Kant's Justification of Ethics

OWEN WARE

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Plato was right in raising this question and asking, as he used to do, Are we on the way from or to the first principles? There is a difference as there is in a race-course between the course from the judges to the turning-point and the way back.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (1.4)

The schools are instructed to pretend to no higher or more comprehensive insight on any point touching the universal human concerns than the insight that is accessible to the great multitude (who are always most worthy of our respect), and to limit themselves to the cultivation of those grounds of proof alone that can be grasped universally and are sufficient from a moral standpoint.

Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (B xxxiii)

Abbreviations

In the case of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I follow the standard practice of referring to the 1781 (A) and 1787 (B) editions. For all other texts, citations appear in the order of abbreviation, volume number, and page number from the *Akademie Ausgabe*, *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by *Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften* (29 vols. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1900ff). Translation decisions are my own, though I have consulted (and sometimes followed) *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, edited by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992ff).

Kant's Works

A/B	*Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (*Critique of Pure Reason*), 1781/87.
Anth	*Die Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (*Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*), 1798.
Br	*Briefe* (*Letters*), various dates.
FM	*Welches sind die wirklichen Fortschritte, die die Metaphysik seit Leibnitzens und Wolf's Zeiten in Deutschland gemacht hat?* (*What Real Progress has Metaphysics Made in Germany since Wolff?*), 1793/1804.
G	*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (*Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*), 1785.
GSE	*Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen* (*Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime*), 1764.
ID	*De Mundi Sensibilis atque Intelligibilis Forma et Principiis* (*Inaugural Dissertation on the Form and Principles of the Sensible and the Intelligible World*), 1770.
KpV	*Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (*Critique of Practical Reason*), 1788.
KU	*Kritik der Urteilskraft* (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*), 1790.
MpVT	'Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee' ('On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Philosophy'), 1791.
MS	*Die Metaphysik der Sitten* (*The Metaphysics of Morals*), 1797.
ND	*Nova dilucidatio* (*A New Elucidation of the First Principles of Metaphysical Cognition*), 1755.
NVE	'Nachricht von der Einrichtung seiner Vorlesungen in dem Winterhalbenjahre von 1765–1766' ('Announcement of the Programme of his Lectures for the Winter Semester of 1765–1766'), 1765.
OP	*Opus Postumum*.
Päd	*Pädagogik* (*Education*), 1803.
R	*Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft (Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*), 1793.

Refl	*Reflexionen,* various dates.
RezSchulz	*Recension von Schulz's Versuch einer Anleitung zur Sittenlehre für alle Menschen* (*Review of Schulz*), 1784.
TP	*Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis* (*On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice*), 1793.
ÜGTP	*Über den Gebrauch teleologischer Principien in der Philosophie* (*On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy*), 1788.
V-Met-L2/Pölitz	*Kant Metaphysik L 2 Pölitz* (*Lectures on Metaphysics Pölitz*), 1790/1791.
V-Met/Mron	*Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1782/1783 Metaphysik Mrongovius* (*Lectures on Metaphysics Mrongovius*), 1782/1783.
V-Met/Heinze	*Kant Metaphysik L1 Heinze* (*Lectures on Metaphysics Heinz*), 1770–1775.
V-Mo/Collins	*Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1784/1785. Moralphilosophie Collins* (*Lectures on Moral Philosophy Collins*), 1784/1785.
V-Phil-Th/Pölitz	*Vorlesungen Wintersemester 1783/1784 Philosophische Religionslehre nach Pölitz* (*Lectures on the Doctrine of Religion Pölitz*), 1783/1784.
V-PP/Herder	*Praktische Philosophie Herder* (*Practical Philosophy Herder*), 1762/1763.
WDO	*Was heißt sich im Denken orientiren?* (*What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?*), 1786.

Contents

Preface

I once heard it said that because of the sheer amount of time it takes, the person who begins writing a book is not the same person who finishes it. Nothing could be more true about my experience working on this project. The research began in the fall of 2006 when I enrolled in 'Kant's Ethics', a PhD seminar co-taught by Sergio Tenenbaum and Arthur Ripstein at the University of Toronto. My final paper ended up becoming my first publication on Kant, 'The Duty of Self-Knowledge' (2009). After my area examination, I decided to pursue my dissertation project on Kant's moral philosophy under the supervision of Paul Franks, which I defended in the summer of 2010. In the years that followed, I abandoned some of the views I upheld in my dissertation, went on to pursue different aspects of Kant's ethics, and even ventured into the world of post-Kantian philosophy, writing a book on Fichte (2020) along the way. How the present book came into being is a bit of a mystery, even to me, but I can identify one set of encounters that made its existence possible.

During the 2015–2016 academic year I lived in Frankfurt as a Humboldt Research Fellow at the Goethe-Universität. It was during that year that I had the pleasure of meeting Gabriele Gava, who showed me a hospitality that it seems only Italians are capable of. It was during that year, involving many conversations over espresso, that Gabriele helped me see Kant's methodology (specifically his distinction of analytic and synthetic procedures) as a key for unlocking the critical system. What I learned from Gabriele helped bring about a kind of revolution in my way of understanding Kant, and it was largely thanks to him that I was able to piece together a new way of applying the analytic-synthetic distinction to Kant's project of moral justification in the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*. In Frankfurt I also benefitted from conversations with Marcus Willaschek and members of his Kant-Arbeitskreis. Among the members of the Arbeitskreis, I was fortunate to become friends with Thomas Höwing, whose warmth and friendliness made my stay in Germany one I shall never forget.

Many other individuals helped me prior to, and after, my stay in Frankfurt. In addition to my dissertation committee members and current colleagues, Sergio Tenenbaum and Arthur Ripstein, I must first thank two individuals from my student days at the University of Toronto who I am now proud to call friends: Anthony Bruno and Ariel Zylberman. The amount of care they have both shown in helping me refine my work is staggering. I am also grateful to Karl Ameriks, Barbara Herman, and Robert Stern for providing me with feedback and

encouragement during the early years of my post-dissertation life, first as a post-doctoral fellow and then as an assistant professor. One will see in this book just how much the spirit of my reading of Kant is shaped by their scholarship.

I have benefitted from regular conversations with colleagues at the institutions where I worked, including Kristen Gjesdal, David Wolfsdorf, Sam Black, Evan Tiffany, Dai Heide, and many others. One could not ask for a better colleague than Dai; and he helped me see—more than anyone else—the importance of Kant's metaphysics for understanding his practical philosophy. Other people who have helped shape the views I present in this book, either through written or spoken feedback, include Don Ainslie, Stefano Bacin, Jochen Bojanowski, Claudia Blöser, John Callanan, Robert Clewis, Ben Crowe, Janelle DeWitt, Stephen Engstrom, Michael Forster, Markus Gabriel, Sebastian Gardner, Jeanine Grenberg, Hannah Ginsborg, Paul Guyer, Andree Hahmann, Bob Hanna, Chris Herrera, Karolina Hübner, Thomas Khurana, Karin Nisenbaum, Sven Nyholm, Lara Ostaric, Markus Kohl, Bernd Ludwig, Dean Moyar, Heiko Puls, Andrews Reath, Francey Russell, Lisa Shapiro, Feroz Shah, Irina Schumski, Nick Stang, Martin Sticker, Oliver Sensen, Ulrich Schlösser, Joe Saunders, Krista Thomason, Allen Wood, Benjamin Yost, my two Oxford University Press reviewers, and my supportive editor, Peter Momtchiloff. I do not know how I can repay all these debts of gratitude, and all I can say when I think of these individuals is *thank you*.

I am grateful to have the permission to reuse portions of my previously published articles, many of which have been revised or rewritten here. Chapter 1 draws from 'Skepticism in Kant's *Groundwork*', *European Journal of Philosophy* (2016). Chapter 2 draws from 'Rethinking Kant's Fact of Reason', *Philosophers' Imprint* (2014). Chapter 3 draws from 'Kant's Deductions of Morality and Freedom', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (2017). Chapter 4 draws from 'Kant on Moral Sensibility and Moral Motivation', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (2014) and 'Accessing the Moral Law through Feeling', *Kantian Review* (2015). And Chapter 5 draws from 'The Duty of Self-Knowledge', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (2009).

While writing this book, I have been fortunate to receive the love, support, and companionship of Leah Ware. She makes it all worth it.

Last, but not least, I have had the privilege of teaching many talented students at Temple University, Simon Fraser University, and at my current institution, the University of Toronto. When I wrote this book, I had my students at the forefront of my mind. They have helped me grow as a writer, scholar, and aspiring philosopher more than they possibly could know. This book is dedicated to them.

Italo Calvino once wrote that 'every reading of a classic is in fact a rereading', from which it follows, he added, that 'a classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say.'[1] I find these definitions fitting when it comes to the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*, for both of these texts contain—despite their relatively small size—a conceptual richness and systematicity that few other works in the history of ethics have attained. It is perhaps this seemingly inexhaustible quality that underlies the variety of interpretations and controversies that continue to surround Kant's moral philosophy today. My method for reading Kant in this book is to take the principle of charity to heart and try, as best as I can, to present his arguments in a coherent, consistent, and unified manner. This is not because I think Kant should have the last word, but because I find the principle of charity the most powerful tool for unlocking a philosopher's position. I do not pretend to have solved all the mysteries of Kant's project of justifying ethics in the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*; nor do I regard my interpretations here as final or beyond fixing. But this much is clear: Whether or not the reader is sympathetic to Kant, the fact stands that Kant is a 'classic author' as Calvino defines it: 'the one you cannot feel indifferent to, who helps you to define yourself in relation to him, even in dispute with him.'[2]

[1] Calvino (1982, 128). [2] Calvino (1982, 130).

Introduction

The Quiet Avoidance of Justification

When we survey the history of ethics in the West from the ancient Greeks to the present, we see that approaches to moral justification divide roughly into two camps. The first camp starts with a minimal set of premises, say, a thin conception of what it means to be a rational agent, and it then proceeds to derive a substantive account of moral requirements and their normativity. This would be an ambitious strategy of justification, since it tries to get a lot (moral normativity) from very little (a mere capacity to respond to reasons). While clearly a strong version of the ambitious approach, we can easily identify more moderate examples that still share the same form, such as social contract theories that only appeal to self-interest and the instrumental principle. The second camp goes about the task of justification the other way around. Instead of starting with very little, advocates of this strategy start with more—perhaps a whole lot more—such as a conception of thick ethical virtues, and then they work to explain their function, say, for securing an agent's flourishing. This is what I would call a modest strategy of justification, for instead of trying to get us into the world of morality, it already presupposes our home within that world. The second approach merely attempts to make the standpoint of morality intelligible for those already committed to it.

Ever since the revival of interest among English-speaking scholars in Kant's philosophy, dating from the 1960s, one can detect a boundary line dividing those who approach his ethics through the framework of the ambitious strategy and those who approach it through the framework of the modest strategy. Among the former we can include the work of Thomas Nagel, David Velleman, and Christine Korsgaard; among the latter, the work of John Rawls, Barbara Herman, and Thomas Hill.[1] A parallel boundary line also divides scholars working on Kant's theoretical philosophy, especially with regard to his transcendental deduction of the categories. Those who give the deduction an ambitious interpretation, according to which we get a lot (the validity of the categories) from very little (a mere capacity for representation) include Peter Strawson, Jonathan Bennett, and Robert Wolff.[2] Among those who give the deduction a more modest interpretation, we can

[1] See Nagel (1970), Velleman (1989, 2000, 2009), Korsgaard (1996a, 1996b, 2008, 2009), Rawls (1989), Herman (2007), and Hill (2012).

[2] See Strawson (1966), Bennett (1966), and Wolff (1963).

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identify Karl Ameriks, Stephen Engstrom, and Robert Stern.[3] What motivates these two boundary lines is difficult to tell, but I believe it is partly the result of the meta-philosophical assumptions these writers uphold. In particular, what seems to divide their positions is an attitude toward *skepticism*, with the first group arguing that Kant's aim in his theoretical and moral philosophy is to refute the skeptic, and the second group arguing instead that Kant was either uninterested in skepticism or, at most, only concerned to diagnose it.[4]

My reasons for drawing attention to the reception of Kant's philosophy is to show just how surprising it is that after sixty years of scholarship, the literature devoted to Kant's justification of ethics is still rather thin. Some time ago Barbara Herman described the state of affairs as follows:

> In the resurgence of work on Kant's ethics, one notices the quiet avoidance of the issue of justification. This is to some extent the harmless by-product of a new enthusiasm generated by success with the substantive ethical theory. But the other thing at work, I believe, is the suspicion that the project of justification in Kantian ethics is intractable.[5]

Since Herman wrote these words in 1989, a handful of monographs have appeared devoted to what were once 'scarcely charted regions' in Section III of the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* and the first chapter of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.[6] For the most part, however, the suspicion Herman mentions is very much alive, since scholars continue to disagree over nearly every aspect of Kant's arguments for freedom and morality. While it is not the goal of my book to settle these controversies once and for all, I hope to show that the parameters of these disputes have been unduly narrow, and that Kant's project of justification links up, in deep and interesting ways, with his theories of moral motivation, moral feeling, and moral conscience.

Like advocates of the modest interpretation, I do not think that Kant was seeking to refute the skeptic on the skeptic's own terms. Nor do I think that Kant ever sought to derive the moral law or its normativity from a thin conception of what it means to be a rational agent, as I will argue in Chapter 3. However, matters are complicated by the fact that Kant's so-called modest starting point is not a conception of ethical life in the Aristotelian sense, involving thick virtues, or in the Hegelian sense, involving concrete institutions, but in a conception of 'common

[3] See Ameriks (2003), Engstrom (1994), and Stern (1999).

[4] There is a precedent in Aristotle, who acknowledges the limited force of arguments in ethics. 'Now if arguments were in themselves enough to make men good, they would justly, as Theognis says, have won very great rewards, and such rewards should have been provided; but as things are, while they seem to have power to encourage and stimulate the generous-minded among our youth, and to make a character which is gently born, and a true lover of what is noble, ready to be possessed by virtue, they are not able to encourage the many to nobility and goodness' (1984, X.9).

[5] Herman (1989, 131).

