Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals

The *Groundwork of the Metaphysic(s) of Morals* (German: *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1785), also known as *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* or *Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals*, is Immanuel Kant's first contribution to moral philosophy. It argues for an *a priori* basis for morality. Where the *Critique of Pure Reason* laid out Kant's metaphysical and epistemological ideas, this relatively short, primarily meta-ethical, work was intended to outline and define the concepts and arguments shaping his future work *The Metaphysics of Morals*. However, the latter work is much less readable than the Groundwork.

The Groundwork is notable for its explanation of the categorical imperative, which is the central concept of Kant's moral philosophy.

The Groundwork is broken into a preface, followed by three sections. Kant's argument works from common reason up to the supreme unconditional law, in order to identify its existence. He then works backwards from there to prove the relevance and weight of the moral law. The third and final section of the book is famously obscure, and it is partly because of this that Kant later, in 1788, decided to publish the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

The categorical imperative

The categorical imperative is the centerpiece of the *Groundwork*. Although it may seem superficially similar to the Golden Rule, it is in no way equivalent. The Golden Rule demands that one's actions conform to one's own standard, whereas Kant's moral imperative places the standard for moral good in reason (directly contradicting Hume, who claimed reason could not be a ground for moral choices).[1] He states that people should always be treated with respect to their personhood and dignity, and always as ends in themselves: they can be treated as a means and an end at the same time, but never only as a means.

Consider the example of the liar. The Golden Rule allows that lying to others may be acceptable under some conditions, but the categorical imperative determines lying immoral without exception. This could be considered to be a flaw in the Golden Rule, one that is corrected by insisting, as Kant does, that actions must be universal to be moral and by insisting that morality cannot be merely a matter of preference or taste.

Kant expanded and elucidated these ideas further in some of his later works, primarily the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788, informally referred to as his Second Critique), *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) and the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797).

Maxims

In establishing the *a priori* rational basis for morality, Kant uses the notion of a maxim — a formulation of the subjective principle of volition or, in other words, a rule followed in any intentional act. Actions that have moral worth are determined to fall into one of the five formulations of the categorical imperative. Each one describes the universal law of morality

1. its subjective content is such that it treats the humanity in oneself or others solely as a vehicle towards one's ends; or
2. the subjective content of the maxim is inconsistent with the will making one's rational autonomy an object of respect.

It is important to note that, in Kant's *Groundwork*, he is concerned with explaining the purely formal (negative or limiting) aspects of his moral philosophy. Actions either have moral worth or they do not. At the time that he was writing, it was most important to establish what actions were morally unlawful — that is, what we *ought not to do* — before moving deeper into his theory.
Common sense of duty
Kant states that there is nothing "which can be regarded as good without qualification, except a good will." A good will is the moral compass that always seeks good: if an agent fails, it is not the fault of the good will but of the agent's ability to carry it out.

In the opening section, Kant explains what is commonly meant by moral obligations and duty. It is fairly common sense, he writes, not to consider moral an act done out of inclination for the self. A shopkeeper with honest prices does so foremost to be respected by his customers, not for the sake of honesty. He "deserves praise and encouragement, but not esteem." It is common knowledge that the people for whose good actions there is no reward are those who act most morally. Kant revises this in his declaration that they are the only people acting morally. We esteem a man who gives up his life because he gains nothing in doing so. "Duty is the necessity to act out of reverence for the [moral] law." Thus, to follow the moral law, the intrinsic sense of right and wrong, is our greatest obligation.

Four cases of ethical action
In the Groundwork, Kant outlines four possible cases in which a decision is carried out in respect of duty:
• Case One involves actions that are contrary to duty (such as stealing);
• Case Two involves actions that are dutiful but done only because of fear of penalty or sanction (such as paying taxes);
• Case Three involves actions that accord with duty but which the agent is already inclined towards because it is pleasurable in some way (such as a labour of love); and
• Case Four involves actions that accord with duty but are contrary to inclination (such as not committing suicide, despite being in unbearable distress)

Examples of moral conduct used in the Groundwork
In order to illustrate his philosophy, Kant uses four examples of what he considers immoral conduct throughout the Groundwork:
1. One who is sick of life and contemplating suicide;
2. One who wants to make a false promise so as to secure a loan that he does not intend to repay;
3. One who does not wish to pursue a special talent that may benefit society; and
4. One who is financially secure but does not donate to charity.

On the Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns
Published as a supplement to the Groundwork, On the Supposed Right to Lie because of Philanthropic Concerns examines again the example of lying. Let us determine if, according to Kant's contradiction test, this behaviour is immoral. If the behaviour leads to a contradiction (that is, if it is internally incoherent or cannot be willed by an agent), the behaviour is immoral. Lies only work in an overall environment of truthfulness. The liar still wants everyone else to tell the truth, since, if everyone were to lie, no one would believe anything that anyone said, and lies would no longer be effective. Thus, we cannot will that our subjective maxim of lying be universalised without self-contradiction: if everyone were to behave thus, such behaviour would not work. Therefore, in Kant's system, lying is immoral.

