



GROUNDING FOR THE METAPHYSICS OF MORALS



Immanuel Kant

Summary

Philosophy may be divided into three fields: physics (the study of the physical world), ethics (the study of morals), and logic (the study of logical principles). These fields may involve either "empirical" study of our experiences, or "pure" analysis of concepts. "Metaphysics" is the study of pure concepts as they relate to moral or physical experience.

People generally presume that moral principles must apply to all rational beings at all places and all times. Moral principles must therefore be based on concepts of reason, as opposed to particularities of culture or personality. The goal of the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* is to develop a clearer understanding of moral principles, so that people may better avert distractions.

Several general principles about moral duties may be advanced. First, actions are moral if and only if they are undertaken for the sake of morality alone (without any ulterior motive). Second, the moral quality of an action is judged not according to the action's consequences, but according to the motive that produced it. Third, actions are moral if and only if they are undertaken out of respect for the moral law (as opposed to some other motivation such as a need or desire).

Since specific interests, circumstances, and consequences cannot be considered, the moral "law" must be a general formula that is applicable in all situations. Rather than commanding specific actions, it must express the principle that actions should be undertaken with pure motives, without consideration of consequences, and out of pure reverence for the law. The formula that meets these criteria is the following: we should act in such a way that we could want the maxim (the motivating principle) of our action to become a universal law. People have a decent intuitive sense for this law. Still, it is helpful for philosophy to state the law clearly so that people can keep it in mind.

It is nearly impossible to find examples of pure moral actions. Nearly every action we observe can be attributed to some interest or motivation other than pure morality. Yet this should not discourage us, for moral principles come from reason, not from experience. Indeed, moral principles could not come from experience, for all experiences depend on particular circumstances, whereas moral principles must have absolute validity, independent of all circumstances.

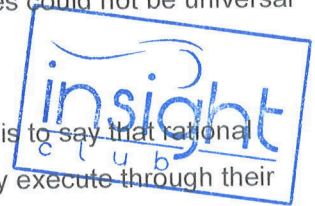
Because it applies in all circumstances, reason's fundamental moral principle may be called the "categorical imperative." The categorical imperative may be expressed according to the same



formula as the moral law: act only in such a way that you could want the maxim (the motivating principle) of your action to become a universal law. When people violate the categorical imperative, they apply a different standard to their own behavior than they would want applied to everyone else in the form of a universal law. This is a contradiction that violates principles of reason.

The categorical imperative may also be formulated as a requirement that we must not treat other rational beings as mere means to our own purposes. Rational beings have the capacity to pursue predetermined objectives ("ends") by means of their will, yet in pursuing their goals they never think of themselves as mere means to another purpose; they are themselves the purpose of their actions--they are "ends in themselves. If we treat other rational beings as mere means, we contradict the fact that all rational beings are ends in themselves. In this case, our principles could not be universal laws, and we would violate the categorical imperative.

Another way of stating the point that rational beings are ends in themselves is to say that rational beings are simultaneously the authors and the subjects of the principles they execute through their will. The categorical imperative may also be formulated as a requirement that we act only according to principles that could be laws in a "kingdom of ends"--that is, a legal community in which all rational beings are at once the makers and subjects of all laws.



The argument so far has established what the moral law is, but has not demonstrated why we feel we should be moral. The basis for morality is the concept of freedom. Freedom is the ability to give your own law to your will. When we follow the demands of some need, desire, or circumstance, we are in a state of "heteronomy"; our will is determined by something outside of ourselves. When we follow the categorical imperative and chose maxims that could be universal laws, we are in a state of "autonomy"; we use reason to determine our own law for ourselves. In other words, we are free.

Freedom of the will can never be demonstrated by experience. It is a principle of reason that everything we understand may be explained on the basis of prior conditions. In other words, the world we observe and understand is a world governed by the principle that every event was caused by another event. Yet this world is nothing more than the picture that reason develops in making sense of "appearances." The world of "things in themselves"--the objects underlying appearances--may have different qualities, including freedom of the will. We can have no knowledge of things in themselves. Thus freedom of the will may be neither proven nor disproven. All that we may know is that we have a concept of freedom of the will, and that morality may be based on this concept.



