

Introduction to Groundwork: through First Section (ix–xvii)

Christine M. Korsgaard

October 5: the Introduction through the end of “First section” is required (book pp. ix–xvii). The next heading, “Second section,” is not included.

Source: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge University Press, revised edition, 2012. Translation by Mary Gregor, revised by Jens Timmermann; introduction by Christine M. Korsgaard.

This text and its PDF are converted from the supplied ebook. PDF page numbers are not the printed book page numbers. Kant’s Akademie references are retained. The wording, emphasis, and notes come from the book.

Christine M. Korsgaard

A life devoted to the pursuit of philosophical inquiry may be inwardly as full of drama and event – of obstacle and overcoming, battle and victory, challenge and conquest – as that of any general, politician, or explorer, and yet be outwardly so quiet and routine as to defy biographical narration. Immanuel Kant was born in 1724 in Königsberg, East Prussia, to a Pietist family of modest means.¹ Encouraged by his mother and the family pastor to pursue the career marked out by his intellectual gifts, Kant attended the University of Königsberg, and then worked for a time as a private tutor in the homes of various families in the neighborhood, while pursuing his researches in natural science. Later he got a position as a *Privatdozent*, an unsalaried lecturer who is paid by student fees, at the University. There Kant lectured on logic, metaphysics, ethics, geography, anthropology, mathematics, the foundations of natural science, and physics. In 1770, he finally obtained a regular professorship, the Chair of Logic and Metaphysics, at Königsberg. Destined by limited means and uneven health never to marry or travel, Kant remained in the Königsberg area, a quiet, hardworking scholar and teacher, until his death in 1804.

But sometime in the 1770s – we do not know exactly when – Kant began to work out ideas that were destined to challenge our conception of reason’s relationship – and so of our own relationship – to the world around us. Kant himself compared his system to that of Copernicus, which explained the ordering of the heavens by turning them inside out, that is, by removing the earth – the human world – from the center, and making it revolve around the sun instead. Kant’s own revolution also turns the world inside out, but in a very different way, for it places humanity back in the center. Kant argued that the rational order which the metaphysician looks for in the world is neither something that we discover through experience, nor something that our reason assures us must be there. Instead, it is something which we human beings impose upon the world – in part through the way we construct our knowledge, but also, in a different way, through our actions.

The implications for moral philosophy, first presented in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, are profound. The *Groundwork* is an acknowledged philosophical classic, an introduction to one of the most influential accounts of our moral nature which the tradition has ever produced. Some of its central themes – that every human being is an end in himself or herself, not to be used

as a mere means by others; that respect for your own humanity finds its fullest expression in respect for that of others; and that morality is freedom, and evil a form of enslavement – have become not only well-established themes in moral philosophy, but part of our moral culture.

But the *Groundwork* owes its popularity to its power, not to its accessibility. Like all of Kant's works, it is a difficult book. It is couched in the technical vocabulary which Kant developed for the presentation of his ideas. It presents us with a single, continuous argument, each of whose steps is itself an argument, and which runs the length of the book. But the particular arguments which make up the whole are sufficiently difficult in themselves that their contribution to the larger argument is easy to lose sight of. The main aim of this introduction will be to provide a kind of road map through the book, by showing how the material presented in each of the main sections contributes to the argument as a whole. First, however, we must situate the project of the *Groundwork* within Kant's general project, and explain some of the basic terminology he employs.

Kant's philosophical project

Kant was led to his revolutionary views about reason through an investigation of the question "What contribution does pure reason make to our knowledge of the world and to the government of our actions?" The empiricists of Kant's day had claimed that all of our knowledge, as well as our moral ideas, is derived from experience. The more extreme of the rationalists, on the other hand, believed that at least in principle all truths could be derived from self-evident rational principles. And all rationalists believe that at least some important truths, such as the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and truths about what we ought to do, are either self-evident or can be deductively proved. In order to formulate the issue between these two schools of thought more clearly, Kant employed two distinctions that apply to judgments. Since Kant uses these two distinctions in the *Groundwork* in order to formulate the question he wants to raise about morality, it is necessary for the reader to be acquainted with them.

