

- PLEASE READ: (1) the guidelines in the middle of this page;  
(2) p. 10 (righthand side, from the break) – p. 12 (righthand side, 1/4 of the way down);  
(3) p. 24 (lefthand side, from "So there is only ...") – p. 26 (righthand side, two lines from top).**

## Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals

Immanuel Kant

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between square brackets in normal-sized type.] In the title, 'Groundwork' refers not to the foundation that is laid but to the work of laying it.

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So the action's moral value doesn't depend on whether what is aimed at in it is actually achieved, but solely on the principle *of the will* from which the action is done, irrespective of anything the faculty of *desire* may be aiming at. From what I have said it is clear that the purposes we may have in acting, and their effects as drivers of the will towards desired ends, can't give our actions any unconditional value, any *moral* value. Well, then, if the action's moral value isn't to be found in

- the will in its relation to its hoped-for effect,

where *can* it be found? The only possible source for it is

- the principle on which the will acts—and never mind the ends that may be achieved by the action.

For the will stands at the crossroads, so to speak, at the intersection between •its *a priori* principle, which is formal, and •its *a posteriori* driver—the contingent desire that acts on it—which is material. In that position it must be determined by something; and if it is done from duty it must be determined by the formal principle of the will, since every material principle—every contingent driver of the will—has been withdrawn from it.

The **third proposition**—a consequence of the first two—I would express as follows:

- To have a duty is to be required to act in a certain way out of respect for law.

(1) As for what will result from my action, I can certainly *prefer* or *be drawn to* it, but I can't have *respect* for it; to earn my respect it would have to be something the will *does*, not merely something that its doings *lead to*. (2) Similarly, I can't •respect any want or preference: if the preference is mine, the most I can do is to •endorse it; if it is someone else's I can even •love it—i.e. see it as favourable to my interests. What can get respect and can thus serve as a command is •something that isn't (1) a consequence of my

volition but only a source for it, and isn't (2) in the service of my preferences but rather overpowers them or at least prevents them from being considered in the choice I make; •this something is, in a word, *law* itself. Suppose now that someone acts from duty: the influence of his *preferences* can't have anything to do with this, and so facts about what he might achieve by his action don't come into it either; so what is there left that can lead him to act as he does? If the question means 'What is there objectively, i.e. distinct from himself, that determines his will in this case?' the only possible answer is *law*. And if the question concerns what there is *in the person* that influences his will—i.e. what subjectively influences it—the answer has to be *his respect for this practical law*, and thus his acceptance of the maxim *I am to follow this law even if it thwarts all my desires*. (A maxim is a subjective principle of volition. The objective principle is the practical law itself; it would also be the subjective principle for all rational beings if reason fully controlled the formation of preferences.)

So an action's moral value doesn't lie in •the effect that is expected from it, or in •any principle of action that motivates it because of this expected effect. All the expected effects—something agreeable for me, or even happiness for others—could be brought about through other causes and don't *need* •the will of a rational being, whereas the highest good—what is unconditionally good—can be found only in •such a will. So this wonderful good, which we call *moral* goodness, can't consist in anything but *the thought of law* in itself *that only a rational being can have*—with the will being moved to act by this thought and not by the hoped-for effect of the action. When the person acts according to this conception, this moral goodness is already present •in him; we don't have to look for it •in the upshot of

his action.<sup>1</sup> [In passages like this, ‘thought’ translates *Vorstellung* = ‘mental representation’.]

So we have a law the thought of which can settle the will without reference to any expected result, and *must* do so if the will is to be called absolutely good without qualification; what kind of law can this be? Since I have robbed the will of any *impulses* that could come to it from obeying any law, nothing remains to serve as a ‘guiding’ principle of the will except *conduct’s universally conforming to law as such*. That is, **I ought never to act in such a way that I couldn’t also will that the maxim on which I act should be a universal law**. In this context the ‘guiding’ principle of the will is conformity to law as such, not bringing in any particular law governing some class of actions; and it *must* serve as the will’s principle if *duty* is not to be a vain delusion and chimerical concept. Common sense in its practical judgments is in perfect agreement with this, and constantly has this principle in view.

