly Kant held that moral reason must postulate the a priori proposition that (directly contrary to feudalism) *everyone may acquire and own property*. It has this reciprocal corollary, that everyone also has the duty to respect everyone else’s property as well. The introduction of the empirical notions of embodiment and of property also means that this is a mixed rather than a pure a priori proposition. When it takes the form of a law addressed to people who are able to violate others’ freedom by stealing their property, it becomes a “synthetic” a priori proposition of right.¹⁰ Our choices may require other instrumentalities besides property. We may need the help of other people, and that in turn may require business contracts with them. The same postulate of property applies not only to them but also to relations in which one person has a role with authority over another, as, say, a parent over a child.

His thoughts on this latter subject led Kant to discuss sex and marriage in §§24–7 (pp. 61–4). His view may strike some readers today as so passé as not to be worthy of serious consideration. He contends there that, since the purpose of sex is the procreation of children, sexual activity should be restricted to the permanent, monogamous, and heterosexual union of marriage. It is not obvious, however, that Kant’s claim is completely outmoded, when we think of the present

¹⁰ 6:249 (p. 39). See also 6:380–1, 396 (pp. 146, 157–8). As Kant saw it, in an analytic statement the predicate only repeats the subject, whereas in a synthetic statement the predicate adds new information to the notion of the subject. All empirical statements are synthetic and contingently true; all definitions are analytic and necessarily true. One of the crucial problems Kant aimed to resolve in the first *Critique* was to explain the possibility of synthetic statements that also are a priori and assert a necessary connection between the subject and the predicate.

situation in which a distressingly high percentage of children are conceived casually out of wedlock and then deprived of the care and the moral guidance they normally need from both parents. Since the stability of society depends so heavily on the continuing initiation of each new generation into societal values, Kant held that behaviors related to perhaps the most personal and intimate area of human conduct are not just a matter of private interest but are also of enormous public concern, thereby justifying the inclusion of this discussion in the "Doctrine of Right."

Following Rousseau, Kant held that property in the sense of land originally belonged to everyone "in common," so that any private acquisition and ownership must conform to the united or general will of the people. Such a collective will can exist only within a civil society in which everyone has contracted with everyone else to protect everyone's right to exercise their freedom.

In his discussion of the right to own property, Kant distinguishes between simple physical (empirical or phenomenal) possession and rightful (noumenal or intelligible) ownership.¹¹ The first can exist in a Hobbesian state of nature, but only provisionally, that is, only as long as one has the physical power to repel all claimants. In such a world the fact of possession gives a presumption of possible ownership and the fact of first possession a presumption of rightful acquisition. However, this does not effectively safeguard our ability to hold *securely* the things we need. Since the notions of rightful acquisition and ownership (independently of physical possession) are meaningful concepts only within a civil condition, Kant now turns his attention to the notion of the best state that reason can devise.

The Right of a State

Stated in the words of the principle of right, only in a rightly constituted civil society is it possible "for the free choice of each to accord with the freedom of all, and therefore possible for there to be any right," including the right to private property (6:263; p. 51). Only then is the principle of right codified in public legislation and enforced by competent judicial decisions, thereby making possible private ownership that is not provisional but is certain and secure.

Throughout virtually all his earlier works Kant had stressed that the moral condition of the human race is characterized by a radical propensity toward evil that shows itself both in moral struggles within each person and the constant danger of conflicts between persons. So terrible would be the unrelenting threat of conflict in the state of nature, Kant wrote, that even a race of devils would be willing to contract

¹¹ Kant's use of the terms "noumenal" and "intelligible" refer to whatever *ought* to be the case according to rational, normative standards. By contrast, the empirical or phenomenal world is simply whatever *is* the case, which we learn through our senses. Pure practical reason can make claims beyond the competence of theoretical reason. As Kant had argued in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (5:119–21), the former has superior cognitive power, because of the appearance in our moral self-awareness of the moral law, the law of the noumenal world.

with each other to enter into a civil society.¹² Kant did not mean that either the original state of nature or the original contract by which people form themselves into a state should be taken as literal history. But the anthropological fact of the universal tendency to prefer pleasure over morality, he had maintained, sets the main task of the state: to restrain the selfishness of human nature, which persists even in those who have voluntarily taken upon themselves the duties of citizenship.