Context

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) spent all of his life in Königsberg, a small German town on the Baltic Sea in East Prussia. (After World War II, Germany's border was pushed west, so Königsberg is now called Kaliningrad and is part of Russia.) At the age of fifty-five, Kant had published much work on the natural sciences, taught at Königsberg University for over twenty years, and achieved a good reputation in German literary circles.

During the last twenty-five years of his life, however, Kant's philosophical work placed him firmly in the company of such towering giants as Plato and Aristotle. Kant's three major works are often considered to be the starting points for different branches of modern philosophy: the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) for the philosophy of mind; the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) for moral philosophy; and the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) for aesthetics, the philosophy of art.

The *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* was published in 1785, just before the *Critique of Practical Reason*. It is essentially a short introduction to the argument presented in the second Critique. In order to understand what Kant is up to in this book, it is useful to know something about Kant's other works and about the intellectual climate of his time.

Kant lived and wrote during a period in European intellectual history called the "Enlightenment." Stretching from the mid-seventeenth century to the early nineteenth, this period produced the ideas about human rights and democracy that inspired the French and American revolutions. (Some other major figures of the Enlightenment were ##Locke##, ##Hume##, ##Rousseau##, and Leibniz.)

The characteristic quality of the Enlightenment was an immense confidence in "reason"--that is, in humanity's ability to solve problems through logical analysis. The central metaphor of the Enlightenment was a notion of the light of reason dispelling the darkness of mythology and misunderstanding. Enlightenment thinkers like Kant felt that history had placed them in the unique position of being able to provide clear reasons and arguments for their beliefs. The ideas of earlier generations, they thought, had been determined by myths and traditions; their own ideas were based on reason. (According to this way of thinking, the French monarchy's claims to power were based on tradition; reason prescribed a republican government like that created by the revolution.)

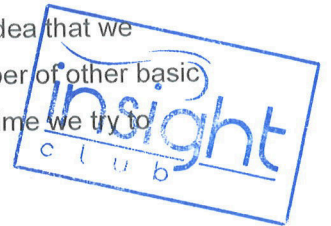
Kant's philosophical goal was to use logical analysis to understand reason itself. Before we go about analyzing our world, Kant argued, we must understand the mental tools we will be using. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant set about developing a comprehensive picture of how our mind--our "reason"--receives and processes information.





Kant later said that the great Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-76) had inspired him to undertake this project. Hume, Kant said, awoke him from an intellectual "slumber." The idea that so inspired Kant was Hume's analysis of cause-and-effect relationships. When we talk about events in the world, Hume noted, we say that one thing "causes" another. But nothing in our perceptions tells us that anything causes anything else. All we know from our perceptions is that certain events regularly occur immediately after certain other events. "Causation" is a concept that we employ to make sense of why certain events regularly follow certain other events.

Kant took Hume's idea and went one step further. Causation, Kant argues, is not just an idea that we employ to make sense of our perceptions. It is a concept *that we cannot help but employ*. We don't sit around watching events and then develop an idea of causation on the basis of what we see. When we see a baseball break a window, for instance, we don't need to have seen balls break windows before to say that the ball "caused" the window to break; causation is an idea that we automatically bring to bear on the situation. Kant argued that causation and a number of other basic ideas--time and space, for instance--are hardwired, as it were, into our minds. Anytime we try to understand what we see, we cannot help but think in terms of causes and effects.



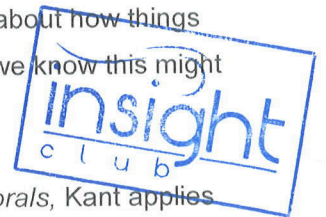
Kant's argument with Hume may seem like hairsplitting, but it has huge implications. If our picture of the world is structured by concepts that are hardwired into our minds, then we can't know anything about how the world "really" is. The world we know about is developed by combining sensory data ("appearances" or "phenomena," as Kant called them) with fundamental concepts of reason (causation, etc.). We don't know anything about the "things-in-themselves" from which sensory data emanates. This recognition that our understanding of the world may have as much to do with our minds as with the world has been called a "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy--a change in perspective as significant to philosophy as Copernicus' recognition that the earth is not the center of the universe.