Consider the question: May I when in difficulties make a promise that I intend not to keep? The question obviously has two meanings: is it •prudent to make a false promise?

does it conform to •duty to make a false promise? No doubt it often *is* •prudent, ·but not as often as you might think·. Obviously the false promise isn’t made prudent by its merely extricating me from my present difficulties; I have to think about whether it will in the long run cause more trouble than it saves in the present. Even with all my supposed cunning, the consequences can’t be so easily foreseen. People’s loss of trust in me might be far more disadvantageous than the trouble I am now trying to avoid, and it is hard to tell whether it mightn’t be more *prudent* to act according to a universal maxim *not ever to make a promise that I don’t intend to keep*. But I quickly come to see that such a maxim is based only on fear of consequences. Being truthful from •duty is an entirely different thing from being truthful out of •fear of bad consequences; for in •the former case a law is included in the concept of the action itself (·so that the right answer to ‘What are you doing?’ will include a mention of that law·); whereas in •the latter I must first look outward to see what results my action may have. [In the preceding sentence, Kant speaks of a ‘law for me’ and of results ‘for me’.] To deviate from the principle of duty is certainly bad; whereas to be unfaithful to my maxim

<sup>1</sup> It might be objected that I tried to take refuge in an obscure feeling behind the word ‘respect’, instead of clearing things up through a concept of reason. Although respect is indeed a feeling, it doesn’t come from outer influence; rather, it is a •feeling that a rational concept creates unaided; so it is different in kind from all the •feelings caused from outside, the ones that can come from desire or fear. When I directly recognize something as a law for myself I recognize it *with respect*, which merely means that I am conscious of submitting my will to a law without interference from any other influences on my mind. The will’s being directly settled by law, and the consciousness of this happening, is called ‘respect’; so *respect* should be seen as an *effect* of the law’s operation on the person’s will, not as a *cause* of it. Really, respect is the thought of a value that breaks down my self-love. Thus it is not something to be either desired or feared, though it has something analogous to both ·desire and fear·. The only thing that can be respected is law, and it has to be the law that we •impose on ourselves yet •recognize as necessary in itself.

•As a law it makes us subject to it, without consulting our self-love; which gives it some analogy to fear.

•As imposed on us by ourselves, it is a consequence of our will; which gives it some analogy to preference.

·This is really the only *basic* sense of the term ‘respect’·. Any •respect for a *person* is only •respect for the law (of righteousness, etc.) of which the person provides an example. Our respect for a person’s talents, for instance, is our recognition that we ought to practice until we are as talented as he is; we see him as a kind of example of a •law, because we regard it as our •duty to improve our talents. ·So respect for persons is a disguised form of respect for law·. All moral *concern* (as it is called) consists solely in respect for the law.

of prudence may be very advantageous to me, though it is certainly safer to abide by it. How can I know whether a deceitful promise is consistent with duty? The shortest way to go about finding out is also the surest. It is to ask myself:

- Would I be content for my maxim (of getting out of a difficulty through a false promise) to hold as a *universal law*, for myself as well as for others?

•That is tantamount to asking:

- Could I say to myself that anyone may make a false promise when he is in a difficulty that he can't get out of in any other way?

Immediately I realize that I could will •the lie but not •a universal law to lie; for such a law would result in there being no promises at all, because it would be futile to offer stories about my future conduct to people who wouldn't believe me; or if they carelessly did believe me and were taken in •by my promise•, would pay me back in my own coin. Thus my maxim would necessarily destroy itself as soon as it was made a universal law.

So I don't need to be a very penetrating thinker to bring it about that my will is morally good. Inexperienced in how the world goes, unable to prepare for all its contingencies, I need only to ask myself: *Can you will that your maxim become a universal law?* If not, it must be rejected, not because of any harm it might bring to anyone, but because there couldn't be a system of •universal legislation that included it as one of its principles, and •that is the kind of legislation that reason forces me to respect. I don't yet see what it is based on (a question that a philosopher may investigate), but I at least understand these two:

- It is something whose value far outweighs all the value of everything aimed at by *desire*,
- My duty consists in my having to act from pure respect for the practical law.

Every other motive must yield to duty, because it is the condition of a •will that is good in itself, and the value of •that surpasses everything.

And so in the common-sense understanding of morality we have worked our way through to its *principle*. Admittedly, common sense doesn't have the abstract thought of this principle as something universal, but it always has the principle in view and uses it as the standard for its judgments.