However, in §43 of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant makes an unexpected turnabout and flatly rejects this view that the state has, as its primary role, the suppression of what, in *Perpetual Peace* (8:381), he called “the wickedness in human nature.” Apparently he decided that, although his original claim was meant only to *take into account* the facts of the human condition, it comes dangerously close to repeating the “most pernicious” empiricist error of trying to *base* moral norms on facts, on the special nature of human beings and their circumstances. Moreover, he adds, we have no experience with “human beings’ maxim of violence and of their malevolent tendency to attack one another before external legislation endowed with power appears” (6:312; p. 89).¹³ Kant remained convinced that all human beings suffer from a universal propensity toward evil, but he now maintains that it is not “some fact that makes coercion through public law necessary.” The moral law still needs to be applied to the human situation, but all moral norms, including the ideal of a just civil order, must rest on reason and reason alone. What reason alone can do is to compare a condition lacking public laws with one organized under the principle of right. Reason can point out that, regardless of how people in fact tend to treat each other, the state of nature necessarily lacks *public* justice. In cases of dispute each person’s thinking is limited to his or her own estimate of what is right and good, for there is no impersonal mediator. Consequently, persistent differences can be settled in the end only by force. In a state of nature might truly does make right. However, within a civil arrangement there can be a “rightful condition” between individuals, in which the principle of right is publicly recognized and disputes are conclusively arbitrated by a competent and objective legal tribunal, enabling everyone to enjoy their rights.

With this single exception, Kant’s delineation of the ideal state repeats what he had held throughout his earlier political writings. In order to be a system that protects the freedom and rights of everyone, the state should be a republic, in which authority is divided between its legislative, executive, and judicial functions. Only such a division can successfully combat tendencies to revert to tyranny, as well as effectively recognize the freedom, equality, and independence of all its

¹² See, for example, *Gr.* 4:405; *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* 6:3–60, 100. See also *Speculative Beginning of Human History* 8:120; *Perpetual Peace* 8:355–85; *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent* 8:21–6; *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* 7:325–8, 330; *The Metaphysics of Morals* 6:315–16; pp. 93–4.

¹³ But elsewhere Kant had repeatedly insisted that we have clear evidence of the proclivity to evil, both from human behavior within political divisions after revolutions and by the behavior of states that have not yet entered into a league of nations.

citizens.¹⁴ Since its laws are either derived from or consistent with the categorical imperative, the aim of the just state, like that of the moral law, is only to ensure a condition of right – not, as people generally believe today, to assume responsibility for the welfare and happiness of each and every citizen. Individuals who hold the state accountable for the quality of their lives may decide they might be better off in the state of nature or even under a paternalistically despotic government.¹⁵ Kant therefore insisted that the role of the state is only to ensure freedom, to provide those arrangements that enable each person to pursue what each sees as in his or her best personal interests within the limits of right.

Other parts of his earlier political theory also remain in place. Rebellion against even an unjust ruler is morally impermissible, for the only alternative to any society is a state of injustice. Again, the state has the right to tax property owners for the preservation of the state itself and also to help those unable to provide for their own most basic needs. Finally, punishment for crimes should be retributive, meant to redress the violations of justice.

What is true of the relations between individuals holds also for the relations between individual states. “Only in a universal *association of states* (analogous to that by which a people becomes a state) can rights come to hold *conclusively* and a true *condition of peace* come about” (6:350; p. 119). It is not clear that universal peace can actually be achieved, but it remains the highest practical ideal toward which we are obligated to strive. Even approximating it requires a voluntary community of states. Without some such arrangement, nations remain in a state of nature, always a state of injustice, since wrongs cannot be remedied by a lawsuit but finally only by war. Kant’s rules for the conduct of war may seem idealistic today, but his intent can hardly be challenged: to minimize the evils of war while also making possible a lasting peace.

The Appendix (pp. 125–38), which concludes the first section of the book, was added by Kant in response to a review. It elaborates those views that had been attacked, particularly about rights against a person, for this was a discussion that had not been previously explored within the context of a free society.

Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue

Introduction to the Doctrine of Virtue

Because we are finite beings who always have needs, we are continually involved in satisfying those needs. Which needs we select depends on our goals and our incentives or motives for choosing those goals. Kant holds it is a unique characteristic of free agents to be able to set goals for themselves (what he calls the

¹⁴ Kant does not explain how women can alter their societal place so as to work their way up to independence.