[6] See Schönecker (1999), Allison (2011), Grenberg (2013), and Puls (2016).

human reason' (*gemeinen Menschenvernunft*). And while the form of Kant's strategy is modest insofar as it works within this conception, the content is arguably not modest at all. If anything, it is wildly ambitious insofar as Kant frames the ends and interests of common human reason in terms of a moral teleology (regarding our essential ends), a moral theology (regarding ideas of the soul and God), and a seemingly robust metaphysics (regarding a distinction between phenomena and noumena). I want to emphasize this from the outset as a reminder that Kant's attempt to reorient philosophy from a common standpoint is not an innocent philosophical move. Nor is it simply a matter of describing moral experience from a first-person perspective, free from presuppositions. For Kant, as we shall see, the appeal of a common standpoint is that it reveals a use of reason already bound up with moral, religious, and even metaphysical concepts.[7]

This aspect of Kant's position will likely strike readers today as antiquated. But in my view it is something we should acknowledge and, if not come to terms with, then at least accept on the grounds of textual accuracy. For many years it was not unusual to hear philosophers denounce Kant's approach to ethics on the grounds of its 'extravagant metaphysical luggage',[8] and many shared Strawson's view that if there is lasting value to Kant's philosophy, it lies on the merely conceptual (which is to say non-metaphysical) side of his project.[9] This sentiment has enjoyed a long lifespan in the field of Kantian ethics, which to this day appears unaffected by a growing wave of metaphysics-friendly approaches to the first *Critique*.[10] Not that long ago, for instance, one prominent ethicist believed it would attract his readership to declare, quite boldly, that 'we can be naturalists while preserving the moral and psychological richness of Kant'.[11] My own view is that separating Kant's ethics and his metaphysics cannot be won so easily. Nor am I of the opinion that such a separation would be desirable. At any rate, a conviction that will guide my discussion here is that it is worthwhile to approach Kant on his own terms, extravagant luggage and all, and resist the temptation to make his work conform to contemporary trends. Kant himself was of the view that we 'always return to metaphysics' (A850/B878),[12] and that such a return is necessary if we want to ground ethics as a science. Accordingly, he tells us, 'those same people who oppose metaphysics still have an indispensable duty to go back to its principles even in the doctrine of virtue and, before they teach, to become pupils in the classroom of metaphysics' (MS 6:376–7).[13]

[7] See Ameriks (2000) for further discussion of these presuppositions.

[8] Williams (1985, 65). [9] Strawson (1966).

[10] See, for example, Adams (1997), Watkins (2005), Ameriks (2003), Hogan (2009), Marshall (2010), Insole (2013), Dyck (2014), Stang (2016), Indregard (2018), and Heide (2020).

[11] Velleman (2006, 15).

[12] A return, he adds, 'as to a beloved from whom we have been estranged' (A850/B878).

[13] In this context Kant argues that feeling cannot ground a moral principle. Any such principle of feeling, he adds, 'is really an obscurely thought *metaphysics* that is inherent in every human being because of his rational predisposition, as a teacher will readily grant if he experiments in questioning his pupil *socratically* about the imperative of duty and its application to moral appraisal of his actions' (MS 6:376–7).

Taking this council to heart, my aim here is to understand the basic structure of Kant's project of moral justification, with a focus on his foundational arguments for the reality of human freedom and the normativity of the moral law. For this reason I shall be limiting my investigation almost exclusively to the two texts where these arguments appear—*Groundwork* III and the second *Critique*—though I will often contextualize these arguments within Kant's corpus at large, including his writings on theoretical philosophy. My chief aim in this book is to give a fresh interpretation of Kant's justification of ethics that, while true to the spirit of the modest strategy sketched above, reveals the far-reaching significance of his effort to reorient ethics around a shared, pre-theoretical, and hence common standpoint. To this end I will be building upon the excellent work of recent commentators who have shown the extent to which Kant's commitment to common human reason plays a central role in his philosophy, although I wish to push this reading further by uncovering its deeper systematic function. A distinctive feature of the interpretation I will be developing over the coming chapters is that Kant's project of justifying the reality of human freedom and the normativity of the moral law turns on a complex set of argumentative strategies that have gone overlooked by most commentators. At their basis, I shall argue, we find a revolutionary view of the relationship between philosophy and what Kant calls our 'higher vocation' (*höhere Bestimmung*).

Philosophy as Justification

This revolutionary view is central to the project of critical philosophy Kant sets out in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, making it a helpful place to begin our investigation. Indeed, the opening lines of the first *Critique* draw attention to our unavoidable tendency to ask questions that transcend sense experience, such as whether we possess an immortal soul, whether we are free in our actions, or whether God exists. At the same time, Kant is clear that what hangs in the balance of these questions is nothing that will occasion despair for the ordinary person. As he explains, the space where such questions lead constitutes the 'battlefield… of metaphysics' (A viii). To deprive its combatants of their knowledge-claims is thereby a loss that only effects 'the monopoly of the schools and in no way the interest of human beings', since ordinary persons are not entangled in such controversies (B xxxii). After all, Kant asks, have the 'fine-spun arguments' of the schools—concerning immortality, freedom, or God—'ever been able to reach the public or have the least influence over its convictions?' (B xxxiii). He does not think so. Nor does he think philosophers should pretend to occupy such a position of influence. Instead they should seek 'no higher or more comprehensive insight on any point touching the universal human concerns than the insight that is accessible to the great multitude (who are always most worthy of our respect),

and', Kant adds, 'to limit themselves to the cultivation of those grounds of proof alone that can be grasped universally and are sufficient from a moral standpoint' (B xxxiii).[14]

Upon hearing such a plea for humility, one might think that Kant is rejecting metaphysics altogether. Yet I believe this impression would be mistaken. In addition to denouncing dogmatism and skepticism in philosophy, Kant goes out of his way to criticize 'indifferentism' for its anti-metaphysical character, writing that it signals 'the mother of chaos and night in the sciences' (A x).[15] As he emphasizes, 'it is pointless to affect **indifference** with respect to such inquiries to whose object human nature **cannot** be **indifferent**' (A x), referring once again to those questions that drive human reason to leave its sphere in the sensible world.[16] Rather than retreat from the battlefield of metaphysics, then, it is the philosopher's duty to establish peace by way of a critical examination of reason itself—its sources, contents, and limits—the process of which Kant says will usher a new era in the development of reason, the era of 'enlightenment' (A xi). But contrary to what one might expect, this stage does not privilege the theoretical interests of reason, not even in the domains of well-grounded science such as physics, mathematics, and logic. The aim of depriving speculative reason access to objects beyond the sensible world is to vindicate those objects as items of belief for reason in its *practical* use. The aim, as Kant famously puts it, is to 'deny **knowledge** in order to make room for **faith**' (B xxx; see also A744/B772).

Behind these claims we find a new model of philosophy at the heart of Kant's system, what we might call philosophy as justification.[17] The inspiration for this model appears to have been occasioned by Kant's reading of Rousseau, and in a surviving fragment Kant describes the effects of this reading in language reminiscent of a religious conversion:

> I myself am a researcher by inclination. I feel the entire thirst for cognition and the eager restlessness to proceed further in it, as well as the satisfaction at every acquisition. There was a time when I believed this alone could constitute honor

[14] Kant nonetheless ends on a more positive note: 'Yet care is taken for a more equitable claim on the part of the speculative philosopher. He remains the exclusive trustee of a science that is useful to the public even without their knowledge, namely the critique of reason; for the latter can never become popular, but also has no need of being so; for just as little as the people want to fill their heads with fine-spun arguments for useful truths, so just as little do the equally subtle objections against these truths ever enter their minds' (B xxxiv).

[15] See Kelsey (2014) for an excellent account of the threat indifferentism poses in Kant's theoretical philosophy.

[16] 'Why has providence set many objects, although they are intimately connected with our highest interest, so high that it is barely granted to us to encounter them in an indistinct perception, doubted even by ourselves, through which our searching glance is more enticed than satisfied?' (A744/B772).

[17] This is similar to what Rawls (1989) calls 'philosophy as defense' and what Ameriks (2000) calls 'philosophy as apologetics', although I mean to capture a broader role in speaking of philosophy as justification.

> of humankind, and I despised the rabble who knows nothing. *Rousseau* has set me right. This blinding prejudice vanishes, I learn to honor human beings, and I would feel by far less useful than the common laborer if I did not believe that this consideration could impart value to all others in order to establish the rights of humanity. (Refl 20:44)[18]

This fragment was composed around 1765, a decade and a half before the appearance of the first *Critique*, and its influence on Kant's masterpiece is unmistakable. A recurring theme in the first *Critique* is that philosophy faces the project of protecting the rights of humanity by making the ground for the 'majestic moral edifices' of pure reason 'level and firm enough to be built upon' (B376). Kant even defines the true concept of philosophy as the 'science of the relation of all cognition to the essential ends of human reason', adding that the highest of these ends constitutes 'the entire vocation of human beings' (A840/B868).[19] The practical orientation of Kant's system therefore explains, on the one hand, why he advocates a close engagement with traditional metaphysics, condemning an attitude of indifference to such crucial questions, and yet, on the other, why he ridicules the fine-spun arguments of the schools, claiming that they never have nor ever will influence the hearts and minds of ordinary persons.[20]

In saying this, however, is Kant recommending that we settle all disputes in philosophy by appealing to common sense? In wanting to give philosophy a foothold in common human reason, one of Kant's aims is to supply us with a touchstone 'for passing judgment on the correctness' of reason in its 's*peculative* use' (LJ 9:57). The touchstone is what he identifies with the entire moral vocation of human beings, the object of which permits an extension of reason beyond the sensible world, but only for the sake of rational belief. In order to have a guiding thread through the 'immeasurable space of the supersensible', Kant says the philosopher must take hold of an interest of reason in its practical use, found already in the most ordinary understanding (WDO 8:137). In this way the philosopher must rid herself of what Kant calls a 'prejudice *against* healthy human reason' (V-Lo/Blomberg 24:193). But this does not obviate the need for insight and science altogether; nor does it render methods of argument and justification unnecessary.

[18] For the Rousseau–Kant connection, see Velkley (2002), Ameriks (2012), and Callanan (2019).

[19] It is in the sphere of practical reason, Kant argues, that the 'unquenchable desire to find a firm footing beyond all bounds of experience' must be directed, once we realize, of course, that such desire will never find satisfaction on speculative grounds alone (A796/B824). 'Pure reason has a presentiment of objects of great interest to it. It takes the path of mere speculation in order to come closer to these; but they flee before it. Presumably it may hope for better luck on the only path that still remains to it, namely that of its practical use' (A796/B824). See Ferrarin (2015) and Deligiorgi (2017) for further discussion.

[20] Kant makes a similar claim in the 1781 edition: 'In what concerns all human beings without exception nature is not to be blamed for any partiality in the distribution of its gifts, and in regard to the essential ends of human nature even the highest philosophy cannot advance further than the guidance that nature has also conferred on the most common understanding' (A831/B859).

In fact, Kant is careful to warn against what he calls a 'prejudice *for* healthy human reason' that would render such methods redundant—adding, with a bite of sarcasm, that 'to appeal to ordinary common sense when insight and science run short, and not before, is one of the subtle discoveries of recent times, whereby the dullest windbag can confidently take on the most profound thinker and hold his own with him' (Prol 4:259).

Methods of Justification in Ethics

This last warning is crucial for understanding the topic of this book: namely, Kant's justification of ethics in *Groundwork* III and the second *Critique*. Although Kant thinks moral inquiry must also get a foothold in common human reason, he does not think we can prove or defend the fundamental concepts of ethics by appealing to common sense alone. On the contrary, methods of argument and justification play a key role in Kant's writings, four of which will occupy our attention in the coming chapters:

- First, there is the *skeptical method*, or the method of doubting a claim (and 'bringing it to the highest degree of uncertainty') in order to motivate inquiry into its sources and origins. This procedure is effective for suspending judgment in matters of speculation with the aim of 'getting on the trail of truth' (LJ 9:84; see also A423/B451). As we shall see in Chapter 1, the skeptical method plays a central role in the *Groundwork*. After claiming that only a good will can be considered good 'without limitation', Kant considers the suspicion that this idea has its basis in 'mere high-flown fantasy' and that we have 'misunderstood the purpose of nature in assigning reason as the ruler of the will' (G 4:394–395). But Kant raises this suspicion, not because he harbors any doubt in the value of a good will, but because the suspicion serves to motivate inquiry into the sources and origins of the idea itself.
- Second, there is the *experimental method*, or the method of illustrating a claim by way of a thought experiment. This procedure applies in contexts where the claim in question can be made vivid and intuitively compelling, even though it does not admit of a strict proof. As we shall see in Chapter 2, the experimental method plays a central role in the second *Critique*. After claiming that consciousness of the moral law reveals our freedom to us, Kant sets up a thought experiment to illustrate how common human reason separates morality from considerations of one's own happiness (KpV 5:30). The experiment has the reader consider the case of a man facing a conflict between duty and death, with the aim of showing that this man would judge it possible to perform his duty even under threats of execution. What then

becomes vivid is the way we judge that the moral law holds more authority than the sum-total of our sensible inclinations.

- Third, there is the *polemical method*, or the method of defending a claim by countering 'dogmatic denials' of it (A739–40/B767–8). This procedure applies in contexts where the claim in question lies beyond the reach of human reason, since we can then show that one is not entitled to reject what one cannot know. As we shall see in Chapter 3, the polemical method plays a central role in *Groundwork* III. After tracing the moral 'ought' to our own intelligible 'will', Kant argues that moral motivation requires a 'causality of reason to determine sensibility in conformity with its principles' (G 4:460). Yet Kant's point is that we cannot explain the connection between a noumenal cause and a phenomenal effect in feeling. Thus, 'where determination by laws of nature ceases, there all explanation ceases as well, and nothing is left but defense, that is, to repel the objections of those who pretend to have seen deeper into the essence of things' (G 4:459).
- Lastly, there is the *phenomenological method*, or the method of reflecting on a claim as it appears in consciousness. This procedure applies in contexts where the claim in question displays unique features that come to light, not through conceptual analysis, but only through reflective attention. As we shall see in Chapter 4, the phenomenological method plays a central role in the third chapter of the second *Critique*. After repeating his earlier claim that we cannot comprehend how reason can determine sensibility, Kant adds that we still have room to consider what *effects* moral consciousness must have on our capacity to feel (KpV 5:72). Aside from eliciting a painful feeling of self-reproach when we see that we have treated happiness as a law-giving principle, our consciousness of the moral law also elicits a pleasurable feeling of self-esteem, i.e., when we see that as rational beings we are 'elevated' above our sensible nature and hence capable of autonomy.

