

Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals

*Edited by
Christoph Horn
Dieter Schönecker*

Walter de Gruyter

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Edited by
Christoph Horn and Dieter Schönecker

in cooperation with
Corinna Mieth

Walter de Gruyter · Berlin · New York

⊗ Printed on acid-free paper which falls within the guidelines
of the ANSI to ensure permanence and durability.

ISBN-13: 978- 3-11-017707-7

ISBN-10: 3-11-017707-2

Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;
detailed bibliographic data is available in the Internet at <<http://dnb.ddb.de>>.

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Printed in Germany

Typesetting: OLD Media, Neckarsteinach

Printing and binding: Druckhaus "Thomas Müntzer", Bad Langensalza

Cover design: Martin Zech, Bremen

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Preface

Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* is one of the most influential texts in the entire history of moral philosophy. It offers the first and presumably the most attractive account in Kant's writings of an ethics which can be called 'Kantian' in the sense in which we are accustomed to understand this classification. In earlier stages of his development, Kant sympathized with variations of a Leibniz-Wolffian perfectionism or with a Hutcheson-Humean moral sense-philosophy. In the *Groundwork*, however, Kant develops his own characteristic position. He now emphasizes that an adequate form of moral philosophy has to be 'pure', i. e. both free from all empirical elements of interest, self-love, and natural feelings as well as free from rational concepts of perfection. More generally speaking, ethics must not be grounded on anthropology, since morality is a demand, as Kant contends, which is addressed towards all rational beings as rational beings. According to Kant, ethics has to be spelled out on the basis of a 'moral law' that is valid for all finite rational beings. He believes that only from this point of view can moral motivation and moral obligation be formulated in an appropriate way. It is the *Groundwork* in which Kant develops and discusses his doctrine of the categorical imperative and where he attempts to give a 'deduction' for the universal validity of the moral law. Published in 1785, the *Groundwork* presents a type of moral philosophy that has continuously inspired and provoked its readers ever since.

At first sight, Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* seems to be a clearly structured, well argued, and easily accessible text; not without reason it has often been used to introduce beginners to Kant's moral philosophy. On close reading, however, the text really turns out to be most difficult and somewhat underdetermined. The *Groundwork* is a highly condensed treatise containing many of the topics and ideas Kant treated in his university lectures and his notes since the 1760s. Thus, interpreters face many hard questions, e. g.: Kant begins with the doctrine of the goodness of the good will; however, he never says what a good will actually is, rather, he just describes what it is not – so what is it? Why does he introduce tele-

ological considerations to support his idea of a good will? Does Kant allow inclinations to somehow accompany or even support the feeling of respect, or does he not? In what precise way does he derive the categorical imperative? What kind of procedure does the categorical imperative provide to test our maxims? How are the different formulas of the categorical imperative correlated? As for the third section, it has often been described as rather dark or elusive and hardly accessible to a meaningful reconstruction.

These are difficult questions and problems of interpretative exegesis. The other feature which makes the *Groundwork* demanding is that it raises several far-reaching claims, often insufficiently corroborated, that lead to the most fundamental questions and problems of moral philosophy such as: Can pure reason really be practical? Is Kant's doctrine of the categorical imperative in one of its formulas convincing? Does universalization in one way or another work at all? Does Kant really provide an argument for the universal validity of a moral law? Does he really provide an argument against consequentialism? Can we make sense of his idea of autonomy? In recent years, there have been considerable achievements in researching Kant's *Groundwork* and concerning Kantian moral philosophy in general. An impressive number of articles and monographs have been published, many if not most of them devoted not only to historical aspects, but also to a systematic assessment of Kant's contribution to ethics.

The articles published here are intended to summarize and to continue the work done within contemporary research on the *Groundwork*. They are the contributions delivered at a conference which took place at the University of Bonn from July 19th to 22th 2004. This conference was generously supported by the German National Research Association (DFG) and the *Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität* of Bonn. We'd like to thank our colleagues who attended the conference and contributed to lively discussions and then later to this volume. Special thanks go to Corinna Mieth for her cooperation in all questions regarding the conference and the present volume. For additional work on the manuscripts we are grateful for the support of Alexander Cotter, Nadine Dietzler, Michael Helwig, Nadine Köhne, Richard Capobianco, and Simon Weber.

