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Commentaries

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

K r i s t a K . T h o m a s o n

I m m a n u e l K a n t (1724–1804) is one of the canonical figures in the history of philosophy, and *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* is one of his best-known works. It is required reading in many philosophy courses, especially those that cover moral philosophy. And for good reason. The *Groundwork* introduces some of Kant’s most famous contributions to moral philosophy. Here, Kant articulates his arguments about moral duty and human dignity, ideas that have become influential both in the history of philosophy and more widely in our everyday thinking.

Kant’s book, however, does not make for easy reading. He uses technical language and, moreover, appears to presume that readers of the *Groundwork* are familiar with his other treatises, thus giving the impression that they have walked into his arguments in the middle rather than at the beginning.

Our hope is that this edition eases some of the struggle. It is aimed at those who have not encountered Kant previously and may have little acquaintance with philosophy. In other translations, notes provide background context or define an unfamiliar term. Ours also do so, but they do more. They guide the reader through the text, providing a companion to help make plainer some of his dense language, remind the reader where Kant is in his arguments, and offer examples that make concrete some
of his more abstract ideas. In this way, we seek to remove barriers while encouraging readers to do their own interpretative work.

Before approaching the text itself, let us consider its context: The *Groundwork* was published in 1785. It appeared four years after Kant’s masterpiece *Critique of Pure Reason* (or *first Critique*) and twelve years before the *Metaphysics of Morals*, the book whose groundwork it is supposed to establish. Because the *Groundwork* references the *first Critique*, a few words about that book are helpful.

In it Kant provides a close examination (a “critique”) of the discipline of metaphysics, the study of the nature of reality. According to Kant, that study was in crisis, having been attacked as useless, misguided, or even harmful. Kant wants to defend the discipline while convincing the traditional metaphysicians that they have approached matters in the wrong way. Central to Kant’s project is determining the limits of reason. Traditional metaphysicians believed that using only their reasoning powers, they could reach conclusions about the most far-reaching subjects, including the existence of the soul, the structure of the universe, or the nature of God. Kant argues that reason cannot prove anything one way or the other about such matters, but it can nevertheless play an important role in expanding our knowledge of the world.

According to Kant, one reason traditional metaphysicians believed they needed to resolve the most fundamental matters is because they believed morality to be at stake. They believed that morality had to be based on the existence of God or the immortality of the soul. Kant, however, denies this connection and seeks to explain the relationship between traditional metaphysics and morality. This question is the starting point for the *Groundwork*, where Kant takes his readers through a progression of reflections about morality. Beginning with what ordinary people believe, he proceeds to offer a philosophical account of what morality is and what it requires of us.
Even though he resists the idea that we need to work out all our metaphysical questions in order to answer moral questions, he is sympathetic to the methods of traditional metaphysics. In the *Groundwork*, Kant often speaks of the need to do “pure” philosophy that is devoid of “empirical” elements, which are derived from experience.

To see why, let us consider one of Kant’s own examples: What does it mean to be a good friend? We can go about answering this question in different ways. One approach would be to consider all the available examples of friendship. According to Kant, this method would be empirical. Yet it has flaws. First, we have no reason to think that our examples of friendship are good, not bad. Second, we need criteria to know that a friendship is good. How do we determine the criteria? We cannot do so by surveying all our examples of friendship. That method would be akin to deciding the definition of a good film by watching innumerable films.

Imagine instead that we surveyed what people think. Yet people are sometimes mistaken about the nature of a good friendship. Thus we would learn from a survey only what people generally believe about friendship, not what constitutes the actual nature of a good friendship. Suppose we asked only wise people. This method looks like an improvement because we would be less likely to receive bad answers. Yet how do we decide who is a wise person? We would need to know what makes a person wise. Thus, for Kant, the empirical method seems to lead us in circles.

To determine the essence of a good friendship, we need to think about the definition of a good friendship, which, in Kant’s view, is the territory of the metaphysicians. How do we develop a definition? We do what the metaphysicians do: reason about the matter and try to determine the essential characteristics of a good friendship. This is the process Kant uses in the *Groundwork* to examine the nature of morality.
Consider the opening lines from Section 1:

Nothing in the world, or even beyond it, can possibly be conceived and be called good without qualification other than a **good will**. Understanding, wit, judgment, and other *talents* of the mind are undoubtedly good and desirable in many respects, as are the qualities of *temperament* such as courage, determination, and perseverance. But both (the talents of the mind and the qualities of temperament) may also become extremely bad and harmful if the will that utilizes these gifts of nature, and whose constitution is thus called *character*, is not itself good.

How does Kant arrive at this claim about the good will? In spite of unfamiliar language, Kant’s reasoning is rather straightforward. Imagine that someone asks you what makes a person good. You might initially think of a list of good qualities or traits. Perhaps you believe that courage makes someone good. Then you consider, for example, a courageous supervillain from a comic book, who clearly is not a good person. The goodness of some qualities or traits seems to depend on the goodness of the person to whom they belong. Being a good person, then, must be something other than just having the right kinds of traits. Whatever “good” means, it has to be (in Kant’s terms) good without qualification; it cannot be the sort of thing that can be used in bad ways.

Here we are using the same method that the metaphysicians use. We start with some possible claims. We then try to critique them by identifying their flaws. We switch back and forth between the role of defender and the role of attacker. We do so until we develop claims strong enough to withstand most criticisms. This kind of reasoning does not require us to introduce any empirical element. No data would tell us what is good without qualification. We might begin, as Kant does, with
examples of good people and good things familiar to us. But we only use those examples to help craft our definition. To develop it, we leave the examples aside and focus on the definition.

