# 2

# The Argument of Kant's *Groundwork*, Chapter 1

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## I

A great deal has been written about Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.[1] But in those writings little attention has been devoted to analyzing the structure and argument of Chapter I of that work. The discussions of Chapter I that one finds in most of the commentaries on the *Groundwork* do little to uncover and set forth any overall structure or argument in the chapter.

But in fact Chapter I contains a sustained argument beginning with the first sentence and continuing through to the point where the principle of morality is stated toward the end of the chapter. When this argument is made apparent, it is also apparent that Chapter I has a definite role to play in the economy of the whole work. Chapter I establishes what the "supreme principle of morality" is by an analysis of the concept of moral goodness. Chapter II continues with an exposition, using technical philosophical terminology, of that same principle; and Chapter III, of course, aims to justify that principle.

Of the writers and commentators on Kant's ethics who have written about the *Groundwork*, Chapter I, some discern no argumentative structure to the chapter as a whole, while others do discern that there is an argument running through this chapter. Into the first category fall W. D. Ross and H. J. Paton. Into the latter category fall A. R. C. Duncan, T. C. Williams, and Robert Shope.[2] Duncan gives an excellent analysis of the structure and argument of Chapter I, and states that there is to be found in this chapter an argument like the one that will be pre-

sented in this paper (though he does not spell it out), beginning with the concept of the good will and ending with a description of the moral or practical principle upon which such a will is acting.[3] Duncan's attempt throughout his book to discern the structure, strategy, and argument of the *Groundwork*, makes it an extremely valuable book; we shall later (in Part IV) discuss briefly his "critical" interpretation of the *Groundwork* in relation to its first chapter. Williams also states that there is an argument of the kind that Duncan mentions, but does not give the details of the argument.[4] And, finally, Shope states a version of the argument in his discussion, with the aim of showing that Kant's attempts to derive the categorical imperative in its first formulation are unsuccessful.

In this essay, I shall set forth my own account of the argument that is to be found in the *Groundwork*, Chapter I, in Part II. Part III is a further discussion of certain parts of that argument. I discuss two possible interpretations of the argument in Part IV. In Part V, I shall make a few concluding remarks. Finally, there is an appendix in which Kant's remarks on "respect" (*Achtung*) are discussed.

## II

I have set forth Kant's argument in nine propositions, and will comment on each one.

(1) A good will only has absolute worth.

This is the assertion with which the section begins; it is a point which is explained at some length (*G*, 393–394). Kant gives little in the way of argument for this proposition. He thus apparently takes it to be part of our "ordinary rational knowledge of morality."[5] Kant regards this section as an analysis of our common rational beliefs about morality,[6] so perhaps he thinks that this first proposition is one which would be accepted by any rational being when he is presented with it.

There are two questions which naturally arise concerning this proposition: (a) What is a "good will"? and (b) What is "absolute worth"? (a) We can give no very definite answer to the first question, for the concept of "good will" is simply a concept which is to be analyzed, and as a preanalytical concept it is bound to be vague and indefinite. In a sense the whole of Chapter I is devoted to arriving at an answer to this

question. We could say of this preanalytic concept, however, that a good will is that in virtue of his possession of which one may be said to be a morally good person. (b) "Absolute worth" may be regarded as a worth outweighing any worth which is not absolute. Thus Kant is claiming that the worth of a good will is greater than the worth of any other kind of thing. Now since it will turn out that a good will is a moral will, and is the locus of moral value in persons, we could also express proposition (1) as a statement about moral value:

(1a) Moral value always outweighs any other kind of value.

To express proposition (1) in this way is perhaps to anticipate later features of the argument of this section, but we note it now because we find that later Kant uses "moral value" and "absolute value" interchangeably.

(2) A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes. (*G*, 394)

This proposition is advanced by Kant at the beginning of the third paragraph of Chapter I. Whenever anything is good because of what it effects, it is good only in a derivative sense, i.e., good as a means. But the good will is not just good as a means; it is good in itself. It is good simply in virtue of being what it is. Proposition (2) follows from (1), for although it is true that a thing may be intrinsically good without being absolutely good, it would be impossible for something good only as a means to be absolutely good—for the goodness of the means would always be qualified by the goodness of the end. And if a good will is *also* good as a means, this is a fact distinct from and independent of the fact of its intrinsic goodness.

