

## OVERVIEW OF KANT'S SYSTEM

Immanuel Kant, 1724-1804, is the capstone in traditional courses in M&E (metaphysics and epistemology) of the modern European period. Kant is often the capstone because he claims to overcome the dispute between the "rationalists" (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz) and the "empiricists" (Locke, Hume).

Rather than do the big M&E book, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the traditional capstone, we will instead discuss his ethics in the next three lectures, focusing on the notion of freedom, which for Kant involves all three of our areas: metaphysics, morals, and politics. We will focus on the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*.

To get Kant's moral philosophy we have to understand the relation of his morals to the CPR.

Kant thought humans had "faculties"; these are ordered, but not in a chronological process. Rather, they are logically ordered with the later ones dependent upon the earlier ones.

- Sensibility passively receives sensory input.
- Understanding actively knows objects by bringing them under concepts.
- Reason pushes us to bring our conceptual knowledge into an orderly system.

*Critique of Pure Reason*: limit knowledge to natural appearance to make room for morality. We must "limit knowledge [to natural appearance] to make room for faith." Here "faith" = thinkable, but not knowable freedom necessary for morality. We do this by declaring understanding ruler, thus stopping endless battles of dogmatic empiricism and rationalism, which leads to skepticism and indifferentism.

*Groundwork* and *Critique of Practical Reason*: defend notion of pure practical reason as self-determination, or "autonomy," giving the law to yourself. As all causality works by law, freedom is not exemption from all laws – it's not lawlessness. While it's not heteronomy, or determination by natural laws (of chemistry, physics, psychology, anthropology ....), it is lawful: freedom is determining your actions by the moral law, which you as rational agent give to yourself.

A "critique" will establish the "limits and possibility" of the topic under examination. Each of Kant's first two critiques has an "interest" and a ruling "faculty."

	Interest	Ruling faculty	Realm
<i>Critique of Pure Reason</i> (CPR)	Knowledge	Understanding	Nature / realm of appearances
<i>Critique of Practical Reason</i> (CPrR)	Morality	Reason	Freedom / "intelligible realm"

*Critique of Judgement*: mediate realms of nature and freedom divorced by first two critiques

## KANT AND HUME

In the CPR, Kant says that Hume awoke him from his dogmatic slumbers. In CPR that's about causality, but probably more shocking for Kant was Hume's making morality a matter of character, passions, and human nature.

(From SEP): Hume's method of moral philosophy is experimental and empirical; Kant emphasizes the necessity of grounding morality in a priori principles.

Hume says that reason is properly a "slave to the passions," while Kant bases morality in his conception of a reason that is practical in itself.

Hume identifies such feelings as benevolence and generosity as proper moral motivations; Kant sees the motive of duty as only thing conveying a special moral worth to actions.

According to Hume, moral judgments are essentially the deliverances of sentiment (ECPM 85). We recognize moral good and evil by means of certain feelings: the calm pleasure of moral approval or the discomfiting displeasure of moral disapproval, either of which may be felt in contemplating a character trait in oneself or another from an unbiased perspective ("the general point of view").

According to Hume, traits—be they feelings, motives, or abilities—that elicit our approval are those that are useful or agreeable to oneself or others; those that elicit our disapproval are those that are harmful or unpleasant for oneself or others. We call the traits that elicit our approval "virtues," and those that elicit our disapproval "vices."

Hume assumes that we all have the same moral feelings, that is, that if we all take up the moral point of view, we will all agree in our approvals and disapprovals of various traits.

The operation of our sentiments of moral approval and disapproval depend on sympathy, which allows the feelings of one person to be shared by others. Although Hume believes that only human beings experience moral sentiments, he believes that nonhuman animals also have sympathy, and thus share with us one of the essential foundations of morality.

## REASON

Speculative or theoretical reason is a "drive" to complete a system of thought, to render our knowledge complete and consistent. It has 3 totalizing Ideas: God, soul, and world.

