

# Kant's Ethics and Kantian Ethics

Prof. Rae Langton

## Lecture I. *Groundwork* Preface and Section I. 'The Good Will'

1. *Some background.* Kant (1724-1804) was born and spent his life in Königsberg, Prussia, where he spent a life that was relatively uneventful, except in intellectual terms. His early writings were largely on philosophy of physics and astronomy. A 1755 work on a theory of the heavens predicted the existence of Uranus, later discovered by Herschel in 1881. He survived on a precarious income as *Privatdozent*, and did not receive a regular academic salary until 1770, when he was appointed to the Chair of Logic and Metaphysics. He is best known for his revolutionary *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), and his works on ethics, of which the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* is a classic statement. His ethics was controversial, but received a significant favorable response. Here is an unusual contemporary reaction, to which we'll return.

Great Kant,

As a believer calls to his God, I call to you for help, for comfort, or for counsel to prepare me for death. Your writings prove that there is a future life. But as for this life, I have found nothing, nothing at all that could replace the good I have lost, for I loved someone who, in my eyes, encompassed within himself all that is worthwhile, so that I lived only for him, everything else was in comparison just rubbish, cheap trinkets. Well, I have offended this person, because of a long drawn out lie, which I have now disclosed to him, though there was nothing unfavourable to my character in it, I had no vice in my life that needed hiding. The lie was enough though, and his love vanished. As an honourable man, he doesn't refuse me friendship. But that inner feeling that once, unbidden, led us to each other, is no more—oh my heart splinters into a thousand pieces! If I hadn't read so much of your work I would certainly have put an end to my life. But the conclusion I had to draw from your theory stops me—it is wrong for me to die because my life is tormented, instead I'm supposed to live because of my being. Now put yourself in my place, and either damn me or comfort me. I've read the metaphysic of morals, and the categorical imperative, and it doesn't help a bit. My reason abandons me just when I need it. Answer me, I implore you—or you won't be acting in accordance with your own imperative.

My address is Maria Herbert of Klagenfurt, Carinthia, care of the white lead factory, or perhaps you would rather send it via Reinhold because the mail is more reliable there. (August 1791)

2. *Preface to the Groundwork.* 4: 387. A 'metaphysics of morals'. Kant has a primary division between ethics, which is occupied with the 'laws of freedom'; and physics, which is occupied with the 'laws of nature'. Each of these is divided, in turn, into a rational, *a priori* part, and an empirical part. The empirical part of ethics is 'practical anthropology'; the *a priori* part is a metaphysics of morals. Its *a priori* nature means it must hold for all rational beings, not simply human beings (which would be a matter of anthropology).

4: 390. Kant anticipates in the Preface the important later theme of the 'motive of duty': 'in the case of what it is to be morally good, it is not enough that it conform with the moral law but it must also be done *for the sake of the law*'—because otherwise it would be contingent, precarious and unreliable. 4: 391. Note Kant's optimism about practical reason, as compared with theoretical, hence a less pressing need for a critique of practical reason.

3. *Groundwork Section I*. 'Transition from common rational to philosophic moral cognition'. This is the transition from the *good will*, to *duty* and the *categorical imperative*. 'Common rational cognition' allows that the only thing good in itself, without limitation, is a *good will*. When we explicate this, we must draw on the notion of a *duty*, which in turn must be understood as 'necessity of an action from respect for *law*'. So we ultimately reach the 'philosophic moral cognition' that the principle of the good will is that 'I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law'.

*The good will*. 4: 393. 'It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will'. The good will is good in itself, unconditionally, regardless of its consequences, and regardless of what it is accompanied by. This is true of nothing else: all other goods, whether qualities of temperament or gifts of fortune, are conditioned goods. They sometimes fail to be good—depending on their consequences, and depending on what they are accompanied by. Coolness and self-control are useful to a good will, but also useful to an evil will—the 'abominable' coolness of a scoundrel (4: 394). Happiness is good only when it has a certain relation to a good will: (i) when it can *help* the good will; rather than hinder it, e.g. through promoting arrogance; and most of all (ii) when it is *deserved*. The good will is an unconditioned good: it is the only unconditioned good, *and* it is the condition of the goodness of other things.

*Conditioned and unconditioned goods*. Compare: the distinction between ends and means; and the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic value.

There are . . . two distinctions in goodness. One is the distinction between things valued for their sakes and things valued for the sake of something else—between ends and means, or final and instrumental goods. The other is the distinction between things which have their value in themselves and things which derive their value from some other source: intrinsically good things versus extrinsically good things. Intrinsic and instrumental good should not be treated as correlatives, because they belong to two different distinctions. (Korsgaard, 'Two Distinctions in Goodness', p. 250)

*Kant and Aristotle*. Compare: Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, and his identification of *happiness* as *end* and *self-sufficient good*.

If... there is some end of the things we do, which we desire for its own sake (everything else being desired for the sake of this), and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for at that rate the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain), clearly this must be the good, and the chief good. (1094a:20) The self-sufficient we now define as that which when isolated makes life desirable and lacking in nothing; and such we think happiness to be. (1097b:18)

Kant and Aristotle agree that we value happiness as an end, not a means; but for Kant that is compatible with happiness having merely extrinsic value. 4: 395. Happiness cannot be the goal or end of practical reason, since reason is so bad at achieving it. Paradox of hedonism: 'the more a cultivated reason occupies itself with the enjoyment of life and with happiness, so much the further does one get away from true satisfaction'. The purpose of reason must be to produce a will that is good, not as a means to other purposes, but good 'in itself'.

*Duty*. 4: 397. The concept of a will 'good in itself' is to be explicated in terms of a *duty*, which 'contains' that of a good will, under certain 'subjective hindrances' or competing inclinations.