¹⁵ See *Critique of Judgment* 5:426n.

“matter” of choice). This is shown by the fact that it is self-contradictory to claim that one person can impose reasons or ends on another. Others can coerce us into promoting *their* ends, but that does not make them *our* freely chosen ends.

We not only have an unavoidable interest in our own happiness and welfare; we also have an obligatory interest in what morality requires of us. Because these two interests can and do conflict, we often find ourselves reluctant to do what is right, and that is why morality appears to us, not just as what is right, but also as what is our duty. In adopting the moral incentive as our motive for acting, therefore, we must commit ourselves to the maxim always to try with all our might to “act in conformity with duty *from* duty” (6:391; p. 154).

If all our goals were based on our desires for pleasure, we would be unable to identify any ends as being morally good, intrinsically good apart from how they might affect our well-being. Then all our ends would be means to or constituents of happiness; and since categorical imperatives cannot be based on the ends of inclinations, the concept of duty would disappear. Our moral reason (which Kant calls “pure practical reason”) must be a power of ends able to oppose and overcome the influence of any ends that are simply desired. Consequently, there must be ends that can be identified in an *a priori* way as duties, ends that everyone ought to adopt, whether or not they in fact have them as their ends.

Stated in very general terms, there are two kinds of obligatory ends. Some are to be recognized and respected, and they include all free agents in whom the moral law resides – ourselves and every other human being – giving us all a dignity, an absolute inner worth, beyond all price. Other ends, based on the dignity of persons, are to be promoted and, when possible, achieved, and they are one’s own perfection and the happiness of others.

Perfection includes, as our highest, unconditionally good end, virtue, which both is its own reward and exceeds the worth of everything else we might achieve. On 6:380 (p. 146) Kant defines virtue as moral courage, the strength to constrain ourselves to do our duty because it is our duty, because we have adopted the categorical imperative as the law of our own will. It includes the strength to frustrate, when necessary, any obstacles to our moral resolve, most particularly our own desires and inclinations when they oppose the moral law. Perfection also includes the development of our mental and physical abilities so that we may be “worthy of the humanity that dwells within” us (6:387; p. 151). It requires us to cultivate those moral feelings, such as self-esteem and concern for others’ happiness, that can support our moral vocation. We may also have an indirect duty to promote our own permissible happiness when that will remove obstacles to our obeying the moral law. We do not have a direct duty to seek our own happiness, for we will inevitably and without reluctance do so. But we do not inevitably care about the happiness of others, and for that reason, respect for them requires us, insofar as we can do so, to contribute to their happiness. Since it is up to them to determine what will make them happy, this means that, within

the limit of not seriously impairing our own welfare, we need to adopt their ends as our own.

The Supreme Principle of Virtue. Although Kant appeals to the first formula of the categorical imperative, the Formula of Universality, to establish many of his initial claims about our duties of virtue, he identifies the supreme principle of the doctrine of virtue as the second formula, the Formula of Respect for Persons (or the Formula of Humanity, as it is also called) (*Gr.* 4:429). It reads: “Act in accordance with a maxim of *ends* that it can be a universal law for everyone (6:395; p. 157).

The first formula is a purely formal standard and so is analytically true, simply setting out the meaning of freedom and, for the supreme principle of right, of outer freedom. But the second formula adds what Kant calls moral matter, the notion of persons as ends, that is, as intrinsically valuable, to the formal criterion of universality. It therefore is a synthetic claim. The main difference between the two formulas is that the second formula still invokes the principle of noncontradiction but does not do so in a purely formal manner. Rather, it forbids actions that are contrary to (that contradict) the respect we owe those ends that are duties, most particularly the dignity of persons, whether ourselves or others. Still a formula of the ultimate moral principle, it also provides the incentive for adopting those ends that are one’s duties.