Critical reason is reason's ability to set limits to itself; it's what Kant is doing in the *Critiques*.

No more rationalist metaphysics: theoretical reason cannot yield knowledge by seducing understanding to apply categories to totalizing Ideas without the possibility of sensory matter: It's illegitimate metaphysics to say that the soul is a substance, that God caused the world to exist, that the world is infinite – or limited – in time and space.

Instead, critical reason tells us that theoretical reason can only guide understanding by providing "regulative" ideas (e.g., we must assume the world fits together as a harmonious whole, even though we can never have a sensory grasp of the whole), so that we can continue scientific investigation of the relations among objects produced by applying categories to sensory matter.

No more empiricist skepticism: freedom is thinkable [not knowable].

Practical reason is reason's ability to order itself to submit to the moral law that it gives itself.

Thinkable, but not knowable, freedom necessary for morality.

“Freedom” = non-physically caused, but instead rationally determined, will.

So, reason has an unavoidable interest in thinking of itself as free. That is, theoretical reason cannot demonstrate freedom, but practical reason must assume it for the purpose of moral action. Having the ability to make judgments and apply reason puts us outside that system of causally necessitated events. "Reason creates for itself the idea of a spontaneity that can, on its own, start to act--without, i.e., needing to be preceded by another cause by means of which it is determined to action in turn, according to the law of causal connection," Kant says. (A 533/B 561)

#### DEFINITION OF PURE PRACTICAL REASON

- 1) Maxim of action meets test of categorical imperative:
  - a. Maxim could be universal law (“everyone must do this”)
  - b. Maxim respects humanity in self and others as end in itself
  - c. Maxim harmonizes legislation in "kingdom of ends"
- 2) Contrast with hypothetical imperatives in which determinate objects determine the will – “if you want X, do Y”
- 3) So, pure practical reason is determined by pure form of law, not desire for an object.

#### OVERVIEW OF THE *GROUNDWORK*

1. Transition from Ordinary Rational Knowledge of Morality to Popular Philosophy
  2. Transition from Popular Philosophy to Metaphysics of Morals
  3. Transition from MM to Critique of Pure Practical Reason
1. Ordinary beliefs show we all agree that a good will, one that acts from duty, is the only thing worthy in itself, whether or not my desires happen to align with that duty or not, and whatever the outcome of actions. Doing one's duty means the reason we perform our actions (our "maxim") fits the form of law; i.e., our maxim can be made a universal law ("everyone must"). We can't ever be sure we have in fact performed an act from duty, so in order not to lose our commitment to acting morally, we need to investigate how reason alone, without reference to empirical causes, commands us to act from duty.
  2. The CI is distinguished from hypothetical imperatives, and the CI is given its various formulas: (universal law, humanity as end in itself, autonomy, and "kingdom of ends"). We see how to use these formulas to test maxims: sometimes universalizing a maxim entails contradiction, so you can't even *think* a world with that as a universal law (e.g., break a promise when it's useful would entail no one believes any promise, so you couldn't even break one, since you couldn't make one) and sometimes a world built on a universalized maxim cannot be *willed* (e.g., it's conceivable you could think a world in which no one developed their talents, but you couldn't will it, because you might one day be in need of a doctor's developed talent, for instance). Rather, what people do in acting immorally is they will that they be exempted from a universal law that otherwise binds everyone else. But this destroys the kingdom of ends.

3. Freedom of will as rational self-determination by self-giving law is shown, by means of the distinction of phenomenon (natural world / appearances / empirical sciences) vs noumenon (thing-in-itself / intelligible world) to be thinkable but not knowable. Freedom is hence a practical assumption; in order that we not squeeze out the possibility of morality by locking every causality into empirical scientific verification, we must assume we are free to give ourselves the moral law.

#### SECTION 1 OF THE *GROUNDWORK*.

This section works from the perspective of ordinary common sense, what everyday people say about morals.

