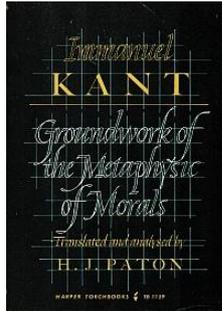


Kant's Rational Ethics

A Review of Immanuel Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, transl. by H.J. Paton, New York: Harper & Row (Harper Torchbooks), 1964; originally published as *The Moral Law*, London: Hutchinson, 1948, 3rd edn. 1956.

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ABSTRACT. In the third and final article of this trilogy of short reviews dedicated to Kant's practical philosophy, Kant has the word. What does his major work on ethics, the *Grundlegung* (variously translated as Groundwork, Foundation, or Fundamentals) of his moral theory, still have to tell us today about the problem of grounding ethics, why should we still read it? The review tries to

answer these questions in a manner that is understandable not only to Kant specialists. It aims to assist readers in approaching this difficult but still essential work on moral theory by throwing a spotlight on some of its major ambitions and ideas.

KEY WORDS: Immanuel Kant, Kant's practical philosophy, Kant's ethics, Kantian moral theory, history of ideas, critique of pure reason, Kant's concept of reason, practical reason, nature of reason, rationality, practical rationality, moral reasoning, categorical imperative, Kantian ethics, rational ethics

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Introduction: The Problem of Grounding Ethics

Kant's (1786) *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, despite its forbidding name and demanding content, is perhaps the most eloquent and thought-provoking book on the foundations of rational ethics (or more precisely, moral reasoning) ever published. It certainly is the most influential and revolutionary essay ever about the subject.

Unfortunately, it is also one of the most difficult texts of moral philosophy ever written and for this reason lends itself to

different interpretations and translations. I recommend relying on the classical translation by H.J. Paton (1964), which comes with a useful "Analysis of the Argument" by the translator (pp. 13-60). In addition, I find B.E.A. Liddell's (1970) modern version of the *Grundlegung* quite helpful.

Kant begins his argument with these famous words, which immediately get us to the heart of the matter:

It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a *good will*.... A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes – because of its fitness for attaining some proposed end; it is good through its willing alone – that is, good in itself. (Kant, 1786, B1-3; Paton, 1964, p. 61f)

The crux of the problem of grounding ethics – the core problem of practical reason - consists in the question of how reason can identify and justify an action as "good" (i.e., as the right thing to do). There are only two ways in which this is conceivable, Kant tells us: either, because the action serves to accomplish some other good that is presupposed to be good, or else because this way of acting is good in itself, that is, it has an unconditional quality of being right, in the sense that it may be said to be good under all circumstances. Only this second way can furnish a sufficient foundation for ethics; for anything else would mean to try to ground ethics in mere expediency, that is,

in an action's usefulness with a view to some other good. That would not only beg the question of what constitutes good action; it would indeed make ethics redundant. Expediency – instrumental efficacy – serves whatever ends and means we choose, regardless of whether we are guided by a good will. Against such plain relativism, Kant maintains that there must be some less subjective and self-serving form of reasoning about the ends and means of justified action. In my words (Ulrich, 2009b, p. 11): *Drop the ego!* is perhaps the most basic intuition underlying all ethics, including rational ethics and its quest for grounding good will in reason. This is how I would basically translate Kant's central concept of "good will" into contemporary terms.

From Virtue Ethics to Rational Ethics: In Search of Practical Reason

This intuition of holding back the ego (which is not the same as denying it) makes it understandable why classical ethics was preoccupied with psychological and educational questions of character and thus was conceived primarily in terms of virtue ethics. To this preoccupation with character – the classical example is Aristotle's (1976) *Nicomachean Ethics*, although rational deliberation does play a role in it (see Ulrich, 2009a) – the Medieval scholastics later added religion (i.e., faith) as a basis for explaining the binding character of the moral idea, which in effect moved ethics even further away from a grounding in reason. But just as a

theological grounding of ethics is helpful only for those who believe, as it presupposes faith without being able to create it, virtue ethics as a methodological (though not as an educational) approach similarly tends to presuppose what it aims to produce: moral character and good will. As a theory of good practice, it ultimately relies on an appeal to the good will (or in Aristotle's framework, to the good character) of agents; for whether or not an agent will in a given situation act virtuously depends on his being good-willed – an act of faith that cannot be grounded any further but at best be encouraged through education and custom.