The first is the analytic/synthetic distinction, which concerns what makes a judgment true or false. A judgment is analytic if the predicate is contained in the concept of the subject. Otherwise, the predicate adds something new to our conception of the subject and the judgment is synthetic. Analytic judgments are, roughly, true by definition: when we say that a moon is a satellite of a planet, we are not reporting the results of an astronomical discovery, but explaining the meaning of a term. The second is the a priori/a posteriori distinction, which concerns the way we know that a judgment is true. A judgment is known a posteriori if it is known from experience, while it is known a priori if our knowledge of it is independent of any particular experience. Putting these two distinctions together yields three possible types of judgment. If a judgment is analytically true, we know this a priori, for we do not need experience to tell us what is contained in our concepts. For this reason, there are no analytic a posteriori judgments. If a judgment is known a posteriori, or from experience, it must be synthetic, for the subject and the predicate are "synthesized" in our experience: we learn from experience that the sky is blue, rather than yellow, because we see that the sky and blueness are joined. The remaining kind of judgment, synthetic a priori, would be one which tells us something new about its subject, and yet which is known independently of experience – on the basis of reasoning alone. If pure reason tells us anything substantial and important, either about the world, or about what we ought to do, then what it tells us will take the

form of synthetic a priori judgments. So for Kant, the question whether pure reason can guide us, either in metaphysical speculation or in action, amounts to the question whether and how we can establish any synthetic a priori judgments.²

The Preface, and the project of the *Groundwork*

We can make these abstract ideas more concrete by turning to the Preface of the *Groundwork*. Here Kant divides philosophy into three parts: *logic*, which applies to all thought; *physics*, which deals with the way the world is; and *ethics*, which deals with what we ought to do. Kant thinks of each of these as a domain of laws: logic deals with the laws of thought; physics, with the laws of nature; and ethics, with what Kant calls the laws of freedom, that is, the laws governing the conduct of free beings. Logic is a domain of pure reason, but physics and ethics each have both a pure and an empirical part. For instance, we learn about particular laws of nature, such as the law that viruses are the cause of colds, from experience. But how do we learn that the world in general behaves in a lawlike way – that every event has a cause?³ This judgment is not based on experience, for we can have no experience of every possible event. Nor is it an analytic judgment, for it is not part of the concept of an event that it has a cause. If we do know, then, that the world in general behaves in a lawlike way, we must have synthetic a priori knowledge. A body of such knowledge is called a “metaphysics.” If it is true that every event has a cause, then this truth is part of the metaphysics of nature.

That there must be a metaphysics of morals is even more obvious. For morality is concerned with practical questions – not with the way things *are*, but with the way things *ought to be*. Since experience tells us only about the way things are, it cannot by itself provide answers to our practical questions. Moral judgments must therefore be a priori. Yet it is clear that moral laws are not analytic, for if they were, we could settle controversial moral questions simply by analyzing our concepts. So if there are any moral requirements, then there must be a metaphysics of morals, a body of synthetic a priori judgments concerning what we ought to do.

The *Groundwork*, however, is not Kant’s entire metaphysics of morals, but only its most fundamental part. Kant wrote another book under the title *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in which our duties are categorized and expounded in considerable detail. There the reader may learn what conclusions Kant himself thought could be derived from his theory about a wide variety of issues, ranging from questions of personal morality – such as the legitimacy of suicide, the permissibility of using alcohol and drugs, the proper treatment of animals, and the nature and conduct of friendship and marriage – to larger political questions, such as the proper form of the political state, the legitimacy of revolution, and the permissibility of war.

This book is only a *Groundwork*, and its aim is to establish the most preliminary and fundamental point of the subject: that there is a domain of laws applying to our conduct, that there is such a thing as morality. Its aim is, as Kant himself says, “the identification and corroboration of *the supreme principle of morality*” (4:392).⁴ That supreme principle, which Kant calls the *categorical imperative*, commands simply that our actions should have the *form* of moral conduct; that is, that they should be derivable from universal principles. When we act, we are to ask whether the reasons for which we propose to act could be made universal, embodied in a principle. Kant believed that this formal requirement yields substantive constraints on our conduct – not every proposed reason for action can be made universal, and so not every action can be squared with the requirement of

acting on principle. We have already seen that the principle that tells us that nature in general behaves in a lawlike way must be synthetic a priori, if it can be established at all. In the same way, Kant thinks, the principle that tells us that *we ought to* behave in a lawlike way must be synthetic a priori, if ethics exists at all. The project of the *Groundwork* is simply to establish that there is a categorical imperative – and so that we have moral obligations.