As we shall see, what makes the phenomenological approach important as a method of justification is that it warrants our possession of a faculty of sensibility attuned to the demands of pure practical reason, without presuming insight into the causal connection between the two. Similar to the experimental method mentioned above, this procedure is effective for establishing moral concepts that do not admit of a strict proof.

Proofs in Moral Philosophy

This brings us to an important question for the present study: What kinds of proof are available within Kant's moral philosophy? While he never stipulates the exact meaning of a 'proof' (*Beweis*) in his writings on ethics, Kant does speak to

this issue in the first *Critique* and in his lectures on logic. An important distinction we find in these texts concerns what Kant variously calls indirect, negative, or *apagogic* proofs, on the one hand, and direct, positive, or *ostensive* proofs, on the other (A7891/B817). Apagogic proofs work to establish the truth of a proposition by demonstrating the falsity of claims opposed to it—hence, the strategy is indirect or negative, since the truth emerges by way of elimination. Ostensive proofs in contrast work to establish the truth of a proposition by revealing its grounds—hence, the strategy is direct or positive, since the truthemerges by way of insight into its source. The advantage of an ostensive proof, Kant explains, is that it discloses, not only the truth of a proposition, 'but also at the same time its *genesis*, its generative source' (V-Lo/Blomberg 24:233). As he puts it, 'The direct or ostensive proof is, in all kinds of cognition, that which is combined with the conviction of truth and simultaneously with insight into its sources' (A7891/B817).[21]

Applying this distinction to Kant's moral philosophy is helpful. In the *Groundwork*, for example, Kant explains that it is one thing to clarify the structure of the moral law and another to justify its application to us as a binding imperative. The problem is that merely clarifying a concept does not give us insight into its genesis. The moral law expresses an unconditional demand, and we experience that demand in the form of an 'ought', but we cannot tell from where this demand purports to bind us. For all we know, Kant adds, the moral 'ought' might arise from the faculty of the imagination, not from the faculty of reason, in which case it would be an illusion. This question leads Kant in *Groundwork* III to offer a genetic proof or 'deduction' of the moral law's bindingness. As we shall see, the genetic proof involves a critical examination of our faculty of practical reason—separating its empirical and pure uses—in order to show that our will is not just sensibly affected. Kant argues that the ground of our own sensibly affected will contains the idea of a pure will capable of determining itself on the basis of reason alone. The source of moral obligation therefore lies within us: what we 'ought' to do as sensibly affected beings is what we 'would' do as beings with a pure will.

But what about the moral law itself? Does it not also fall within the purview of Kant's project of justification? On the reading I shall defend in this book, the necessity of the moral law itself is never the object of a genetic proof or deduction

[21] The impression we receive upon hearing these remarks is that the model of an ostensive or genetic proof is clearly superior, in Kant's eyes, to the model of an apogogic or non-genetic proof. And to an extent that is no doubt the case. However, we should not be misled into thinking that apogogic or non-genetic proofs are to be avoided at all costs, as if their presence would threaten to undermine a program of justification. To be sure, although Kant refers to them as 'more of an emergency aid than a procedure which satisfies all the aims of reason', he adds that 'they have an advantage in self-evidence over the direct proofs in this: that a contradiction always carries with it more clarity of representation than the best connection, and thereby more closely approaches the intuitiveness of a demonstration' (A790/B818). Although I disagree with the details of his interpretation, Guyer's (2017) proposal that Kant's procedure in Sections I and II of the *Groundwork* largely accords with the apogogic model is helpful.

in Kant's moral philosophy, not even in the semi-critical form it takes in the first *Critique*.[22] A key piece of evidence in support of this reading comes from Kant's closing statements in *Groundwork* III, which have not, I am afraid to say, received the amount of attention that they deserve among commentators.[23] What Kant makes clear in these statements is that human reason reaches a limit when it comes to the absolute necessity of the moral law, because human reason can alight upon no further condition under which to subsume (and thereby comprehend) the necessity in question (G 4:463). Were we to find some further condition under which to subsume the necessity of the moral law, then by that very token it would not be a species of absolute necessity after all. For Kant, we can gain insight into the moral law's bindingness, or its 'necessitation' (*Nötigung*), insofar as we can trace this bindingness to our own intelligible will. But when it comes to the moral law itself, or its 'necessity' (*Notwendigkeit*), Kant argues that all we can do is comprehend its '*incomprehensibility*' (G 4:463).

When we take these final remarks in *Groundwork* III seriously, a novel way of interpreting Kant's justification of ethics opens up. In the first place, we need not view Kant's assertion in the second *Critique* that consciousness of the moral law is an underivable 'fact' as marking a 'great reversal' from his earlier argument in *Groundwork* III.[24] On the contrary, I shall argue that with respect to the moral law's necessity as a principle valid for all rational beings, Kant's position shows no signs of wavering between *Groundwork* III and the second *Critique*: in each text he upholds that we cannot comprehend the necessity of the moral law and that it therefore admits of no deduction or genetic proof. What Kant makes salient in his later work is that an experimental method can illustrate our consciousness of this necessity as a fact of common human reason, 'prior to all speculation about its possibility' (KpV 5:90). But as we shall see, this is a variation of a theme already present in *Groundwork* III, since even there Kant argues that the 'practical use of common reason confirms the correctness' of his deduction, referring us to the case of a scoundrel who, when one sets before him examples of virtuous conduct

[22] See §3.2 and §3.6 for my defense of this claim.

[23] Rauscher (2009) and Puls (2016) are two important exceptions to this neglect.

[24] This is Ameriks's (1982, 226) turn of phrase. The list of scholars who subscribe to some version of the reversal reading is long, including Ross (1954), Beck (1960), Henrich (1960), Williams (1968), Korsgaard (1989), O'Neill (1989), Allison (1990), Łuków (1993), Neiman (1994), Hill (1998), Allison (2011), Rawls (2000), Engstrom (2002), Darwall (2006), Sussman (2008), Reath (2012), and Grenberg (2013). Other scholars find a significant change in Kant's project of justification, not because he gave up a proof of the moral law, but because he gave up a non-moral argument for freedom. For this view, see Schönecker (1999, 2006, 2013, 2014), Guyer (2009), Timmermann (2010), Ludwig (2010, 2012, 2015, 2018), Hahmann (2012), and Bojanowski (2017). Noteworthy exceptions to this trend in the literature include McCarthy (1982), Wolff (2009), Wood (2011), and Tenenbaum (2012). However, with the exception of Puls's German monograph (2016), there have been no systematic efforts to find continuity in Kant's project of justification from 1785 to 1788.

(even ones involving 'great sacrifices' of self-interest) wishes 'that he might also be so disposed' (G 4:454).[25]

Further support for my reading comes from what Kant says about his methodology in the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*. In the prefaces of each work Kant tells the reader that his order of exposition will unfold along two paths, one 'analytic', and the other 'synthetic'. The analytic path begins with what is given in common moral experience and works to clarify the highest principle that makes this experience possible. We follow this path, Kant explains, when we *separate* what is empirical in our faculty of practical reason (as it is conditioned by sensibility) from what is pure (as it is unconditioned by sensibility) in order to 'ascend' to the supreme law of this faculty as a whole—the moral law as a principle of autonomy. Only after discovering this law can we take the synthetic path, which turns back and descends to our original starting point. We follow this path, Kant explains, when we *recombine* what was previously separated, the empirical and pure parts of practical reason, in order to reveal their necessary connection. In this respect, while both the analytic and synthetic paths constitute a single method, the synthetic path marks the path of justification proper, since it yields a special kind of insight, either insight into the possibility of moral obligation (in the *Groundwork*) or insight into the possibility of moral motivation (in the second *Critique*).[26]

We shall return to this distinction of analytic and synthetic paths more than once in the coming chapters.[27] But I should say that my aim here is not to defend a continuity reading for its own sake. The value of this reading is that it clears room for us to explore other possible differences shaping Kant's project in the second *Critique*. As I have just hinted at, Kant's later project is much broader in scope than commentators have traditionally assumed.[28] It includes, not just his

[25] For a different reading, see Bittner (1989). Sticker (2014, 2015) is one of the few scholars to recognize that Kant's example of the scoundrel from subsection 4 of *Groundwork* III signals a return 'back' to common cognition. However, like the majority of commentators, Sticker does not contextualize this example with reference to Kant's methodology, as I plan to do.

[26] In an important essay devoted to Kant's methodology, Gabriele Gava (2015) makes a compelling case for assigning two distinct senses to Kant's analytic–synthetic distinction in his theoretical philosophy. A broader sense characterizes them as *strategies of exposition* and a narrower sense characterizes them as *modes of cognition*. In the latter case, analysis refers to conceptual clarification and synthesis refers to the special a priori insights afforded by Kant's transcendental deductions. In the former case, an analytic strategy of exposition begins by separating a faculty of cognition into its basic elements, as it is given in experience, and a synthetic strategy recombines what was previously separated in order to show their necessary unity. Interestingly, these two senses come together in the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*. Kant explicitly organizes each text in terms of analytic and synthetic paths, according to which we ascend from the basic parts of practical reason to its supreme law (the moral law), and then descend from this law back to the parts. Moreover, in each text Kant provides analytic knowledge (based on conceptual clarification) along the analytic path and synthetic cognition (based on necessary a priori connections) along the synthetic path.

[27] See §1.1, §1.13, §3.1, §3.3, §3.12, §4.1, §4.11, and §4.12.

[28] Beck (1960) and Allison (1990) are standard representatives of this view. For an important exception, see Franks (2005).

doctrine of the fact of reason in the first chapter, but also his theory of moral sensibility in the third chapter. On the reading I shall defend, Kant's synthetic path in the second *Critique* extends to the question of how the moral law can be a real motivating 'incentive' (*Triebfeder*), i.e., how it can be a subjective ground of action and not merely an objective (and potentially ineffective) principle. Given our inability to comprehend a causality of reason, Kant appeals instead to a phenomenological method in the third chapter and examines the effects that consciousness of the moral law must have on our capacity to feel.[29] The result is confirmation of the moral law's applicability to beings who, like us, are not only rational but also sensibly affected, since the theory of moral sensibility shows that our 'hearts' and not just our 'heads' are responsive to the demands of duty. This is consistent with Kant's project of locating the source of morality within us, the aim of *Groundwork* III, but it goes further, on my account, by describing a positive interaction between reason and feeling, ultimately showing how our consciousness of the moral law influences our faculty of sensibility through moral feelings of self-reproach and self-esteem.

To Whom? From Where? Against What?

If one now wanted a label to capture the spirit of Kant's metaethics in the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*, as I have presented these texts so far, then I think anti-error theory would be an apt turn of phrase. The error theorist, at least in her traditional guise, tells us that ordinary moral judgments are systematically false. This implies by extension that common human reason is completely mistaken in its conception of ethics. Kant's metaethics is an anti-error theory to the extent that it gives primacy to the ordinary standpoint of life over the speculative standpoint of philosophy. Yet there is a further point to note in light of Kant's conversion around 1765, namely, that he seeks to reorient philosophy itself (and not just moral philosophy) to the ends and interests of human beings, making his anti-error theory as much a meta-philosophical view as it is a meta-ethical one. I mention this to help dispel a sense of perplexity readers are likely to have with respect to Kant's apparent disregard for any form of radical moral skepticism. On this issue I find it instructive to consider Kant's rejoinder to a critic of the *Groundwork* 'who wanted to say something censuring this work', but in fact, he adds, 'hit the mark better than he himself may have intended when he said: that no new principle of morality is set forth in it but only a *new formula*' (KpV 5:8n).

[29] I am sympathetic to Heidegger's impression of the third chapter—that it is 'the most brilliant phenomenological analysis of the phenomenon of morality that we have from him' (1927/1988, 133). But I think there are limits to the phenomenological interpretation of Kant defended by Heidegger (1927/1988) and, more recently, by Schönecker (2013) and Grenberg (2013), which I shall discuss at greater length in §4.10 and §4.11.

In reply Kant asks rhetorically: 'But who would even want to introduce a new principle of all morality and, as it were, first invent it? *Just as if, before him, the world had been ignorant of what duty is or in complete error about it*' (KpV 5:8n; emphasis added).

A response some readers might have is that this hypothetical scenario—that the world has been in complete error about duty—is precisely the kind of skeptical threat the moral philosopher is responsible for addressing. But it is important to see from the outset of this book that Kant views this response as mistaken in its idea of what moral philosophy can accomplish, for the same reasons Rousseau gives, speaking through the character of a Savoyard Vicar, when he asks 'Were not all books written by men? Why, then, would man need them to know his duties, and what means had he of knowing them before these books were written?'[30] This is not to say that Rousseau and Kant are *apologists* for common sense, since they agree that our everyday judgments require development, education, and cultivation, of which the right kind of philosophy (in Kant's case, a 'metaphysics of morals') plays an active role.[31] But neither of these writers take it as a condition of success for their theorizing to somehow refute a skeptic who requests a reason to care about duty or ethical life in general, or who regards common reason as totally mistaken in all moral matters. All of this leads me to conclude that a distinctive feature of Kant's anti-error theory is a self-directed point of focus, insofar as it aims to vindicate the claims of ethics within a pre-theoretical standpoint.

This gives us a preliminary answer to a set of questions Bernard Williams once raised in the context of asking 'what a justification of ethical life should try to do'.[32] In Williams's view, we should ask any attempted justification the following three questions: 'To whom is it addressed? From where? Against what?'[33] On my reading, while Kant invokes the skeptic's doubts to provoke inquiry into the sources of morality, he is not addressing the moral skeptic per se. He is not taking up the 'adversarial stance' and attempting to deploy an argument the skeptic about morality must accept on pain of contradiction.[34] At the same time, we should not lose sight of the fact that Kant was writing for students and specialists of philosophy—not just to professional scholars, but also to individuals who have turned their reflections to moral issues and who want, if possible, rationally satisfying answers. Neither the *Groundwork* nor the second *Critique* were intended to serve as popular treatises; here as elsewhere Kant is explicit about giving scholastic rigor priority over widespread appeal when it comes to laying the foundations of a science (G 4:391–392). Because Kant thinks moral philosophy is corruptible, and in some cases corrupting, it is necessary for his project to reveal the fatal flaws of rival ethical theories, especially those based on empirical principles. So to answer Williams's second question, 'From where?', it is clear that Kant develops

[30] Rousseau (1762/1979, 303). [31] On this point I agree with Sticker (2015).
[32] Williams (1985, 23). [33] Williams (1985, 23). [34] Wright (1991).

his justification of ethics from the standpoint of philosophy, but one suitably equipped to examine the sources of common human reason.