(3) A human action is morally good if and only if it is done from duty. (*G*, 397–399)

Central to Chapter I of the *Groundwork* are "three propositions" concerning morality which Kant presents and explains. Kant tells us what his second and third propositions are, but he fails to tell us just what the first proposition is. Let us regard (3) as Kant's "first proposition."[7] The proposition states the conclusion of a rather lengthy discussion running from *G*, 397 to *G*, 399.

It seems that Kant thought that proposition (3) followed from proposition (1), though the way in which it follows is not obvious. The two important aspects of the transition from the one proposition to the other are the following: (a) the shift from the value of a good will, to the value of actions which are expressions of that will. For the purposes of the present argument Kant could analyze either the notion of a good will or the notion of a morally good action and get the same results. (b) The introduction of the concept of duty, as a concept central to the analysis of acts expressive of a good will in human beings. Kant introduces the concept of duty as follows:

> We will therefore take up the concept of duty, which includes that of a good will, exposed, however, to certain subjective limitations and obstacles. (*G*, 397)

That is, wherever we have dutiful action, there we have an action which is an expression of a good will, though the converse is not true. The concept of duty is applicable when, as with human beings, the dictates of a good will are or may be resisted by the agent's feelings and desires. We may note, however, that proposition (3) does follow from proposition (1) only if we are given an analysis of action from duty adequate to show that such actions and only such actions are expressive of a good will. We shall discuss Kant's account of action from duty in greater detail in Part III of this paper.

(4) To act from duty is to act, not with regard to the purpose to be attained by our action, but with regard only to the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon.

This is Kant's "second proposition" (*G*, 399). It has been reworded slightly to bring it into closer relation to our proposition (3). The paragraph in which Kant states this proposition and attempts to justify it is worth quoting in full:

> Our second proposition is this: An action done from duty has its moral worth, *not in the purpose* to be attained by it, but in the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon; it depends therefore, not on the realization of the object of the action, but solely on the principle of volition in accordance with which, irrespective of all objects of the faculty of desire, the action has been performed. That the purposes we may have in our actions, and also their effects considered as ends and motives of

> the will, can give to actions no unconditioned and moral worth is clear from what has gone before. Where then can this worth be found if we are not to find it in the will's relation to the effect hoped for from the action? It can be found nowhere but *in the principle of the will*, irrespective of the ends which can be brought about by such an action; for between its *a priori* principle, which is formal, and its *a posteriori* motive, which is material, the will stands, so to speak, at a parting of the ways; and since it must be determined by something, it will have to be determined by the formal principle of volition when an action is done from duty, where, as we have seen, every material principle is taken away from it. (*G*, 399–400)

The argument here is complex, and Kant is not entirely clear about what he is arguing for, as we shall see. If action from duty is action expressive of a good will, and hence is action good in itself (as the good will is good in itself), then the goodness of the action can lie neither in its actual or intended effect, for in that case, the action would only be good as a means. (*Cf.* proposition (2).) But all actions undertaken for the purpose of fulfilling some desire are actions which are good merely as means. So morally good action cannot be action which is undertaken to fulfill a desire. But when our actions are morally good, our will has been determined to action by *something*. What can it be which determines the will to a morally good action, if it is not some inclination? Kant's answer is that the basis of determination can be found nowhere but in "the principle of the will." The will is then pictured as choosing between "an *a priori* principle, which is formal, and its *a posteriori* motive, which is material" (*G*, 400). Since the latter has been ruled out as a candidate for what determines the will in morally good action, it must be the case that in action from duty the will is determined by "the formal principle of volition."

In proposition (4) we have one of the first mentions in Chapter I of the *maxim* of an action. Kant offers a definition of "maxim" a page later: "The subjective principle of willing."[8] The maxim is thus the general rule or policy of action a person is following when he performs an action. It is "subjective" in that it holds only for the agent who has adopted it. Kant contrasts "maxims" with practical laws (*G*, 400n) or imperatives[9] both of which are *objective* practical principles. As "objective" they are binding for all rational agents, *will* be followed by a fully rational will, and *ought* to be followed by an imperfectly rational being. (See *G*, 412–413.)