Common sense tells us that the only thing that is good w/o qualification is a good will. Talent, character, luck can be put to bad use. You need a good will to be *worthy* of happiness. A good will is good in itself, not because of what happens.

Nature didn't give us a reason to ensure our survival, let alone our happiness. Instinct would have been better for that. But we do have a reason, so that must be so that we can have a rational will, one that is good in itself.

A will is good when it acts from duty (as we will see, it's your duty to act in morally appropriate ways, in which your maxim fits the CI). Kant gives 4 options to isolate the relation of a good will and duty (a good will acts "for the sake of" duty / acts "from" duty / has duty as its motive).

- 1, disregard acts contrary to duty
- 2, disregard acts that accord with duty but are done for selfish desire (e.g., to avoid being caught)
- 3, disregard acts that accord with duty but are done because they coincide with desires (e.g., you don't kill yourself because things are going well, or you give money away because you like doing so)
- 4, we can accept acts in which you have no desires to act morally, but do so anyway (e.g., the desperate man still doesn't commit suicide even though he has no desire to live any longer)

Note that this is a thought experiment designed to isolate what is a good will, one that acts from duty, not just in accord with duty. Kant is not recommending you go looking for such horrible situations to show you have a good will. That might possibly be disqualifying as it could be a sort of desire to be proud of yourself.

You do your duty when you act from respect (*Achtung*, possibly also "reverence") for the law. What "law" is that? It can only be the form of law, which means the moral law commands that you only act when you can will your maxim to be a universal law. ("maxim" = principle explaining your action; why you did something, what you hoped to accomplish; "universal law" = "everyone must").

Take the example of lying when convenient. You cannot will this maxim to be a universal law because it would destroy the possibility of being believed, so you couldn't even lie then (you need to be believed to be able to lie).

So here we've seen that even ordinary moral reflection can grasp the key point that what makes a will good is its acting from respect for the moral law, that which can have a universalizable maxim.

## SECTION 2 OF THE *GROUNDWORK*

Although we can't ever demonstrate that any empirical action was ever solely motivated by duty (we can't introspect the hidden depths of psychology where inclinations might be at work), reason still commands what *ought* to happen: we ought to follow the moral law. (We don't automatically do what's right; we have to be commanded to do it. If there was a being with no desires driven by its finite material nature, then it would just do what is right. But we aren't like that.)

Furthermore, you could never reach the moral law by induction from experience of good actions, because how could you judge they were good or not except by consulting reason's ideas of duty and the good will?

We need a "metaphysics of morals" (a knowledge of morality prior to experience) in order to avoid the usual mish-mash of moral philosophy, which mixes together customary ideas with examples, bits of advice, and psychological and anthropological findings. It can also help us practically by allowing us to experience, by reason alone, the powerful feeling we get from thinking of actions done from duty and the way reason despises actions done from mere inclination. This helps us have reason be the master of the faculties in the practical realm (just as understanding should be the master in the theoretical realm, to rein in the flights of fancy of rationalist metaphysics).

First, we have to distinguish the CI from rules of skill ("if you want to shoot free throws consistently make sure you bend your knees and keep your elbow under your shooting hand") and counsels of prudence ("if you want to be healthy, you should watch your diet and exercise"). Both of these are hypothetical imperatives: If you want X, then you should do Y, where X is an empirical goal (high FT% or good health).

The Categorical Imperative, on the other hand, has the form of universal law (whatever your empirical goals, act in such a way that your maxim could be a universal law). All maxims that fit the CI have a form (universality), a material (human agents as ends in themselves), and a complete determination (consistency with the realm of ends as a realm of nature)

### THE FORMULAS OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Unless otherwise noted, after this paragraph I'm going to quote / paraphrase Harry van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, in discussing the formulations of the Categorical Imperative. Van der Linden stresses that each of the different formulas of the CI can be seen as commanding you to work toward a world in which your actions are compatible with the freedom, autonomy, and development of talents of everyone, that is, act so that you bring about the "kingdom of ends" (not just that you don't stand in the way of that). This is a controversial way of reading Kant; perhaps even one that goes against some of Kant's statements. But it's a way of seeing one way in which Kant can speak to our aspirations for justice, freedom, and morality in politics.

