

Kant's argument in the *Groundwork* (preface and chapter 1)

The purpose of this outline is to help you understand the **argument** Kant employs in developing his unique approach to ethics. This is challenging and represents a somewhat higher level of work than we've undertaken up to this point.

Throughout your reading of this text, keep in mind Kant's general goals: 1) to distinguish his approach and explain why this approach is necessary to an understanding of morals; 2) to identify the supreme principle of morality, i.e., that which makes all moral actions moral, or the condition for the very possibility of morality as such; and 3) to demonstrate that this principle is not dependent on the consequences of action.

I. Preface

Here Kant summarizes: i) the different branches of philosophy, ii) discusses the aim, and iii) the method of the *Groundwork*.

A. Philosophy is divided into logic, physics (natural philosophy), and ethics. These branches are further subdivided along empirical (depending on sensation) vs. *a priori* (independent of experience, purely intellectual and abstract) lines. Only logic is purely *a priori*. But physics and ethics, although principally empirical, have an *a priori* aspect as well. In physics, for example, Kant sees the law of cause and effect as something that we can never experience *per se*, but only confirm. We must assume the law of cause and effect to be an *a priori* principle of physics if that science is even to get off the ground.

The case is the same with ethics. Concepts such as "ought" and "duty" **are not** derived from experience. They must be presupposed on the basis of **REASON** if we are to have any specific moral principles at all. If we don't do this then we run into the problem of rationalizing our actions as described below (see "**natural dialectic**").

B. The **Groundwork** is to begin the task of outlining these *a priori* principles of ethics. It is therefore concerned strictly with "pure" ethics, with identifying the supreme principle of morality *independent* of any potential applications.

C. Kant begins from the presumption that we do in fact make moral judgments. But he wants to move from our "**ordinary moral judgments**" to a **philosophical statement of the principle they involve**. To do so, he asks what conditions must hold for such judgments to be possible in the first place? This is what is meant by **critical** or **transcendental** philosophy, a term often applied to Kant's works.

Kant will start with the question of what makes moral actions "good," and then uses this to work back to the "supreme principle of morality" (i.e., the **Categorical Imperative**).

II. Chapter 1

Chapter 1 presents a complex argument that proceeds from an account of what is the highest good (the idea of a "good will"), to an understanding of what "duty" is, and finally to a statement of the "formal principle" of this duty. This formal principle, stated generally, is the *Categorical Imperative*.

i. The only thing good in all circumstances, under any condition, and without restriction is a "**good will**." The "goodness" of the "good will" is **not derived from any results** it obtains, because this would make it "good" only conditionally, i.e., on account of something else. [Kant argues for this claim about the highest good by referring to what he sees as the "function" of reason. Since everything in life is adapted toward some function or purpose, what is the function of reason? According to Kant, Reason functions to control the will. But to what end? It can't be to produce happiness, since Kant claims instinct would be a better guide for this. It must instead be simply to produce a will which is good in itself.]

ii. How, exactly, do we tell when a "good will" is present? Kant here considers a number of now **famous examples**, including those of the shopkeeper and saving one's life, all of which point toward the idea that we can

only be certain that a “good will” is present when a person is acting on the basis of “duty.” Hence, Kant concludes: *Only because it is done out of duty is an action morally good.*

iii. Kant proceeds to turn this observation into a formalized statement (i.e., a general and abstract principle) by combining points i) and ii). First, from his preceding discussion of the “good will,” Kant makes the claim that an *action gets its moral worth not from the results we seek to obtain, but from the formal principle (the maxim) by which we act.* Combine this with (ii), the motive of duty, and we get: *an action is morally good when we act for the sake of duty as such, no matter what that duty may be.*

But what is it to act from “duty as such”? “**Duty**,” considered in abstraction from any particular duties, implies acting out of **reverence for the law**. I’ll leave it up to you to figure out what Kant means by “reverence,” but you should be able to get the point: *to act on the maxim of doing one’s duty is to act out of reverence for the law.* Law is universal. So, to will that you act in reverence of the law is to will that you act by a standard applicable to all rational beings, i.e., act according to a *universal* standard.

Thus, in “the conformity of our actions to universal law as such” Kant finds the common universal form of all moral actions.

Restate this as a general principle and you get the **Categorical Imperative**: “**I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will my maxim to be a universal law.**” This is the ultimate condition of all moral judgments, i.e., the supreme principle of morality. Later Kant gives it in another well-known version, that of **Respect for Persons**. This second principle says that you should never treat people as means to an end. You have to always respect them as ends in themselves.

In conclusion to Chapter 1, Kant points to some **general reasons in defense of his strategy**. Here again, as in the preface, he stresses *the distinction between* “**ordinary reason**” and “**philosophical reason**.”

What does this distinction amount to?

Ordinary thinking favors the practical over the theoretical, the “real” over the abstract. This is especially so with judgments of morality. Ordinarily, our judgments are concerned with practical actions... we don’t formulated the categorical imperative or whatever rule we use consciously, we just want to know what to do and when. Often we base our decision off of what society takes for granted, what we’ve been taught as a child, etc..

But ordinary thinking like this faces a problem. Since it is fixated on the practical, *ordinary thinking overlooks the impact that desire/pleasure have on the judgments it makes*, i.e., the ways that our *feelings can unconsciously influence or bias our decisions*. This impact gives rise to what Kant calls a “**natural dialectic**” – at one point, under such and such conditions, we think “X” is a duty; at other points, under other conditions, we do not... over time, going back and forth, we fall victim to rationalization, self-deception, and relativism. Morality becomes no more than mere opinion.

Kant’s “philosophical”/a priori approach is designed to avoid this. Kant locates the source of morality *in reason alone*. Thus considered, “purely” in the form of the Categorical Imperative, Kant presents an abstract principle on which to act and by which to avoid the problems ordinary practical thinking faces.