

IMMANUEL KANT

THE METAPHYSICAL
ELEMENTS OF ETHICS

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Kant I.

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The Metaphysical Elements of Ethics

PREFACE

If there exists on any subject a philosophy (that is, a system of rational knowledge based on concepts), then there must also be for this philosophy a system of pure rational concepts, independent of any condition of intuition, in other words, a metaphysic. It may be asked whether metaphysical elements are required also for every practical philosophy, which is the doctrine of duties, and therefore also for Ethics, in order to be able to present it as a true science (systematically), not merely as an aggregate of separate doctrines (fragmentarily). As regards pure jurisprudence, no one will question this requirement; for it concerns only what is formal in the elective will, which has to be limited in its external relations according to laws of freedom; without regarding any end which is the matter of this will. Here, therefore, deontology is a mere scientific doctrine (*doctrina scientiae*).¹

Now in this philosophy (of ethics) it seems contrary to the idea of it that we should go back to metaphysical elements in order to make the notion of duty purified from everything empirical (from every feeling) a motive of action. For what sort of notion can we form of the mighty power and herculean strength which would be sufficient to overcome the vice-breeding inclinations, if Virtue is to borrow her "arms from the armoury of metaphysics," which is a matter of speculation that only few men can handle? Hence all ethical teaching in lecture rooms, pulpits, and popular books, when it is decked out with fragments of metaphysics, becomes ridiculous. But it is not, therefore, useless, much less ridiculous, to trace in metaphysics the first principles of ethics; for it is only as a philosopher that anyone can reach the first principles of this conception of duty, otherwise we could not look for either certainty or purity in the ethical teaching. To rely for this reason on a certain feeling which, on account of the effect expected from it, is called moral, may, perhaps, even satisfy the popular teacher, provided he desires as the criterion of a moral duty to consider the problem: "If everyone in every case made your maxim the universal law, how could this law be consistent with itself?" But if it were merely feeling that made it our duty to take this principle as a criterion, then this would not be dictated by reason, but only adopted instinctively and therefore blindly.

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But in fact, whatever men imagine, no moral principle is based on any feeling, but such a principle is really nothing else than an obscurely conceived metaphysic which inheres in every man's reasoning faculty; as the teacher will easily find who tries to catechize his pupils in the Socratic method about the imperative of duty and its application to the moral judgement of his actions. The mode of stating it need not be always metaphysical, and the language need not necessarily be scholastic, unless the pupil is to be trained to be a philosopher. But the thought must go back to the elements of metaphysics, without which we cannot expect any certainty or purity, or even motive power in ethics.

If we deviate from this principle and begin from pathological, or purely sensitive, or even moral feeling (from what is subjectively practical instead of what is objective), that is, from the

¹ One who is acquainted with practical philosophy is not, therefore, a practical philosopher. The latter is he who makes the rational end the principle of his actions, while at the same time he joins with this the necessary knowledge which, as it aims at action, must not be spun out into the most subtle threads of metaphysic, unless a legal duty is in question; in which case *meum* and *tuum* must be accurately determined in the balance of justice, on the principle of equality of action and action, which requires something like mathematical proportion, but not in the case of a mere ethical duty. For in this case the question is not only to know what it is a duty to do (a thing which on account of the ends that all men naturally have can be easily decided), but the chief point is the inner principle of the will namely that the consciousness of this duty be also the spring of action, in order that we may be able to say of the man who joins to his knowledge this principle of wisdom that he is a practical philosopher.

matter of the will, the end, not from its form that is the law, in order from thence to determine duties; then, certainly, there are no metaphysical elements of ethics, for feeling by whatever it may be excited is always physical. But then ethical teaching, whether in schools, or lecture-rooms, etc., is corrupted in its source. For it is not a matter of indifference by what motives or means one is led to a good purpose (the obedience to duty). However disgusting, then, metaphysics may appear to those pretended philosophers who dogmatize oracularly, or even brilliantly, about the doctrine of duty, it is, nevertheless, an indispensable duty for those who oppose it to go back to its principles even in ethics, and to begin by going to school on its benches.