This brings us to Williams's third question, 'Against what?' That is, what is Kant's project of justification working to avoid? If my answers to the first two questions are correct, then it is safe to say that Kant is not working to avoid the threat of immoralism. Kant is optimistic that even a scoundrel recognizes the dignity of moral action, however much he fails (perhaps due to frailty) to conform his will to the requirements of duty (G 4:460). But then what is the problem to which Kant is seeking a solution in his writings on ethics? The answer changes depending on what text we have before us, the *Groundwork* or the second *Critique*, but what they share in common, on my reading, is an effort to rescue common human reason from the conflict it experiences between the claims of morality, on the one hand, and the claims of happiness, on the other. This is not a mere speculative problem of 'doubt' (*Zweifel*), such as the kind pure reason generates when it oversteps the field of experience, but a practical conflict at the heart of common moral consciousness—in a word, a problem of 'despair' (*Verzweiflung*).[35] Yet the despair in question is not so much a crisis of competing forces as it is a crisis of competing self-conceptions, since what the tension between morality and happiness threatens, at bottom, is a disharmony in our higher vocation. It is a threat, as Kant puts it, of becoming *obscure* to ourselves (G 4:405).

A fourth question we might pose, adding to Williams's list, concerns what a project of moral justification aims to accomplish. To what end is it directed? If it is correct to say that Kant is working against a threat of self-obscurity, then we can understand his aim in terms of restoring harmony to the idea of our higher vocation. This is the mind-set in which Kant is working to overcome, not doubt, but despair. By making moral experience intelligible to ourselves—either by defending the belief that we are free, or by revealing the source of obligation within us, or by describing our capacity to feel respect for the law—Kant's goal is to vindicate a lofty yet fragile idea of humanity: namely, the idea of humanity as having a citizenship in a world beyond the sensible one and a destiny beyond the pursuit of happiness. In other words, by making moral experience intelligible to ourselves, the aim of Kant's justification of ethics is to restore *trust* in the idea of ourselves as the kind of beings for whom morality applies—that is, finite beings with moral reason and moral sensibility.

This answers what we might call a general question about the legitimacy of our moral vocation, which will make up the largest portion of this book (Chapters 1–4). As we shall see, however, it does not address a specific question of how we can take steps toward our moral vocation, since this raises an issue of how we can

[35] See Breazeale (2012) and Franks (2008) for two illuminating accounts of the link between 'doubt' (*Zweifel*) and 'despair' (*Verzweiflung*) in post-Kantian skepticism. See also Grenberg (2013) for a detailed treatment of the problem of a practical conflict between morality and happiness.

know whether our moral progress is genuine. For this reason I have devoted the final chapter of this book (Chapter 5) to the problem of moral self-knowledge, keeping an eye to the obstacles Kant thinks stand in the way of our moral improvement. On my reading, these obstacles constitute two sides of what I call Kant's opacity thesis: his claim that we can never get to the bottom of our own intentions for acting. One side of the opacity thesis concerns our persistent tendency to deceive ourselves, to construe our intentions in a flattering or praiseworthy light. The other side concerns the limit we encounter in trying to understand ourselves without ever gaining access to our underlying characters. On my account, the presence of self-opacity threatens to undermine the intelligibility of moral progress by making it uncertain whether our commitment to our higher vocation is sincere or merely feigned. This is not a question of whether we are warranted in ascribing such a vocation to ourselves. Rather, it is a question of whether we can trust our own moral aspirations, the solution of which, I shall argue, leads Kant to develop a theory of conscience in his later works, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

Admittedly, the broader question I plan to investigate here—whether there is reversal or continuity in Kant's justification of ethics—may appear to be of interest only to historians of philosophy. Yet in truth it speaks to a larger issue in contemporary ethics over the normativity of moral requirements, specifically the issue of whether those requirements are derivable from a more foundational conception of action or even from a more basic conception of theoretical rationality (a strategy employed, with varying aims, by Thomas Nagel, Alan Gewirth, Peter Railton, David Velleman, Connie Rosati, and Christine Korsgaard, among others).[36] Proponents of what we might call foundationalism in ethics are ready to acknowledge that Kant's second *Critique* has a different starting point: our common moral consciousness.[37] Nevertheless, many believe that Kant had ventured an argument from a more basic conception of rational agency in his earlier work. It would then be significant if my version of the continuity reading were true, beyond throwing new light on Kant's intellectual development. Not only may foundationalism lose its historical affiliation with *Groundwork* III, but Kant's reasons for resisting a deduction of the moral law from non-moral premises may also be good reasons for resisting foundationalism today. I will return to this set of reflections in the Conclusion where I shall say why Kant's justification of ethics, although not free of problems, is still of lasting importance.

[36] See Nagel (1970), Gewirth (1978), Railton (1997), Velleman (1989, 2000, 2009), Rosati (2003), and Korsgaard (1996a, 2008, 2009).

[37] As I am using this label, foundationalism in ethics is a broad category for any strategy of deriving the normativity of moral requirements from a more basic conception of action, agency, freedom, or rationality (including theoretical rationality). There are similarities here to what Ameriks labels 'strong foundationalism' in the philosophical programs of the early post-Kantians, who similarly wanted to derive robust knowledge claims (e.g., about the external world) from a more basic conception of representation, consciousness, or self-consciousness. See Ameriks (2000).

1
Moral Skepticism

> The objections that are to be feared lie in ourselves. We must search them out like old but unexpired claims.
>
> – Kant (A777/B805)

1.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to set the stage for a closer examination of Kant's arguments for the reality of human freedom and the normativity of the moral law in *Groundwork* III. Its central task is to clarify the organization of the *Groundwork* as a whole, which I will show unfolds according to a skeptical method. My proposal is that Kant's strategy of making a claim doubtful in order to arrive at its source underlies the various 'transitions' of the work, namely, from common to philosophical moral cognition in Section I, from popular moral philosophy to a metaphysics of morals in Section II, and lastly, from a metaphysics of morals to a critique of pure practical reason in Section III. By working through these transitions, my first task is to provide the reader with a sketch of the main arguments constituting the *Groundwork*, which will prepare the way for a careful assessment of Kant's project of justification in the third section. One important result of interpreting the *Groundwork* through this framework is that it highlights a significant but easy to overlook feature of Kant's methodology. As he tells us in the Preface, the first two sections of the book follow an 'analytic' path and the third follows a 'synthetic' path (G 4:392). While commentators have debated over the exact import of this distinction, I will propose that the analytic path is equivalent to a procedure of 'ascending' to the highest principles of practical reason and the synthetic path is equivalent to the procedure of 'descending' from these principles back to the standpoint of common human reason in which we find them employed.

In all this it remains puzzling that Kant does not invoke or address the skeptic's traditional question in *Groundwork* III, 'Why be moral?', as one might have expected. Quite a few commentators have taken Kant's silence on this issue as evidence that he was uninterested in the sort of concerns that preoccupy ethical and meta-ethical theorizing today. John Rawls, for example, was convinced that Kant did not wish to confront a radical moral skeptic. That was not a problem for

Kant's Justification of Ethics. Owen Ware, Oxford University Press (2021). © Owen Ware.
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him, 'however much it may trouble us'.[1] Similarly, Thomas Hill has suggested that Kant's aim in *Groundwork* III is 'easily obscured' by the fact that his audience was not the sort of skeptic or amoralist we are familiar with. He did not take himself to be responding to those 'who are indifferent to morality and demand that philosophy supply them with a motive to be moral'.[2] Related comments appear in the work of Allen Wood, Jens Timmermann, and Henry Allison.[3] There are, however, a few exceptions to this trend. Michael Forster and Paul Guyer have both argued that Kant is actively engaged with a variety of skeptics from the tradition—of Humean, Cartesian, and Pyhronnian origin.[4] In Guyer's view, Rawls and Hill are

> right to suggest that the project of the *Groundwork* is not to justify the universal and binding demands of morality to someone who alleges no presumption in their favor, but it would be wrong to conclude from this that Kant's argument is not intended as an answer to moral skepticism as Kant understood it.[5]

According to Guyer, Kant is responding to a number of skeptical opponents in his writings, including the ancient Epicureans, as well as modern authors such as Wolff, Baumgarten, Hobbes, Hume, and others.[6]

In what follows I wish to clear room for a new position within this debate. While I agree that Kant's goal in the *Groundwork* is anti-skeptical, contrary to Rawls and Hill, I do not want to characterize it in adversarial terms. In my view, Kant is not advancing an argument the skeptic about morality must accept on pain of contradiction; he is not trying to defeat 'a real philosophical opponent, the Sceptic, in rational debate', to borrow Crispin Wright's description.[7] My own view is that characterizing Kant's ethics in adversarial terms obscures an important feature of his approach: namely, that the skeptic most worth addressing lies within ourselves. I will therefore argue, contrary to Forster and Guyer, that Kant is not speaking to the philosophical tradition in any direct or straightforward manner.[8]

[1] Rawls (2000, 149). [2] Hill (1998, 250).

[3] Wood: 'Kant's deduction of the supreme principle of morality admittedly does not address (or even appear to take seriously) some of the more extreme forms of skepticism about value which have dominated twentieth-century meta-ethics' (1999, 381, note 30). Timmermann: 'Kant does not take the traditional amoralist's question of why we should be moral at all seriously . . . Moreover, it is doubtful whether anyone would be in a position to persuade a radical amoralist' (2007, 130, note 21). Allison: '[Kant's] interlocutor is not the familiar skeptical amoralist in search of reasons for obeying the dictates of morality when they clash with self-interest' (2011, 309–10).

[4] Forster (2008) and Guyer (2008). [5] Guyer (2008, 26). [6] Guyer (2008, 7).

[7] As Wright makes clear: 'There are no such real opponents. That generations of philosophers have felt impelled to grapple with skeptical arguments is not attributable to a courtesy due to an historically distinguished sponsorship but to the fact that these arguments are paradoxes: seemingly valid derivations from seemingly well supported premisses of utterly unacceptable consequences' (1991, 89).

[8] This makes my position closer to Guyer's earlier view (2000). There are also resonances between my account and Conant's (2004), although exploring those resonances is beyond the scope of this book.

On the reading I will defend, Kant himself employs a skeptical method in the *Groundwork* as a way of exposing certain obstacles in our ordinary and philosophical thinking about morality. The central obstacle he wants to uncover is practical in character, arising from a natural tendency we have to rationalize against the moral law. In attempting to resolve this tendency, the goal of the *Groundwork* is to vindicate our common idea of duty and the higher vocation it entails.

1.2 Background: Kant's Methodology

When we open the *Groundwork* to its first page, we find Kant introducing the reader to a map of human knowledge. At the upper end of the map we find a distinction between two kinds of rational cognition: 'formal' and 'material' (G 4:387). Rational cognition is formal (as with logic) when it abstracts from any particular object and merely considers rules necessary for thinking. Rational cognition is material when it concerns laws necessary for objects themselves—either 'laws of nature' (as with physics) or 'laws of freedom' (as with ethics). According to Kant, each branch of material rational cognition admits of a further subdivision. Physics has an 'empirical' part and a 'pure' part. The empirical part concerns the application of the most fundamental laws of nature to the sensible world; the pure part concerns those laws themselves, abstracting from their application to the sensible world. Similarly, the empirical part of ethics concerns the application of the most fundamental laws of freedom to human beings; the pure part concerns those laws themselves, abstracting from their application to human beings. To one side of the map, then, we have an empirical physics of nature and what Kant calls 'practical anthropology'; to the other side, we have a metaphysics of nature and what Kant calls a 'metaphysics of morals' (G 4:388).

Carefully separating these branches of study is important, Kant explains, because they point to a clear division of intellectual labor. 'All professions, crafts, and arts have gained', he writes, 'by the distribution of labor, namely when one person does not do everything, but each limits himself to a certain task that differs noticeably from others in the way it is carried out, so as to be able to accomplish it most perfectly and with greater ease' (G 4:388). Kant argues that if we try to do everything at once, we will not be able to make progress in any given field: 'Where labor is not differentiated and distributed like that, professions still remain in a most barbarous state' (G 4:388). One difficulty is that *mixing* the empirical and the pure together is very much in line with public taste, especially in the field of ethics. So Kant thinks that if we are to make real progress in the study of moral philosophy we must abandon, if only for the time being, any desire for widespread appeal. We must attain what he calls 'determinate insight' first,

and only afterwards speak to the interests of the public (G 4:410). To this end Kant thinks we must divide our labor properly and begin with the pure part of ethics before proceeding to its empirical part. We must begin with a metaphysics of morals.

The first question Kant takes up in the Preface is whether a metaphysics of morals is even possible. We have no basis to raise this concern in the case of logic or physics; for these are well-established branches on the map of human knowledge. But the same is not true for the pure part of ethics, the theory of which does not yet exist. Kant's reply is that we catch a glimpse of the possibility of a metaphysics of morals when we turn to the 'common idea of duty' (*gemeinen Idee der Pflicht*) (G 4:389). For this idea highlights an important feature of our everyday moral discourse: the fact that when we speak of moral obligations, we assume that such obligations carry 'absolute necessity' (G 4:389):

> Everyone must admit that a law, if it is to hold morally, i.e., as the ground of an obligation, must carry with it absolute necessity; that the command: *Thou shalt not lie*, does not just hold for human beings only, as if other rational beings did not have to heed it; and so with all remaining actual moral laws. Hence the ground of the obligation here must not be sought in the nature of the human being, or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but *a priori* solely in concepts of pure reason. (G 4:389)

Here Kant is saying that everyday moral experience (i.e., our consciousness that some actions are absolutely required of us) indicates that a metaphysics of morals is possible, for these demands carry a necessity that could not have come from the empirical constitution of our will. That is sufficient, in Kant's view, to show that a study of the pure part of ethics is not in vain.

