

Summary of Kant's *Groundwork of
the Metaphysics of Morals*

Version 1.1

Richard Baron

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1 Introduction

This document defines some key terms in Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and then summarizes the argument.

The document has been written to help students, so it simplifies in places and omits inessential parts of the argument.

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2 Definitions of key terms

Reason. The faculty that allows us to select our actions on the basis of principles, and that allows us to act from a sense of duty.

The moral law. The law that is given to us by pure reason, and that is binding on all rational beings. It is to act only on maxims that we could will to be universal. What we might want to achieve, for ourselves or for others, has to be irrelevant.

Duty. Only acting from a sense of duty can give our actions moral worth. When we act in this way, we act out of respect for the law, and not because we want to achieve certain results.

The will. The faculty that we exercise when we act. Only rational beings have a will. The will is autonomous when it chooses on the basis of reason, without reference to external desires.

A good will. One that always acts in accordance with the moral law.

Imperatives. Hypothetical imperatives tell us how to act if we want to achieve specified results. The categorical imperative tells us how to act at all times, regardless of our goals or circumstances.

The categorical imperative. This is the command of morality. There are three ways to formulate it.

1. Only act on a maxim that you can will should become a universal law.
2. Treat all rational beings as ends in themselves.
3. Always regard yourself as a legislator for a kingdom of ends.

Perfect duties. Duties not to act in certain ways because it would be impossible to universalize acting in those ways.

Imperfect duties. Duties not to act in certain ways because you could not rationally will that acting in those ways be universal.

Dignity. The intrinsic worth of something which has no substitute. Only people and morality have dignity. Other things are merely things, they have substitutes, and they have prices.

Freedom. The will is free when it is not determined by external causes, but only by the law. We must suppose that rational beings *as they are in themselves* are free, even though we find that *as they appear to us*, they are subject to the laws of nature.

3 A summary of the argument

The headings have been added to structure the argument. They are mostly not Kant's headings. And while the summary stays close to Kant's text, some material has been added to make connections.

Numbers in brackets in headings are page numbers in the Akademie edition. These numbers are given in several editions.

The work and related works

The *Groundwork*, published in 1785, shows us how to approach morality. It is a wonderful book, even if one thinks that its approach is mistaken. It is very short. It is best understood by reading it several times quickly, not worrying about understanding it all at first but allowing different parts of it to make sense on successive readings. Only after that should a slow and careful reading be attempted.

The *Critique of Practical Reason*, published in 1788, shows us how we can think in the way in which we should think.

The *Metaphysics of Morals*, published in 1797, supplies specific rules.

Universality (387-392)

Moral laws must be universal, binding on all rational beings, in order to be the ground of obligation. So they cannot depend on specific features of human beings, but must be grounded in pure reason.

We here seek a supreme principle of morality that will yield moral laws.

What is always good? (393-394)

Not qualities like courage, resolution or perseverance: these can be harmful if the will is not good.

Not wealth, health or the like, because these could lead to pride unless a good will checked that tendency.

But a good will has a clear value in itself, regardless of circumstances.

Why do we have reason? (395-396)

It is not to ensure our happiness: instinct would be safer for that purpose.

We need reason in order to have a good will. A good will is one which fulfils a purpose that is determined only by reason.

The importance of acting from a sense of duty (397-401)

The intended or actual effects of actions cannot give moral worth to the actions. An action's worth depends on the principle of volition that determines the action.

When an action is performed from a sense of duty, that gives it moral worth. An action performed from a sense of duty is performed out of respect for the law. We cannot have such respect for inclinations or for the effects of actions. Moreover, effects could have been brought about without involving the will of a rational being, and it is in such a will that the highest good is to be found.

Respect for the law is needed so that the law can command us. And we need reason in order to be able to represent the law in itself, and therefore to be commanded by it.

What sort of law? (402-405)

For the will to be absolutely good, the law that determines it must not make reference to the expected effects of actions. So impulses that might be linked to particular laws are ruled out. All that is left by way of law is the universal conformity of actions to law as such.

This means that I should act only in such a way that I can will that my maxim should become a universal law.

For example, I cannot will that a maxim to make false promises in order to get out of difficulties should become a universal law, because that would destroy the institution of promise-making. So I should not make false promises.

Do we manage to act from a sense of duty? (406-408)

Experience does not give us any ground to be sure that we do. We might easily comply with the law from other motives, without that being obvious.

We will only be protected from losing our grasp of duty if we are convinced that reason commands us to act from a sense of duty.

The abstract nature of the argument (408-411)

The moral law needs to be universal, applying to all rational beings and valid completely regardless of conditions. No experience can even show that such a law is possible.