It was said earlier that Kant seems not entirely clear in the last quoted

paragraph about what he is arguing for. In fact, it seems that he is establishing two distinct propositions. The first is:

(4a) The moral value of an action is a quality of its *maxim.*

This proposition is consistently a part of Kant's moral doctrine. This part of Kant's doctrine is especially prominent in the *Religion* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*; in the former work, virtue is defined in terms of a perfectly general and formal maxim of action;[10] in the latter work, it is said that the duties of virtue arise from imperatives directed, not to actions (as in the *Doctrine of Right*); but to maxims of action.[11] Maxims are rules of action which are freely chosen by the agent. They are the "inner" rules which are followed in the performance of "outer" actions; it is for our choice of maxims that we are most directly responsible, for actions for which we are responsible are simply consequences of our having adopted a certain maxim.[12] At times it seems that Kant intends a definite contrast between actions and maxims of action,[13] and at other times it seems that we may speak indifferently of an action or its maxim.[14] In any case it is consistently a part of Kant's moral doctrine that we cannot tell the moral value of an action from its "outer" nature—we must look to its "inner" principle, i.e., its maxim.[15]

But there is another proposition for which it seems that Kant is arguing in the present paragraph. He wants to assert not only (4a), but he also wants to say that the maxim of action from duty is of a particular kind—it is a maxim which has been adopted, not because its adoption will lead to the fulfilment of some desire of ours, but solely in virtue of its "form." Thus we have:

(4b) Action from duty is action done on the basis of a maxim which we have adopted, not because its adoption will fulfil desires of ours, but because of its form.

This proposition will be discussed more fully in Part III. Kant next sums up the results of the argument so far:[16]

> Therefore nothing but the *idea of the law* in itself, *which admittedly is present only in a rational being*—so far as it, and not an expected result, is the ground determining the will—can constitute that pre-eminent good which we call moral, a good which is already present in the person acting on this idea and has not to be awaited merely from the result. (*G*, 401)

and then he asks:

> But what kind of law can this be the thought of which, even without regard to the results expected from it, has to determine the will if this is to be called good absolutely and without qualification? (*G*, 402)

Kant replies to this question as follows:

> Since I have robbed the will of every inducement that might arise for it as a consequence of obeying any particular law, nothing is left but the conformity of actions to universal law as such, and this alone must serve the will as its principle. That is to say, I ought never to act except in such a way *that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law.* Here bare conformity to law as such (without having as its base any law prescribing particular actions) is what serves the will as its principle, and must so serve it if duty is not to be everywhere an empty delusion and a chimerical concept. The ordinary reason of mankind also agrees with this completely in its practical judgments and always has the aforesaid principle before its eyes. (*G*, 402)

We may state Kant's argument in this passage as follows:

(5) This formal principle of volition (i.e., the principle of the adoption of maxims in virtue of their form) is simply the requirement that my action conform to universal law as such.

Kant believes that we must accept this proposition because a purely *formal* principle of volition could require nothing more.

(6) The essence of law is its universality.

This is obtained by an analysis of the concept of law, in Kant's view.

(7) Hence the moral law commands nothing but that I always act in such a way that I can will my maxim should become a universal law.

It may seem that proposition (7) either does not follow from (5) and (6), or that it does not express all that Kant thought that it did. But it is plain enough that Kant thought that a principle adequate to be a supreme principle of morality did follow from (5) and (6). Also, when

Kant introduces the first formulation of the categorical imperative in Chapter II, he writes that by merely considering the concept of a categorical imperative, we can know what it must contain:

> For since besides the law this imperative contains only the necessity that our maxim should conform to this law, while the law, as we have seen, contains no condition to limit it, there remains nothing over to which the maxim has to conform except the universality of a law as such. (*G*, 421)

It seems that Kant thinks that moral imperatives command simply that our actions be law-like in general. It is at least doubtful whether Kant really can deduce the moral imperative from the concept of the law by itself. Whether he can depends, among other things, on what the meaning of that moral imperative is; the question of what the categorical imperative means—and the related question of how it is to be applied[17]—are themselves much controverted topics. For this reason I shall not attempt to judge whether Kant's derivation here is successful.

We may now draw some inferences from the argument as a whole: Propositions (5) through (7) purport to be an analysis of the "formal principle of volition" which purports to show that this formal principle tells us to "always act in such a way that I can will my maxim should become a universal law" (from (7)). And (4b) said that *action from duty* is action on such a "formal principle of volition" (i.e., a principle which we adopt in virtue of its form). Thus, putting together (4b), and (5) through (7), we obtain:

(8) To act for the sake of duty is to act only on that maxim which can at the same time be willed as a universal law.

