

Groundwork III

PHIL 871

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1 The Aim of Groundwork III

- Aims to show that the moral law, understood as a categorical imperative, is objectively valid for the human will
 - Proof of the objective validity of the moral law depends on proof of the transcendental freedom of the human will
 - * Worry arises concerning a vicious circle—viz. that our knowledge of the moral law depends on knowledge of freedom and vice versa
 - Proof of the objective validity of the moral law, together with the claim (argued in GI-II) that if there is practical spontaneity (efficacious rational willing) then it must have a law, and that is the moral law, would then suffice for a demonstration that the CI is objectively valid

2 Structure of Groundwork III¹

¹ Timmermann (2007), xxxi

1. The concept of freedom is the key to the explanation of the autonomy of the will (4:446–7)
2. Freedom as property of the will of all rational beings (4:447–8)
3. The interest attaching to the ideas of morality (4:448–53)
 - a. Preparation of the ‘circle’: our consciousness of freedom and morality are not grounded in any conventional interest (4:448–50)
 - b. The suspicion of a ‘circle’: freedom and morality (4:450)
 - c. The escape: we step outside the circle when we consider ourselves members of an intellectual world (4:450–3)
4. The ‘deduction’: how is a categorical imperative possible? (4:453–5)
5. The extreme boundary of all practical philosophy (4:455–63)
 - a. The problem of reconciling natural necessity and free will does not yet mark the extreme boundary of practical philosophy (4:455–7)
 - b. We are conscious of our free will but cannot cognize or explain it (4:457–9)
 - c. The inexplicability of the interest we take in morality is the outermost boundary of moral philosophy (4:459–63)
6. Conclusion: Comprehending that we cannot comprehend morality (4:463)

3 *Kant's Argument*

1. A (human) will is 'a kind of causality that living beings have so far as they are rational' [definition]
2. Freedom of the will, understood negatively, is practical freedom, or the ability 'to be active independently of alien causes determining' the will [definition]
3. Freedom of the will, understood positively, is *autonomy*, or 'the property that a will has of being a law to itself' [definition]
4. Negative freedom depends on positive freedom, so a person possesses practical freedom in virtue of their being autonomous [premise]
5. An autonomous will necessarily has the categorical imperative as its practical principle or fundamental standard of (rational) choice [premise]
6. The categorical imperative states the fundamental principle of morality [premise]
7. ∴ An autonomous (free) will and a good will (a will which chooses according to morality's dictates) are identical
 - A (rational) agent is moral if and only if it is free
8. All rational agents are free
9. ∴ All rational agents are subject to (and thus motivated by) the moral law
10. ∴ The moral law is objectively valid
 - Kant takes premises (1) - (3) and (5) - (7) to have been demonstrated in the analysis of <duty> and the good will in the previous sections of the *Groundwork*
 - Premises (4) and (8) require defense

4 *Defending Premise (4)*

- (4) Negative freedom depends on positive freedom, so a person possesses practical freedom in virtue of their being autonomous
 - A merely negatively free will would be 'lawless', which is incompatible with its being free²
 - The intelligibility of nature depends on lawful causation (necessitation of one event by a previous event)
 - * Rational choice cannot be construed in terms of natural causation, since this would be a 'heteronomy of efficient causes' (4:446)
 - The intelligibility of rational choice depends on a lawful relation between desire and choice that is not (though is compatible with) natural law
 - * Why suppose that the CI is the necessary law – couldn't the hypothetical imperative supply the requisite intelligibility?

² Since the concept of causality brings with it that of laws in accordance with which, by something that we call a cause, something else, namely an effect, must be posited, so freedom, although it is not a property of the will in accordance with natural laws, is not for that reason lawless but must instead be a causality in accordance with immutable laws but of a special kind; for otherwise a free will would be an absurdity (4:446)

- * Kant seems to assume that a free will could not be one which is saddled with inclinations, only some of which it endorses as choice worthy – instead a free will must be a will that is not determined by *any* inclination that is not itself produced by the will's activity (i.e. *respect*)

5 Defending Premise (8) – Freedom from a Practical Standpoint³

- A. If one cannot act except under the assumption of freedom, then that person is really free, if only from a practical standpoint
- B. Those laws connected with freedom apply to such a deliberative agent just as if she *really were*, from the standpoint of theoretical philosophy, *free*
- C. Rational agents cannot act except under the assumption of their freedom
- D. ∴ Rational agents are, from a practical standpoint, free [A, C]
- E. ∴ The laws of freedom (i.e. the moral law) necessarily apply to rational agents [B, D]
- F. ∴ Rational agents are, for all practical purposes, really free

OBJECTION: Why think that we are rational agents?