It would be easy to show how common sense, with this compass in its hand, knows very well how to distinguish •good from •bad, •consistent with duty from •inconsistent with duty. To do this it doesn't have to be taught anything new; it merely needs (Socrates-fashion) to have its attention drawn to the principle that it already has; and thus •we can see• that neither science nor philosophy is needed in order to know what one must do to be honest and good, and even to be wise and virtuous. That's something we might well have assumed in advance: that the knowledge of what every person is obliged to do (and thus also what everyone is obliged to know) is *everyone's* business, even the most common person's. We can't help admiring the way common sense's ability to make •practical judgment outstrips its ability to make •theoretical ones. In •theoretical judgments, if common sense ventures to go beyond the laws of experience and perceptions of the senses, it falls into sheer inconceivabilities and self-contradictions, or at least into a chaos of uncertainty, obscurity, and instability. On the other hand, it is just when common sense *excludes* •everything empirical—that is•, all action-drivers that bring in the senses—that its ability to make •practical judgments first shows itself to advantage. It may then start splitting hairs, quibbling with its own conscience or with other claims concerning what should be called right, or wanting to satisfy itself about the exact worth of certain actions; and the great

*imperative*, I know right away what it will contain. For all the imperative contains is

the law, and

the necessity that the maxim conform to the law;

and the law doesn't contain any condition limiting it (-comparable with the condition that is always part of a hypothetical imperative-). So there is nothing left for the maxim to conform to except the universality of a law as such, and what the imperative represents as necessary is just precisely that conformity of maxim to law.<sup>8</sup>

So there is only one categorical imperative, and this is it: 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.'

Now if all imperatives of duty can be derived from this one imperative as a principle, we'll at least be able to show what we understand by the concept of duty, what the concept means, even if we haven't yet settled whether so-called 'duty' is an empty concept or not.

The universality of law according to which effects occur constitutes what is properly called *nature* in the most general sense, . . . i.e. the existence of things considered as determined by universal laws. So the universal imperative of duty can be expressed as follows: **Act as though the maxim of your action were to become, through your will, a universal law of nature.**

I want now to list some duties, adopting the usual division of them into •duties to ourselves and •duties to others, and into •perfect duties and •imperfect duties.<sup>9</sup>

(1) A man who has been brought by a series of troubles to the point of despair and of weariness with life still has his reason sufficiently to ask himself: 'Wouldn't it be contrary to my duty to myself to take my own life?' Now he asks: 'Could the maxim of my action -in killing myself- become a universal law of nature?' Well, here is his maxim:

For love of myself, I make it my principle to cut my life short when prolonging it threatens to bring more troubles than satisfactions.

So the question is whether *this* principle of self-love could become a universal law of nature. If it did, that would be a nature that had a law according to which a single feeling •created a life-affirming push and also •led to the destruction of life itself; and we can see at a glance that such a 'nature' would contradict itself, and so couldn't *be* a nature. So the maxim we are discussing *couldn't* be a law of nature, and therefore would be utterly in conflict with the supreme principle of duty.

(2) Another man sees himself being driven by need to borrow money. He realizes that no-one will lend to him unless he firmly promises to repay it at a certain time, and he is well aware that he wouldn't be able to keep such a promise. He is disposed to make such a promise, but he has enough conscience to ask himself: 'Isn't it improper and opposed to duty to relieve one's needs in that way?' If he does decide to make the promise, the maxim of his action will run like this:

<sup>8</sup> A *maxim* is a subjective principle of acting, and must be distinguished from the *objective* principle, which is the practical *law*. The maxim contains the practical rule that reason comes up with in conformity with the state the person (the subject) is in, including his preferences, his ignorances, and so on; so it is the principle according to which the subject *acts*. The law, on the other hand, is the objective principle valid for every rational being, and the principle by which the subject *ought to act*; that is, it is an imperative.

<sup>9</sup> Please note that I reserve the •serious, considered• division of duties for a future *metaphysic of morals*, and that the present division is merely one I chose as an aid to arranging my examples. . .

When I think I need money, I will borrow money and promise to repay it, although I know that the repayment won't ever happen.

Here he is—for the rest of this paragraph—reflecting on this: 'It may be that this principle of self-love or of personal advantage would fit nicely into my whole future welfare, so that there is no *prudential* case against it. But the question remains: would it be right? To answer this, I change the demand of self-love into a universal law, and then put the question like this: If my maxim became a universal law, *then* how would things stand? I can see straight off that it could never hold as a universal law of nature, and must contradict itself. For if you take a law saying that anyone who thinks he is in need can make any promises he likes without intending to keep them, and make it *universal* so that everyone in need *does* behave in this way, that would make the promise and the intended purpose of it *impossible*—no-one would believe what was promised to him but would only laugh at any such performance as a vain pretence.'

(3) A third finds in himself a talent that could be developed so as to make him in many respects a useful person. But he finds himself in comfortable circumstances, and would rather indulge in pleasure than take the trouble to broaden and improve his fortunate natural gifts. But now he asks whether his maxim of neglecting his gifts, agreeing as it does with his liking for idle amusement, also agrees with what is called 'duty'. He sees that a system of nature conforming with this law could indeed *exist*, with everyone behaving like the Islanders of the south Pacific, letting their talents rust and devoting their lives merely to idleness, indulgence, and baby-making—in short, to *pleasure*. But he can't possibly **will** that this should become a universal law of nature or that it should be implanted in us by a natural instinct. For,

as a rational being, he necessarily wills that all his abilities should be developed, because they serve him and are given to him for all sorts of possible purposes.