We cannot derive morality from examples. We need to set the standard first, in order to be able to determine whether the examples do show morality.

Abstraction is not only necessary. It also has an advantage. The pure thought of duty can influence the heart. If we took

account of human inclinations, we would waver between motives that could not be brought under a principle.

Rational beings (411-414)

A rational being can work according to a conception of laws, that is, according to principles, and can thereby have a will.

While a rational being has a will, the being may or may not obey the imperative of the law and do only what it ought to do. It will do so if the will is fully determined by reason, but otherwise it may go astray.

Imperatives are only needed to order the subjective will (what the rational being actually wants to do) to come into line with the law. A perfectly good will would not need imperatives. A rational being with such a will would simply act in accordance with the law, because it had no desire to do otherwise.

Imperatives (414-420)

Hypothetical imperatives tell us how to achieve specific ends. Some of them are captured in rules of skill.

One end we all have is happiness, and the hypothetical imperatives which aim at this end are captured in counsels of prudence. But it is so hard to be sure what will make us happy that we cannot derive precise commands as to what to do, imperatives in the strictest sense.

Categorical imperatives command us regardless of our ends. They state that certain actions are required regardless of any purpose. They are captured in the laws of morality.

How is a categorical imperative possible? We cannot see its possibility from experience, because when, for example, someone resolves not to make false promises, he might for

all we know be motivated by ulterior ends, such as a desire to avoid disgrace, so that the imperative not to make false promises would in fact be hypothetical. We shall return to this later.

The content of a categorical imperative (420-421)

Can we get the content of a categorical imperative from the mere idea of one?

The content of a hypothetical imperative cannot be known until we know the purpose it is intended to serve. But since a categorical imperative does not depend on any such external purpose, no extra information is needed to give its content. It contains only the law and the necessity that a maxim upon which we act should accord with the law.

The only thing to which our maxim should conform is the universality of the law. So there is only one categorical imperative, and its content is that we should act only according to a maxim that we can will should become a universal law.

Thus the universal imperative of duty is to act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature.

We shall now give some examples of duties.

Perfect duties (421-424)

These are duties which are revealed by finding that some maxims could not be universalized.

Example: the maxim that one should, out of self-love, end one's life when it has become really bad. If a maxim that one should end one's life out of self-love when life was

really bad were universal, there would be a contradiction in nature, because the feeling of self-love is also the feeling that stimulates the furtherance of life. So there is a duty to preserve one's life, at least when the reason to give it up would be self-love.

Example: the maxim that when in need one should borrow money while knowing that one will not be able to repay and making a false promise to repay. If this maxim were universal, that would destroy the institution of promise-making. So there is duty to keep one's promises.

Imperfect (meritorious) duties(423-424)

These are duties that correspond to maxims which could be universalized, in the sense that humanity could subsist if they were universal, but which one could not will to be universal.

Example: the maxim not to bother developing one's own talents. One could not will that this be universal. A rational being wills that all their talents be developed, because they are given for all sorts of possible purposes. So there is a duty to develop one's talents.

Example: the maxim not to help the poor. One could not will that this be universal, because one might oneself be poor one day. So there is a duty to help the poor.

When we violate a (perfect or imperfect) duty, we do not seek the universalization of the maxim on which we act. We only claim an exception to the opposite maxim, the one that is universalizable. And we do so from the standpoint of a will that is affected by inclination. Such a will would stand in opposition to a will that accorded wholly with reason.

*The ground of a possible categorical imperative
(425-429)*

A duty must hold for all rational beings. We must not try to base a categorical imperative on human nature. That might yield a maxim valid for us, but not a law.

If it is a law that rational beings should always judge their actions by reference to maxims which they can will to be universal laws, that must be connected a priori with the concept of the will of a rational being in general. Everything empirical must be irrelevant.

The ground of a categorical imperative cannot be any material end or any preference. The worth of any such end or preference would be relative to a particular type of being, so we would only get a hypothetical imperative.

The ground must be an end in itself that has absolute value.

Every rational being is an end in itself, not merely a means to be used by this or that will. We call rational beings persons, to indicate this. The contrast is with non-rational things.

Every rational being must have absolute value as an end in itself (as distinct from merely having relative value as a means to some other end), otherwise nothing would have absolute value, and then no supreme principle of action could be found at all.

If we do take it that every rational being is an end in itself, this can ground our categorical imperative. It can do so because all rational beings necessarily think of their existence in this way. It can therefore serve as an objective principle.

So we arrive at the imperative to act in such a way that one always treats oneself and other people as ends, and not merely as means.