But now we must ask a related question: Why is a metaphysics of morals necessary? Right away Kant is clear that venturing into this new area of study is not simply a matter of satisfying our intellectual curiosity. A more serious issue is at stake. This is because in everyday life we require a power of judgment 'sharpened by experience', not only to apply moral laws in concrete cases, but also to acquire 'momentum' for their performance (G 4:389). While it is relatively easy for us to understand the nature of our moral obligations, it is difficult to make those obligations 'effective' in our lives (G 4:389). In saying this, Kant is calling attention to the fact that we are not purely rational beings: we are prone to self-deception, especially when the demands of morality conflict with our self-love. A metaphysics of morals is thus 'indispensably necessary', he writes, 'not merely on the grounds of speculation . . . but because morals themselves remain subject to all sorts of corruption as long as we lack that guideline and supreme norm by which to judge them correctly' (G 4:389–90).

What is striking, then, is that Kant is saying we need a metaphysics of morals to protect common human reason from itself—in fact, this is the practical aim of his entire work, as we shall see.

Kant concludes the Preface by saying that his aim in the *Groundwork* is twofold: to clarify and justify 'the supreme principle of morality' (G 4:392). As he writes, this order is best

> if one wants to proceed along the analytic path from common cognition to the determination of its highest principle and then turn back [*wiederum zurück*] along the synthetic path from an examination of this principle and its sources to the common cognition in which we find it used. (G 4:392)

By *ascending* along the analytic path first, Kant is saying, we will be able to grasp the principle adequate to explain our common idea of duty, the principle of autonomy. By then *descending* along the synthetic path, we will return to the common idea of duty with which we began, but now with a new insight we did not have before: namely, insight into the source of morality within us. This is the sense in which the *Groundwork* promises to come full circle back to common cognition. As we will see, after completing the argument of *Groundwork* III Kant says that the 'practical use of common human reason confirms the correctness of this deduction', citing as an example of a 'malicious scoundrel' who identifies his better self with the demands of morality (G 4:454).[9]

In a text composed just prior to the *Groundwork* Kant is clear that the analytic method 'signifies only that one proceeds from that which is sought as if it were given, and ascends [*aufsteigt*] to the conditions under which alone it is possible', to which he adds, 'it might better be called the *regressive* method to distinguish it from the *synthetic* or *progressive* method' (Prol 4:276n). In the practical sphere, what is given is our common cognition of duty, and the first question we must address is what principle articulates this form of cognition. To do this, the analytic procedure has us separate what is pure in our cognition from what is empirical; that is what allows us to climb up, as it were, to the highest principle governing the cognition in question. Afterwards, when we have grasped this highest principle, we can descend along the synthetic path and recombine what had previously been separated, thereby revealing the necessary connection between what is pure in our cognition and what is empirical. I take it this is why Kant identifies the synthetic path with the path of justification in *Groundwork* III. For it is only after separating our faculty of practical reason into its pure and

[9] Although he does not make reference to Kant's statement of method in the Preface, Engstrom (2009) offers an evocative description of this stage in terms of a moment of return: 'the turning back in thought to the original position of practical knowledge in an acknowledgment of what is already implicitly present in all maxims and practical judgments' (2009, 245).

empirical uses that he is able to reveal their necessary connection, thereby locating the ground of the moral 'ought' in our own intelligible 'will'.

Of course, Kant did not invent this distinction between an analytic ascent and a synthetic return, and his characterization of these two paths as movements of a single argument has much older roots. Aristotle is reported to have said that Plato 'was right in raising this question and asking, as he used to do, Are we on the way from or to the first principles? There is a difference as there is in a race-course between the course from the judges to the turning-point and the *way back*.'[10] The idea of a second stage of argument that reverses the order of the first appears vividly in the *Republic* when Socrates describes the intellect's discovery of the first principle as the result of an upward ascent, after which 'it reverses itself and, keeping hold of what follows from it, descends to a conclusion without making use of anything visible at all'.[11] In the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition, the way upwards marks the path of discovery, which leads to a first principle (in the present context, the supreme principle of morality). But it is only the 'way back'—the descent from this first principle—that marks the path of justification (in the present context, the principle's bindingness upon a human will).

Still, from what we have seen in the Preface one might think that returning to a common standpoint requires that we find access to public taste first and foremost—a view many late eighteenth-century German authors upheld, including Herder, Garve, and Mendelssohn. It is then unclear why Kant lashes out against 'those who, conforming to the taste of their public, are in the habit of peddling the empirical mixed with the rational in all sorts of proportions unknown to themselves', authors he unflatteringly describes as mere 'bunglers' (G 4:388). Despite the harsh tone of this remark, it is important to see that Kant shares the fundamental goal of 'popular philosophy' (*Popularphilosophie*)—that of giving the standpoint of life primacy over the standpoint of philosophy—but he rejects the method that authors like Herder, Garve, and Mendelssohn adopt to attain this goal, the method of mixing the pure part of ethics with the empirical part. Once again Kant's point is that the possibility of making ethics a science depends on separating the two, for only by doing this can we gain insight into the principle behind our common idea of duty. Kant is clear that making ethics open to the public is 'very commendable', but only 'if the elevation [*die Erhebung*] to the principles of pure reason has already happened' (G 4:409). He is not rejecting the aim of popular philosophy, then, as much he is rethinking the path to attain it.

On the whole Kant says little else about his plan of organization in the *Groundwork* beyond the procedural distinction between *Groundwork* I and II

[10] Aristotle (1984, 1.4; emphasis added).

[11] Plato (1997, 511b). See Menn (2002) for an in-depth treatment of the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition.

(the 'analytic path') and *Groundwork* III (the 'synthetic path'). But he leaves the reader with a further clue in the form an outline at the end of the Preface:

1. *First section*: Transition from common to philosophical moral rational cognition.
2. *Second section*: Transition from popular moral philosophy to the metaphysics of morals.
3. *Third section*: Final step from the metaphysics of morals to the critique of pure practical reason.

When we inspect this outline more carefully, an important feature of Kant's methodology comes into focus. We can see that Kant raises a problem within each section of the book in order to make a 'transition' or 'shift' of frameworks (an *Übergang*) necessary.[12] In *Groundwork* I, he raises a problem in the framework of common human reason (with its pre-reflective understanding of morality) that only a transition to philosophical cognition can overcome. In *Groundwork* II, he raises a problem in the framework of popular philosophy (with its empirical, a posteriori method) that only a transition to a metaphysics of morals can overcome. Finally, in *Groundwork* III, Kant shows that a metaphysics of morals is also limited (with its conceptual, a priori method) in a way that demands a critical examination (or a 'critique') of our faculty of reason. What becomes clear, then, is that each stage of Kant's investigation reaches a limit, one internal to the stage itself, and that discovering this limit motivates a shift of frameworks, a shift to a new, higher stage of insight. As we will see, one advantage of this reading is that it explains what motivates each transition in the *Groundwork*: by invoking possible doubts at the level of our ordinary and philosophical thinking about morality, Kant is able to advance his argument to its final, critical step.

While it may seem speculative to attribute this skeptical method to Kant, there is textual evidence to support it, which I touched upon in the Introduction. In the Doctrine of Method from the first *Critique* Kant says that skeptical claims pose a threat to our philosophical commitments even if they have not been voiced by a real person. Their 'seed', as he puts it, lies in human reason itself (A778/B806).

[12] There is little discussion of the *Groundwork*'s organization in the literature. One exception is Guyer (2007) who offers a concise overview of the transition-structure in his commentary on the *Groundwork*. As Guyer points out, one might be tempted to read 'transition' (*Übergang*) in the sense of 'lead to', which suggests a continuous unfolding from one stage to another (2007, 34–5). This gives the impression that the stage of common reason in *Groundwork* I will gradually lead to a metaphysics of morals in *Groundwork* II, and so on. On the contrary, to make a transition for Kant means something more like 'to overcome', indicating the presence of a limit or obstacle. Other commentators who reflect on the meaning of a transition include Schönecker (1997), who focuses on the transition in *Groundwork* I, and O'Neill (1989), who focuses on the transition in *Groundwork* III. However, neither explain what *unifies* the transition-structure of the *Groundwork* as a whole.

Because of this, Kant says it is our responsibility to seek out those claims ourselves, to discover them by using what he calls a skeptical method. 'Thus, think up for yourself the objections which have not yet occurred to any opponent', Kant writes, 'and even lend him the weapons or concede him the most favorable position that he could desire. There is nothing in this to fear, though much to hope, namely that you will come into a possession that can never be attacked in the future' (A778/B806). Similarly, Kant is reported to have said during lecture that as harmful as skepticism is, 'the *skeptical method* is just as useful and purposeful, provided one understands nothing more by this than the way of treating something as uncertain and of bringing it to the highest uncertainty, in the hope of getting on the trail of truth in this way' (JL 9:84).[13]

1.3 Skepticism in *Groundwork* I

Kant begins *Groundwork* I with the well-known claim that a good will is the only thing we can call good 'without limitation' (G 4:393). Riches and power are only good when they are possessed by a person with a good will. Happiness—which may seem to be good for everyone who receives it—is only objectively good on the condition that one is worthy of it. Even characteristics like intelligence and a calm disposition lack intrinsic worth, for it is easy to find examples of intelligent people bent on evil designs or courageous people leading criminal lives (G 4:393). Without going into the details of this claim, I merely want to point out that Kant takes up the standpoint of common reason in the fourth paragraph, and he does so in response to a skeptical worry:

> There is, however, something so strange in this idea of the absolute worth of a mere will, in the estimation of which no allowance is made for any usefulness, that, despite all the agreement even of common understanding with this idea, a suspicion must yet arise that its covert basis is perhaps mere high-flown fantasy and that we may have misunderstood the purpose of nature in assigning reason to our will as its governor. (G 4:394–5)

What is strange is not so much the idea that we have a vocation to cultivate a will that is good, but that pursuing it might require us to suspend or sacrifice our happiness. This is what Kant anticipates will elicit our suspicion. How could it be

[13] As Kant puts it in the first *Critique*: 'External quiet is only illusory. The seed of the attacks [from skepticism], which lies in the nature of human reason, must be extirpated; but how can we extirpate it if we do not give it freedom, indeed even nourishment, to send out shoots, so that we can discover it and afterwards eradicate it at its root?' (A778/B806).

rational to give up everything we hold dear for the sake of a higher vocation? There is something puzzling about this, so much so that Kant says we are likely to suspect the idea of a good will rests on an illusion. The structure of *Groundwork* I takes shape as a response. 'We shall', he asserts, 'put this idea to the test' (G 4:395).

This test draws on resources Kant assumes are available to common reason. One is an idea he thinks everyone has about organized life: that each component of a living being is best adapted to its final end (G 4:395). This is a claim about nature's purposiveness. Kant uses it to show, first, that a rational creature with a hedonic vocation could not be responsible for planning its own happiness. For such a hypothetical creature, nature would have blundered in giving it a rational faculty for seeking the ends of inclination, even, Kant adds, for seeking their best means of fulfilment. Yet a blunder in nature contradicts its purposiveness. On this scenario, then, nature would have been sure to appoint *instinct* the role of governing the creature's will, and it would have been careful to assign reason a passive function—that is, to self-consciously admire the efficiency of instinct, not to 'break forth' into the sphere of action (G 4:395).

This raises the question: Why is reason so ill-suited for the pursuit of happiness? Kant asks us to look at people who have tried to devote themselves to a hedonic vocation. In his view, the 'more a cultivated reason purposely occupies itself with the enjoyment of life and with happiness, so much the further does a human being get away from true satisfaction' (G 4:395). This shows that putting our rational faculties into the service of our sensible nature is counterproductive: it can likely have the effect of multiplying the number of our inclinations, driving us further away from our goal. Kant believes this is true even for people who have devoted themselves to so-called higher pleasures: they often end up bringing 'more trouble upon themselves' instead of gaining in happiness. Soon they 'envy rather than despise the more common run of people, who are closer to the guidance of mere natural instinct and do not allow their reason much influence on their behavior' (G 4:396).

After making these observations, Kant shifts subjects: 'Reason is nevertheless given to *us* as a practical faculty, that is, as one that is to influence the *will*' (G 4:396). The shift is easy to miss, however. At G 4:396 Kant is no longer speaking about a hypothetical creature; he is now speaking about an actual human being. For us, reason does break forth into the sphere of action, and that is enough to show (from the standpoint of common reason) that our vocation cannot merely be to pursue happiness. It would be inconsistent with the wisdom of nature to assign an active rational capacity to a being destined for happiness. So according to nature's purposiveness, our vocation must be different. As Kant says, 'where nature has everywhere else gone to work purposively in distributing its capacities, the true vocation [*Bestimmung*] of reason must be to produce a will that is good, not perhaps *as a means* to other purposes, but *good in itself,* for which reason was absolutely necessary' (G 4:396).

1.4 The Need for Philosophical Cognition

Aside from any question of how compelling this 'test' is, we might wonder what else remains to be shown in *Groundwork* I. It seems that common reason has all the resources it needs to justify our higher moral vocation. The claim of nature's purposiveness, combined with the supposed fact that reason is practical for us, shows that it is consistent to assign unlimited value to a mere will. Why does Kant not think this is enough? Recall that the skeptical worry from G 4:394 is that our vocation may rest on an illusion, that its underlying idea—a will that is good without limitation—may be a product of the imagination. While the test shows the consistency of these claims from the standpoint of common reason, it does not clarify the principle of a good will itself. And this highlights an obstacle in our ordinary moral thinking: we are unable to render the principle of our higher vocation explicit. A 'transition' to philosophical cognition is needed for this.

Kant's claim is more modest than it sounds, however. The transition in *Groundwork* I is only meant to clarify what we already know. He says that we have 'to explicate the concept of a will that is to be esteemed in itself and that is good apart from any further purpose, as it already dwells in natural sound understanding' (G 4:397). We need philosophical cognition to do this because it contains the right conceptual tools. Thus Kant's strategy is to analyze how someone with a good will must act when faced with desires coming from his or her sensible nature. The result is that we set before ourselves the concept of '*duty*' (*Pflicht*), 'which contains that of a good will though under certain subjective limitations and hindrances, which, however, far from concealing it and making it unrecognizable, rather bring it out by contrast and make it shine forth all the more brightly' (G 4:397).