First section

In each section of the *Groundwork*, Kant carries out a specific project, which in turn forms part of the argument of the whole. In the Preface, Kant says that his project in the first section will be “to take one’s route analytically from common cognition to the determination of its supreme principle” (4:392). In other words, Kant is going to start from our ordinary ways of thinking about morality and analyze them to discover the principle behind them. It is important to keep in mind that because he is analyzing our ordinary views, Kant is not, in this section, trying to *prove* that human beings have obligations. Instead, he is trying to identify *what* it is that he has to establish in order to prove that. What must we show, in order to show that moral obligation is real?

The “common cognition” from which Kant starts his argument is that morally good actions have a special kind of value. A person who does the right thing for the right reason evinces what Kant calls a good will, and the first section opens with the claim that a good will is the only thing to which we attribute “unconditional worth.” The good will is good “just by its willing” (4:394), which means that it is in actions expressive of a good will that we see this special kind of value realized. Kant does not mean that the good will is the only thing we value for its own sake, or as an end. A number of the things which Kant says have only “conditional” value, such as health and happiness, are things obviously valued for their own sakes. Instead, he means that the good will is the only thing which has a value that is completely independent of its relation to other things, which it therefore has in all circumstances, and which cannot be undercut by external conditions.

A scientist may be brilliant at his work, and yet use his gifts for evil ends. A political leader may achieve fine ends, but be ruthless in the cost she is willing to impose on others in order to carry out her plans. A wealthy aesthete may lead a gracious and happy life, and yet be utterly regardless of the plight of less fortunate people around him. The evil ends of the scientist, the ruthlessness of the politician, and the thoughtlessness of the aesthete undercut or at least detract from what we value in them and their lives. But suppose that someone performs a morally worthy action: say, he hurries to the rescue of an endangered enemy, at considerable risk to himself. Many things may go wrong with his action. Perhaps the rescuer fails in his efforts to save his enemy. Perhaps he himself dies in the attempt. Perhaps the attempt was ill judged; we see that it could not have worked and so was a wasted effort. In spite of all this, we cannot withhold our tribute from this action, and from the rescuer as its author. Nothing can detract from the value of such an action, which is independent of “what it effects, or accomplishes” (4:394).⁵

When we attribute unconditional value to an action, it is because we have a certain conception of the motives from which the person acted. If we found out, for instance, that the rescuer had acted only because he hoped he would get a reward, and had no idea that there was any risk involved, we would feel quite differently. So what gives a morally good action its special value is the motivation behind it, the principle on the basis of which it is chosen, or in Kantian terms, willed. This implies that once we know how actions with unconditional value are willed – once we know what principle

a person like the rescuer acts on – we will know what makes them morally good. And when we know what makes actions morally good, we will be able to determine *which* actions are morally good, and so to determine what the moral law tells us to do. This is what Kant means when he says he is going to “unravel the concept” of a good will (4:397): that he is going to find out what principle the person of good will acts on, in order to determine what the moral law tells us to do.

In order to do this, Kant says, he is going to focus on a particular category of morally good actions, namely those which are done “from duty.” Duty is the good will operating under “certain subjective limitations and hindrances, which . . . far from concealing it and making it unrecognizable. . . bring it out by contrast and make it shine forth all the more brightly” (4:397). The hindrance Kant has in mind is that the person of whom we say that he acts “from duty” has other motives which, in the absence of duty, would lead him to avoid the action. When such a person does his duty, not otherwise wanting to, we know that the thought of duty alone has been sufficient to produce the action. Looking at this kind of case, where the motive of duty produces an action without any help from other motives, gives us a clearer view of what that motive is. 6

Kant proceeds to distinguish three kinds of motivation. You may perform an action *from duty*, that is, do it because you think it is the right thing to do. You may perform it from *immediate inclination*, because you want to do it for its own sake, or because you enjoy doing actions of that kind. Or, finally, you may perform an action because you are “impelled to do so by another inclination,” that is, as a means to some further end (4:397). In order to discover what is distinctive about good-willed actions and so what their principle is, Kant invites us to think about the contrast between right actions done from duty and right actions motivated in these other ways. To illustrate this contrast, he provides some examples.