The examples again (429-430)

Suicide when life had become really bad would involve using oneself merely as a means to ensure that one's life was tolerable right up to its conclusion.

Borrowing money while making a false promise to repay would involve using the lender merely as a means to achieve an end that the lender could not share. The same would be true of any attack on other people's freedom or property: the criminal could not see the victims as able to have the same ends.

While not developing one's talents might be consistent with the maintenance of humanity as an end in itself, it would not be consistent with the advancement of that end.

Contributing to the happiness of others would further their ends, which must be my ends too if the conception of an end in itself is to have its full effect in me.

Wills as legislators (431-433)

The objective ground of practical legislation lies in the form of universality. But the subjective ground lies in the end, which is to treat all rational beings as ends in themselves.

The condition of the will's conformity with the law is the idea of the will of every rational being as a legislator of universal law. We must reject maxims that are inconsistent with seeing the will of every rational being as such a legislator. We see ourselves as subject to the law because we see ourselves as having legislated it.

Up to now, we have had to take it that the relevant imperatives are categorical in order to explain the concept of duty. We still cannot show that they are in fact categorical. But we can now show that the distinguishing mark of a categorical imperative (as opposed to a hypothetical one)

is that interest is renounced and that this is expressed in the imperative itself.

We can do this because a supreme legislator cannot depend on any interest. If it did so, then it would need another law restricting the interest of its self-love to the condition that this interest should be valid as a universal law. And if we regard ourselves as legislators, that is enough to make us regard ourselves as subject to the law. If we were regarded as merely subject to the law, without being legislators, we would need some interest to persuade us to regard ourselves as subject to the law. Then we would only have a conditional imperative to obey the law.

The will as universal legislator is autonomous. Contrast the state of heteronomy, when one is guided by interest rather than by duty.

The kingdom of ends (433-434)

The kingdom of ends is the union of rational beings, in which each treats itself and others as ends. The union is achieved through common laws. The ends are each rational being as an end in itself and all the particular ends that those beings may have.

One belongs to the kingdom of ends as a member when one legislates universal laws, while also being subject to them.

One belongs to the kingdom of ends as sovereign when as legislator one is subject to the will of no other. This requires being an independent being, with no needs and with unlimited power that is adequate to one's will. In such a condition, duty does not apply because one's maxims will automatically comply with the objective principle of legislating universal laws. But for other members, duty is the requirement to make one's maxims comply with that principle.

Each rational being must be regarded as legislating universal law because otherwise it could not be thought of as an end in itself. It is part of the dignity of a rational being to obey only laws which it at the same time enacts itself.

Price and dignity (434-435)

Everything has either a price or dignity.

A price may be a market price (if it has some reference to human inclinations or needs) or an affective price (if it merely accords with our taste, without reference to any need). If something has a price, then there is a substitute for it.

Dignity is intrinsic worth, and if something has dignity it has no substitute.

The only things with dignity are morality, and humanity so far as it is capable of morality.

Morality has dignity because it is the only condition under which a rational being can be an end in itself. This is because it is the only way in which a rational being can be a legislating member of the kingdom of ends.

Skill and diligence have a market price; wit and imagination have an affective price; but there are no substitutes for promise-keeping or benevolence based on principles (rather than on instinct). Their worth consists in the mental dispositions behind them, rather than in their effects or in any profit from them.

Dignity and respect (435-436)

The worth of a morally good disposition is based on the fact that it makes one fit to be a universal legislator and to join the kingdom of ends, membership of which accords with one's own nature as an end in itself.

The autonomous being legislates for itself and all others, and is bound only by the laws that it has legislated. Since nothing has worth except that which the law determines, the law itself must have unconditional and incomparable worth, that is, dignity. And a rational being must therefore have respect for it. So autonomy is the ground of the dignity of human nature.

The three formulations of the categorical imperative (436-437)

1. Only act on a maxim that you can will should become a universal law. This formulation shows the form of universality, the best guide to moral judgement, reflecting the unity of the form of the will.
2. Treat all rational beings as ends in themselves. This formulation shows the matter of the imperative, the end. Treating all rational beings as ends in themselves is a limiting condition on the plurality of ends.
3. Always regard yourself as a legislator for a kingdom of ends. This formulation gives the complete determination of all maxims: one's own legislation should harmonize with a possible kingdom of ends, a totality or completeness of a system of ends.

The first formulation is the most rigorous one, and the best guide to moral judgement. But all three formulations can help in gaining acceptance for the moral law.

An unconditionally good will (437-438)

An unconditionally good will cannot be evil. That is, its maxim, universalized, cannot conflict with itself. It therefore always acts only on a universalizable maxim. Doing so is the only way to ensure that a will can never conflict with itself.