Kant's solution to this difficulty is ingenious: he places the origin of a good will within the nature (or concept) of reason itself. To avoid a possible misunderstanding, by reason's nature he does not mean its empirical state or development in the individual but rather, those general structures and requirements which characterize it by inner necessity (a priori), in the sense that reason cannot operate without them; for example, reason cannot help but regard itself as free (Kant, 1786, B101; Paton, 1964, p. 116). In other words, he refers to the nature of *pure* reason – the sheer idea of reasonableness regardless of its empirical occurrence in individuals. Unlike all previous ethics, including Aristotle, Kant does not assume that the binding force of the moral idea needs to reside in some external

psychological or religious condition such as character, faith, or virtuous action. Rather, he understands it as residing in one of the most fundamental conditions of reason itself, the requirement of consequent (or consistent) thought. Living up to its own intrinsic requirements is what Kant (1786, Bxi; Paton, 1964, p. 59) calls a "pure" interest of reason or "interest of pure reason" – an interest that has no other aim than preserving the possibility of reason itself.

The implication of this new concept of pure reason is powerful indeed: in its practical no less than in its theoretical employment, reason is itself in charge of the conditions of its successful operation. We can only recognize as true, both in an empirical and in a moral sense, what our mind creates itself; or in the famous words of the Introduction to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

Reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own. (Kant, 1787, Bxiii):

It is to this shift of perspective that Kant (1787, Bxvi) referred as the "Copernican" revolution of speculative philosophy or, as we would rather say today, of epistemology. Copernicus was the first astronomer to recognize very clearly that counter to the observed (phenomenal) movements of the planets around the earth, their true (noumenal) movements were ellipses around the sun. He was able

to achieve this revolution of our worldview because

[He] dared, in a manner contradictory of the senses, but yet true, to seek the observed movements, not in the heavenly bodies, but in the spectator. (Kant, 1787, Bxxii note).

A similar shift of perspective now is to inform Kant's revolution of practical philosophy. Kant himself does not say so – he refers to the Copernican revolution only in his critique of theoretical reason – but I would argue that the notion of a Copernican revolution of ethics provides a very immediate and helpful key to the core of Kant's concept of rational ethics: the reason why we ought to act morally is not because some external authority obliges us but simply because we recognize such action to be reasonable. *The moral force resides in our will to be reasonable.*

For a moment though, Kant appears to lose sight of this consequence of his own "Copernican" approach when in the last chapter of the *Groundwork* (Kant, 1786, B113ff; Paton, 1964, p. 123ff), we find him searching for some mysterious absolute source of the binding force of the moral idea, a source that would explain why pure reason, before and beyond all empirical motives, is compelled to be moral. Such a force, if it really existed, would need to be independent of all human willing and reasoning and thus external to our mind, if not external to all nature (transcendent) – an implication that

runs counter to Kant's core idea of grounding ethics in reason. Lest we fall into this trap of searching for an absolute, transcendent source of morality beyond all human willing and reasoning, I propose we better understand "pure" reason as a mere limiting concept; as an admittedly unreal (nonempirical) ideal-type of reason that serves Kant to undertake his great experiment of thought, the experiment of submitting reason in its practical (moral) no less than in its theoretical (empirical) employment to its own tribunal. Thus seen, Kant's ultimate and vain effort of finding an absolute source of universal moral obligation is a remarkable testimony to his relentless self-critical determination to push his inquiry to its utmost limits, even if such an effort is ultimately bound to fail:

But how pure reason can be practical in itself without further motives drawn from some other source; that is, how the bare principle of the universal validity of all its maxims ... can by itself ... supply a motive and create an interest which could be called purely moral; or in other words, how pure reason can be practical - all human reason is totally incapable of explaining this, and all the effort and labor to seek such an explanation is wasted. (Kant, 1786, B124f; Paton, 1964, p. 129)