Now we also know, from propositions (1) through (3) that a will which acts for the sake of duty is a good will. We may therefore conclude, from (1) through (3) and from (8), that

(9) A good will is a will which always acts only on that maxim which can at the same time be willed as a universal law.

It is now clear that there is a continuous argument from the concept of a good will to the first formulation of the categorical imperative, and it is also apparent that Kant thought that there was. Thus we may say that although the nature of the moral law has not been sufficiently

explained when its formulation is introduced in the first chapter, and although certain aspects of it have not been explained,[18] at least the fact that a maxim of a good will would always have the character of universalizability has been sufficiently established in the first section, and is taken by Kant to have been so established, through an analysis of concepts to be found in "ordinary rational knowledge of morality."[19]

* * *

This analysis of the argument of Section I of the *Groundwork* leaves out of account those parts of that section which are not a part of what I take to be the main argument of the section. These parts are three: (1) There is an unusual and not very convincing argument from considerations of natural teleology concerning the "function of practical reason" (*G*, 394–396). Kant argues that if men have the ability to apply reason to action, as they do, this practical use of reason could not have been given them for the purpose of furthering their happiness, but only for the purpose of bringing about the existence of a will good in itself. We shall not discuss this passage further. (2) Kant introduces the concept of respect (*Achtung*) for the law (*G*, 400). We shall take this passage up in the Appendix. (3) After we are given the formulation of the moral law (*G*, 402), the section concludes with a further exposition of the contrast between moral reasoning and prudential reasoning, and argues that a philosophical understanding of morality is necessary if men, in their ordinary practical thinking, are not to confound moral and prudential concerns—a confounding which leads to the destruction of morality. We will not need to discuss this passage further.

## III

It seems that Kant's primary purpose in his discussion of his "first proposition" (*G*, 397–399) is to develop the distinction between action from duty and action merely in accord with duty. Kant does not develop criteria for distinguishing between actions done on the basis of different motives, i.e., criteria which would be useful in the everyday task of making certain kinds of moral judgments. Rather he is attempting to distinguish from one another the *concepts* of action from duty and action merely in accord with duty.

In considering actions from duty, we can first eliminate actions

which are contrary to duty; in the case of such actions "the question does not even arise whether they could have been done for the sake of duty" (*G*, 397). It is also relatively easy to distinguish actions from duty from those which are done as a means to the fulfilment of some inclination, because for such actions we have no immediate inclination, and thus they are not performed because of any intrinsic characteristics of the action. The distinction between actions done *aus Pflicht* (from duty) and those not so done is hardest to make out where we compare dutiful actions to those which fulfil some *immediate inclination.*

Kant does not define "action from duty" before proceeding to discuss it—this is in accord with his belief concerning philosophical methodology that proper definitions can come only at the conclusion of a philosophical analysis, and not at the beginning.[20] But Kant seems to be assuming in this discussion that action from duty is action which is done for its own sake. It is reasonable that action from duty should be of this character, since if it were not the doing of an action for its own sake, it is hard to see how the action could be expressive of a will good in itself. We can see why Kant says that it is more difficult to draw the contrast between action from duty and action from immediate inclination—in both cases we are performing an action for its own sake. In attempting to draw the contrast between these latter two kinds of action Kant uses a number of examples:

Consider the obligation we have to preserve our own life. Since in normal circumstances we *want* to preserve our lives, the actions by which we do so have no moral value. It is only when the grounds of immediate inclination are taken away that the contrast between inclination and duty becomes clear. Only then, if we refrain from taking our own life, do we so refrain *from duty* (*G*, 397–398).