An unconditionally good will abstracts completely from ends that have to come about as effects. If it did not, it would only be relatively good.

This abstraction means that the will needs an independently existing end. Such an end must be one that can only be conceived negatively, as an end that one should never act against. It is therefore one in which all willing must be regarded not merely as a means, but also as an end.

The independently existing end must be the subject of all possible ends, because this subject is the subject of an absolutely good will, since such a will cannot be subordinated to any other object. So the second formulation of the categorical imperative is basically the same as the first.

It follows that every rational being as an end in itself must be able to regard itself as a universal legislator, because it is the fitness of its maxims to be legislated as universal law that allows it to be regarded as an end in itself.

The kingdom of ends and autonomy of the will (438-440)

A kingdom of ends is possible because legislation belongs to all persons as legislators. But someone who acts on appropriate maxims cannot be sure that others will do the same. The actual being of the kingdom of ends, with all obeying the right maxims, would not increase its intrinsic

worth, because what matters is the ways in which individual rational beings prescribe their actions to themselves.

Morality is the relation of actions to the autonomy of the will. The autonomy of the will is the possible legislation of universal law by means of maxims of the will.

If the maxims of the will are necessarily in accord with the laws of autonomy, the will is absolutely good. But other wills need to be subjected to the law. Nonetheless they have sublimity because they are subjected by virtue of their own legislation, and have dignity by virtue of this capacity to legislate universally and subject themselves to the law. Their actions gain moral worth only from being performed out of respect for the law.

Heteronomy of the will (441)

Heteronomy is choosing the law by reference to objects of the will. The result is hypothetical imperatives: I ought to do something because I want something else. For example, there is a hypothetical imperative not to lie in order to keep a good reputation. But a categorical imperative would forbid lying even when one's reputation would be safe.

Principles of morality founded on an assumption of heteronomy (441-445)

There are both empirical and rational principles that might be put forward as foundations of morality if one were to assume heteronomy.

Empirical principles are one's own happiness and moral feeling. They are useless as a foundation for moral laws that hold for all rational beings, because they are contingent on human nature or circumstances.

One's own happiness is not a good guide to morality, both because well-being is not proportional to doing the right things and because prudence can be misused. In addition, using it as a guide would involve basing morality on incentives that destroyed its sublimity, because it would involve putting motives to virtue in the same class as motives to vice.

Moral feeling is better than one's own happiness as a guide to morality. At least it honours virtue for its own sake, rather than for the advantages it may bring. But such feelings vary between people, so they cannot provide a uniform measure of good and evil.

One rational principle is the ontological concept of perfection. But the idea is indeterminate, and getting a determinate morality out of it would require us to presuppose the morality that it is supposed to explain.

The theological concept of perfection is worse than the ontological concept as a guide because we cannot intuit it, so we would either have to derive it from our own concept of morality, or rely on ideas of glory, dominion and vengeance. If we did the latter, we would get a system that was directly opposed to morality.

The idea of perfection is however better than moral feeling as a guide to morality, because it refers us to reason rather than to sensibility.

All of these attempted foundations draw on the nature of the subject, whether the subject's inclination and taste (the principle of one's own happiness) or the subject's reason directed to objects of our volition in general (the principle of perfection).

No heteronomous approach can command morally, that is, categorically. Such an approach must determine the will by its anticipation of some effect of an action. But

then there would need to be another law that this effect should necessarily be pursued. An imperative to restrict that maxim would also be needed, because the basis in the nature of the subject would make the law merely contingent.

So autonomy of the will is the only possible foundation of morality. If morality is to be seen as real, there must be a possible synthetic use of pure practical reason. We must therefore examine the faculty of reason.

The need for freedom (446-448)

Freedom would allow causality of the will, independently of determination by any alien causes. This is in contrast to natural necessity.

But causality requires laws to connect causes to effects. Freedom of the will must be autonomy, the will's being a law to itself. This in turn is the principle of only acting on a maxim which can have itself as a universal law for its object. So a free will is a will that is subject to moral laws.

Thus if a free will is presupposed, morality follows. So if we can establish freedom, we can make the link between an absolutely good will and universalizable maxims, showing that such a will's maxim can always have itself as content when the maxim is regarded as a universal law.

We must presuppose freedom for all rational beings, in order to make this link. So we cannot base freedom on human experience.

We cannot think of a reason that consciously lets itself be directed from outside, because then it would ascribe its judgements to impulse rather than to reason. So as the will of a rational being, reason must regard itself as free. And from a practical point of view, we must attribute a free will to all rational beings.