But Kant's effort is far from wasted. Without apparently being fully aware of it, he actually uncovers that there is no need at all for such an explanation. The fact that a reasonable agent wants to act morally (i.e., to act out of good will) is quite sufficient for saying he ought to do

so; for anything else would undermine the integrity of reason. It belongs to the peculiar force of reason in its "pure" form, that whatever it makes us want, we *ought* to do. Hence, if as a reasonable being I want to act morally, I ought to do it; and conversely, if reason tells me I ought to do it, as a reasonable being I want it. The moral "ought" is really a *call to reason*:

'I ought' is properly an 'I will' which holds necessarily for every rational being. (Kant, 1786, B102; Paton, p. 117).

This, then, is the core idea of a rational ethics as Kant conceives it: the force of the moral idea resides at bottom in the power of reason, and that must be quite good enough for us as reasonable beings. The moral idea is an immanent rather than a transcendent idea of reason. It is in this sense that it is "necessary" (indispensable) and "categorical" (unconditional) for any rational agent.

The Principle of Moral Universalization

We arrive, then, at the most fundamental contribution that Kant has made to practical philosophy – his formalization of the moral idea in terms of the principle of moral universalization or, as he calls it, the *categorical imperative*:

Act according to a maxim that you could want to become a universal law. (my simplified transl.; cf. Kant, 1786, B52 and B81, and Paton, 1964, pp. 88 and 104)

Or, still simpler: "Act only on a premise that can be everyone's premise" (my free transl.).

As is well known, Kant proposes a variety of different formulations of the categorical imperative; but their fundamental concern is the same. It says that to judge the moral quality of an action, we should first ask ourselves what is the underpinning maxim. In Kant's language, a maxim is a subjective rule or norm of action (i.e., in the terms of my simplified translation above, a personal premise), while a principle is an objective, because generally binding or "necessitating" rule or norm of action (i.e., a premise that everyone may be expected to make the basis of their actions). Kant's point in distinguishing the two is that he does not want us to presuppose that our individual premises are naturally in harmony with principles that everyone could hold; quite the contrary, the problem of practical reason emerges from the divergence of the two perspectives (cf. Kant, 1786, B37-39 and B102f; Paton, 1964, pp. 80f and 117). A perfect moral agent would not need to consider moral imperatives and duties; "imperatives are in consequence only formulae for expressing the relation of objective laws of willing [i.e., duties] to the subjective imperfection of the will of this or that rational being – for example, of the human will." (Kant, 1786, B39; Paton, 1964, p. 81) It is because individual and collective premises do not usually converge that Kant asks us to consider

what our personal premises are and to what extent they might be the premises of all others concerned, that is, universalizable. Insofar, the categorical imperative, counter to what is often assumed, cannot be said to be idealistic.

Once we are clear in our mind as to what is the underpinning maxim of an action, the consequent next issue is whether this maxim could hold as a principle of action, in the precise sense just defined. To answer this question, we may assess it against the categorical imperative in its different formulations. If our maxim runs counter to any of these imperatives, it is not an adequate principle, for it cannot be properly universalized. This makes it understandable why Kant calls his three variations "equivalent" despite their apparent differences.

Kant's preferred way of describing the idea of moral universalization is by analogy with "the law." He wavers a bit between the law of the state (legal norms), in the so-called "Formula of Universal Law" (Kant, 1786, B51f; Paton, 1964, p. 88), and the law of nature (natural laws) in the "Formula of the Law of Nature" (Kant, 1786, B52; Paton, 1964, p.89). In accordance with the political roots of Kant's concept of reason (see my reviews of Hans Saner's (1973) *Kant's Political Thought* and Onora O'Neill's *Constructions of Reason* in Ulrich, 2015a and b, previously 2011a and b), I suggest to take legal norms as the basic metaphor

and natural laws as a derived, more illustrative metaphor (for metaphors they are both, just like the concept of "duty" that Kant derives from it and which similarly stands for an unconditional obligation legislated by our own will). As Kant sees it, the principle of moral universalization obligates us not unlike the way a legal norm obligates everyone under its jurisdiction. The difference is that a legal norm obliges us only conditionally, namely, to the extent that we belong to the community of individuals that have given themselves such legislation (and further, to be precise, to the extent that there is no applicable legislation of superior authority that poses different demands). By contrast, a moral norm (or now, for Kant: a "moral law") applies unconditionally or categorically for any rational agent - it is the ultimate source of obligation beyond which we cannot refer to any other, supposedly superior source of obligation.