For further normative interpretation of these examples see categorical imperative
Kant's argument: autonomy and freedom

Why should we want to act morally? That is, why should we will in a rationally consistent manner? Why can one not make an exception of oneself and one's case? Kant's arguments stem from his concept of freedom. He argues that the very idea of morality, the limiting of oneself from engaging in certain behaviours because they are "immoral", is the highest expression of the concept of freedom.

Freedom here refers to liberty from the influence of external forces (external to reason). If an agent is influenced by want of an object or fame or revenge, or for any other reason, Kant believes that he is not free: he is beholden to these outside influences, which state Kant labels heteronomy.

To Kant, freedom also means adherence to the moral law, having one's will determined not, as above, externally but by its own decision. The state of being free is the state of the will being autonomous, literally, in the state of "giving the law to oneself":

Autonomy of the will is the property that the will has of being a law to itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition).

This can be contrasted with:

If the will seeks the law that is to determine it anywhere but in the fitness of its maxims for its own legislation of universal laws, and if it thus goes outside of itself and seeks this law in the character of any of its objects, then heteronomy always results.

If one wishes to be autonomous, one must not be compelled to act by external influences but instead by one's own mind and rational thoughts. One such logical principle is the law of non-contradiction. P and not P (P and ~P) cannot exist simultaneously. Similarly, the snow is either white or not white; it cannot be both white and not white at the same time.

To act rationally is to abide (at least) by the law of non-contradiction, not willing that something be both true and false simultaneously. Thus, if an agent engages in any behaviour that is not governed by rational thought (i.e., is being irrational), he is influenced by external forces and is beholden to them. Immorality, then, is simply and deeply irrational. To be unfree is to have abandoned one's rational faculties. If, by contrast, one's behaviour is governed by rational thought, and is thus not contradictory, it is permissible.

Not all forces external to the will are external to the person, however. Inclinations such as greed and anger can be part of a person but are still external to the will. This is a clear example in which Kant's view of freedom differs from the opposite view, of the freedom to do what one wants. When consumed by anger, people desire to do certain things but, once the haze has cleared, often realise that that desire was for something immoral and that they were driven by factors external to their will. Inclinations, then, sometimes enslave us. Kant's theory of freedom is one of the few that take this into account.

Kant and simple utilitarianism

Kant does not encourage acting in order to attain happiness. Such actions "[...] can also be extremely bad and hurtful [...] power, wealth, honour, even health and that complete well-being and contentment with one's state which goes by the name of 'happiness.'" A rational agent will pursue happiness when on reflection the categorical imperative recommends happiness, but not as a foundational goal in itself.

Although happiness is not frowned upon, no action should be directed toward it. "[E]very rational being [...] exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means for arbitrary use." Rationality deserves what Kant calls an end, "a subjective ground of its self-determination." It would seem that Kant advises us to ignore ourselves and consider only the situation of others. This is not true. Kant says that happiness should not be our goal, but he also says we should respect moral agents. We ourselves are moral agents with a capacity for happiness and it is our duty as rational agents to pursue happiness so long as it does not interfere with other duties. The sophisticated Utilitarian
theories on the other hand do recommend what appears to be an entirely selfless moral agent. This is all true, except... Kant writes, "A man even has an indirect duty to seek happiness. The more he is troubled by the burdens of anxiety and need, the more he may be tempted to fail in his duty. Even apart from duty, everyone has the most fundamental urge to be happy, since the idea of happiness more or less sums up in our minds the satisfaction of all our desires, cares, and needs." Section 1, Chp 3, part 1b. Although Kant may claim utilitarianism is not sufficient, he also admits in this work at the end that his own foundations are lacking as well. The Empiricists assert that the words good and evil are nothing other than pleasure and pain (See Locke, Bentham, Hume, Spinoza, etc...), to assert negatively that Kant would encourage an action that would lead to a greater amount of pain would be absurd, as this would be going against nature itself. As the first rule of the categorical imperative was "1. Always act on a maxim which you can will to become a universal law of Nature", to seek pain (evil) rather than pleasure(good) would break this first rule.

Critical reaction
In his book On the Basis of Morality (1840), Arthur Schopenhauer presents a careful analysis of the Groundwork. His criticism is an attempt to prove, among other things, that actions are not moral when they are performed solely from duty. Schopenhauer specifically targeted the Categorical Imperative, labelling it cold and egoistic. While he publicly called himself a Kantian, and made clear and bold criticisms of Hegelian philosophy, he was quick and unrelenting in his analysis of the inconsistencies throughout Kant's long body of work.

English Editions and Translations
  • 2005 *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals* [12], tr. Jonathan F. Bennett (1930-).[13]

References
[9] p. 61; emphasis Kant's.
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