Immanuel Kant

Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals (1785)*

Nothing in the world—or out of it!—can possibly be conceived that could be called 'good' without qualification except a GOOD WILL. Mental talents such as intelligence, wit, and judgment, and temperaments such as courage, resoluteness, and perseverance are doubtless in many ways good and desirable; but they can become extremely bad and harmful if the person's character isn't good—i.e. if the will that is to make use of these •gifts of nature isn't good. Similarly with •gifts of fortune. Power, riches, honour, even health, and the over-all well-being and contentment with one's condition that we call 'happiness', create pride, often leading to arrogance, if there isn't a good will to correct their influence on the mind. . . . Not to mention the fact that the sight of someone who shows no sign of a pure and good will and yet enjoys uninterrupted prosperity will never give pleasure to an impartial rational observer. So it seems that without a good will one can't even be worthy of being happy.

Even qualities that are conducive to this good will and can make its work easier have no intrinsic unconditional worth. We rightly hold them in high esteem, but only because we assume them to be accompanied by a good will; so we can't take them to be absolutely ·or unconditionally· good.

•Moderation in emotions and passions, self-control, and calm deliberation not only are good in many ways but seem even to constitute part of the person's inner worth, and they were indeed unconditionally valued by the ancients. Yet they are very far from being good without qualification—·good in themselves, good in any circumstances·—for without the principles of a good will they can become extremely bad: ·for example·, a villain's •coolness makes him far more dangerous and more straightforwardly abominable to us than he would otherwise have seemed.

What makes a good will good? It isn't what it brings about, its usefulness in achieving some intended end. Rather, good will is good because of how it wills—i.e. it is good in itself. Taken just in itself it is to be valued incomparably more highly than anything that could be brought about by it in the satisfaction of some preference—or, if you like, the sum total of all preferences! Consider this case:

> Through bad luck or a miserly endowment from step- motherly nature, this person's will has no power at all to accomplish its purpose; not even the greatest effort on his part would enable it to achieve anything it aims at. But he does still have a good will—not as a mere wish but as the summoning of all the means in his power.

The good will of this person would sparkle like a jewel all by itself, as something that had its full worth in itself. Its value wouldn't go up or down depending on how useful or fruitless it was. If it was useful, that would only be the setting ·of the jewel·, so to speak, enabling us to handle it more conveniently in commerce (·a diamond ring is easier to manage than a diamond·) or to get those who don't know much ·about jewels· to look at it. But the setting doesn't affect the value ·of the jewel· and doesn't recommend it the experts.

[...]

So we have to develop •the concept of a will that is to be esteemed as good in itself without regard to anything else, •the concept that always takes first place in judging the total worth of our actions, with everything else depending on it, •a concept that is already lodged in any natural and sound understanding, and doesn't need to be taught so much as to be brought to light. In order to develop and unfold it, I'll dig into the

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* Originally published in German in 1785. This excerpt is taken from Jonathan Bennett's translation, available online at the url: <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/kgw.html>. Bennett's translation strays farther from the original text than most translations do, in order to make the result as readable as possible. He explains the notation he uses in his editing as follows: "[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."

concept of duty, which contains it. The concept of a good will is present in the concept of duty, ·not shining out in all its objective and unconditional glory, but rather· in a manner that brings it under certain subjective •restrictions and •hindrances; but •these are far from concealing it or disguising it, for they rather bring it out by contrast and make it shine forth all the more brightly. ·I shall now look at that contrast·.

·My topic is the difference between doing something from duty and doing it for other reasons. In tackling this, I shall set aside without discussion two kinds of case—one for which my question doesn't arise, and a second for which the question arises but is too easy to answer for the case to be interesting or instructive. Following those two, I shall introduce two further kinds of case·. (1) I shan't discuss actions which—even if they are useful in some way or other—are clearly opposed to duty, because with them the question of doing them from duty doesn't even arise. (2) I shall also ignore cases where someone does A, which really is in accord with duty, but where what he directly wants isn't to perform A but to perform B which somehow leads to or involves A. ·For example: he (B) unbolts the door so as to escape from the fire, and in so doing he (A) enables others to escape also. There is no need to spend time on such cases·, because in them it is easy to tell whether an action that is in accord with duty is done •from duty or rather •for some selfish purpose. (3) It is far harder to detect that difference when the action the person performs —one that is in accord with duty—is what he directly wanted to do, ·rather than being something he did only because it was involved in something else that he directly wanted to do·. Take the example of a shop-keeper who charges the same prices for selling his goods to inexperienced customers as for selling them to anyone else. This is in accord with duty. But there is also a prudential and not-duty-based motive that the shop-keeper might have for this course of conduct: when there is a buyers' market, he may sell as cheaply to children as to others so as not to lose customers. Thus the customer is honestly served, but we can't infer from this that the shop-keeper has behaved in this way from duty and principles of honesty. His own advantage requires this behaviour, and we can't assume that in addition he directly wants something for his customers and out of love for them he charges them all the same price. His conduct of his policy on pricing comes neither from duty nor from directly wanting it, but from a selfish purpose. [Kant's German really does say first that the shop-keeper isn't led by a direct want and then that he is. His point seems to be this: The shop-keeper does want to treat all his customers equitably; his intention is aimed at precisely that fact about his conduct (unlike the case in (2) where the agent enables other people to escape but isn't aiming at that at all). But the shop-keeper's intention doesn't stop there, so to speak; he wants to treat his customers equitably not because of what he wants for them, but because of how he wants them to behave later in his interests. This involves a kind of indirectness, which doesn't assimilate this case to (2) but does distinguish it from a fourth kind of conduct that still isn't morally worthy but not because it involves the 'indirectness' of (2) or that of (3).]