My own preferred way of thinking of the unconditional moral thrust of the universalization principle is in terms of never treating others merely as a means for one's own ends:

Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end. (The "Formula of the End in Itself," Kant, 1786, B66f; Paton, 1964, p. 96)

As I tend to translate it for myself: "Do not instrumentalize other people!" or even

simpler: "Respect other people!" To be sure, only in combination with the other two Formulas does this imperative of non-instrumentalization fully capture the moral thrust of "universalization"; but for me the notion of non-instrumentalization embodies a humanistic core that comes closest to a truly universal norm of human conduct for our epoch. Furthermore, to overcome any anthropocentric bias one might object to, we may apply it not only to people but equally to animals and all living nature: "Do not instrumentalize other living beings!"

Conclusion: Kant's Major Lesson, and an Invitation to Read the *Groundwork*

Despite all simplification that is necessary – and possible – with a view to supporting moral practice, a core difficulty remains: We do not and cannot usually act in ways that do justice to everyone.

Universalization is an ideal rather than a practical premise. Nor does the universalization principle tell us anything about what our premises should be; necessarily so, as these depend on the situation. Hence, while the suggested reformulations of the universalization principle hopefully make Kant's intent a bit easier to grasp, they do not tell us how to act accordingly. Kant is therefore often accused of the impractical and abstract, apparently merely formal character of his notion of rational ethics. Yes, it is true; his categorical imperative is not a norm that we can immediately put into practice.

But it is the nature of the problem rather than Kant's failure to do justice to it that makes it so difficult. Expecting an immediately practical norm – a recipe for moral action – would be to misunderstand the nature of the problem and worse, it would leave no room for moral reasoning. Moral reasoning is about moral imperfection, not about moral perfection. That is, it is precisely because moral perfection is not usually achievable by human agents that moral reasoning is important. Moral reasoning means to handle the unavoidable moral imperfection of all our claims and actions "with reason," and Kant's *Groundwork* explains what that implies. No other author before and after Kant has thought more thoroughly and rigorously about the problem. And nobody else has arrived at a more fundamental and important conclusion: there exists a deep, inextricable link between morally tenable action and consistent reasoning. This is the great lesson that Kant's practical philosophy can teach us – a lesson that certainly is as pertinent today as it has ever been.

If you would like to read more about this lesson, you may wish to consult the more extensive discussion of Kant's rational ethics in Ulrich (2009b). However, this present short review is not meant to promote my own writings on practical philosophy, much less to impose my view of the eminent relevance of Kant's practical philosophy for our epoch; rather,

it is meant to encourage you to go to the source and read Kant himself.

The Groundwork probably remains the best place to start exploring this great lesson of which I am talking and which our epoch, it seems to me, has all but forgotten. I would certainly recommend Paton's (1964) translation, as in my view it remains the best edition in English language. It is difficult reading, to be sure, but I do not think it is beyond what the so-called general intelligent reader (though perhaps with a dose of not so general perseverance) can handle. For moral reasoning is not and cannot be the privilege of philosophers, certainly not the way Kant understands it. Try it. Read it. Reflect on it. And try again. And if at times you find its language indigestible and its content complicated (rightly so), the above comments and the personal reading they express are meant to put you back on track, by reminding you of the core idea that matters, the deep link between reasonableness and morality. Acting morally, Kant teaches us, means to try and act on principles that we can share with others, by making sure we consider the perspective of those who may be concerned about our ways of acting. Kant's categorical imperative, then, is asking for no more than what every reasonable agent is capable of; but, and this is the difference it makes, it also asks for no less.

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