1, The Universal-law Formula. "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law"

The moral agent wills that *everyone* act only on maxims that can be willed to become universal laws. The immoral agent wills that everyone except himself obey the moral law.... The purpose of the categorical imperative, then, is to make possible *a harmony of rational wills*, and the agent who obeys this imperative out of respect for the moral law wills this harmony.

2, The Natural-law Formula. In the *Foundations*: "Act as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature"

In *Critique of Practical Reason*: "Ask yourself whether, if the action which you propose should take place by a law of nature of which you yourself were a part, you could regard it as possible through your will" (p. 72; V: 77)....

In the second formula, the regulatively interpreted natural order (harmonious whole) is presented as a model that helps to clarify what such a legislation involves.

3, The Humanity-as-an-end-in-itself Formula: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only" (*Foundations*, p. 47; IV: 287).

JP: The key is "as a means only." Of course, we are always treating other people as means quite a bit; the key is that we allow them to set the conditions in which we interact with them. To use a homely example, of course you can use someone as a means to the end of you getting some salt at the dinner table, but you must do so in a way that could be universalized, that is, by respectfully asking them to pass the salt, please. That we are treating them as an end-in-themselves, as capable of rationally deciding to help or not, as well as means to the end of you getting the salt.

HvdL: The formula is often rephrased as demanding respect for persons: we must treat ourselves and others as rational moral agents.... The idea of humanity does not refer to humanity as it now exists but to *humanity as it ought to exist*.

This insight is clearly expressed by the neo-Kantian Cohen, who reformulates the third formula as follows: "Do not act as an I, in the empirical sense, but as the I of mankind, in the ideal sense. Regard your own person as well as any other not in the physical, racial, or narrowly historical terms of individual existence, but exclusively as an embodiment of the eternal, world-historical idea of mankind."

Duties to oneself, then, are, in the final instance, duties to humanity. It is from this perspective that Kant's much better argument (as compared to his naturalistic argument) for the moral impermissibility of suicide is to be understood: "To destroy the subject of morality in one's person is to root out the existence of morality itself from the world, so far as this is in one's power; and yet morality is an end in itself. Consequently, to dispose of oneself as a mere means to an arbitrary end is to abase humanity in one's own person (*homo noumenon*), which was yet entrusted to man (*homo phaenomenon*) for its preservation."

Thomas E. Hill, Jr., in his recent paper "Humanity as an End in Itself." Hill claims that "Kant thought of humanity as a characteristic, or a *set of characteristics, of persons* (p. 85)." This set includes, among others, the *capacity to act* on hypothetical as well as unconditional principles, the *power to set any end whatsoever*, and the *ability to understand the world*.

A similar view is put forward by John E. Atwell in his "Kant's Notion of Respect for Persons"<sup>32</sup> Atwell emphasizes that "*humanity*" refers to those capacities which set human agents apart from nonrational animals. On both their accounts, to treat humanity as an end in itself is to strive to exercise and develop these capacities. Thus it is morally wrong to impair one's rational capacities or to destroy them, and one must develop one's talents. Likewise, with

respect to others, one must enhance their use of reason rather than manipulate them by nonrational means, and one must support them in their pursuit of morally permissible ends.

JP: Kant distinguishes dignity from market price. You have a market price for use of your skills, but you can't put a price on the status of humans as persons, as capable of being free, autonomous, rational moral agents; that's dignity and can't be bargained away by yourself or taken away by force.

4, Autonomy. The fourth formula demands that the moral agent "... act only so that the will through its maxims could regard itself at the same time as universally lawgiving" (Foundations, p. 52; IV: 292).