By proceeding in this way, Kant is able to show that the principle of a good will can be expressed as a formula of universal law, and that its motive for action can be expressed as a feeling of respect for the law as such. Aware of how abstract this sounds, Kant reminds us that we do not necessarily have a conscious grasp of the moral law in our everyday lives. It is, rather, the implicit normative standard of our judgments, a standard Kant thinks we employ whenever we appraise an action's inner worth. This is why philosophical cognition does not teach us anything we did not already know. Without 'in the least teaching it anything new', Kant writes, we have only 'like Socrates' made common reason 'attentive [*aufmerksam*] to its own principle' (G 4:404).[14] 'With this compass in hand', he

[14] Kant alludes to Socratic maieutics in the first *Critique* in the context of discussing Plato's theory of archetypes. For Plato, he writes, archetypes 'flowed from the highest reason, through which human reason partakes in them; our reason, however, now no longer finds itself in its original state, but must call back with toil the old, now very obscure ideas through a recollection [*Erinnerung*] (which is called philosophy)' (A313/B370).

goes on to say, common reason 'knows very well how to distinguish in every case that comes up what is good and what is evil, what is in conformity with duty or contrary to duty' (G 4:404). The transition *to* philosophical cognition in *Groundwork* I is therefore a transition *within* common reason.[15]

1.5 A Natural Dialectic

But there is a problem here. In our everyday frame of mind we are prone to self-deception. We can easily delude ourselves into thinking that our happiness should have priority over moral claims. As a result, common reason falls into a 'natural dialectic': it starts to 'rationalize against those strict laws of duty, and to cast doubt upon their validity, or at least their purity and strictness' (G 4:405).[16] This is a different problem than before. By *subverting* the moral law from a position of authority, we are susceptible to a genuine error of deliberation—that of reversing the priority of moral claims, so that considerations of our happiness retain superiority from a practical point of view. We are susceptible, that is, to an excess of self-love (what Kant will call 'self-conceit' in the second *Critique*).

Kant is not clear how this excess arises. At first it appears that the source of our propensity to rationalize against the moral law is borne from the desires we have as sensible beings; but on closer inspection this does not hold up. To see why, consider what Kant says:

> The human being feels within himself a powerful counterweight to all the commands of duty, which reason represents to him as so deserving of the highest respect—the counterweight of his needs and inclinations, the entire satisfaction of which he sums up under the name happiness [*Glückseligkeit*]. (G 4:405)

This last sentence ends with an important qualification. Kant is not speaking of our needs and inclinations taken individually, but of the conception we have of their sum-total satisfaction. Later, in *Groundwork* II, Kant will define happiness as an 'ideal' of one day having our wants and wishes fulfilled (G 4:418). The ideal is

[15] I agree with Allison's (2011) observation that the transition of Section I is unique. While the transitions of Sections II and III involve the 'replacement of one philosophical standpoint by another (popular moral philosophy by metaphysics of morals) and one level of philosophical discourse by another (a metaphysics of morals by a critique of pure practical reason)', Section I resembles what Allison calls 'a movement in place'. That is to say, 'its argument consists in a clarification or making explicit of what is supposedly implicit in a shared, pre-philosophical, understanding of morality' (2011, 71).

[16] 'Dialectic' has a pejorative meaning in Kant's writings, referring to a tempting but ultimately erroneous way of thinking. Presumably the dialectic mentioned in the *Groundwork* is 'natural' because it refers to an error all of us are prone to make in matters of deliberation. It is a dialectic in the sense of a back-and-forth exchange—as we will see, a constant 'quibbling' with morality—that without a critique will never find rest.

empty, however, because it does not specify in advance what will make us satisfied; we still need experience to figure out how to bring our desires into harmony with each other.

This is a small yet significant point of clarification. It shows that the dialectic of common reason does not lie between the moral law and the inclinations. Our inclinations, taken individually, do not present us with an end. The dialectic arises between the two ends we have as beings who are both rational and sensible—namely, between morality and our own happiness. They are set in opposition, in Kant's view, because the demands of morality do not promise anything to our desires. Viewed from the perspective of common reason, then, the strict laws of duty seem to insult us, to show 'disregard and contempt' for the interest we have in our well-being (G 4:405). It is only natural that we will try to defend this interest by striking back, i.e., by stripping moral laws of their very authority.[17]

1.6 Skepticism in *Groundwork* II

In *Groundwork* II Kant calls upon philosophy for a second time. At first we needed tools of philosophical cognition to clarify the principle of a good will. This was more or less a theoretical need. But having identified a natural dialectic in our ordinary thinking, Kant now argues we need philosophy on practical grounds. We need *help* in resolving our tendency to rationalize against the moral law. As we will see, the question framing *Groundwork* II is what kind of philosophical method is fit for this task, and here Kant criticizes popular philosophy because it plays into the hands of skepticism.[18] But what kind of skepticism is at stake? And how does Kant use this problem to motivate his own (less popular) alternative?

To address the first question, let us consider the two skeptics Kant introduces in *Groundwork* II.[19] The first does not deny the truth or correctness of the moral

[17] As Engstrom puts it, the recognition the moral law inflicts upon the ego 'may prompt it to strike back in anger', and it may do this by staging a reversal of representation, throwing back the discovery of its own pretense (2010, 115).

[18] In Kant's view popular philosophy suffers from a mixed method: 'now the special determination of human nature (but occasionally the idea of a rational nature as such along with it), now perfection, now happiness, here moral feeling, there fear of God, a bit of this and also a bit of that in a marvelous mixture' (G 4:410). Quite a few late eighteenth-century philosophers fall under this description. Johan van der Zande lists Sulzer, Iselin, Mendelssohn, and Herder, among others (1995, 423). Interestingly, one figure van der Zande does not list is the young Kant himself, who in his early work attempted to draw moral conclusions by observing ways in which sentiments of beauty and sublimity arise in human life (see §4.2).

[19] The first skeptic I will be speaking of represents the group of philosophers Kant says have always 'denied the reality of this disposition in human actions [i.e., to act from duty] and ascribed everything to more or less refined self-love' (G 4:406). The second skeptic represents 'the wishes of those who ridicule all morality as the mere phantom of a human imagination overstepping itself through self-conceit' (G 4:407). What this shows, I believe, is that the two skeptics from *Groundwork* II do not

law. Kant tells us his doubts concern human nature: in his view, we are unable to live up to the moral law's commands, and so he is skeptical about our motivational capacities. Kant describes this philosopher as speaking with 'deep regret' that human nature is 'noble enough to take as its precept an idea so worthy of respect but at the same time is too weak to follow it' (G 4:406). It is not that he thinks the moral law is impure (for example, that duty is mixed up with self-interest), but that we are imperfect and so incapable of regarding duty as our incentive. The thought that troubles him is not that moral principles lack validity, but that we lack the capacity to be successfully moved by them. Kant's second skeptic raises a different concern. Rather than express 'deep regret' over the moral weakness of our will, he harbors a malicious wish to 'ridicule all morality as a mere figment of the imagination [*Hirngespinst*] overstepping itself through self-conceit' (G 4:407).[20] In his eyes, we frequently meet individuals who use the appearance of morality to hide their selfish motives, from which he draws the conclusion that there is nothing behind the appearance, no objective ground from which the claims of duty can bind us. The everyday experience of moral obligation, the second skeptic argues, is not a product of reason: it is an illusion of the imagination.[21]

Despite their differences, Kant's point is that each skeptic commits the same error. Both rest their doubts on experience. For the first skeptic, it is the evidence of our weakness of will—the fact that we seem incapable of regarding duty as an incentive—that questions our ability to live up to the moral law's commands. For the second skeptic, it is the evidence of our selfishness—the fact that we often disguise our motives under the mask of virtue—that questions moral objectivity itself. In *Groundwork* II Kant uses a strategy of exaggeration to undermine these concerns. First, he admits that we cannot know for certain whether our actions have a moral motive or a motive drawn from self-love. It may be the case that our actions are but effects of the 'dear self', 'which is always turning up' (G 4:407). But Kant's point is that it would be wrong to draw any conclusions from this. The fact

voice problems specific to any traditional school of thought. Rather, they are general problems that arise naturally in the course of speculating about the nature of morality. As we will see, Kant introduces them in order to expose the shortcomings of popular moral philosophy, the rival to his own metaphysics of morals.

[20] In German *Hirngespinst* means 'phantasm', 'fantasy', or 'figment of the imagination'. In Kant's technical language, a *Hirngespinst* usually refers to a concept empty of content. For example: 'An imaginary being <*ens imaginarium*> is a mere phantom of the brain [*Hirngespinst*], but of which the thought is still possible. What does not contradict itself is logically possible; that is, the concept is indeed possible, but there is no reality there. One thus says of the concept: it has no objective reality' (V-Met-L2/Pölitz 28:544).

[21] In the second *Critique*, Kant says that some people (not necessarily philosophers) have a tendency to search out a hidden self-interested motive for every moral action, with the idea that 'human virtue might in the end be held a mere phantom of the brain, and so all striving toward it would be deprecated as vain affectation and delusive self-conceit' (KpV 5:154).

that we cannot find examples of our moral strength of will does not support the inference that we lack the *capacity* for such strength. Nor does the fact that people more often than not use morality for their selfish purposes support the inference that morality is entirely *subjective*. By exaggerating their worries, Kant's aim is to uncover the fallacy these philosophers share in common: the fallacy of thinking that what we cannot perceive must not exist.

Kant thinks we can learn a general lesson from this. The lesson is that we cannot settle questions about morality on the basis of experience. Observations of people's behavior cannot determine what we are motivationally capable of, nor do they give us purchase on normative claims about how we should act (for example, that we should only attend to the 'interests of the inclinations', G 4:406). Admittedly, when we look out into the world we see that people—including ourselves—often act selfishly. We need not be cynical in making such reports.[22] Yet the important point is this. If we cannot know whether our actions proceed from a moral motive or a motive of self-love—and if empirical evidence cannot distinguish between the two—then we cannot know *from experience* whether we have the capacity to act from duty. So if we try to counter the skeptic by offering examples of allegedly good conduct, we will in turn commit the same mistake the skeptic has made. We will develop our stance, which may purport to be anti-skeptical, on the assumption that we can settle moral questions from an empirical point of view. And that would draw us back into the very problem we wished to escape.

What is at stake in the beginning of *Groundwork* II is a question of proper philosophical procedure. As we read further, we see that Kant's criticism is aimed not so much at skepticism but at a moral theory that subscribes to an empirical method. This is what Kant calls popular moral philosophy, a theory based on a 'disgusting hodgepodge of patchwork observations', some drawn from reason, others from experience (G 4:409). Since popular philosophy assumes we can gain insight into virtue by observing others and finding examples of good conduct, it is left defenseless against those who wish to cast doubt upon our higher vocation. Once again Kant's point is that experience cannot be our testing ground for morality and virtue. As he puts it elsewhere,

> Whoever would draw the concepts of virtue from experience, whoever would make what can at best serve as an example for imperfect illustration into a model from which to derive knowledge (as many have actually done), would make of

[22] 'One need not be an enemy of virtue', Kant writes, 'but only a cool observer, who does not take the liveliest wish for the good straightaway as its reality, to become doubtful at certain moments (especially with increasing years, when experience has made one's judgment partly more shrewd and partly more acute in observation) whether any true virtue is to be found in the world' (G 4:407). The idea that sharpening one's judgment makes one prone to skepticism is also a theme found in the first *Critique*. There Kant speaks of the 'childhood' of pure reason as a kind of self-certain *dogmatism* that comes to be questioned, presumably in reason's adolescence, but that still requires *criticism* to reach 'mature and adult power' (A761/B789).

> virtue an ambiguous non-entity, changeable with time and circumstances, useless for any sort of rule. (A315/B371)

No wonder, then, that popular philosophy fails to secure a foundation for ethics. Once we see this, Kant thinks, it is clear why we need an alternative method, even one that risks unpopularity.

1.7 The Need for a Metaphysics of Morals

Kant's solution is straightforward: If an empirical method fails to secure a foundation for morality, then we must see if we can do better by taking up a different method—a method of rational reflection. In taking up this alternative, we must give up the idea that morality can be derived from some special feature of human nature. As Kant explains, 'duty is to be practical unconditional necessity of action and it must therefore hold for all rational beings (to which alone an imperative can apply at all) and *only because of this* be also a law for all human wills' (G 4:425). Kant announces this new method under the title of a metaphysics of morals, which he also calls 'pure practical philosophy' (G 4:410).

As a method, we can see that a metaphysics of morals ascends higher up along the analytic path of *Groundwork* I. As Kant puts it, 'we leave it undecided whether what is called duty is not as such an empty concept' (G 4:421)—yet what emerges from this path is unexpected. First, when we think of a practical imperative that abstracts from any interest or inclination, we are led to the formula of universal law: 'Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law' (G 4:421). Second, when we ask what end is objectively valid for all rational beings, we see that it can only be humanity in the form of rational nature, since only rational nature has a dignity that sets it apart from things of contingent value. According to Kant, this yields a second formula, the formula of humanity: 'So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means' (G 4:429).

Kant now argues that the first and second formulas combine to yield a third. Quickly put, his claim is that when we think of a being adopting humanity as its end, we have the idea of a being legislating itself by reason. That is, we have the idea of a being acting autonomously, free of any interest or inclination. So by reflecting on the concept of a rational will in general, a metaphysics of morals leads us to the formula of autonomy: '[So act] that the maxims of your choice are also included as universal law in the same volition' (G 4:440; cf., 4:431).[23] Without

[23] I have removed the italics from the original versions of each formula.

discussing the details of these connections, we can at least appreciate what Kant is trying to achieve in *Groundwork* II. The analytic path (that of ascending to the highest principle of practical reason) shows that what the moral law demands of us is 'neither more nor less than just this autonomy': that is the highest concept for thinking of the moral law as a categorical imperative (G 4:440). Had we kept to an empirical method of investigation, the approach of popular philosophy, we would never have been able to grasp this.