Again, people with a sympathetic temperament help others out of immediate inclination, but Kant says that such actions have no moral value. An inclination is in any case an inclination, though some inclinations are more fortunate, happy, beautiful, etc. than others. Actions done on the basis of immediate benevolent feelings possess no moral value, because the maxim of the action has "no moral content" (*G*, 398). Such actions are performed, not from duty, but from inclination. For the maxim of such an action to have moral content, Kant tells us, the action must be performed *aus Pflicht* and not *aus Neigung* (from inclination).[21]

Kant gives the example of the (at least indirect) duty of promoting our own happiness. We ought to try to achieve happiness because un-

happiness leads to temptations to the transgression of duty. But it is only in certain special circumstances that actions whereby we promote our own happiness can possess moral value. These are cases where we are tempted by some immediate inclination to do what we know to be imprudent; in such a case, perhaps the motive of prudence is not sufficient to determine the will, and here perhaps the "law to further his happiness, not from inclination, but from duty" (*G*, 399) becomes relevant. For here it is the motive of duty that supplies the motivation that the principle of happiness does not supply.[22]

Kant also comments that the scriptural command to love our neighbour and even our enemy must be regarded as a command to practical love, and not a command to "pathological love"—for the latter kind of love, love from inclination, cannot be commanded. Here I think we find one of the philosophical motives for Kant's assigning moral value only to actions from duty—only action on such a basis could be commanded by a moral law. Given the fact that any action has some motivational basis, no action could be commanded by the moral law if we acted only from inclination. Note that we're not here commanded to act from duty; rather it is simply that no action from inclination can be demanded of us at all. Whenever we have a moral obligation it is presupposed that an adequate motivational basis for the required action will be forthcoming. But it is only in the case of action from duty that such a presupposition is justified for every case of a moral command. If the moral law commands us unconditionally, it cannot wait on any such presupposition's being justified in each case, for this in effect would be to make the command conditional, and thus not categorical. The justification of the possibility of moral commands must include the justification of the motivational presupposition and it is only in the case of action done from a motive of duty, i.e., only in cases where the action is done *as* a morally required action, that the moral quality of the action is to be found in its very motive.[23]

As Kant recounts these examples, he tells us that maxims of action from duty have "moral content" (*"sittliche Gehalt"*) (*G*, 398), while other maxims do not. What is it for a maxim to have "moral content"? We do not get any very complete answer to that question in Chapter I. But Kant begins to provide an answer to this question in his discussion of his "second proposition." First, we must remind ourselves that the moral value of any action is a quality of its maxim. Secondly, the maxims of actions having moral value are either themselves in some sense "formal," or are determined by a "formal principle of volition." (It is not

clear from what Kant says here which is the better way to state this point.) "Form" is to be contrasted with "matter" here, and the "matter" of an action or maxim of action is, it seems, the purpose (*Absicht*) (*G*, 399) for which it is done, the *end* of the action. Elsewhere Kant identifies the "end" of an action, and the "matter" of a volition.[24] To refer to the "form" of a maxim, in contrast, is to refer to it simply as a principle of action, without reference to the ends which acting on such a principle will realize.

All action to which we are determined by some subjective end (inclination) is action whose maxim is without "moral content." That has been said in the discussion of the "first proposition." So the maxim of action from duty must be a maxim which is determined by no such end, or, which has no such "matter." But we must be determined to the action by something or other. The only other thing which could determine us to action would be some "formal" principle, i.e., a principle containing no reference to any end. If a maxim is a moral maxim having "moral content" it must be so in virtue of its form, for the "matter" of maxims has been excluded as a determining factor in action from duty, or, as Kant puts it, "every material principle is taken away from it (the will)" (*G*, 400). Thus the "moral content" of the morally good maxim must be the result of the presence or the influence of purely "formal" practical principles. Kant then tries to show, as we saw in the last part of this paper, that the "formal" principle in question must be the one that he will later call the categorical imperative.

In this discussion, the nature of the "moral content" of maxims, of "formal" principles, and other key concepts of Kant's argument remains somewhat vague and unclear. It is thus difficult to argue that Kant's argument here is sound. But I think that one attempt to show it to be unsound is not successful: Robert Shope[25] argues that Kant's derivation of the categorical imperative is not successful, and that Kant's argument in Chapter I of the *Groundwork*, even when it is supplemented by other of Kant's arguments from other places, is either a *non sequitur* or it has some doubtful premises. Shope gives an account of part of the argument of Chapter I,[26] and then writes of it:

> Now this line of reasoning only excludes incentives of the will which are, as Kant goes on to call them, *a posteriori* incentives, that is, purposes which some wills *happen* to have but which every will need not have, e.g., an object of inclination. If there are ends which it is objectively, morally necessary to have we might be able to claim that these provide *a priori*