We may fairly wonder how, after all previous explanations of the principles of duty, so far as it is derived from pure reason, it was still possible to reduce it again to a doctrine of happiness; in such a way, however, that a certain moral happiness not resting on empirical causes was ultimately arrived at, a self-contradictory nonentity. In fact, when the thinking man has conquered the temptations to vice, and is conscious of having done his (often hard) duty, he finds himself in a state of peace and satisfaction which may well be called happiness, in which virtue is her own reward. Now, says the eudaemonist, this delight, this happiness, is the real motive of his acting virtuously. The notion of duty, says he, does not immediately determine his will; it is only by means of the happiness in prospect that he is moved to his duty. Now, on the other hand, since he can promise himself this reward of virtue only from the consciousness of having done his duty, it is clear that the latter must have preceded: that is, he must feel himself bound to do his duty before he thinks, and without thinking, that happiness will be the consequence of obedience to duty. He is thus involved in a circle in his assignment of cause and effect. He can only hope to be happy if he is conscious of his obedience to duty: and he can only be moved to obedience to duty if he foresees that he will thereby become happy. But in this reasoning there is also a contradiction. For, on the one side, he must obey his duty, without asking what effect this will have on his happiness, consequently, from a moral principle; on the other side, he can only recognize something as his duty when he can reckon on happiness which will accrue to him thereby, and consequently on a pathological principle, which is the direct opposite of the former.

I have in another place (the Berlin Monatsschrift), reduced, as I believe, to the simplest expressions the distinction between pathological and moral pleasure. The pleasure, namely, which must precede the obedience to the law in order that one may act according to the law is pathological, and the process follows the physical order of nature; that which must be preceded by the law in order that it may be felt is in the moral order. If this distinction is not observed; if eudaemonism (the principle of happiness) is adopted as the principle instead of eleutheronomy (the principle of freedom of the inner legislation), the consequence is the euthanasia (quiet death) of all morality.

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The cause of these mistakes is no other than the following: Those who are accustomed only to physiological explanations will not admit into their heads the categorical imperative from which these laws dictatorially proceed, notwithstanding that they feel themselves irresistibly forced by it. Dissatisfied at not being able to explain what lies wholly beyond that sphere, namely, freedom of the elective will, elevating as is this privilege, that man has of being capable of such an idea, they are stirred up by the proud claims of speculative reason, which feels its power so strongly in the fields, just as if they were allies leagued in defence of the omnipotence of theoretical reason and roused by a general call to arms to resist that idea; and thus they are at present, and perhaps for a long time to come, though ultimately in vain, to attack the moral concept of freedom and if possible render it doubtful.

INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION TO THE METAPHYSICAL ELEMENTS OF ETHICS

Ethics in ancient times signified moral philosophy (*philosophia moralis*) generally, which was also called the doctrine of duties. Subsequently it was found advisable to confine this name to a part of moral philosophy, namely, to the doctrine of duties which are not subject to external laws (for

which in German the name Tugendlehre was found suitable). Thus the system of general deontology is divided into that of jurisprudence (*jurisprudentia*), which is capable of external laws, and of ethics, which is not thus capable, and we may let this division stand.

I. Exposition of the Conception of Ethics

The notion of duty is in itself already the notion of a constraint of the free elective will by the law; whether this constraint be an external one or be self-constraint. The moral imperative, by its categorical (the unconditional ought) announces this constraint, which therefore does not apply to all rational beings (for there may also be holy beings), but applies to men as rational physical beings who are unholy enough to be seduced by pleasure to the transgression of the moral law, although they themselves recognize its authority; and when they do obey it, to obey it unwillingly (with resistance of their inclination); and it is in this that the constraint properly consists.² Now, as man is a free (moral) being, the notion of duty can contain only self-constraint (by the idea of the law itself), when we look to the internal determination of the will (the spring), for thus only is it possible to combine that constraint (even if it were external) with the freedom of the elective will. The notion of duty then must be an ethical one.