Bonn and Siegen, April 2006
Christoph Horn and Dieter Schönecker

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Groundwork
Preface

Nico Scarano

Necessity and Apriority in Kant's Moral Philosophy

An Interpretation of the *Groundwork's* Preface (GMS, 387–392)

Kant's Preface to the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* can be divided into three parts. First of all, the text begins with a topology of the philosophical disciplines, in which the project of a metaphysics of morals is delimited from other forms of theory (GMS, 387,1–388,14).¹ Secondly, it contains a compactly reasoned appeal for the indispensability of such a pure moral philosophy, that is, a theory that proceeds completely a priori. Simultaneously, Kant emphasizes the uniqueness of this project (GMS, 388,15–391,14). And thirdly, the Preface offers a prospective of the task, the structure, and the method of the *Groundwork*, which does not itself already contain such a metaphysics of morals, but, as Kant stresses, represents a “preliminary work,” laying the foundation upon which the comprehensive theory will be developed “in the future” (GMS, 391,16–392).

In the following I will go into all three parts of the Preface. The focus of my analysis, however, concerns Kant's central argument for the indispensability of a pure moral philosophy. At decisive points, Kant clearly inserts modal considerations. For the reconstruction of the argument, it is therefore important to define precisely which form of necessity is intended. Kant uses the terms *necessary* and *necessity* in quite disparate contexts and with different meanings. He nowhere explicitly says what necessity in the domain of morality can even mean. For that reason, before I move onto the analysis of Kant's argument, I will address more closely the logical structure of ethical principles. One must first understand the logical form that such a principle exhibits in order to be able to work out the basis of Kant's central argument

¹ This paper was translated by Aaron Looney.

for a pure moral philosophy. It will become evident that Kant's argument is comprehensible if the decisive concept *necessity* is understood as a modal operator in the sense of modern logic. The modal status, *necessity*, allows moral principles to guide our counterfactual, practical reflections. This aspect of logical form can be clearly distinguished from epistemological connotations, on the one hand, and the prescriptive or imperative character of normative propositions, on the other.

1. What is a Metaphysics of Morals? (GMS, 387,1–388,14)

Kant does not introduce the Preface of the *Groundwork* with a characterization of the work's content; rather he attempts first of all to define the place of a metaphysics of morals within philosophy. For this task, he makes use of three criteria. Kant first differentiates philosophical theories by whether they are "formal" or "material." Formal philosophy, according to Kant, is equated with logic. It possesses no specific object; rather it concerns itself, "without distinction among objects," with "the universal rules of thinking in general" (GMS, 387,10f.). In contrast, every material philosophy "has to do with determinate objects and the laws to which they are subjected" (GMS, 387,12f.).

This formulation already offers an indication of the second criterion. Kant subdivides material theories, in turn, into two classes. Kant distinguishes them by with reference to the laws to which the objects that the theories deal are subjected. He seems to assume that there are exactly two kinds of laws. And, correspondingly, he differentiates between two types of material philosophy: on the one hand, "physics," or "doctrine of nature," or, alternatively, "natural wisdom;" and, on the other hand, "ethics," or "doctrine of morals," or, alternatively, "moral wisdom." It is a matter of the "laws of nature," in the one case, and of the "laws of freedom," in the other, that each theory is respectively concerned (GMS, 387,14f.). What can Kant mean by this? The expression "laws of nature" seems to be relatively unproblematic. But what is to be understood by the expression "laws of freedom?"

From Kant's elucidation one can infer a more exact interpretation. Laws of nature are therefore laws "in accordance with which everything happens," while the laws of freedom are those "in accordance with which everything ought to happen" (GMS, 387,25–388,1).² Obviously, one can draw the parallel here to the modern terminologi-

² See also the parallel passage in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 802/B 831.

cal distinction between descriptive and normative statements. At the center of a philosophical doctrine of nature, there would then stand general descriptive judgments; that means, more precisely, statements of law that describe how objects of nature act. And at the center of a doctrine of morals there would stand normative judgments that exhibit a comparable degree of generality and modal status. I will later address more thoroughly what it could mean that some normative judgments exhibit a comparable modal status to statements of law in the natural sciences. Such a parallel is far from trivial. On the contrary, it is one of the critical challenges for the interpretation of Kant's ethical writings.³ The first step toward a unified interpretation of the two kinds of laws consists in seeing both kinds equally as propositionally structured entities that demonstrate a clearly identifiable logical form (see 2.1 through 2.3 below).⁴

Next to formality versus materiality and the two types of laws, Kant introduces a third distinctive characteristic of theories. He seems to understand material theories as complex systems that can be split into individual parts. Every material philosophical theory accordingly contains one part that he characterizes as "pure," "rational," or as "a priori" (GMS, 388,4–14), and it may contain a second, "empirical" part. Kant presupposes that in both the doctrine of nature and the doctrine of morals the two parts can be isolated from each other. It follows, therefore, that there are two a priori types of theory: on the one hand, a "*metaphysics of nature*," and, on the other, the sought-after "*metaphysics of morals*" (GMS, 388,10).