The first one involves a merchant who refrains from overcharging gullible customers, because this gives him a good reputation which helps his business. This is an example of the third kind of motivation – doing what is right, but only as a means to some further end – and Kant mentions it only to lay it aside. The difference between doing the right thing from duty and doing it to promote some other end is obvious, for someone who does the right thing from duty does it for its own sake, and not for any ulterior motive. Yet in order that an action should evince a good will, it is not enough that it should be done for its own sake. This is the point of the other three examples, in which Kant contrasts someone who does an action from immediate inclination with someone who does the same action from duty. For instance, Kant says, there are people

so attuned to compassion that, even without another motivating ground of vanity, or self-interest, they find an inner gratification in spreading joy around them, and can relish the contentment of others, in so far as it is their work. (4:398)

A person like this helps others when they are in need, and, unlike the prudent merchant, but *like* the dutiful person, does so for its own sake. A sympathetic person has no ulterior purpose in helping; he just enjoys “spreading joy around him.” The lesson Kant wants us to draw from this is that the difference between the sympathetic person, and the person who helps from the motive of duty, does not rest in their purposes. They have the same purpose, which is to help others. Yet the sympathetic person’s action does not have the moral worth of the action done from duty. According to Kant, reflection on this fact leads us to see that the moral worth of an action does not lie in its purpose, but rather in the “maxim” on which it is done, that is, the principle on which the agent acts (4:399).

In order to understand these claims it is necessary to understand the psychology behind them: the way that, as Kant sees it, human beings decide to act. According to Kant, our nature presents us with “incentives” which prompt or tempt us to act in certain ways. Among these incentives are the psychological roots of our ordinary desires and inclinations (as sympathy is the root of the desire to help); later, we will learn that moral thoughts – thoughts about what is required of us – also provide us with incentives. These incentives do not operate on us directly as causes of decision and action. Instead, they provide considerations which we take into account when we decide what to do. When you decide to act on an incentive, you “make it your maxim” to act in the way suggested by the incentive. For instance, when you decide to do something simply because you want to, you “make it your maxim” to act as desire prompts.

Kant claims that the difference between the naturally sympathetic person and the dutiful person rests in their maxims. The sympathetic person decides to help because helping is something he enjoys. His maxim, therefore, is to do those things he likes doing. The point here is not that his *purpose* is simply to please himself. His purpose is to help, but he adopts that purpose – he makes it his maxim to pursue that end – because he enjoys helping. The reason his action lacks moral worth is not that he *wants* to help only because it *pleases* him. The reason his action lacks moral worth is that he *chooses* to help *only* because he *wants* to: he allows himself to be guided by his desires in the selection of his ends. The person who acts from duty, by contrast, makes it her maxim to help because she conceives helping as something that is required of her. Again we must understand this in the right way. The point is not that her *purpose* is “to do her duty.” Her purpose is to help, but she chooses helping as her purpose *because* she thinks that is what she is required to do: she thinks that the needs of others make a claim on her.

Kant thinks that performing an action because you regard the action or its end as one that is required of you is equivalent to being moved by the thought of the maxim of the action as a kind of law. The dutiful person takes the maxim of helping others to *express* or *embody* a requirement, just as a law does. In Kant’s terminology, she sees the maxim of helping others as having *the form of a law*.⁷ When we think that a certain maxim expresses a requirement, or has the form of a law, that thought itself is an incentive to perform the action. Kant calls this incentive “respect for law.”

We now know what gives actions done from duty their special moral worth. They get their moral worth from the fact that the person who does them acts from respect for law. A good person is moved by the thought that his or her maxim has the form of a law. The principle of a good will, therefore, is to do only those actions whose maxims can be conceived as having the form of a law. If there is such a thing as moral obligation – if, as Kant himself says, “duty is not to be as such an empty delusion and a chimerical concept” (4:402) – then we must establish that our wills are governed by this principle: “I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.”