Kant states that this formula makes clear that "the will is ... not only subject to the law but subject in such a way that it must be regarded also as self-legislative and only for this reason as being subject to the law (of which it can regard itself as the author)" (p. 49; 290).

Hence, the fourth formula expresses the principle of *autonomy*.... Autonomy, then, is not a given but a task, and heteronomy is determination or conditioning by laws that are not rationally produced (i.e., self-legislated).

JP: autonomy as giving yourself the law has an echo in Rousseau; many folks see R as having influenced Kant. When you put it in political terms, autonomy demands democracy, that is, people must have a say in formulating the laws that they are obligated to obey. That doesn't mean you don't have to obey laws you don't like or that you argued against when they were being deliberated, as long as those laws respect the dignity of human persons.

By the same token, you don't have an obligation to obey laws that don't respect the dignity of human persons; in fact, you could argue that you have a duty to struggle against such laws, to bring about a world in which such laws no longer exist (and in which such laws could never again exist).

Here is where the rubber will meet the road with revolution. In political writings, Kant is strongly against any so-called right of revolt; a legal system that includes a law that says it's okay to disobey the law when you want to is self-contradictory. Similarly, as the condition of living in a state is obedience to the executive, you can't have a state that allows disobedience without self-contradiction. (Now if you happen to be in a failed state, that is, the "state of nature," then you have recourse to natural right, but as we saw with Hobbes, it's always unclear just who gets to judge when a state has failed.)

That might not be the end of the story though. In ethical terms, recall that for Kant, your maxims must accord with the CI, and hence must respect the dignity of your adversaries, those whose laws deny your dignity.

Thus, it looks like Kant requires prefigurative politics: you have to "be the change you want to bring about." To bring about a world of peace, you must employ peaceful means (persuasion, boycott, noncompliance, and other forms of non-violent resistance).

As we know, however, most revolutions are not non-violent. In particular, the enslaved people of the Americas embraced violence as the means to destroying the system that denied their humanity. In so doing, did they deny the dignity of their adversaries? Or did they respect it by acknowledging the utter perversity to which they used their faculties and

by defeating them in battle for the sake of a universal commitment to dignity that those adversaries had denied? That is, could you argue that the enslaved people treated their adversaries as human beings, albeit those who had staked their lives to evil, and hence in fighting them, acknowledged them as responsible moral agents (evil is a form that only a moral agent can take; a rock that falls on my head is not evil).

5,6,: Kingdom of ends. "[E]very rational being must act as if he, by his maxims, were at all times a legislative member in the universal realm of ends" (Foundations, p. 57; IV: 297). "A]ll maxims which stem from autonomous legislation ought to harmonize with a possible realm of ends as with a realm of nature" (p. 55; 295) .

This realm is described as "a whole of all ends in systematic connection" (p. 51; 292). This systematic connection has the two aspects that within the realm of ends moral agents respect each other as legislators or as ends in themselves (i.e., everyone will uphold and promote the conditions of autonomy), and that they seek to enhance one another's personal ends. The realm of ends, then, is the moral order as a natural order, or humanity as it ought to be.

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#### PERFECT AND IMPERFECT DUTIES

Kant distinguishes two ways to fail the CI: one is a self-contradiction, so you can't even *think* of a world in which that maxims is a universal law, and the other is a world it is impossible to *will* that it should come about. The first failure produces a perfect duty to do the opposite of that maxim; the second, an imperfect duty to do the opposite of that duty. He further distinguishes duties to self and duties to others. That gives us 4 options. He also looks at duties from the perspective of universal law and from the perspective of humanity as end-in-itself. So we end up with 8 discussions.

Perfect duty to self: do not commit suicide to avoid an unpleasant life.

Universal law:

- A. you can't think a world in nature gave man reason instead of just instinct, thus opening the possibility of us to be rational moral agents instead of mere happiness-seeking animals, and have that reason subordinated universally to happiness when things become bad to our empirical, animal, selves;
- B. you can't think a world in which nature gave us self-love as the means to prolonging life and have that turned against life;

Humanity: you can't think a world in which rational agents, who see themselves as ends-in-themselves, use their reason to destroy the empirical subsistence of human reason (our bodies) as a mere means to stop pain.