Thus, a metaphysics of morals would be the following type of theory: (a) It is not purely formal, but rather deals with definite objects. (b) It deals with objects in so far as these are subsumed under "laws of freedom." (c) It contains no empirical elements. At this juncture Kant does not yet presuppose that such a theory actually exists or that it would be possible for a philosophy to work out convincingly such a theory. He has not even argued yet that it is advantageous or even necessary for philosophy to treat the a priori part separately from the empirical part. Kant pursues these lines of questions in the subsequent passages.

³ Thus Tugendhat (1993, 99f.), for example, doubts whether the use of the term "necessity" in Kant's theoretical philosophy and in his practical writings can be understood in a unified manner.

⁴ For the concept of law in Kant's ethics see also Klotz (2001). The concept of necessity as a modal quality that stands at the center of this essay is mentioned by him without, however, further explication (58).

2. *The Indispensability of a Pure Moral Philosophy*
(GMS, 388,15–391,15)

The Kantian appeal for a pure moral philosophy begins with a reference to the usefulness of the division of labor. Kant raises the question whether philosophy would not benefit from such a division. Ultimately, he is not concerned with whether the burden of elaborating philosophical theories should be distributed among the shoulders of a multitude of persons. Rather with this rhetorical consideration, he introduces an explicitly *methodological* train of thought. He asks “whether the nature of the science does not require the empirical part always to be carefully separated from the rational,” (GMS, 388,33f.) and he confines this question to the sub-question “whether one is not of the opinion that it is of the utmost necessity to work out once a pure moral philosophy which is fully cleansed of everything that might be in any way empirical and belong to anthropology” (GMS, 389,6–9).

The passage (GMS, 389,5–23) that is introduced by this question contains, at the same time, a positive response – the thesis that there must be a “pure moral philosophy” is “self evident.” And indeed for Kant this evidence arises “out of the common idea of duty and the moral law” (ibid.). Kant’s cursory argumentation for this thesis is difficult to grasp. Undoubtedly, it constitutes one of the key argumentative passages of the *Groundwork*. How can the argument be reconstructed?

The point of departure for Kant’s line of argumentation lies in the “common idea of duty and the moral law.” Kant seems to assume that we (“everybody:” GMS, 389,11) may convince ourselves of the correctness of his thesis by reflecting upon what we understand by morality. What, however, is contained in our concept of morality? And with which elements of the concept is he concerned in his argumentation? In this context he makes use of an example. The moral command “you ought not to lie” refers to a law that, according to Kant, is valid “not merely for human beings” but also for “other rational beings.” That moral laws have validity for all rational beings, therefore, is the first step of argumentation towards a grounding of the thesis that there must be a pure moral philosophy.

But what does Kant mean by his statement that a moral law is valid for all rational beings? And how can the argument for it be reconstructed, that is, be made as comprehensible as possible in the terms of today’s common philosophical concepts? Kant speaks in this context of an “absolute necessity” of these laws. From this necessity, it

follows that these laws also must be valid for other rational beings. And, in a further step, Kant concludes the apriority of moral philosophy from this necessity. The decisive term for Kant's argumentation, *necessity*, especially requires interpretation. In order to obtain more exact concepts of interpretation, I would like to examine more closely in the following section the logical structure of ethical principles.

2.1. The Logical Structure of Ethical Principles

At the center of every ethics are normative statements. Ethics of principle, like Kant's, presuppose that there are ethical principles that can be formulated with the aid of normative or evaluative statements, which have a high degree of generality and therefore allow the moral judgment of a plurality of cases. Such principles have the goal of guiding our moral judgments and therewith our actions. They formulate criteria by which we can morally judge objects, for example actions or institutions.

Ethical principles can have different logical strengths. They offer either a necessary or a sufficient or a both necessary and sufficient criterion for determining when an object receives a corresponding moral predicate. The categorical imperative, as defined by Kant, or, more precisely, the founding law of the categorical imperative, appears to be a quite demanding principle, one which prescribes both a necessary and a sufficient condition for morality. Kant compares this principle with a "compass in the hand" by which one "knows [his] way around very well in all the cases that come before [him], how to distinguish what is good, what is evil, what conforms to duty or is contrary to duty" (GMS, 404,1–3).

