Kant: Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals

 In the translation by by H. J. Paton

This article consists of notes on Kant’s preparatory work on morality. I am indebted to Paton’s comments in his translation, and these are acknowledged in the text. As with the companion article on the “Critique of Practical Reason”, I am making preparations here for a later summary of Kant’s view of the world in general. (Since published at https://www.academia.edu/10765809/Kants\_View\_of\_the\_World)

Chapter 1: Passage from Ordinary Rational Knowledge of Morality to Philosophical

The Good Will

The good will is the only thing that is good without restriction in all circumstances.

It does not necessarily derive from results, which implies that it is intrinsically good.

The Function of Reason

The use of reason is the purpose the brain is made for. (This is a teleological argument which most modern commentator, including Paton, now discount as old fashioned and erroneous.)

The Good Will and Duty

The good will is manifested in acting for the sake of duty. If we were perfectly good, acting with a good will would be easy. But we are not, so duty is a necessary practical virtue.

First Proposition

Furthermore, human action can be judged morally good if done for the sake of duty. This is Kant’s first proposition. It is better to act for the sake of duty than out of sympathy. (Some commentators have deduced from this reasoning that Kant discounts sympathy as a component of moral behaviour, but Paton in his notes argues that Kant does not discount sympathy as a motive, he merely states that duty alone is sufficient.)

Second Proposition

Action done from duty has its moral worth from that alone and not from results. This is Kant’s Second Proposition. He also emphasises the need to state his philosophy in maxims i.e. principles on which we act. Maxims are subjective principles as opposed to rules, which are objective. Action based on maxims, like action based on rules, leads to results, but results are unimportant in the definition of a good will.

Third Proposition

Reverence for the law defines duty. This is Kant’s third proposition. The law must be prescribed and also respected and therefore revered. We should want to obey the law.

The Categorical Imperative

The discussion so far, notes Paton, is at a high level of abstraction, and is designed to give “the minimum that can be said about morality”. It leads straight to a law which Kant enunciates that ought to be obeyed for its own sake.

“I ought never to act in such a way that I can also will that my action should become a universal law.”

This is regarded by Kant as the supreme principle of morality from which all other flow, hence it is a categorical imperative. All subjective maxims of morality should be examined in the light of it.

The Need for Philosophy

Kant conceded that practical people do not necessarily proceed in this way. But he argues that a philosophical examination of this type is need for morality in order to make impartial laws.

Chapter 2: Passage from Popular Moral Philosophy to a Metaphysic of Morals

The Use of Examples

Examples are of limited use in developing a metaphysic in Kant’s meaning of the term except for illustration. Kant wants to produce a thorough going theoretical treatment based entirely on abstract reasoning.

Popular Philosophy

Popular philosophy (i.e. philosophy based merely on common sense) does not go about the problem in the right way because it confuses a priori and empirical approaches.

Review of Conclusions

Kant has no doubt that morality must be grasped a priori (i.e. independently of the senses). They must therefore be formulated from abstract reasoning without empirical considerations.

Imperatives in General

He defines an imperative as an authoritative law. He starts from the conception of arational agent, i.e. one with the power to act in accordance with the moral law, howsoever defined. Such an agent must act in accordance with principles i.e. the agent’s understanding of the law. Such an agent can then be said to act in accordance with his/her will or with practical reason. Such an agent would beobjective i.e. not subject to passions. By acting in this way, at least according to Kant, an agent would be at least in some sense good. So, a good agent acts on principle, wills his/her actions, reasons practically, is objective and above all acts in accordance with his/her understanding of the moral law. The will is necessitating her: it drives the actions of the agent. As man is human and therefore not entirely rational, such conformance requires effort. It also requires imperatives which the agent must (or should, at least) follow. Imperatives are therefore “I ought…” statements.

Classification of Imperatives

There are three kinds of imperative and therefore three kinds of objective principle and three kinds of good.

1) Hypothetical Imperatives ‘If I will this end, I ought to do such and such…’ the objective is the end and the good is the means to that end. Such an end might require skill, and the good would be a good construction, performance or practical outcome.

2) Assertoric or Pragmatic Imperatives ‘If I do this, there ought to be a happy outcome…’ The objective is the happy outcome; the good is the means to it. Such an end might require prudence (or the ability to use good judgement and circumspection).