Despite Kant's frequent reminders that his procedure in the first two sections of the *Groundwork* is merely analytic, his closing statement in *Groundwork* II still comes as a surprise. He tells us it is possible at this stage of the argument that the concept of duty may be empty, that morality may be a 'figment of the imagination' (*Hirngespinst*) (G 4:445). But why is this still a possibility? And why is Kant telling us this now? It may help to remember that Kant thinks we leave ourselves exposed to skepticism if we develop the concept of duty from experience (G 4:407). The problem with popular philosophy is not only that it leaves us with a patchwork of half-rationalized principles, but that its method consists of observing others and finding examples of virtuous conduct. As a result, popular philosophy is left defenseless against those who wish to denounce morality as an illusion, since experience teaches us that people often act from selfish motives. By adopting a rational method of investigation, we have seen that Kant rejects the assumption the two skeptics from *Groundwork* II share in common, i.e., that what we cannot perceive must not exist. And this suggests Kant's closing remarks are addressed to a new audience. As he says, '*whoever* holds morality to be something and not a chimerical idea without any truth must also admit the principle of morality brought forward' (G 4:445; emphasis added).[24]

My conjecture is that the new audience consists of 'whoever' has, with Kant, made the transition to a metaphysics of morals. If this is right, his comment about the possible illusoriness of duty serves only as a reminder that a metaphysics of morals is limited. Yet again we can see that Kant is using a skeptical method to show why a transition or shift of frameworks is necessary. As a procedure, a metaphysics of morals avoids the pitfalls of popular philosophy—it ascends from our common idea of duty to the principle of autonomy—but within this framework we cannot decide whether this principle is actually binding upon us. By the end of *Groundwork* II it remains to be seen whether the principle of a rational will *in general*, expressed by the moral law as autonomy, is also a necessitating imperative for beings *like us*. For Kant, justifying the moral law's bindingness requires that we take the synthetic path and descend from the principle of autonomy back

[24] Even though the first skeptic does not deny the truth of morality—he only questions our motivational capacities—I do not think Kant is speaking to him at the end of *Groundwork* II. This is because he thinks we can settle moral issues from an empirical point of view, and Kant has rejected this assumption in taking up a metaphysics of morals.

to the 'common cognition in which we find it used' (G 4:392). This finally brings us to the deduction of *Groundwork* III.

1.8 The Deduction of the Categories

Right away we are likely to interpret the term 'deduction' through the context of modern logic, whereby we speak of deducing a conclusion from a valid set of premises. But Kant's use of the term comes from the older discourse of Romano-canon law. One striking instance of this discourse occurs at the beginning of Kant's transcendental deduction of the categories in the first *Critique*. Here he compares this strategy of argument to a juridical procedure:

> Jurists, when they speak of entitlements and claims, distinguish in a legal manner between the questions about what is lawful (*quid juris*) and that which concerns the fact (*quid facti*), and since they demand proof of both, they call the first, that which is to establish the entitlement or the legal claim a **deduction**.
>
> (A84/B116)[25]

Kant spent years laboring on a deduction of the categories, which he says cost him the 'most effort' in the first *Critique* (A xiv). Unfortunately, he left us few clues for understanding the path he took to arrive at his deduction in *Groundwork* III. Given the complexities in each text, it would be unfeasible to compare the two in any detail. Yet I believe an outline of Kant's deduction of the categories will shed light on aspects of *Groundwork* III we might otherwise miss.

In the older discourse of Romano-canon law, the task of a deduction is to vindicate a disputed claim by providing an account of its rightful acquisition. For Kant, pure concepts of the understanding or categories provoke suspicion of their legitimacy because they make claims of epistemic necessity. For example, the category of cause-and-effect says that one event must, under relevant conditions, follow from another. Accordingly it says: 'Under relevant conditions water *must*-freeze when the temperature drops to zero degrees Celsius', and this goes far beyond a claim of prediction, that the water will *probably* freeze at this temperature. What is at issue is not whether we cognize necessity in the categories—for in fact we do—but whether our cognition has an objective ground. A transcendental deduction in Kant's sense must show this, making it akin to what he calls an *ostensive* or *genetic* proof, that is, a proof that provides insight into the sources of a concept (A7891/B817).

[25] For example, my claim to an estate would be justified by a document (such as a will) identifying me as the estate's legal inheritor. In a ground-breaking study Dieter Henrich (1989) has argued that the juridical model gives us insight into the structure of Kant's transcendental deduction.

The difficulty is that the categories are not acquired through sense experience. The mere fact that we use pure concepts like cause-and-effect does not weigh in favor of their legitimacy. Who is to say they are objectively valid? Kant observes that terms like fortune and fate 'circulate with almost universal indulgence', yet nobody can provide 'clear legal ground for an entitlement to their use either from experience or from reason' (A85/B117). So without a deduction or genetic proof we could not tell whether the categories have entered our mind surreptitiously, say, through custom or habit. The worry is urgent because if the basis of the categories turns out to be 'merely subjective', we will be forced to abandon the idea that they serve as conditions of possible experience. Thus Kant wants to impress upon the reader why undertaking a justification of the categories is necessary. 'The reader', he explains, 'must be convinced of the unavoidable necessity of such a transcendental deduction' (A88/B121). Lacking conviction on this point, the reader 'would otherwise proceed blindly, and after much wandering around would still have to return to the ignorance from which he had begun' (A88/B121). In order to prevent this, Kant appeals to a skeptical thought in order to push his argument in the right direction.[26]

Tellingly, he labels this move a 'transition' (*Übergang*) in the title of section 14: 'Transition to the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories'. The skeptical thought Kant appeals to concerns the coordination of our faculties. He says the unity of appearances may not be a product of categories like cause-and-effect, so that what is given to us in sensibility may not relate to the functions of the understanding. The skeptical worry, in other words, is of a potential *disharmony* of our faculties:

> Appearances could after all be so constituted that the understanding would not find them in accord with the conditions of its unity, and everything would then lie in such confusion, e.g., in the succession of appearances nothing would offer itself that would furnish a rule of synthesis and thus correspond to the concept of cause-and-effect, so that this concept would therefore be entirely empty, nugatory, and without significance. Appearances would nonetheless offer objects to our intuition, for intuition by no means requires functions of thinking.
>
> (A90/B123)

Kant says the reader may wish to escape the difficulties of a deduction and try, instead, to establish the validity of the categories by appealing to examples drawn from experience. Taking the empirical path he might think we can derive causal necessity from the regularity of appearances, e.g., from phenomena like the constant rising of the sun. But Kant points out that experience can only support

[26] See Gardner (1999) for a lucid overview of these issues.

inductive generalizations (that B will *probably* follow A), not claims of necessity (that B *must* follow A). At this crossroads the alternatives are clear: Pure concepts 'must either be grounded in the understanding completely *a priori* or else be entirely surrendered as a mere figment of the imagination' (A91/B123). According to this threat, we might not be entitled to say that an effect, *B,* necessarily follows a cause, *A,* only that we must represent 'A-B' together, 'which is precisely what the skeptic wishes most, for then all of our insight through the supposed objective validity of our judgments is nothing but sheer illusion' (B168). The problem is that the categories might only be rules for thinking objects in general, as thinking does not require sensory data, but they would not be applicable to whatever we perceive, i.e., to objects given to us in space and time. In addition to a first step that would show the validity of the categories for a manifold of intuition in general, Kant's argument in the first *Critique* must take a second step, one that would show the application of the categories for a *human* manifold in particular. Indeed, a second step is necessary because the domain of human intuition is unique—it is characterized by space and time—and we need to know if the categories extend this far. In this light, the success Kant's deduction depends on showing the connection between the pure concepts of the understanding and the pure forms of sensibility, which had previously been separated for the sake of analysis. The deduction must now re-combine these two modes of cognition and reveal their necessary synthesis.

1.9 Skepticism in *Groundwork* III

It may not be obvious how any of this relates to *Groundwork* III,beyond the fact that Kant speaks of a 'deduction' in each text.[27] But we are now in a better position to see how the argument of *Groundwork* III unfolds. Reviewing our steps, we have seen that in *Groundwork* II Kant is troubled by an approach to morality that leaves itself exposed to skepticism: the approach of popular philosophy. This is a significant turning point in his argument, for Kant had just shown in *Groundwork* I that common human reason is susceptible to a natural dialectic which requires it to seek help in philosophy. If common reason turns to popular philosophy for a clarification of its moral commitments, it would likely become more entangled in self-obscurity.

Does Kant think bad philosophy can enter the dialectic of common reason? The naturalness of the dialectic suggests that in our everyday frame of mind we do not need the help of empirical theories to justify placing our interest in happiness above the moral law. At the same time, we could readily do this by

[27] See Choi (2019) for an illuminating discussion of the parallels between *Groundwork* III and Kant's version of the transcendental deduction in the 1787 edition of the first *Critique*.

turning to the reductive explanations such theories endorse, i.e., explanations that downgrade the necessity of the moral law along with our experience of duty.[28] If we could convince ourselves that categorical imperatives are really hypothetical, we could justify suspending them in situations where we would like to act out of self-love. So even if empirical theories of morality have an origin outside our natural dialectic, they could still be re-appropriated under the guise of respectable philosophical accounts—accounts that would serve to back up the rationalizations Kant thinks we are prone to make when faced with the strict requirements of duty.[29]

This idea is worth repeating, because it is easy to forget that one of Kant's central tasks in the *Groundwork* is to *rescue* common reason from itself.[30] As we have seen, the practical need for philosophy only becomes explicit at the end of *Groundwork* I when we discover we have a tendency to rationalize against the moral law (see §1.5). That is why Kant says we are compelled to seek help in philosophy, not only to satisfy a 'need of speculation', he adds, 'but on practical grounds themselves', so that we may escape the conflict that inevitably arises between morality and our own happiness (G 4:405). What I now want to show is that the problem of a natural dialectic also plays a central role in the final section of the *Groundwork*. For in the Preface Kant tells the reader that the dialectic we suffer from in our ordinary thinking will only find rest in a 'complete critique of our reason' (G 4:405). This is part of the final step Kant thinks we need to take in *Groundwork* III, namely, to a 'critique of pure practical reason'.[31]

1.10 The Source of Moral Obligation

What does this step involve? Early in the *Groundwork* Kant leaves us with a hint. At the end of *Groundwork* I he says the need of common reason to seek help in

[28] Rawls offers a slightly different point when he speaks of 'the depth of Kant's conviction that those without a conception of the moral law and lacking in moral sensibility could not know that they were free. They would appear to themselves as purely natural creatures endowed with rationality, without the essentials of humanity… The empiricist "delusion," as Kant calls it, must not be allowed to take from us the glorious disclosure of our autonomy made known to us through the moral law as an idea of pure reason' (1988, 133). In §2.11 we will find Kant making a similar point in his reply to Garve.

[29] Here I believe we can build upon Guyer's observation that 'the risk to our moral self-understanding does not arise from without, from wily artifices of corrupt philosophers who appear out of nowhere to darken our paths'. Rather, 'the source of sophistry and corruption lies within us, in evil possibilities inherent in our own nature, which can in turn co-opt our own faculty of reason to produce a form of philosophy that would appear to justify our lapses from duty' (2000, 209).

[30] In addition to Guyer (2000), the idea that the *Groundwork*'s task is educative is voiced by Philonenko (2008, 13–14), but only in passing.

[31] Kant takes up the problem of a 'dialectic' once more in the second *Critique*. Yet we should be attentive to the fact that the dialectic of the second *Critique* is of *pure* practical reason (cf., KpV 5:107). That would set it apart, as a philosophical problem, from the dialectic of the *Groundwork*, which arises for *sensibly conditioned* practical reason. See Klemme (2010) for further discussion.

philosophy is similar to the need we have in matters of speculation. Here I take Kant to be alluding to the Transcendental Dialectic from the first *Critique* where he shows that we suffer from a tendency to 'overstep' the proper bounds of human cognition in seeking objects of knowledge. We fall into a 'chaos of uncertainty' in laying claim to objects outside any relation to sense experience (to God, for example). In the *Groundwork*, however, Kant implies that common reason suffers from the opposite problem:

> We cannot consider without admiration how great an advantage the practical faculty of appraising has over the theoretical in common human understanding. In the latter, if common reason ventures to depart from laws of experience and perceptions of the senses it falls into sheer incomprehensibilities and self-contradictions, at least into a chaos of uncertainty, obscurity, and instability. But in practical matters, it is just when common understanding excludes all sensible incentives from practical laws that its faculty of appraising first begins to show itself to advantage. (G 4:404)

In matters of knowledge, our speculative use of reason becomes dialectical when we overstep the sensible conditions that make human cognition possible. By contrast, in matters of deliberation our practical use of reason displays its authority when we ignore sensuous incentives—for then we can judge an action's worth in terms of its lawful form, stripped from any consideration of self-interest. This means, to bring out the reverse point, that we fall into a 'chaos of uncertainty, obscurity, and instability' when we let sensible incentives *encroach* upon our practical reason. That is when our self-love becomes excessive and when we begin to 'quibble' with the demands of duty.

All of this goes to show why the *Groundwork* needs a final shift of frameworks. If we can show that our faculty of reason has a pure use, separate from its empirical use, then we can see that the only principle legislative for our will is autonomy—that of being a law to ourselves—which is equivalent to morality. A critical examination of this sort would show that our tendency to rationalize against the moral law is without basis: it occurs when we allow what is only a *part* of ourselves—namely, our sensibility—to act as if it constituted ourselves as a *whole*. If successful, then, Kant's critique would vindicate the idea of our higher vocation first expressed in *Groundwork* I, ultimately showing that we have not 'misunderstood the purpose of nature in assigning reason to our will as its governor' (G 4:394–5). It goes without saying that the analytic path opened up by a metaphysics of morals is unable to achieve this end.