Normative propositions in which principles with such a logical rigor come to expression exhibit, by means of a first approach, the following logical form:

- (P1) For all objects x :
if, and only if, x satisfies the criterion C , does x have the moral quality M .

Such propositions contain criteria for determining when an object receives a certain moral predicate or when it is denied it. In P1 it is a matter of the conditions for the assignation of the moral predicate M . According to the all-quantified biconditional, every object that satisfies the condition C simultaneously receives the moral predicate, and vice versa. General propositions that exhibit such a form consequently

assist us in morally evaluating individual cases. If such principles are known to us, then we would have an extremely strong means of coming to correct valuations of our orientations in action.

At the heart of Kantian ethics is the moral valuation of the objects of an entire particular class. The criterion of valuation, formulated by Kant in the categorical imperative, enables first and foremost the judgment of maxims. At the same time, the valuation of maxims leads to the valuations of actions. The normative predicate which is of ultimate concern in the valuations of actions is “morality.”⁵ And the criterion to which actions have to conform so that this moral quality may be attributed to them is expressed in the categorical imperative. For this criterion, I will use in the following passages the abbreviation “CI.”

The fundamental principle of Kantian ethics, therefore, has approximately the following form:

- (P2) For all actions x :
 if, and only if, x satisfies the criterion CI, does x satisfy the demand of morality.

Without going into the difficult questions of interpretation here, the criterion CI can be articulated with slightly greater precision. According to Kant, the quality of the maxim from which an action results is decisive for the moral valuation of an action. For Kant, a concrete maxim for action appears to correspond to the demands of the categorical imperative only if the actor can will at the same time that her maxims become a general law. Regardless of the familiar difficulties in applying this criterion and regardless of the question about the equivalence of the three formulas depicted by Kant, the following formulation could be a preliminary rendering of the fundamental principle of his ethics:

- (P3) For all maxims x and all actions y :
 if, and only if, the underlying maxim x of the action y has the quality that the actor of y can will at the same time that x becomes a general law, does y satisfy the demand of morality.

I assume that we are dealing here with an excellent case of the “law of freedom” of which Kant speaks in the Preface. However, which as-

⁵ I interpret the categorical imperative as a test not only for the legality but also for the morality of an action. Such an interpretation is not uncontested in the contemporary literature on Kant (s., for example, Köhl, 1990, 66f. and Wood in this volume); it does not, however, play a decisive role in my further reflections. The term “morality” in (P2) would, accordingly, simply have to be replaced by the term “legality.”

pect of the logical form refers to the necessity of the law is not, as yet, explicitly worked out.

2.2 The Modal Status of an Ethical Principle

Ethical principles have the task of guiding our moral judgments. A more exact analysis of their logical features takes into account that with their help we judge not only factually existing objects but also objects which we merely imagine or whose existence is possible but not actual.

Let us assume in a particular situation that we have two alternatives of action at our disposal. We must decide between action A and action B. If we choose A, B will never exist; if we choose B, A will likewise never exist. If we wish to judge both options of action from a moral point of view, we can do so with recourse to our ethical principles. In that case, we test whether the criteria formulated in the principles will be satisfied or not satisfied. The criteria must be applicable both to factually existing objects as well as to merely possibly existing ones in order to guide our valuation. Both the actual action A and the merely possible action B fall within the range of objects covered by the principles. This condition has consequences for their modal status.

In order to express modal relations, one can make use of the possible-worlds terminology common in semantics. In case we decide for A and successfully translate this decision into action, then A is an object of the actual world, and B is solely an object of a possible world. We judge both objects with recourse to the same principles. That means, however, that these principles express something not only about the actual world but also about other, possible worlds. Since these principles indicate a strength beyond that of contingency, it appears that they exhibit the modal status of necessity.

In the preliminary formulations (P1) through (P3), this logical quality has yet to be expressed. In (P1') the modal status of necessity, therefore, is explicitly taken up into the formulation:

- (P1') Necessarily, for all objects x :
if, and only if, x satisfies the criterion C, does x have the moral quality M.

Applied to Kantian ethics, this thought results in the following formulation of Kant's fundamental principle:

- (P2') Necessarily, for all actions x :
if, and only if, x satisfies the criterion CI, does x satisfy the demand of morality.