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The impulses of nature, then, contain hindrances to the fulfilment of duty in the mind of man, and resisting forces, some of them powerful; and he must judge himself able to combat these and to conquer them by means of reason, not in the future, but in the present, simultaneously with the thought; he must judge that he can do what the law unconditionally commands that he ought.

Now the power and resolved purpose to resist a strong but unjust opponent is called fortitude (*fortitudo*), and when concerned with the opponent of the moral character within us, it is virtue (*virtus*, *fortitudo moralis*). Accordingly, general deontology, in that part which brings not external, but internal, freedom under laws is the doctrine of virtue.

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Jurisprudence had to do only with the formal condition of external freedom (the condition of consistency with itself, if its maxim became a universal law), that is, with law. Ethics, on the contrary, supplies us with a matter (an object of the free elective will), an end of pure reason which is at the same time conceived as an objectively necessary end, i.e., as duty for all men. For, as the sensible inclinations mislead us to ends (which are the matter of the elective will) that may contradict duty, the legislating reason cannot otherwise guard against their influence than by an opposite moral end, which therefore must be given a priori independently on inclination.

An end is an object of the elective will (of a rational being) by the idea of which this will is determined to an action for the production of this object. Now I may be forced by others to actions which are directed to an end as means, but I cannot be forced to have an end; I can only make something an end to myself. If, however, I am also bound to make something which lies in the notions of practical reason an end to myself, and therefore besides the formal determining principle of the elective will (as contained in law) to have also a material principle, an end which can be opposed to the end derived from sensible impulses; then this gives the notion of an end which is in itself a duty. The doctrine of this cannot belong to jurisprudence, but to ethics, since this alone includes in its conception self-constraint according to moral laws.

² Man, however, as at the same time a moral being, when he considers himself objectively, which he is qualified to do by his pure practical reason, (i.e. according to humanity in his own person), finds himself holy enough to transgress the law only unwillingly; for there is no man so depraved who in this transgression would not feel a resistance and an abhorrence of himself, so that he must put a force on himself. It is impossible to explain the phenomenon that at this parting of the ways (where the beautiful fable places Hercules between virtue and sensuality) man shows more propensity to obey inclination than the law. For, we can only explain what happens by tracing it to a cause according to physical laws; but then we should not be able to conceive the elective will as free. Now this mutually opposed self-constraint and the inevitability of it makes us recognize the incomprehensible property of freedom.

For this reason, ethics may also be defined as the system of the ends of the pure practical reason. The two parts of moral philosophy are distinguished as treating respectively of ends and of duties of constraint. That ethics contains duties to the observance of which one cannot be (physically) forced by others, is merely the consequence of this, that it is a doctrine of ends, since to be forced to have ends or to set them before one's self is a contradiction.

Now that ethics is a doctrine of virtue (*doctrina officiorum virtutis*) follows from the definition of virtue given above compared with the obligation, the peculiarity of which has just been shown. There is in fact no other determination of the elective will, except that to an end, which in the very notion of it implies that I cannot even physically be forced to it by the elective will of others. Another may indeed force me to do something which is not my end (but only means to the end of another), but he cannot force me to make it my own end, and yet I can have no end except of my own making. The latter supposition would be a contradiction- an act of freedom which yet at the same time would not be free. But there is no contradiction in setting before one's self an end which is also a duty: for in this case I constrain myself, and this is quite consistent with freedom.³ But how is such an end possible? That is now the question. For the possibility of the notion of the thing (*viz.*, that it is not self-contradictory) is not enough to prove the possibility of the thing itself (the objective reality of the notion).

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II. Exposition of the Notion of an End which is also a Duty

We can conceive the relation of end to duty in two ways; either starting from the end to find the maxim of the dutiful actions; or conversely, setting out from this to find the end which is also duty. Jurisprudence proceeds in the former way. It is left to everyone's free elective will what end he will choose for his action. But its maxim is determined a priori; namely, that the freedom of the agent must be consistent with the freedom of every other according to a universal law.