The *Groundwork* proceeds precisely along these lines. In the first section, Kant concludes that whatever "morally good" means, it must be something that is good unconditionally. He suggests that the good will fits this description. All the good qualities and traits we might think of would not be good if they were not in the possession of someone who has a good will. If this claim seems right, then trying to determine what a good will is seems to be the promising next step to figuring out what morality is.

What makes the good will good? According to Kant, central to our understanding of the good will is the concept of duty. Someone with a good will does the right thing *because* it is the right thing to do. Again, Kant thinks a little reflection will prove this point. Imagine two people, both of whom decide to help someone in need. One person explains her actions by saying simply that it was the right thing to do, so she did it. The other person explains that she was hoping her actions would make her famous. Clearly, Kant thinks we judge these two cases differently. The second person has, at best, mixed motives, which makes a difference to us; we do not consider her a moral exemplar even though she ended up doing something good.

We can grasp the idea of acting from duty when we realize that people can do what is right even when they do not want to do so. Think, for example, of a whistleblower who informs the public about the unjust or criminal activity of her employer. She might lose her job; she might be bullied and threatened; she might have her entire life turned upside down. Although she did not want to reveal what she knew, she might reasonably explain that she had to because she felt it was the right thing to do. Against all her desires and interests, she did what was right.
Introduction

How is this idea possible? From where does this special motivation come? How do we know our duty? According to Kant, our experience with human beings will not answer these questions. In fact, experience would tell us to be pessimistic about this picture of morality. Most people act from mixed motives if they manage to do the right thing at all. Yet, as Kant points out, experience is irrelevant when we think about morality. We are considering what we ought to do, not what we in fact do. Notice the uniqueness of such thinking: We are reflecting about what we should do, not what we have done, are doing, or will do.

How are we capable of such reflection? Our closest analog is following a law or a command. Indeed, Kant thinks this approach should seem familiar to us. Return to the example of the whistleblower—she might feel as though she had to reveal what she knew, as though her conscience was commanding her. We often experience morality in the form of strong prohibitions. If morality acts like a law, it is not a law like any with which we are familiar. Kant thinks it doesn't come from the state or from God. Instead, it's a law that we give ourselves, coming from our own reason.

In other words, reason grasps the moral law and motivates us to follow it. What does the moral law command us to do? Kant claims that we can't rattle off a list of specific actions, because morality commands us universally. When I think of something that I morally ought not to do, I believe it's not permissible for anyone to do. Morality applies to any and all creatures capable of reason, but we all find ourselves in different circumstances. Therefore, the moral law must be general enough to issue commands regardless of the differences in our lives. Such is how Kant arrives at his famous formulation of the moral law (what he calls the "categorical imperative"): Act only on those maxims you can at the same time will should become universal law. When I'm deciding how to act, I ask myself a very familiar question: What if everyone did this?
According to Kant, that the moral law applies to everyone also helps us understand what our relationship to each other should be. Morality dictates that when I act, I take into account all my fellow rational creatures. Again, Kant believes this concern will be familiar to us. Most of our moral actions involve respecting other people. We shouldn't lie, cheat, steal, or harm others. We can imagine our fellow humans raising objections: “What if we did that? If you don't think we should be permitted to lie or cheat, then why should you?” We are all, as Kant puts it, “ends” to each other. According to Kant, we see ourselves and all our fellow rational creatures as bound by the same moral law. We are all part of the same moral community (what Kant calls “the kingdom of ends”), in which we all have an equal voice.

This conception of morality is discovered by using the methods of the metaphysicians. Having done so, Kant faces one final question: Is this scheme possible? Perhaps he is right that duty, the categorical imperative, and the kingdom of ends are the right way for us to think about morality. But is it actually so? You can imagine the metaphysicians reading the *Groundwork* and anxiously awaiting the answer to this question. They will likely be disappointed with Kant’s answer. Just as he argues in the *first Critique*, if the metaphysicians are looking for a speculative proof, they won’t find it. Nevertheless, Kant thinks that metaphysics confirms what common understanding believes.

Return to the example of good friendship: We can develop a definition of a good friend, a standard by which we measure our friendships. If part of being a good friend is being loyal, we will expect our friends to be loyal, and we will be hurt or disappointed if they are not. Even if almost no actual friendships meet our expectations, Kant thinks this condition won’t affect the correctness of our definition. The same is true of morality. Acting from duty and respecting others is morally required even if fulfilling those obligations is difficult. Moral life is hard, and people are
imperfect. That we don't always do what is right doesn't affect the right-
ness of what we ought to do. At the same time, we know what is right
and that we ought to do it. Yet we also know that many people—even
most—fail. Yet neither of these judgments weakens the other.

In other words, we stand between two worlds. In one, we know,
thanks to reason, what the moral law requires, and we know that we are
capable of following reason because we are free. In the other world, we
are tempted by all manner of inclinations to do what we want rather
than what is right, and often those inclinations win. Kant believes that
we undeniably occupy both worlds. But being a good person requires
that we believe the first world can and should influence how we behave
in the second.

This conclusion reveals much of what is at the heart of Kant’s moral
theory. We have to be comfortable living in the tension between the two
worlds. No one ever said that being a good person was easy. It requires
developing inner strength and good judgment, as we never know what
kinds of challenges we will face. We will likely be tempted to act against
duty because doing the right thing often requires us to relinquish what
we care about or speak up when doing so isn’t popular. We are obligated
to respect other people even when we may not like them or prefer to do
otherwise. In the *Groundwork*, Kant seeks to convince us that we already
know what is right and that philosophical reflection confirms our out-
look, bringing it into sharper focus. Once we possess that clarity, we can
use it to strengthen our resolve and our commitment to acting morally.