Notes

1. Pietism was a religious movement which emphasized inner religious experience, self-examination, and morally good works. Its emphasis on the importance of morality is often thought to have been a strong influence on Kant.

2. For **Kant**’s own introductory discussion of these distinctions see the Introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. **Paul Guyer** and **Allen Wood**, the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, Cambridge University Press, 1998). The relevant passages may be found at A6–11/B10–14, using the standard method of citing this work,

according to the page numbers in the first (A) and second (B) editions. The analytic/synthetic distinction was challenged in the twentieth century, most famously by **W. V. Quine** in his “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (in *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd edition, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961). How damaging this attack is to Kant’s project is a matter of philosophical debate.

3. The principle that every event has a cause has been challenged by modern physics; modern scientists believe that at the level of the most fundamental particles and events it does not hold. An obvious question is what impact this has on Kant’s argument. Must he give up the idea that the causal principle is a synthetic a priori truth, or is it enough for his purposes that events at the macro-level must still be causally ordered if the world is to be knowable? For our purposes here, the causal principle may still be used as an example of a synthetic a priori truth.

4. The standard German edition of Kant’s works is issued under the auspices of the Prussian Academy (1900–). The standard method of citing passages from Kant’s works, except for the *Critique of Pure Reason* (see note 2), refers to the pagination of this edition, and the page numbers are given in the margins of most translations. The citation method used in this introduction also gives the volume number in which the work is found. The citation says that the passage quoted is on page 392 of volume 4 of the Academy edition. An English translation of most of Kant’s works has been published by Cambridge University Press under the general editorship of Paul Guyer and Allen Wood.

5. At 4:395–397, Kant supports these ideas with an argument to the effect that in a teleologically organized system of nature, the natural purpose of the rational will would be to realize the good will, or moral worth. Kant argues that in a teleological system of nature, we can never say that an organ, faculty, or arrangement exists to serve some natural purpose unless it is the fittest and best adapted organ, faculty, or arrangement for that purpose. The rational will, Kant argues, is not especially well adapted to produce happiness or any end outside of itself. Its purpose must therefore be to realize its own value. This argument is offered as a supplement, and the main argument does not depend on it. Kant himself did not believe that a teleological conception of nature has the status of knowledge, although he did consider it an importantly useful way of looking at things. The reader is referred to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (trans. **Paul Guyer** and **Eric Matthews**, the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, Cambridge University Press, 2002) for Kant’s views on teleology.

6. According to a common misreading of the text at this point and of the examples that follow, Kant believes that actions can have moral worth only if they are done reluctantly or without the support of inclination. This is not Kant’s view. He focuses on cases in which the moral motive operates by itself because he wants to get a clear view of it, not because he thinks that the presence of other possible motives somehow prevents an agent from acting on it.

7. Both here and later on in the discussion of the Formula of Universal Law, Kant makes it clear that he thinks the lawlike character of a maxim is a matter of its *form* rather than its *matter*. What does this mean? The distinction between form and matter is an inheritance of Aristotelian metaphysics, in which the matter of a thing is the materials or parts of which it is constructed, while the form is the arrangement of those parts that enables the object to serve its characteristic function. For instance if the function of a house is to serve as a shelter, we would say that the matter of the house is the walls and the roof, and the form is the way those parts are arranged so as to keep the weather out and the objects within protected. The parts of a maxim are usually the act which is done and the end for the sake of which it is done. We can show that the lawlike character of the maxim is a matter of the way the parts are arranged, the form, by considering a triple of maxims like this:

1. I will keep my weapon, because I want it for myself.

2. I will keep your weapon, because I want it for myself.

3. I will keep your weapon, because you have gone mad and may hurt someone.

Maxims 1 and 3 are maxims of good actions, while maxim 2 is of a bad action. Yet maxims 1 and 2 have the same purpose, and maxims 2 and 3 involve the same act. So the lawlike character of the maxim rests neither in the purpose, nor in the act, which are the parts or matter of the maxim. Instead it rests in the way those parts are combined – and so in the form of the maxim. In a good maxim, the parts are so combined that the maxim can serve as a law: everyone could act on it.