3) Categorical Imperatives ‘I ought to do such and such…’ There is no objective, and the good is not a means to any end but an end in itself. Categorical imperatives are therefore apodeictic i.e. unconditional or absolute.

Actions can therefore be judged as appropriately as rules of skill, counsels of prudential action, or laws of morality.

Note that:

1) rules of skill are analytic

2) counsels of prudence are analytic

3) laws of morality are synthetic

This is because rules of skill and counsels of prudence are defined by the action willed i.e. the action defines itself. Laws of morality are synthetic because the necessary action is not defined by the task. Laws of morality are also a priori because they are not defined by dependence on the senses.

Kant defers the justification of categorical imperatives until later (in chapter 3).

The Categorical Imperative and Its Various Formulae

Assuming that a categorical imperative can exist, Kant tries his hand at formulating one:

“Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

This was of course already foreshadowed in his introductory chapter 1. A maxim is a subjective principle of action as opposed to an objective principle or practical law.

According to Paton, it is at this juncture that Kant introduces the concept of freedom of action as a basis for morality. If everyone took a certain action would it be reasonable to expect freedom to be enhanced, or would society be disadvantaged and made less free?

Kant went further with what might be called his first Formula (or, in modern parlance, corollary): the Formula of the Law of Nature:

“Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature”.

Again the law of nature is taken as an indication of freedom. This is not expanded further, but Paton points out that (and it is actually obvious to post-Darwinists) that Kant has what is now regarded as a teleological and therefore outdated view of what constitutes a law of nature. (Kant’s view is if it is against nature it must be wrong. But nature does not actually proceed on such a well defined and mistake free way – most of natural development is trial and error).

Paton has his own reformulation of Kant’s Formula of the Law of Nature:

“A man is morally good if he does not act from passion or self interest but on the universal principle that what is good for him ought to be good for everyone else. Further more this ought not to apply to others like us but to the whole of nature, especially the human race”. [Even this gives rise to difficulties in practice, and gives no real guidance as it stands on things like animal rights and environmentalism. MS]

Notwithstanding, Kant attempts some examples to illustrate the principle. These include a ban on suicide (to curtail even one’s own life is not natural and selfish; the need to develop our talents; not thwarting others who are pursuing good works

After some rather repetitive arguments repeating and summarising much of what he has already said about the need for categorical imperatives to be laws, not depend on outcomes and not require empathy to initiate action, Kant make a radical move in his second re-formulation:

“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”.

This is the Formula of the End in Itself. This seems to be based on the idea that only a rational person can be an end in him/herself. It follows that the Categorical Imperative, which assumes freedom of action, must also as a corollary assume freedom of action for an individual agent acting within its jurisdiction. One agent cannot therefore not treat another as a means to an end, but allow him/her to do what he/she needs to do. If the individual is being used by the agent for some end, then his/her freedom of action is curtailed. So to disobey the Formula of the End in Itself is also to disobey the original formulation by demolishing the very thing on which it is based.

To illustrate the Formula of an End in Itself Kant runs through the same examples as before (see above). Paton notes (and Kant indicates) that all the reasoning so far, including the examples, is very general. Kant does not deal with the difficulties of the application of his Imperative for real life problems.

A further version follows the Formula of Autonomy:

“Act in such a way that your will can regard itself at the same time as making a universal law through its actions.”

Again, this follows from the original version, but it goes further – we particularise universal law through our maxims which leads to the Idea of the promulgation of freedom. Paton says ‘we are already subject to the moral law only because it is the necessary expression of our own nature as rational agents.’

In fact the Formula of Autonomy combines the original statement of the Imperative with the Formula of the End in Itself. Not only is the Imperative universal, but it depends on rational agents for its fulfilment.

The Formula of the Kingdom of Ends is yet another version (or extension) of the imperative:

“Act as if you were through your own maxims a law making member of the Kingdom of Ends.”

This goes one step further than the previous version. It indicates that a group of individuals behaving in accordance with the Formula of Autonomy, and therefore also in accordance with the original version and the other two formulae, form a kingdom. Each member of that kingdom has dignity, i.e. a comparable worth or worthiness.

Morality or virtue alone confers dignity. A man’s worth is as a law making member of the Kingdom of Ends – not his market value or his aesthetic value (or beauty) but his moral value.