(4) A fourth man, for whom things are going well, sees that others (whom he could help) have to struggle with great hardships, and he thinks to himself:

What concern of mine is it? Let each one be as happy as heaven wills, or as he can make himself; I won't take anything from him or even envy him; but I have no desire to contribute to his welfare or help him in time of need.

If such a way of thinking were a universal law of nature, the human race could certainly survive—and no doubt *that* state of humanity would be better than one where everyone chatters about sympathy and benevolence and exerts himself occasionally to practice them, while also taking every chance he can to cheat, and to betray or otherwise violate people's rights. But although it is possible that that maxim should *be* a universal law of nature, it is impossible to **will** that it do so. For a will that brought *that* about would conflict with itself, since instances can often arise in which the person in question would need the love and sympathy of others, and he would have no hope of getting the help he desires, being robbed of it by this law of nature springing from his own will.

Those are a few of the many duties that we have (or at least think we have) that can clearly be derived from the single principle that I have stated on the preceding page. We must *be able to will* that a maxim of our action become a universal law; this is the general formula for the moral evaluation of our action. •Some actions are so constituted that their maxim can't even be *thought* as a universal law of nature without contradiction, let alone being *willed* to be such. It's easy to see that an action of that kind conflicts with stricter or narrower (absolutely obligatory) duty. •With

other actions, the maxim-made-universal-law is not in that way internally impossible (·self-contradictory·), but it is still something that no-one could possibly *will* to be a universal law of nature, because such a will would contradict itself. It's easy to see that an action of *that* kind conflicts with broader (meritorious) duty. Thinking of duties in terms not of the *object* of their action but rather of the *kind of obligation* they involve, what I have given is a complete display of all the kinds of duty, in terms of their dependence on a single principle.

If we attend to what happens in us when we act against duty, we find that we don't (because we *can't*) actually will that our maxim should become a universal law. Rather, we are willing that the opposite of the maxim on which we are acting should remain as a law generally, but we take the liberty of catering to our preferences by making an exception—'just for me, just this once!'. So if we weighed everything from a single standpoint, namely that of *reason*, we would find a contradiction in our own will: willing that a certain principle •be objectively necessary as a universal law and yet •subjectively not hold universally but rather admit of exceptions. However, ·we *don't* consider our actions in this unitary way; rather·, we regard our action ·at one time· from the point of view of a will wholly conformable to reason and then ·at another time· from the point of view of a will affected by preferences; so there is actually no contradiction, but rather the preference's *resisting* the command of reason. In this the •universality of the principle is changed into mere •generality—i.e. the move is made from *all* to *ever so many* or *almost all*—so that the practical principle of reason meets the maxim half-way. This procedure, whether or not it can be justified in our own impartial judgment, shows that we really do acknowledge the validity of the categorical imperative and allow ourselves (while keeping a wary eye on it) only a

few exceptions—ones that strike us as unimportant and as forced on us.

I have thus at least shown that if *duty* is a concept that is to have significance and actual law-giving authority for our actions, it has to be expressed in categorical imperatives, never in hypothetical ones. And along with that I have made clear—and ready for any use—the *content* that the categorical imperative must have if it is to contain the principle of all duty (if there is such a thing as duty). This is a substantial result; but I haven't yet reached the point where I can prove *a priori* that •this kind of imperative really exists, that •there is a practical law that of itself commands absolutely and without any action-drivers, and that •obedience to this law is duty.

If we want to reach that point, it is extremely important that we pay heed to this warning:

Don't slip into thinking that the reality of this principle can be derived from the *special constitution of human nature!*

For duty has to be practical-and-unconditional necessity of action; so it has to hold for all rational beings (the only beings to which an imperative has anything to say), and is a law for all human wills *only because they are rational beings*. In contrast with that, anything that is derived from

- the temperament of human beings in particular, from
- certain feelings and propensities ·of human beings·,
- or even from (if this is possible)
- a particular tendency of the human *reason* that might not hold for the will of every rational being,

—such a thing can yield a •*maxim* that is valid for us, but not a •*law*. That is, it can yield •a subjective principle on which we might act if our desires and dispositions take us that way, but not •an objective principle telling us how to act even if all our dispositions, preferences, and natural tendencies