- Practical deliberation requires the assumption of rationality

6 The Interest of Reason in Morality

- (i) Why is it the case that, by virtue of being a rational being, I am subject to the moral law?
 - Asks for an explanation of the connection between rationality and the moral law
- (ii) What reason is there for me to subject myself, as a rational being, to the moral law?
 - Asks, from a radical skeptical standpoint, why one *should* follow the dictates of the moral law
 - Kant aims only to answer (i) in the final section of the *Groundwork*, by showing *why*, not *whether* moral commands are valid
 - Done by showing how the categorical imperative, as a principle of autonomy, applies to the human will

7 Autonomy & Kant's Circle

The Circle: (1) The ground for our believing we are subject to the moral law is our knowledge that we are free; (2) our knowledge that we are free is based on the presumption that we are subject to the moral law⁴

³ I say now: every being that cannot act otherwise than *under the idea of freedom* is just because of that really free in a practical respect, that is, all laws that are inseparably bound up with freedom hold for him just as if his will had been validly pronounced free also in itself and in theoretical philosophy. Now I assert that to every rational being having a will we must necessarily lend the idea of freedom also, under which alone he acts. Reason must regard itself as the author of its principles independently of alien influences; consequently...the will of a rational being cannot be a will of his own except under the idea of freedom, and such a will must in a practical respect thus be attributed to every rational being. (4:448)

⁴ a kind of circle comes to light here from which, as it seems, there is no way to escape. We take ourselves as free in the order of efficient causes in order to think ourselves under moral laws in the order of ends; and we afterwards think ourselves as subject to these laws because we have ascribed to ourselves freedom of will: for, freedom and the will's own lawgiving are both autonomy and hence reciprocal concepts, and for this very reason one cannot be used to explain the other or to furnish a ground for it but can at most be used only for the logical purpose of reducing apparently different representations of the same object to one single concept (as different fractions of equal value are reduced to their lowest expression). (4:450)

7.1 Breaking the Circle

- We break out of the circle by appealing to the spontaneity of theoretical reason⁵
 - Theoretical reason (or theoretical judgment) is an activity of reason in accordance with rational principles (e.g. principles of logic; an ‘ethics’ of belief)
 - Reasoning in accordance with rational principles cannot be ultimately determined by preceding events⁶
 - Explanation of the spontaneity of theoretical reason requires positing ourselves as ‘intelligible objects’ – i.e. subjects of a realm free of natural (temporally structured) causation⁷
1. The spontaneity of theoretical reason requires us to think of ourselves as not merely empirical but also intelligible objects
 2. An intelligible reasoner cannot think of the causality of its own will except under the idea of freedom (defined negatively as ‘independence from the determining causes of the world of sense’).
 3. A causality of freedom is one according to the moral law (4:447)
 4. ∴ Understanding ourselves as intelligible reasoners, and thus as free, requires understanding ourselves as subject to the moral law⁸

OBJECTIONS:

- There is a gap between premises (1) and (2)
 - Even if we grant both that we are reasoners and that reasoning entails being transcendently free (i.e. being a member of an intelligible realm operating according to laws of reason rather than natural causality), still it does not follow that we are *practical* reasoners with rational *wills*
 - * We cannot act except under the assumption that we are capable of rationally choice
- Premise (1) is also problematic
 - If we cannot infer (e.g.) that there is a substantial self grounding the ‘I think’, how could we infer any other metaphysical conclusion about the self, such as that it is transcendently free, based on appeals concerning the nature of (empirical) reasoning?

References

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⁵ All of our actions and those of other beings are necessitated, the understanding (and the will, insofar as it can be determined by the understanding) alone is free and a pure self-activity, which is not determined by anything other than itself. Without this original and inalterable spontaneity we would not cognize anything a priori, and our thoughts themselves would stand under empirical laws. The capacity to think a priori and to act is the unique condition of the possibility of the origin of all other appearances. The ought would also have no significance at all. (R 544 I (1776-8), 18:182-3)

⁶ [O]ne cannot possibly think of a reason that would consciously receive direction from any other quarter with respect to its judgments, since the subject would then attribute the determination of his judgment not to his reason but to an impulse. (4:448)

⁷ Now, a human being really finds in himself a capacity by which he distinguishes himself from all other things, even from himself insofar as he is affected by objects, and that is reason. ... [R]eason...shows in what we call “ideas” a spontaneity so pure that it thereby goes far beyond anything that sensibility can ever afford it. ... Because of this a rational being must regard himself as intelligence (hence not from the side of his lower powers) as belonging not to the world of sense but to the world of understanding. ... As a rational being, and thus as a being belonging to the intelligible world, the human being can never think of the causality of his own will otherwise than under the idea of freedom’ (4:452).

⁸ As a rational being, and thus as a being belonging to the intelligible world, the human being can never think of the causality of his own will otherwise than under the idea of freedom; for, independence from the determining causes of the world of sense (which reason must always ascribe to itself) is freedom. With the idea of freedom the concept of *autonomy* is now inseparably combined, and with the concept of autonomy the universal principle of morality, which in idea is the ground of all actions of *rational beings*, just as the law of nature is the ground of all appearances. (4:452-3)

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