Empirical Approach to Morality Based on Heteronomy.

The principle of autonomy (i.e. the capacity of an agent to act in accordance with objective morality rather than his/her subjective desires) requires further investigation which Kant postpones to chapter 3. At this point he is content to contrast his approach to those based on heteronomy (i.e. an agent acting in accordance with his/her desires and not under the guidance of objective morality).

Heteronomy is the opposite of autonomy and it is only good for hypothetical imperatives (rules of skill and counsels of prudence). This is because heteronomous principles are either empirical (pursuit of happiness) or rational (pursuit of perfection). To be good is not necessarily to be happy. Kant, a notable jolly and happy character in his private life, certainly has no objection to happiness, but he counsels against it being confused with goodness. Moral perfection, as pursued by rationalists, is all very well, but Kant says it lacks a proper definition. His system actually tells us to do certain things e.g. cultivate our talents, do our duty. If perfection is God, then Kant dismisses it as rule by fear and derivation form some unjustified religion or faith. Morality must reasoned out, not handed down from some mystical source on high.

Heteronomous principles lead not to moral good but to other ends – some of them pleasant, many indefinable in any precise way. Above all, man must be free to reason and form his own decisions.

Unfinished Business for Chapter 3

Kant, forever his own fiercest critic in matters of logic and reason, does not yet think he has justified the principle of autonomy which is the foundation of an agent’s moral behaviour. This alone will in turn justify the Categorical Imperative in all its formulations as a synthetic a proiri proposition.

This is tackled in chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Outline of a Critique of Practical reason

Freedom and Autonomy

In the physical world, freedom can be associated with events and their outcomes. If billiard balls collide, they move under Newton’s laws of motion. This is negative freedom – driven by outside influences, or other imposed. The outcome is in determined, but hard to predict. Positive freedom is, for humans, autonomy that is self imposed. If we could presuppose positive freedom, autonomy and then moral decision would follow. But can we assume positive freedom?

Put another way, is the will of a rational being necessarily free? A rational being regards his judgments as his own. So every agent who is allowed to act strictly rationally supposes himself to be free, and not influenced by coercion from outside. Such a being could follow the principle of autonomy.

Why Have An Interest in Morality?

But why should a rational being, not acting under coercion, take any interest in morality? Furthermore, even if such a being wanted freedom, would he also want laws?

There is a danger here of getting into a vicious circle. If you need laws to give you freedom, do not the laws cancel the freedom? Or is freedom guaranteed by the laws? Which comes first?

To solve this dilemma, Kant proposes that we have two standpoints: in the first, we regard ourselves as free; in the second we regard ourselves as acting agents. He says that in the physical world, we get information from objects which we perceive with our senses. They have appearance, corresponding to our interpretation of the sensual information we receive, but (as with Plato’s forms) we cannot know the things in themselves. This leads him to the assumption of a sensible (phenomenal) world and an intelligible (noumenal) world. In the one we know the form of objects in space and time, in the other we have our own interpretation and ideas about things which may not depend directly on the information of our senses.

It follows that man has an appearance, and an ability to be a conscious, thinking subject (Kant calls this an Ego) which is his connection with the intelligible world, or his intelligence. So Kant sees the appearance of an agent as different from his ability to think consciously and rationally, and this difference is because his appearance is a second order phenomenon derived from what he perceives, but his capacity for intelligent thought does not necessarily depend on such physical perceptions.

A rational agent can bring order to his world via categories, concepts or rules of reason – and for the physical or phenomenal world, these categories are set out exhaustively in his earlier work, The Critique of Pure Reason. Kant sees the intelligible or noumenal world as formed from Ideas, which may have little connection with the world of sense data.

What this means in practical terms is that a rational agent can have the ability to form a view of the world largely independent of the senses: to theorize, in fact. So man can form the Idea of freedom separately from his subjection to laws in the phenomenal world.

Kant sees this distinction as a way out of the vicious circle. Freedom is in the head, the law is in the world. If we have a universe obeying physical laws, we nonetheless retain the freedom to think what we like; if we have freedom to think what we like, we need a regulated universe to operate in. Likewise, if we have a universe obeying moral laws, we guarantee the freedom to think what we like; if we have freedom to think what we like, we need a morally regulated universe to operate in.