(4) It is a duty to preserve one's life, and moreover everyone directly wants to do so. But because of ·the power of· that want, the often anxious care that most men have for their survival has no intrinsic worth, and the maxim Preserve yourself has no moral content. Men preserve their lives according to duty, but not from duty. But now consider this case:

> Adversities and hopeless sorrow have completely taken away this unfortunate man's relish for life. But his fate has not made him ·passively· •despondent or dejected. He is strong in soul, and is •exasperated at how things have gone for him, ·and would like actively to do something about it. Specifically·, he wishes for death. But he preserves his life without loving it, not led by any want or fear, but acting from duty.

For this person the maxim Preserve yourself has moral content.

We have a duty to be charitably helpful where we can, and many people are so sympathetically constituted that without any motive of vanity or selfishness they •find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy and •take delight in the contentment of others if they have made it possible. But I maintain that such behaviour, done in that spirit, has no true moral worth, however amiable it may be and however much it accords with duty. It should be classed with ·actions done from· other wants, such as the desire for honour. With luck, someone's desire for honour may lead to conduct that in fact accords with duty and does good to many people; in that case it deserves •praise and •encouragement; but it doesn't deserve •high esteem, because the maxim ·on which the person is acting· doesn't have the moral content of an action done not because the person likes acting in that way but from duty. [In this context, 'want' and 'liking' and 'desire' are used to translate Neigung, elsewhere in this version translated as 'preference'; other translations mostly use 'inclination'.]

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.1 [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.

[...]

Since every practical law represents some possible action as •good, and thus as •necessary for anyone whose conduct is governed by reason, what every imperative does is to specify some action that is

> •necessary according to the principle of a will that has something good about it.

If the action would be good only as a means to something else, the imperative is hypothetical; but if the action is thought of as good in itself and hence as

> •necessary in a will that conforms to reason, which it has as its principle,

the imperative is categorical.

[...]

When I have the general thought of a hypothetical im- perative, I can't tell just from this thought what such an imperative will contain. To know that, I have to know what the condition is. But when I have the thought categorical 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.

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.

[...]

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.

(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:

> 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.

[...]

But suppose there were something whose existence in itself had absolute value, something which as an end in itself could support determinate laws. That would be a basis—indeed the only basis—for a possible categorical imperative, i.e. of a practical law.

·There is such a thing! It is a human being!· I maintain that man—and in general every rational being—exists as an end in himself and not merely as a means to be used by this or that will at its discretion. Whenever he acts in ways directed towards himself or towards other rational beings, ·a person serves as a means to whatever end his action aims at; but· he must always be regarded as also an end. Things that are

preferred have only conditional value, for if the preferences (and the needs arising from them) didn't exist, their object would be worthless. ·That wouldn't count against the 'objects' in question if the desires on which they depend did themselves have unconditional value, but they don't·! If the preferences themselves, as the sources of needs, did have absolute value, one would want to have them; but that is so far from the case that every rational being must wish he were altogether free of them. So the value of any objects to be obtained through our actions is always conditional. Beings whose existence depends not on our will but on nature, if they are not rational beings, have only relative value as means, and are therefore called 'things' [Sachen]; whereas rational beings are called 'persons', because their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves (i.e. as not to be used merely as means)—which makes such a being •an object of respect, and •something that sets limits to what anyone can choose to do. Such beings are not merely subjective ends whose existence as a result of our action has value for us, but are objective ends, i.e. things [Dinge] whose existence is an end in itself. It is indeed an irreplaceable end: you can't substitute for it something else to which it would be merely a means. If there were no such ends in themselves, nothing of absolute value could be found, and if all value were conditional and thus contingent, no supreme practical principle for reason could be found anywhere.

So if there is to be a supreme practical principle, and a categorical imperative for the human will, it must be an objective principle of the will that can serve as a universal law. Why must it? Because it has to be drawn from the conception of something that is an end in itself and therefore an end for everyone. The basis for this principle is: rational nature exists as an end in itself. Human beings necessarily think of their own existence in this way, which means that the principle holds as a subjective principle of human actions. But every other rational being also thinks of his existence on the same rational ground that holds also for myself;11 and so it is at the same time an objective principle—·one that doesn't depend on contingent facts about this or that subject·—a supreme practical ground from which it must be possible to derive all the laws of the will. So here is the practical imperative: Act in such a way as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of anyone else, always as an end and never merely as a means. [...]