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Ethics, however, proceeds in the opposite way. It cannot start from the ends which the man may propose to himself, and hence give directions as to the maxims he should adopt, that is, as to his duty; for that would be to take empirical principles of maxims, and these could not give any notion of duty; since this, the categorical ought, has its root in pure reason alone. Indeed, if the maxims were to be adopted in accordance with those ends (which are all selfish), we could not properly speak of the notion of duty at all. Hence in ethics the notion of duty must lead to ends, and must on moral principles give the foundation of maxims with respect to the ends which we ought to propose to ourselves.

Setting aside the question what sort of end that is which is in itself a duty, and how such an end is possible, it is here only necessary to show that a duty of this kind is called a duty of virtue, and why it is so called.

To every duty corresponds a right of action (*facultas moralis generatim*), but all duties do not imply a corresponding right (*facultas juridica*) of another to compel anyone, but only the duties called legal duties. Similarly to all ethical obligation corresponds the notion of virtue, but it does not follow that all ethical duties are duties of virtue. Those, in fact, are not so which do not concern so much a certain end (matter, object of the elective will), but merely that which is formal in the moral determination of the will (*e.g.*, that the dutiful action must also be done from duty). It is only an end which is also duty that can be called a duty of virtue. Hence there are several of the latter kind (and thus there are distinct virtues); on the contrary, there is only one duty of the former kind, but it is one which is valid for all actions (only one virtuous disposition).

³ The less a man can be physically forced, and the more he can be morally forced (by the mere idea of duty), so much the freer he is. The man, for example, who is of sufficiently firm resolution and strong mind not to give up an enjoyment which he has resolved on, however much loss is shown as resulting therefrom, and who yet desists from his purpose unhesitatingly, though very reluctantly, when he finds that it would cause him to neglect an official duty or a sick father; this man proves his freedom in the highest degree by this very thing, that he cannot resist the voice of duty.

The duty of virtue is essentially distinguished from the duty of justice in this respect; that it is morally possible to be externally compelled to the latter, whereas the former rests on free self-constraint only. For finite holy beings (which cannot even be tempted to the violation of duty) there is no doctrine of virtue, but only moral philosophy, the latter being an autonomy of practical reason, whereas the former is also an autocracy of it. That is, it includes a consciousness- not indeed immediately perceived, but rightly concluded, from the moral categorical imperative- of the power to become master of one's inclinations which resist the law; so that human morality in its highest stage can yet be nothing more than virtue; even if it were quite pure (perfectly free from the influence of a spring foreign to duty), a state which is poetically personified under the name of the wise man (as an ideal to which one should continually approximate).

Virtue, however, is not to be defined and esteemed merely as habit, and (as it is expressed in the prize essay of Cochius) as a long custom acquired by practice of morally good actions. For, if this is not an effect of well-resolved and firm principles ever more and more purified, then, like any other mechanical arrangement brought about by technical practical reason, it is neither armed for all circumstances nor adequately secured against the change that may be wrought by new allurements.

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REMARK

To virtue = + a is opposed as its logical contradictory (*contradictorie oppositum*) the negative lack of virtue (moral weakness) = 0; but vice = – a is its contrary (*contrarie s. realiter oppositum*); and it is not merely a needless question but an offensive one to ask whether great crimes do not perhaps demand more strength of mind than great virtues. For by strength of mind we understand the strength of purpose of a man, as a being endowed with freedom, and consequently so far as he is master of himself (in his senses) and therefore in a healthy condition of mind. But great crimes are paroxysms, the very sight of which makes the man of healthy mind shudder. The question would therefore be something like this: whether a man in a fit of madness can have more physical strength than if he is in his senses; and we may admit this without on that account ascribing to him more strength of mind, if by mind we understand the vital principle of man in the free use of his powers. For since those crimes have their ground merely in the power of the inclinations that weaken reason, which does not prove strength of mind, this question would be nearly the same as the question whether a man in a fit of illness can show more strength than in a healthy condition; and this may be directly denied, since the want of health, which consists in the proper balance of all the bodily forces of the man, is a weakness in the system of these forces, by which system alone we can estimate absolute health.

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