Although Kant leaves us in the dark here, we can begin to understand his strategy better by looking at the title of subsection four in *Groundwork* III: 'How is a Categorical Imperative Possible?' An even more revealing piece of evidence

comes a few paragraphs later where Kant draws a parallel to the transcendental deduction of the categories. After summarizing the argument, he adds: 'this is roughly like the way in which concepts of the understanding, which by themselves signify nothing but lawful form in general, are added to intuitions of the world of sense and thereby make possible synthetic propositions *a priori* on which all cognition of a nature rests' (G 4:454). If we take Kant at his word, then the parallel of a transcendental deduction in *Groundwork* III is to be found in his answer to the question of how a moral 'ought' is possible. And this makes sense, considering that our cognition of an 'ought' expressed in the moral law provokes the same sort of suspicion raised by the epistemic 'must' in the categories. In both cases we are faced with claims marked by necessity, and the question is whether these claims have an objective ground. We want insight into the source of moral obligation, in order to vindicate our possession of it, just as we want insight into the source of the categories.[32]

The first step of Kant's deduction in *Groundwork* III introduces different but compatible ways we can view ourselves as agents. On the one hand, when I view myself from the standpoint of an observer, in the third person, I see that my actions are part of the same 'world of sense' that govern objects and events around me. My actions are the product of forces beyond my control. On the other hand, when I view myself as an agent, in the *first person,* I presuppose a different space: a 'world of understanding' or 'intelligible world' unaffected by natural influences, including the influences of my sensibility (G 4:452).[33] I recognize that I am, not only acted upon, but active myself. Kant uses this distinction to show that when I view myself exclusively from the standpoint of agency, participating in the intelligible world, I cannot derive a principle of action from my inclinations as a sensible being. I am now considering myself 'outside' of the space of causes to which my inclinations belong. So the only principle I can derive is that of being a law to myself, and that is the principle of autonomy. As a participant in the intelligible world, then, I see that a principle of being a law to myself is valid for me without

[32] I am following Schönecker (2006), Timmermann (2007), and Stern (2011) in framing the deduction of *Groundwork* III as an argument, not for the validity of the moral law, but for its bindingness as a categorical imperative. Guyer has recently expressed resistance to this interpretation (2007, 2008). In his view, the bindingness problem only concerns the 'imperatival character of the fundamental principle of morality for us', yet this, he concludes, is 'a statement of a consequence of the deduction rather than the attempted deduction itself' (2009, 181, note 7). There is evidence that Kant's deduction of the categorical imperative in subsection four presupposes a previous deduction of freedom in subsection three. This evidence would make my view of the *Groundwork*'s proof-structure compatible with Guyer's. The remaining question—which I will touch upon in §3.8—is whether Guyer is right to interpret the initial deduction of freedom in strongly metaphysical terms.

[33] As Kant writes: 'One resource, however, still remains to us, namely to inquire whether we do not take a *different standpoint* when by means of freedom we think ourselves as causes efficient *a priori* than when we represent ourselves in terms of our actions as effects that we see before our eyes' (G 4:450; emphasis added).

the mediation of my inclinations: in this way, it is the only principle of my will *qua* will, the only principle *I give to myself immediately.*

But as a step in a genetic proof, this gives us a limited result. The two-world distinction says that when we regard ourselves as agents we presuppose a space undetermined by sensibility, and from the standpoint of this space our practical reason is '*more*' than a sensibly conditioned faculty. A critic might concede, however, that the moral law is valid for rational beings, and so for ourselves considered only as participants in the intelligible world. Yet this leaves open the question of whether the moral law applies to beings like us, who *are* affected by sensibility (G 4:450; cf., 4:453). Just as step one from the transcendental deduction leaves open the question of whether the categories are valid in their application to our particular manifold of intuition—as it is characterized by space and time—the first step of *Groundwork* III leaves open the question of whether the moral law is binding for human agents, as they are characterized by sensible desires.[34] What this shows, as before, is that a second step is necessary to complete the deduction.

It is important to bear in mind that Kant treats both worlds in *Groundwork* III as *standpoints* for thinking of our agency. We can consider ourselves from the standpoint of the sensible world, on the one hand, and from the standpoint of the intelligible world, on the other (G 4:452). We can agree, then, that if the intelligible world affords us a standpoint for thinking of our 'pure' will, the world of sense affords us a standpoint for thinking of our 'empirical' will. In this sense Kant's two worlds stand in a unique relationship to each other because one gives us a concept of our will as self-sufficient, whereas the other gives a concept of our will as dependent. To be sure, each world affords us insight into the nature of our will, I am not denying that, but my point is that only the intelligible world affords us insight into the 'idea' of our will as a self-legislating faculty—where an 'Idea' signifies, in Kant's epistemology, the maximum perfection of a concept.[35] The world of sense affords us insight into the nature of our will, too, but only as a faculty dependent on impulses and inclinations.

[34] The question of parallelism in Kant's deductions is intriguing yet difficult to settle. All I am committed to here is parallelism between (a) a general step (the validity of the categories for a manifold of intuition in general/the validity of the moral law for a rational being in general) and (b) a specific step (the validity of the categories for a human manifold of intuition/the validity of the categorical imperative for a human will). Guyer has attempted to draw a more elaborate set of connections ranging from Kant's derivation of the categorical imperative in Section II of the *Groundwork* to his system of duties in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. For details, see Guyer (2007). For a critical reply, see Allison (2007).

[35] In the first *Critique* Kant draws inspiration from Plato in this definition of an 'idea' (*Idee*). With respect to the idea of a political constitution 'providing for the greatest human freedom according to laws that permit the freedom of each to exist together with that of others', Kant writes: 'Even though this may never come to pass, the idea of this maximum is nevertheless wholly correct when it is set forth as an archetype, in order to bring the legislative constitution of human beings ever nearer to a possible greatest perfection' (A317/B373). I have capitalized the English to make this technical feature of Kant's term salient. This point is developed by Tenenbaum (2012) in an excellent essay, to which I am indebted.

In saying this, Kant's claim is that the Idea I have of my will from the standpoint of the intelligible world is the 'ground' of my will as I conceive it from the standpoint of the sensible world. The concept of my will as it is sensibly affected is a limited concept of my will; it only reveals what is a *part* of my faculty of practical reason. The Idea of my will as it is unaffected by sensibility, i.e., the concept of the maximum perfection of my will, reveals my faculty of practical reason as a self-sufficient *whole*. Kant indicates as much in the following passage:

> This *categorical* ought represents a synthetic proposition *a priori*, since to my will affected by sensible desires there is added the idea of the same will but belonging to the world of the understanding—a will pure and practical of itself, which contains the supreme condition, in accordance with reason, of the former will. (G 4:453)

This passage is easy to overlook, but in my view it is essential for understanding the second step of Kant's deduction in *Groundwork* III. Moral laws carry the force of imperatives for us because our empirical will is not a separate faculty at all. Whenever we exercise our will in the world of sense, we presuppose the idea of our *same will* yet unaffected by needs, impulses, and inclinations. For this reason moral laws do not concern the activity of a separate faculty, a 'pure will' belonging to some other realm. The pure will is nothing other than the Idea of our own, empirical will conceived of in its complete perfection. That is why the moral 'ought' expresses *my own will* as a member of the intelligible world: I experience it as an 'ought' only because I must view myself 'at the same time' (*zugleich*) as part of the world of sense (G 4:455). What Kant's genetic proof shows, then, is that my experience of necessitation in the categorical imperative has an objective basis after all. What the moral 'ought' expresses is, not a figment of my imagination, but my own pure 'will' (G 4:454).

1.11 Kant's Scoundrel

One advantage of the interpretation just sketched is that it shows why Kant's deduction in *Groundwork* III works to resolve the natural dialectic of common human reason. As we have seen, Kant describes this dialectic in *Groundwork* I by speaking of a 'counterweight' we feel 'to all the commands of duty' (G 4:405). The problem, he explains, is that reason 'issues its precepts unremittingly, without thereby promising anything to the inclinations, and so, as it were, with disregard and contempt for those claims' (G 4:405). To protect the interest we have in our own happiness, we in turn strip moral laws of their status, either by casting doubt upon their validity or by questioning their strictness. By way of rationalization we try to make our compliance with the moral law conditional upon our well-being. And that, for Kant, is how the natural dialectic of common reason arises. What

starts off as a desire to protect our interest in happiness ends up as a choice to subvert the moral law, to dislodge it from its proper place of authority.

But what is the origin of this choice? Much of what Kant says is shrouded in mystery, but he leaves us with some suggestive remarks. The natural dialectic arises, he writes, as soon as common reason 'cultivates itself' (G 4:405). We can think of it like this: Our first vocation as sensible beings comes from the idea of our happiness, the imagined end of our sum-total satisfaction. Over time we become aware of other reasons for action, 'laws' that do not speak to the fulfillment of our needs and inclinations. A conflict inevitably arises, in turn, because our initial grasp of these laws is distorted: all we see is their unremitting character, without recognizing their true source. At this stage we are capable of moral thought in some basic sense—we can consider duties of action—but we do not yet know where these duties come from. All we see are *external* claims that pose a threat to our first vocation, happiness. In this way our distorted grasp of duty is a matter of perspective, the perspective we have as beings who are unaware that moral claims come from *within* us.

The example Kant uses to 'confirm the correctness' of his deduction in *Groundwork* III reveals the importance of the problem at hand:

> There is no one—not even the most malicious scoundrel, if only he is otherwise accustomed to use reason—who, when one sets before him examples of honesty of purpose, of steadfastness in following good maxims, of sympathy and general benevolence (even combined with great sacrifices of advantage and comfort), does not wish [*wünsche*] that he might also be so disposed. (G 4:454)

Anyone confronted with these examples must see something remarkable. The agent they characterize becomes more sublime in our eyes the more he suffers a loss of personal well-being. The *wish* we feel in response—to be disposed of such strength of will—indicates that our higher vocation cannot be the pursuit of happiness. If it were, we would not want to be like someone whose moral resolve leads him, in the examples at hand, to great sacrifices of advantage and comfort. Kant makes this point earlier in the *Groundwork* when he claims, appealing once more to 'the most ordinary observation', that an action of integrity 'done with steadfast soul, apart from every view to advantage of any kind in this world or another and even under the greatest temptations of need or allurement' has a more powerful effect on us than a similar action motivated by self-interest or love of honor. Only the former, he adds, 'elevates the soul' of the spectator and 'awakens a wish to be able to act in like manner oneself' (G 4:411n).[36]

[36] This example from *Groundwork* III foreshadows Kant's use of an experimental method in the second *Critique*, which we will discuss again in §2.5 and §2.7.

The moment we express this wish, Kant claims, we must *shift standpoints*, stepping outside the world of sense to which our needs and inclinations belong (G 4:454). In wanting to emulate the virtuous agent, we must place ourselves in the intelligible world, and only there do we recognize our capacity for pure practical reason. Kant's point, as we have just seen, is that even a malicious scoundrel must see this—even *he* must recognize his autonomous self reflected back to him in the examples of moral conduct. Once he shifts standpoints and regards himself in this new light, 'he is conscious of a good will that, by his own acknowledgments, constitutes the law for his evil will as a member of the world of sense—a law of whose authority he is cognizant even while he transgresses it' (G 4:455). Having already articulated the supreme principle of morality, Kant has thus come full circle and returned to the common idea of duty first presented in *Groundwork* I. The scoundrel now before us recognizes the moral 'ought' as his same 'will' in the intelligible world, and it is 'thought by him as an "ought" only insofar as he regards himself at the same time as a member of the world of sense' (G 4:455).

1.12 The Delusion of Skepticism

Looking back, we can see why nothing Kant says at the end of the *Groundwork* would satisfy a person looking for a motive to be moral. The argument of *Groundwork* III takes up a different question altogether. As Hill points out, Kant is not speaking to those 'who are indifferent to morality and demand that philosophy supply them with a motive to be moral'.[37] And to this extent Hill and others are right: Kant is not trying to refute a radical skeptic or amoralist. His aim is to resolve the dialectic we are all prone to succumb to by showing that morality is the principle of our will as a whole,considered in itself, whereas happiness only applies to a part of our will, considered in relation to sensibility. Yet it is only when we descend along the synthetic path of *Groundwork* III that we attain this insight and see the necessary connection between the two. The pure will revealed to us from the standpoint of the intelligible world is nothing other than the 'Idea' of our empirical will revealed to us from the standpoint of the sensible world.

For this reason we should not turn to *Groundwork* III for an answer to the skeptic's standard question, 'Why be moral?' If the skeptic is asking how morality will further one of his given desires, then he is begging the whole issue at stake. He is treating morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives, placing his own interests and inclinations in first rank. That is not to say Kant's attitude to skepticism is entirely dismissive in the *Groundwork*. The results of *Groundwork* III

[37] Hill (1998, 250).

must speak, at least indirectly, to those who wish to ridicule morality as a figment of the imagination. Like any ordinary person who engages in rationalization, the skeptics Kant considers in *Groundwork* II would display a genuine practical error if they asserted their happiness above the moral law. By doing so they would be lost in the same self-obscurity Kant says common reason finds itself. They would be guilty of giving priority to the satisfaction of their inclinations, aside from whatever false theory of ethics they uphold.

So in the end I believe we can turn the skeptics' words against themselves. If anyone has succumbed to a delusion, as they claim, it is not the moralist, but the skeptic himself, insofar as he has presumed that sensibility constitutes our whole self and happiness our highest end. This is the sense in which our need for philosophy is, as Kant says, practical in nature. Skeptical claims are troubling, not because they attack our deepest moral intuitions from the outside, but because they resonate with unspoken doubts we feel within ourselves. I have proposed that we read Kant's *Groundwork* as a method for invoking such doubts in order to expose, and overcome, the limits in our ordinary and philosophical thinking about morality. It seems that an actual skeptic stands in need of this help, no less than anyone else. After all, part of the problem Kant is addressing in the *Groundwork* is how our rational development leads us to come into conflict with the demands of morality. We experience those demands as external attacks to what we initially regard as our sole vocation, the pursuit of happiness. That is why we need *insight*—and for Kant, this is what the philosopher can offer—into the true source of those demands.

1.13 Closing Remarks

In this chapter I have argued that Kant's project in *Groundwork* III is best clarified in light of his own distinction between an analytic path and a synthetic path. We follow the analytic path when we ascend, in the first two sections, to the moral law as the highest principle of practical reason. We follow the synthetic path when we descend, in the third section, from the moral law back to the common use of reason in which we find it used. In this way the path of justification in *Groundwork* III culminates in Kant's claim that what we recognize we would do as members of the intelligible world is what we should do as beings who belong at the same time to the sensible world. Indeed, after separating the faculty of practical reason from any empirical element, Kant's task is to show that the highest law of this faculty, the moral law, is binding upon the will of sensibly affected beings like us. It is thus only by taking the synthetic path, where we move from the first principle back to our original starting point, that we can see a real synthetic connection between the moral 'ought' and our 'will', constituting a genetic proof or

deduction of the former. Despite its complex apparatus, then, the project of *Groundwork* III works to resolve a practical problem, that of our tendency to rationalize against the claims of morality. In this way Kant is not trying to convince us to enter into the world of morality, but rather to make that world intelligible to those of us already committed to it.

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