This last claim leads Kant to criticize Aristotle. Virtue, he writes, does not lie in the *degree* of practicing moral maxims (“in the *mean*”), as Aristotle had claimed, but in the adoption of the right moral principle in the first place.¹⁶ Unfortunately, Kant’s criticism here is, in the main, misdirected, because he did not attend more carefully to the differences between choosing one’s overriding policies or maxims and deciding how to apply such principles to situations in which we must act. Kant was concerned here with the first kind of judgment, with the adoption of the right maxims or policies, while Aristotle was focusing on making judgments of the second kind, concerned with how to act *after* having committed oneself to a policy, say, of bravery. This difference is particularly important in the case of wide duties (discussed below), when the right maxims do not determine just how we should act. Kant in fact sounds very Aristotelian when he discusses making the second kind of judgment on page 6:428 (p. 181) – determining how much wine to serve one’s guests without encouraging them to intemperance!

Kant’s final point in this section is that what the moral law commands, virtue, is always possible to attain. If obedience to that law depended on empirical possibilities, that would destroy its categorical, that is, its moral, character. (So Kant is often said to hold that “ought implies can.”) Virtue consists in a commitment to the right principles, the right intentions, and forming intentions correctly does not depend on conditions in the world.

¹⁶ 6:404, 432–3, 433n. (pp. 163, 184–5, 185n).

Virtue. Kant returns to his consideration of relevant psychological terms on 6:408–10 (pp. 166–8). There he defines “passion” as a desire that has become a habitual inclination, and since habituation destroys freedom, passions cause the loss of freedom. To allow oneself to be ruled by freedom-destroying inclinations is the essence of vice. Morality requires us to bring all our capacities and inclinations under the rule of reason, but to do so calmly so as not to rely unwittingly on inclinations for motivation. Because virtue constantly faces the alluring opposition of inclinations, it is “always *in progress* and yet always starts *from the beginning*” (6:409; p. 167). Finally, as we have seen, duties relating to one’s ends Kant calls “duties of virtue.” (But having respect is not a duty of virtue, since it arises within us spontaneously. Moreover, respect for the moral law as such does not generate an end which is also a duty.)

Wide Duties. When the categorical imperative requires us to adopt and act on *positive* maxims or, what is the same thing, general *positive* policies or principles, Kant stresses that they obligate us to what he called “wide” or “indeterminate” duties. So, for example, the policy to develop our talents allows us considerable latitude. It does not specify ahead of time exactly which abilities to develop, in what direction, or to what extent. Such matters must be left to each person’s judgment. Kant makes some comments about developing good judgment on 6:411 (pp. 168–9), but he discusses the topic of moral education at more length in two later sections, “Teaching Ethics” and “Ethical Ascetics” (pp. 221–6, 227–8).

Strangely enough, Kant discusses an extremely important aspect of positive choices only once and only in the footnote to 6:433 (p. 185). As a consequence, it has been often overlooked, and that has given rise to a variety of misinterpretations of his entire theory. Despite the fact that positive moral maxims do not determine exactly how we are to fulfill them, we still need to live our lives as rationally as possible. The second formula of the categorical imperative mandates self-respect, and that surely does not license us to act stupidly, irresponsibly, or insensitively. But now the only kind of rationality available to us is prudence, and in his footnote Kant writes that at this point we can judge “what is to be done only in accordance with rules of prudence (pragmatic rules), not in accordance with rules of morality (moral rules).” Such standards of conduct apply not only to positive duties but also, with appropriate emendations, to morally permissible actions. Because people’s situations can vary widely, so too can their decisions about how to act. Since we are rarely in a position to know all the factors that may go into others’ decisions, we are also rarely, if ever, in a position to judge how well or badly they are fulfilling their positive obligations.

Only when he describes positive duties of virtue as wide does Kant also introduce the notion of “narrow” duties which prescribe actions and “how much one is to do by the action” (6:390; p. 153). He goes on to equate *formal* duties with narrow duties and further describes them as “limiting” and “negative.”

Earlier (p. 390) Kant's title for Part VII had included the phrase, "Duties of Right Are of Narrow Obligation," but because he was mainly concerned there with ethical duties, he did not explain this notion of "narrowness" there. On 6:411 and 419 (pp. 168, 174–5), however, he reminds us that (1) as the principle for all laws, the first formula is a purely formal norm and so (2) essentially a negative and restrictive maxim for actions, determining duties precisely and strictly, and (3) since duties of right mainly constrain those actions that would violate rightful freedom, they are also fundamentally narrow and negative. As we have seen, the first formula of the categorical imperative forbids actions that have maxims that cannot also be stated as universal norms without generating a contradiction. For example, we may not act unjustly, disobey civil laws, even positive laws, or refuse to help those in dire need.