Kant's insights posed a severe challenge to many earlier ideas. Before Kant, for instance, many philosophers offered "proofs" of the existence of God. One argument made was that there must be a "first cause" for the universe. Kant pointed out that we can either imagine a world in which some divine being set the universe in motion, causing all later events; or we can imagine a universe that is an infinite series of causes and effects extending endlessly into the past and future. But since causation is an idea that comes from our minds and not from the world, we cannot know whether there "really" are causes and effects in the world--let alone whether there was a "first cause" that caused all later events. The question of whether there "must" be a first cause for the universe is



irrelevant, because it is really a question about how we understand the world, not a question about the world itself.

Kant's analysis similarly shifted the debate over "free will" and "determinism." (Kant presents a version of this argument in Chapter 3 of the *Grounding*.) Human beings believe that they have "free will"; we feel as though we may freely choose to do whatever we like. At the same time, however, the world that we experience is a world of causes and effects; everything we observe was caused by whatever preceded it. Even our own choices appear to have been caused by prior events; for instance, the choices you make now are based on values you learned from your parents, which they learned from their parents, and so forth. But how can we be free if our behavior is determined by prior events? Again, Kant's analysis shows that this is an irrelevant question. Anytime we analyze events in the world, we come up with a picture that includes causes and effects. When we use reason to understand why we have made the choices we have, we can come up with a causal explanation. But this picture isn't necessarily accurate. We don't know anything about how things "really" are; we are free to think that we can make free choices, because for all we know this might "really" be the case.



In the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant applies this same technique--using reason to analyze itself--to determine what moral choices we should make. Just as we cannot rely on our picture of the world for knowledge about how the world "really" is, so can we not rely on expectations about events in the world in developing moral principles. Kant tries to develop a moral philosophy that depends only on the fundamental concepts of reason.

Some later scholars and philosophers have criticized Enlightenment philosophers like Kant for placing too much confidence in reason. Some have argued that rational analysis isn't the best way to deal with moral questions. Further, some have argued that Enlightenment thinkers were pompous to think that they could discover the timeless truths of reason; in fact, their ideas were determined by their culture just as all other people's are. Some experts have gone as far as to associate the Enlightenment with the crimes of imperialism, noting a similarity between the idea of reason dispelling myth and the idea that Western people have a right and a duty to supplant less "advanced" civilizations. As we work through the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, we will return to such criticisms as they apply to Kant.

Overall Analysis and Themes

Over the course of the Commentary sections on the specific chapters, we have reviewed a number of criticisms of Kant. Some philosophers have argued that in practice our moral beliefs are based on



intuitions, not on reason. Hegel pointed out that moral beliefs can never be unconditional because moral questions must be resolved in the context of the society in which we live. ##Nietzsche## argued that reason is not the source of moral freedom, but is rather an impediment to free choice.

The common thread of all these criticisms is that Kant's position is too abstract to be useful. As human beings, we live in a particular place at a particular time. It is not necessarily possible or desirable for us to separate our rationality from the other features of our personality. We may reason about issues in abstract terms, and we may imagine the situations of other people, yet our starting point must always be our own life situation.

It is a typical feature--a common "mistake," if you will--of Enlightenment thinking to presume that we can ignore our own particularities and discover universal principles of reason. This "mistake" may have been possible because Enlightenment philosophers came from a relatively homogeneous culture (that of eighteenth-century Europe) and from a relatively homogeneous class position (one of relative financial security). This homogeneity may have led Enlightenment thinkers to oversimplify certain questions, presuming that their answers were "rational" when they in fact depended on cultural assumptions.

On the other hand, Kant's philosophy--and Enlightenment philosophy in general-- is by no means a philosophy of privilege. Indeed, Kant's ideas are radically egalitarian. According to Kant, moral truths are not received from on high through divine revelation or inspiration. Rather, they are based on reasons that make sense to all people (indeed, all rational beings) who bother to think about them. The passion with which people espouse moral views suggests that many people continue to share Kant's view that moral principles must be absolute and universal. Late twentieth-century people may be more aware of diversity than Kant was. As a result, we may have less confidence than him that what makes sense to us will make sense to other people. Nevertheless, in our day as in Kant's, people do tend to think that there is more to their moral beliefs than mere cultural prejudice.

Like all great philosophers, Kant's arguments have provoked a wide range of responses, positive and negative. Whatever we make of Kant's views, it would be difficult to underestimate the historical impact of his "Copernican Revolution" in philosophy. Even today, nearly two hundred years after his death, Kant's arguments remain a powerful presence in philosophy.