Freedom and the moral law (448-453)

We have not yet shown why the moral law should bind us, or why we assign such a great worth to acting in accordance with it. There seems to be a circle running between freedom and self-legislation, which are both forms of autonomy.

The solution is to distinguish two different points of view on ourselves.

We perceive objects as they affect us, not as they are in themselves. Even our own selves are known to us only as appearance, through an inner sense. But each of us must assume an ego in itself behind the perceived self.

One finds in oneself understanding, which organizes sensuous representations. One also finds within oneself reason, which has ideas that go far beyond what one could get from sensuous representations.

One regards the self in two ways: as belonging to the world of sense and subject to natural laws; and qua intelligence, as subject to laws that are independent of nature and are founded purely on reason. The self regarded qua intelligence is thought of as free, and morality can follow from that. This breaks the circle between freedom and self-legislation.

How is a categorical imperative possible? (453-455)

When one regards oneself as belonging to the intelligible world, one calls one's causality a will. When one regards oneself as belonging to the world of sense, one's actions are seen as mere appearances of that causality. But that causality is invisible, and one must see one's actions as determined by desires and inclinations, which are themselves appearances.

The intelligible world is the ground of the world of sense, and therefore the ground of its laws. The intelligible world is therefore directly legislative for my will, which belongs wholly to the intelligible world. This direct legislation means that I must regard the intelligible world's laws as imperative for me. This explains how a categorical imperative is possible.

But I also intuit myself as belonging to the world of sense, affected by sensuous desires. So while I ought to follow the laws of the intelligible world, it does not follow that I will follow them.

People all want to show honesty of intention, steadfastness in following good maxims, and benevolence, so they want to be free of government by desires and external causes. This shows how one transfers oneself in thought to the intelligible world, recognizing the authority of a good will. Having a good will might not contribute to the satisfaction of one's desires, but it would contribute to the intrinsic worth of one's own person.

The limit of practical philosophy (455-457)

Concepts that are not concepts of experience include natural necessity (which is however confirmed by experience) and freedom. The objective reality of freedom is questionable because it is not confirmed by experience.

There is an apparent contradiction between natural necessity, which is clear from experience, and freedom, which is required to make use of reason in practical philosophy. This contradiction needs to be resolved.

We settle the conflict by distinguishing between appearances and things in themselves. There is no contradiction in saying that something as appearance is subject to natural

laws, while as a thing in itself it is independent of those laws.

Seeing oneself as in the intelligible world (457-458)

If one thinks of oneself as in the intelligible world, one thinks of oneself as intelligence, as governed by reason's law, and as unaffected by inclinations and impulses. We thus bring in the causality of reason.

But practical reason cannot obtain any motive for action from the intelligible world, because it knows nothing of that world. The concept of an intelligible world is only a point of view that reason must take up in order to think of itself as practical. The universality of the will's maxims as laws and the form of the law can be found, as the formal condition of the intelligible world, but if laws were determined by reference to an object, we would be back to heteronomy.

Reason cannot explain how pure reason can be practical (458-463)

Reason cannot explain how pure reason can be practical, that is, it cannot explain how freedom is possible.

Reason cannot do so because it can only explain by reduction to laws which can be given in some possible experience. But freedom is a mere idea. Its reality cannot be shown in accordance with laws of nature, so it cannot be shown in any possible experience.

This impossibility of explaining freedom of the will is one with the impossibility of explaining the appeal of the moral law. We do feel good about the fulfilment of duty, but how can reason cause a feeling? We can only grasp causation between objects of experience.

We can still say that moral law appeals to us because it is valid for us, since it has sprung from our will as intelligence and hence from our real self.

So we can say how a categorical imperative is possible once we have supplied the idea of freedom. But we cannot discern how freedom is possible. We can only see how we can and must presuppose freedom.

Moreover, we cannot work out how pure reason can be practical on its own, that is, how the principle of the universal validity of maxims could in itself act as an incentive to be moral. All we can say is that the intelligible world is what is left after excluding from what determines the will everything from the world of sense. We know that there is something left over, but we have no knowledge of what it is. We can only draw attention to the form of practical reason, that is, the universality of maxims.

Nonetheless, the idea of a pure intelligible world remains useful for the purposes of rational belief. The idea produces a lively interest in the moral law.

Grasping unconditioned necessity (463)

If there were no necessity, there would be no rational knowledge. So we try to find out about necessity. But we can only have insight into why it is necessary that something happens, or that something should happen, under some condition which shows why it happens or should happen. It follows that reason cannot make unconditional necessity conceivable.

We do not grasp the necessity of the moral law, but we do grasp the inconceivability of that necessity.