This doctrine reflects Kant's classical liberal view that the function of the state is basically to protect its citizens' freedom, so that all its fundamental laws will tend to be negative, restricting actions that would violate rightful freedom. But it has equally important significance for his treatment of ethical duties, for, as he later stresses, many of those duties are also negative and restrictive. Such duties do not have exceptions. They obligate us absolutely.

In his "Casuistical Questions" at the end of later sections, Kant presents dramatic cases in which the strictness of the negative commands of the moral law, such as the categorical prohibition against suicide, are opposed by violations that have spectacularly positive consequences, whether moral or prudential. The consequences he gives include the good of an entire country and even the good of the entire human race and, on a more personal level, the avoidance of the undesirable effects of an incurable disease. Kant constructs such scenarios because it is in just such cases that we are most tempted to make an exception, just this once, to obedience to the moral law. It is because negative duties do not allow exceptions for *any* reasons whatsoever that the ultimate moral norm is called the "categorical" imperative.

Doctrine of the Elements of Ethics

Kant begins his discussion of ethical principles by pointing out an apparent antinomy. On the one hand, the claim that a person can have obligations to himself or herself cannot be true, for it generates a contradiction. It requires that person be both passively constrained (by such duties) and simultaneously actively constraining (by legislating the same duties). It seems that one could always excuse oneself from all such obligations. But on the other hand, if a person could not put himself or herself under obligation, there would be no duties at all, since all moral duties are based on one's own practical reason.

Kant's solution is to appeal to his famous doctrine of the two viewpoints. Insofar as a person recognizes himself as giver of the law, he views himself as an intelligible

or noumenal being, while as a being put under obligation, he regards himself as a sensible or phenomenal being. He concludes that, because we take different viewpoints for different purposes, a person “can acknowledge a duty to himself without falling into contradiction” (6:418; p. 174).

In 6:418–19 Kant returns to his discussion of wide and narrow duties. As we have seen, the doctrine of virtue includes both kinds of duties. The first kind of duty (formal or negative or limiting) forbids us to act contrary to our health or self-preservation; and here Kant quotes the Stoic dictum, “Live in conformity with nature.” The second kind of duty to oneself (material or positive or wide) commands us to develop our capacities and talents sufficiently to be able to attain our ends; and the relevant Stoic dictum is, “*Make yourself more perfect than mere nature has made you.*”

Duties of Virtue to Oneself

As Moral-Physical (of Natural/Animal/Sensible) Beings, Kant writes, we have three positive duties, self-preservation, preservation of the species, and preservation of our natural capacity to enjoy life.¹⁷ Relevant to the first, we are forbidden to neglect self-preservation, whether by consuming such excessive amounts of food or drink as to seriously impair our ability to act rationally or by committing suicide or by mutilating healthy parts of one’s body. As for the second, we may not misuse our sexual inclinations. Finally, we may not neglect our own happiness when doing so could be detrimental to our moral integrity. To care for our own happiness is only an indirect duty, because the real point is to promote our own moral character.

Kant then discusses negative duties, that is, what he calls duties of omission, in some detail. Regardless of other evils it may cause, he writes, suicide is always intrinsically wrong, always an attack on a person’s humanity, that is, moral personality. If a person commits suicide for a prudential reason, such as to avoid suffering, he is treating himself only as a means to a prudentially desirable end, and that is an immoral debasement of himself as having intrinsic worth. If he commits suicide for a morally good end, such as promoting the happiness of others, such a maxim contradicts the principle that we may never withdraw from duty. Kant’s condemnation of “mutilation” must be interpreted in light of the fact that he wrote long before organ transplants were possible. When technology made transplants possible, the transition from his view to the present acceptance of such procedures came only after a good deal of discussion.

When he discusses sexual activity, we may need to remember that Kant also lived long before it was possible to separate heterosexual sex from procreation. He again insists that sex has only one “natural” purpose, the preservation of the species. To avoid debasing one’s humanity, it would always be wrong, in this view,

¹⁷ 6:388, 420 (pp. 151–2, 175).

to deliberately engage in such activity so as to prevent its “natural” end. Kant now asks whether it would be immoral, if, within marriage and without frustrating its end, a person’s only purpose in sexual activity were pleasure. He seems to imply that such an action would be “legal” but in itself lack specifically ethical value.