The proposition (P3) is also to be completed accordingly:

- (P3') Necessarily, for all maxims x and all actions y :
 if, and only if, the underlying maxim x of the action y has the quality that the actor of y can will at the same time that x becomes a general law, does y satisfy the demand of morality.

The fact that ethical principles carry in themselves the modal status of necessity provides an important methodical starting point for the construction of ethical theories. Thus, the execution of the commonly performed counterfactual thought experiments in ethics is only possible under the condition that the principles of valuation support such an operation. Contingent principles are not in a position to do that. Kant makes methodical use of this logical quality of moral principles particularly in those places where he speaks of other “rational beings” (e.g. *GMS*, 389, 401, 408, 412, 415). The central passage in the Preface of the *Groundwork* in which he argues for the necessity of a pure moral philosophy also belongs to this methodical usage. It does not matter in these passages whether there actually are other such beings as, for example, the inhabitants of other planets or also God. For the Kantian argumentation it is sufficient that such beings could exist, that their existence is thinkable. The corresponding passages must be understood as methodically executed thought experiments, which make use of the particular modal status of ethical principles.

Now it becomes clear why the “laws of freedom” have a comparable modal status to the “laws of nature.” Laws of nature support counterfactual arguments, too. In order to achieve this, they also must have a modal status which is higher than simple contingency. The connections formulated in them are also valid in all natural law governed, possible worlds, and in this respect, they exhibit the modal status of necessity. The difference between laws of nature and laws of freedom appears to consist primarily in the fact that the laws of nature are concerned with all-quantified, descriptive biconditionals, while the laws of freedom are concerned with all-quantified, normative biconditionals, each receiving the modal status of necessity.⁶

⁶ Actually, the type of necessity spoken of here has to be further specified. Is it a matter of “logical,” “conceptual,” “nomological,” or “metaphysical” possible worlds? In Scarano (2001, chapter 3.2), I argued that our moral principles have a comparable status to the “metaphysical necessity” introduced by Saul Kripke (1980). To Kant has to be ascribed the view that it is herewith a matter of “conceptual necessity.” I see an indication of this interpretation in the method he applies in the first and second sections. He presupposes that the content or the *formula* of the categorical imperative can be found solely through the means of the conceptual analysis of our

2.3. Necessity, Normativity, and Apriority

A possible but easily avoidable equivocation in the expression *necessity* can be cleared up at this juncture. Sometimes the expression is used in the realm of morality as a synonym of *normativity* or *prescriptivity*. Consequently, actions are necessary if they connote a “should” or if it is our duty to carry them out. This type of usage is also found in Kant. In the central “third proposition” of the first part of the Groundwork, this usage is clearly expressed: “Duty is the necessity of an action from respect for the law” (GMS, 400,18f.). While the necessity analyzed previously refers to the moral principles, it is here a matter of the necessity of the action itself. However this aspect is terminologically classified, whether as “normative,” “prescriptive,” “evaluative,” or whether one speaks of the imperative character of moral judgments, it may be distinctly distinguished from the modal-logical concept of necessity responsible for the counterfactual variations.

In the propositions (P1') through (P3') this aspect – that is, *necessity* in the sense of “normative,” “prescriptive,” or “evaluative” – is indeed contained. There it is connected, however, to the moral predicate, not the operator of necessity. When I speak of *necessity* in the following sections, I mean a modal quality of judgments and not the specificum of normativity.

Kant uses the expression *necessity* with yet other meanings. Every interpretation depends on the clarification in each particular context of what Kant exactly intends in those corresponding places and of how each particular argument is to be reconstructed. Next to (a) the type of usage as a modal operator that makes counterfactual considerations possible and (b) the usage in the sense of an imperative character, thus in the sense of “normativity” or “prescriptivity,” there is (c)

moral concepts. At the beginning of the decisive argumentation in the second section, he writes, “Regarding this problem we will first try to see whether perhaps the mere concept of a categorical imperative does not also provide us with its formula” (GMS, 420,18–20). And approximately twenty pages later, he asserts in retrospect: “Yet that the specified principle of autonomy is the sole principle of morals may well be established through the mere analysis of the concepts of morality” (GMS, 440,28–30). He, therefore, assumes that he actually was able to extract the formula of the supreme moral principle solely through a conceptual analysis. In my opinion, such a proceeding allows only one conclusion: If the moral principle can be produced solely through an analytical procedure on our concept of morality, then it would have the status of conceptual necessity. According to Kant, the founding law of the categorical imperative is valid in all conceptually possible worlds. The question of which type of necessity moral principles exhibit, however, is not essential for the ensuing reflections.

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