Perfect duty to others: do not lie to others or make promises you can't keep

Universal law: You can't think a world in which everyone lies when they feel like it as no one would then believe anything, and you need others to believe in order for you to lie.

Humanity: You can't think a world in which everyone used everyone else merely as means to an end, because no one would agree to always be merely a means, hence the universality fails.



Imperfect duty to self: develop your talents

Universal law: You can think a world in which everyone just pursues immediate sensuous pleasure and doesn't develop their talents, but you can't will that world, for rational agents will that all their talents be developed.

This might mean something like this: to have happiness as a goal (there's nothing wrong with that, Kant says; you just have to pursue your happiness in ways that respect the moral law, that is, that allow others to be free and autonomous and to share with you a kingdom of ends) you have to have some developed talents, since happiness can't be just chasing immediate pleasure but means living in world in which everyone has some developed talents contributing to each other's happiness.

Humanity: your humanity as end-in-itself includes capacities to be developed, so you cannot will a world in which that development is neglected.

Imperfect duty to others: contribute to the happiness of others

Universal law: You can think a world in which everyone is indifferent to the happiness of others, so that they never help anyone in need, but you can't will such a world, as you might one day find yourself in need and you would have destroyed your chance at such help.

Humanity: You can think a world in which everyone is indifferent to the happiness of others, but you could never will it, as that would mean you are cutting off the harmony of their ends with yours, which would limit your humanity as end-in-itself.

### SECTION 3 OF THE *GROUNDWORK*

#### INTRODUCTION VIA THE CPR

3rd Antinomy of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is the key to understanding the notion of freedom at work in Section 3 of the *Groundwork*.

Thesis: causality of freedom [rationalism]. Reason demands a stop to infinite regress of series of causes, so it posits absolute spontaneity as uncaused cause; this is "transcendental freedom."

Antithesis: causality of natural laws [empiricism]. Transcendental freedom, the idea of an uncaused cause, destroys the very idea of a causality, that is, universal and necessary law [everything must have a cause].

Solution: transcendental idealism, based on the distinction between phenomena [sensory appearances categorized into objects with causal relations] and noumena [the "thing-in-itself" which is "behind" or "grounds" appearances; we cannot know this, but we can think it]. The thesis concerns the noumenal [thinkable] thing-in-itself; the antithesis concerns phenomenal [knowable] appearance.

First, practical, consequence: freedom is thinkable, but not knowable, so morals can be thought as safe from omnivorous empirical science.

Second, critical, consequence: neither side – rationalism or empiricism – can win a final victory, so the spectator can see the futility of continuing with this opposition and can opt for the critical perspective, which allows a choice for one side or the other, depending on motive: morality, which presupposes freedom, or knowledge, which presupposes universal causality.

### THE *GROUNDWORK*

The will causes actions. Freedom of the will is not being exempt from laws, but is autonomy: reason giving itself the moral law.

We seem to be caught in a circle between two notions of autonomy: freedom from being determined (empirically) and hence free to begin a causal sequence versus being (rationally) determined by self-giving of laws. But we can break the circle by adopting the two-perspectives approach outlined above: the thinkable self, the thing-in-itself behind our empirical ego, is free to rationally bind us to the moral law it gives itself.

Here we see that in morals, reason gives commands to understanding: stay in your lane, don't try to determine all our actions by empirical causality; reason is pure activity able to begin a causal sequence. But in knowledge, understanding rules over reason: stay in your lane, don't try to create knowledge by applying categories to mere ideas without sensory matter.

Despite not being able to know the merely thinkable freedom of the will, we have grounds for "rational belief" in it, since the idea of a kingdom of ends produces in us a "lively interest" in the moral law. We can connect this back to the feeling of respect we have for actions done from duty.