When he addresses excessive drinking and overeating, and the use of drugs like opium, Kant sets aside considerations of harmful consequences that are only prudential concerns. What makes such behavior wrong is that it diminishes or even destroys, if only for a time, a person’s capacity to think and act as a responsible moral agent. It therefore violates the regard we should have for our own dignity.

Kant considers our positive and imperfect duties to ourselves as moral-physical beings in Book II, Section I: “On a Human Being’s Duty to Himself to Develop and Increase His Natural Perfection, That Is, for a Pragmatic Purpose.”¹⁸ What sets us off from all other living beings is our ability to set our own ends. Choosing (and not merely wishing for) an end entails choosing the means to it. In order to live up to our “humanity,” our rational agency, we therefore have a duty to cultivate our natural abilities so we can attain our ends. The moral law also identifies self-development as morally obligatory as both a pragmatic means to virtuous living and as an exercise of our moral character. Kant does not become more explicit, since exactly how we carry out this responsibility depends so heavily on contingencies which cannot be taken into account ahead of time.

As Imperfectly Moral Beings, our overriding duty is to be morally perfect in the sense of doing our duty from the motive of duty alone, “without the admixture of aims derived from sensibility” (6:446; p. 196). Because of subjective limitations, for example, on our knowledge of our own motives, this duty is like all other positive duties, of wide obligation.

In his appraisal of our negative duties, Kant once again appeals to the norm that we may not deny what he calls the “humanity in our own person,” that is, our moral personality and its dignity, by making ourselves a thing, merely a means to satisfy our inclinations, as we do by lying, avarice, or servility. While lying often injures others, its essential evil lies in its hypocrisy, which directly denies the speaker’s integrity. By avarice Kant means miserly avarice in which one values the mere possession of things more than one does oneself and, as a consequence, one leaves one’s own genuine needs unsatisfied. This, he writes, is contrary to the duty to live up to the dignity of the humanity in oneself.¹⁹

Kant begins his discussion of servility by observing that our ability to reason can give us extrinsic value so that we can charge more for our services, but this gives us no more intrinsic value than, to update his discussion, a bright robot. What makes each of us a person with the same inalienable dignity and keeps each of us from being merely a means to someone else’s ends, is our freedom and the moral law

¹⁸ 6:444–6; see also 4:19 (pp. 194–5; 174–5).

¹⁹ 6:432–3, 452 (pp. 184–5, 201).

within us. This constitutes the “humanity in our person” which is “the object of the respect which [we] can demand from every other human being, but which [we] must also not forfeit” (6:435; pp. 186–7). On the side of moral emotions, then, the subjective foundation of morality for us is our self-esteem. Here Kant does something he rarely allows himself – the liberty to speak directly to his audience. We can imagine him sternly lecturing his students! “Be no man’s lackey,” he says. “Bowing and scraping before [others is to behave in a manner] unworthy of a human being . . . one who makes himself a worm cannot complain afterwards if people step on him” (6:436–7; pp. 187–8).

The first positive duty to ourselves Kant addresses is the cultivation of our *conscience*. Kant had raised this topic earlier in the “Introduction to the Doctrine of Virtue,” and now, in “On a Human Being’s Duty to Himself as His Own Innate Judge,” he likens the judgments of conscience to those of a tribunal or court.²⁰ Conscience for Kant is a kind of “second-order” reflection on how well we are making or have made our choices. We do not have a duty simply to *have* a conscience. We have a conscience whether we want one or not. (Unconscientiousness therefore is not a lack of a conscience but a tendency to ignore its voice.) But to promote our own autonomy, we do have a duty to be conscientious in the sense of cultivating it and being attentive to its judgments, so that the “first command of all duties,” as the oracle at Delphi had told Socrates, is to “*know yourself*.”²¹ However, since we can never be sure about the purity of our intentions, judgments of conscience apparently are limited to questions about the moral *legality* of our behavior and about whether we have tried or are trying as hard as possible to act dutifully.