Returning to the questions at the beginning of this section: Why should a rational being, not acting under coercion, take any interest in morality in the first place? Even if such a being wanted freedom, would he also want laws? The answer to both questions is the same: A rational being needs order in order to think freely, so he should take an interest in morality to guarantee it.

How Is a Categorical Imperative Possible?

Kant starts to answer this question by claiming that there must be a connection between the intelligible and sensible worlds since we all live in both at the same time. He suggests that the intelligible world contains the basis of the sensible world and also its laws. An agent can see what is what in the intelligible world only because of an ‘I ought…’ command from the sensible world. This ‘I ought…’ command comes from the Categorical imperative. Kant goes so far as to say that so far as thinking about morality is concerned even a scoundrel has a conscience but he ignores what it tells him in the sensible world. [Even if we doubt this, it is at least conceivable that a scoundrel values freedom of the will as a given for himself, and, if he thinks about it, for other people. But he ignores the call to preserve it for others out of what he regards as physical necessity.]

Finally, Kant considers the possibility that he has set up an antinomy or contradiction: on the one hand, the intellect wants freedom; on the other some things are necessary.

The way to handle this is again to see the problem from the two viewpoints of the intelligible and sensible worlds. We conceive of freedom of the will: we feel free, and our intellect tells us that we are free. But things in the real, deterministic world conspire against us, and we have to live in the real world.

What Is the Intelligible World?

Kant here follows up an important digression on the nature of the intelligible world. Do we know what it is? Can we equate it with reason?

He proposes that the intelligible world is not intuited, or instinctive, or even known in a codified way. It is a nothingness; thinking which is not known through sense. So we can equate it with reason, and also assume that it has freedom to act under its own principle of autonomy. He sees the intelligible world only as having a propensity or natural inclination to reason in a free manner. It is therefore capable in principle of thinking about the conditions for moral behaviour without the influence of the temptations of the sensible world.

Continuing with this theme, Kant says there are limits to reason i.e. what can be discovered in the intelligible world. Man can be described by his appearance and his actions. But his intelligence is not an object in space, but an Idea.

We differ from non-rational creatures, who respond only to sensuous impulses. Man has the capacity to reason. Reason leads to the Ideas of freedom and autonomy and thence to interest in the moral law by the route outlined above. This interest is a ‘moral feeling’, a recognition of the binding character of the moral law. This moral feeling makes us enter the sensible world and to make judgments of our actions in an ‘I ought…’ manner.

But what authority has such an Idea from the intelligible world ultimately to judge the morality of actions in the sensible world? The moral law is not valid merely because it interests us. It interests us because we recognize it as valid. In other words, we don’t rely on the moral law’s connection with the idea of freedom so much as that it works in the sensible world.

The Remaining Problems

A categorical imperative is possible only on a presupposition of freedom to think, which leads to autonomy and thence to a need for a moral law.

But Kant is still not satisfied that he has explained the following by reason alone:

• how freedom is possible

• how pure reason (in the sensible world ) can be used alongside practical reason (in the intelligible world)

• how we can see moral interests as valid

Kant excludes a causal relationship between these three, since causal relationships belong to the sensible world. Instead he insists that the intelligible world supplies an Idea of freedom from which can be developed a theory which can be used to advise men not to take actions based only on sensuous motives. He refuses at this point to say that freedom is a priori; only that it is an Idea in the intelligible world. Nonetheless, we (and he) tend to use the concept of freedom as if it is a priori.

So we come to the limit of moral enquiry. Freedom is an intellectual Idea. All physical knowledge ends at the limit if the sensible world. But rational belief in the concept of freedom can be a practical help in determining the moral law. Kant thinks this is exemplified best in his concept of a Kingdom of Ends – people not using others as their means but as an end.

Concluding Note

Paton says that Kant “always seeks knowledge of the necessary”. He must always have a necessary postulate to start an argument, and in this case that postulate is the Idea of freedom.

Kant wants to make an argument as follows: “Freedom leads to the moral law”, which parallels his previous argument in The Critique of Pure Reason about the sensible world in which “Time and Space lead to physical laws”. He declines to do this in the present book, contenting himself by pointing out the problems of so doing. This is because he needs, as he sees it, to cross from the intelligible world of Ideas to the sensible world of action.

He examines this problem in his next book, The Critique of Practical Reason. (To be published on academia.edu)