So holy are the judgments of our conscience that we cannot avoid thinking of them as if they were divine verdicts. Since it is our own reason judging us, “the concept of religion is here for us only ‘a principle of estimating all our duties as divine commands.’”²² However, the only persons we have encountered in our experience and to whom we have duties are all humans, so we do not have special duties to God or to nonrational parts of the world. Duties “with regard to” them are all actually duties to ourselves.

“I can indeed be mistaken at times in my objective judgment as to whether something is a duty or not,” Kant writes, and that is why we must be careful when making such judgments. But, he goes on, it is not possible to have an erring conscience. A judgment can be identified as erroneous only when we can distinguish between subjective belief and objective truth, and in the case of sincere judgments of conscience, we cannot make such a distinction. So, he concludes, if a person acts in accord with conscience, “then as far as guilt or innocence is concerned nothing more can be required of him” (6:401; p. 161).

²⁰ See 6:400–1, 437–40 (pp. 160–1, 188–91).

²¹ 6:441–2 (p. 191).

²² 6:440, 443 (pp. 190, 192–3).

Duties of Virtue to Others

The most fundamental rule here is that we may not be completely indifferent to others nor may we just *use* others, for we owe them, in varying degrees, both our *love* and our *respect*. Each of these obligations focuses on its own kind of duties – positive and wide duties in the case of love, and negative and narrow duties in the case of respect. Nonetheless, in practice we usually may not ignore one when acting on the other. Note that, except in cases of life and death, Kant held that positive ethical obligations to others do *not* belong to the public domain, to be enacted into law and enforced with punitive incentives by the state, as utilitarians like John Stuart Mill later held and as the majority of people today also hold. Elsewhere, as in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* and *On the Proverb: What May be True in Theory but is of No Practical Use* he offered several related reasons for his position. First, institutionalized beneficence (welfare) programs tend to promote a paternalistic lack of respect for others, who are deemed to be like children, lacking autonomy and unable to take responsibility for their own life and welfare. Secondly, paternalistically treating others as children in fact encourages sloth and self-imposed “tutelage,” that is, permanent dependency on others, thereby creating a more or less permanent two-class society, those who are independent and those who are not. Finally, those coerced by law to fulfill their ethical obligation of beneficence tend to be moved only by prudential considerations, so that their compliance has little or no ethical value.

As Moral-Physical Beings, with constant needs, others are owed our concern and *love*. But it would be a mistake to take this love to be a *feeling of pleasure* in the welfare of others. “What is done from constraint . . . is not done from love,” Kant writes, so love cannot be commanded. Since love out of inclination cannot be a duty, it would be a contradiction to claim that it can be. Kant has already pointed out in the *Groundwork* that the biblical command, “You ought to love your neighbor as yourself” means, as Jesus immediately explained, that we should do good to our neighbor.²³ What is and can be enjoined, then, is *practical* love, that is, active benevolence based in the will and not in feelings, adopting others’ ends as our own as long as they are not immoral.²⁴

Like all our duties to others, the maxim of benevolence rests on the requirement of reciprocity. “I want everyone else to be benevolent toward me,” Kant writes, “hence I ought also to be benevolent toward everyone else.”²⁵ According to the principle of universal lawgiving, the procedure given by the first formula, I am permitted to be benevolent to myself only on the condition of being equally benevolent to everyone else, that is, wishing the best for them and finding satisfaction in their happiness and well-being. Apparently unwilling to let anyone

²³ 6:401 (p. 161); Gr. 399 (Matthew 5:44).

²⁵ 6:451; see 450–2 (pp. 200, 199–201).

²⁴ 6:389, 448–50, 452 (pp. 152, 198–200, 201).

believe that an ethics based on reason is in any way inferior to one based on religion, on 6:472–3 (p. 217) he commends those who are “*friend[s] of human beings*,” who are sensitive to the fact that everyone has an equal dignity and whose benevolence extends to all, “as if all were brothers under one *father* who wills the happiness of all.”

Active benevolence, namely, beneficence, goes further. Everyone in need wishes to be helped by others. Since a universal permissive law of wanting help for oneself but of not helping any others in need would conflict with itself, such a maxim is contrary to our duties to others as moral-physical beings with needs. It therefore is a universal law to contribute to the happiness of others, according to their needs, their concept of happiness, and one’s own means.²⁶ This is a wide duty, so that exactly what this requires for each person is a matter for that person’s judgment. One limit is clear: it would be self-defeating to promote others’ happiness or well-being to the extent that it would make us dependent on their beneficence. Kant suggests we make our decisions on the basis of who is closer to us, but he leaves it to the judgment of each person to determine exactly how “closer” should be understood. It is simply not possible to offer a complete account of how such judgments can and should be made, particularly ahead of time.²⁷

It often happens that when we practice beneficence, we grow attached to the person or persons we are helping, and we then are more inclined to beneficence in general. But this is a consequence of *first* doing one’s duty. We are *not* commanded first to feel warmly toward others and then, on that basis, do good to them (6:402; pp. 161–2). When, on 6:456–7 (pp. 204–5), Kant holds that we have a conditional and indirect duty to promote empathy for others, he points out that that duty is still based on the moral principle to promote active benevolence.

Contrary to the benevolence we owe others are those attitudes and actions that manifest envy, jealousy, ingratitude, and malice, including the desire for revenge.²⁸

As Moral (albeit Imperfectly Moral) Beings, everyone is owed *respect*. Like practical love, respect should not be taken to be merely a feeling, in this case like the feeling we might get from comparing ourselves with others. Rather, it too concerns the adoption of a practical maxim to limit both our self-esteem and our actions by our recognition of the dignity of others. As the second formula puts it, we may not degrade others by using them *merely* as a means to our own purposes.

We have seen that everyone has a duty to strive for virtue. Kant holds that we are not obligated to try to make others virtuous, since we cannot have a duty to do for others what only they can do for themselves. But we do have a negative yet wide duty not to detract from their efforts by scandalous conduct. Kant himself gives us the example, by the moral treatises he wrote, that we also may have a positive duty to support, insofar as we can, the moral efforts of others.

²⁶ 6:393, 401–2, 450–3 (pp. 155–6, 161–2, 199–202).

²⁷ 6:452, 454, 467–9 (pp. 201, 202–3, 212–14).

²⁸ 6:458–61, 463–8 (pp. 206–8, 209–13).

Contrary to the respect owed others are all forms of disrespect: arrogance, ingratitude, defamation, and ridicule.

No relationship with others is so valuable or spans our interests so well as *friendship*, and so Kant concludes Part I, "Doctrine of the Elements of Ethics," by a moving discussion in §§46 and 47 of friendship as combining both love and respect.

Doctrine of the Methods of Ethics

The last pages of *The Metaphysics of Morals* are taken up with a description of how moral education might proceed. The goal of such education is to acquire virtue, and earlier, on 6:397 (pp. 158–9), Kant had summarized his view in these words: "the way to acquire [virtue] is to enhance the moral incentive (the thought of the law), both by contemplating the dignity of the pure rational law in us (*contemplatione*) and by practicing virtue (*exercitio*).” On 477–84 (pp. 221–6), he provides a number of straightforward recommendations about how he believes we might do so. These pages can be supplemented by his treatment of the same subject in the "Methodology of Pure Practical Reason" just before the conclusion of his *Critique of Practical Reason*. There also exist some of Kant's notes on teaching.²⁹

Religion

Kant left his treatment of religion until the end, not to give it a place of honor but to model his conviction that a purely rational moral doctrine must precede any consideration of religious morality. There are three reasons for this. First, we do not have any prior knowledge of either the existence of God or the content of his will. Second, if we had such knowledge and based our morality on it, we would destroy morality. For if we define vice as wrong because it is forbidden by God rather than because it is detestable in itself, we cannot avoid appealing to feelings of fear of punishment or hope of reward. That produces a prudential, not a moral, code of conduct. And finally, moral laws are justified by our own reason in a way that does not depend on the existence or nonexistence of God.

Nonetheless, Kant had an acute insight into human psychology when on 6:487 (p. 229) he writes: "We cannot very well make obligation (moral constraint) intuitive for ourselves without thereby thinking of *another's* will, namely God's (of which reason in giving universal laws is only the spokesman)." As we saw when examining the judgments of conscience, the very form of moral laws – their authoritative and universal form – makes it virtually impossible for us not to regard them as worthy of respect as divine commands. And that, to Kant, is the essence of religion.

²⁹ *The Educational Theory of Immanuel Kant*, trans. and ed. Edward Franklin Buchner (Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott, 1904).