> incentives, and Kant has said nothing yet to rule out the possibility that the worth of an action derives from a maxim whose object, end, and purpose is such a morally necessary end. To preserve my life out of inclination, from an *a posteriori* incentive, is to have as my maxim "To preserve my life since I have an inclination to do so." To act from duty however, might be to have as my maxim merely "To preserve my life (regardless of inclination)." Kant so far has not proved that the latter kind of maxim cannot be the ultimate maxim of a good will acting to preserve the agent's life. . . .[27]

An argument from the *Critique of Practical Reason*[28] is introduced as a possible aid in overcoming Kant's embarrassment. That argument concludes (in Shope's formulation): "Therefore, if the idea of an object or material of the faculty of desire determines the will, the practical principle of the agent is not a moral law,"[29] Shope comments that if "object of the will" is to be understood in a broad sense, to mean any intended action," . . . then the argument depends on a dogmatic, metaphysical assumption about the will,"[30] *viz.*, that

> . . . any decision which appears to aim ultimately at some object, such as keeping a promise, or making money from a deceitful promise, must really aim ultimately at getting pleasure or avoiding pain.[31]

> But Kant would then be making the unsupported, dogmatic claim that the will, whether good or bad, can never determine itself to action merely by adopting a principle such as "To keep a promise (regardless of the pleasure or pain I get from doing so)" or such as "To make a deceitful promise when that will get me money."[32]

Nor, Shope thinks, is there any satisfactory way to patch up or improve Kant's argument so as to avoid this unsupported premise.

But Shope's account fails to consider one of Kant's arguments, an argument from Chapter II of the *Groundwork*, concerning the concept of autonomy. (See *G*, 432–433.) There Kant is introducing the concept of autonomy, and giving an account of the categorical imperative as the only possible autonomous moral principle. He contrasts it with other supposed moral principles by noting that all other moral principles presuppose an "object" of the will, which, though it is distinct from the will, must determine or move the will to act; to be thus determined to action by something outside oneself is to be acting heteronomously. "Object" here may again be understood in a broad sense, as including

any intended action. Further, an important part of Kant's general epistemological theory says that objects, i.e., things existing independently of the knowing subject, can only be empirically connected with that subject.[33] Thus the motivation to pursue some "object," e.g., the keeping of a promise or the preserving of one's life for its own sake, will be merely empirical, and will not have the necessity that is a mark of a moral principle in Kant's view (what is your moral obligation *must* be done). This last point is a statement of Kant's argument in the second *Critique* (the one mentioned by Shope), without any reference to the ideas of "pleasure" or "pain." Kant's argument there may now be seen, not as resting on an arbitrary metaphysical assumption, but on (a) a plausible epistemological doctrine saying that causal-motivational connections between objects and the knowing subject are always only empirical, and (b) the Kantian metaethical point that moral principles have a character of necessity.

It might be said that since Kantian autonomy presupposes the *principle* of autonomy (i.e., the categorical imperative itself), to use it to show that the supreme principle of morality is that same principle in Kant's Chapter I is to beg the question. But, from the point of view of the present discussion, what the principle of autonomy is remains to be seen; for all we know it might be Shope's "Tell the truth for its own sake." Thus the autonomy argument is not question-begging; we are speaking of autonomy only in the sense of "freedom" or "self-determination."

Finally, we may mention a reason not found in Kant why Shope's "Don't tell lies" proposal need not worry the defender of Kant; that is the inherent implausibility of such a maxim. "Don't tell lies" just does not seem to be a moral absolute or most basic moral principle, as it would have to be if "Don't tell lies, for its own sake" is to be a maxim of action from duty. It needs justification, in terms of more general moral principles.

If we suppose that Shope had shown that Kant's arguments for the categorical imperative were not sound, and if we suppose that the alternative to the categorical imperative that Kant had failed to rule out were a significant and plausible alternative conception of morality, then Shope's criticisms would have done Kant's moral philosophy serious damage.

## IV

What conclusions may be drawn from the argument of Chapter I? We note that Kant begins with the concept of a good will, and by a continu-

ous analysis of this concept, he ends with a statement of the moral law. It is not referred to here as a "categorical imperative," since neither term in that familiar Kantian phrase has yet been introduced. But the law that is given is substantially the same (there is some difference in wording) as the categorical imperative in its first formulation (*G*, 420). Now the categorical imperative, among other things, serves as a criterion of right action; but here we have that same principle introduced *via* an analysis of action from duty and of moral value. We could summarize the argument of this section as follows: We know that moral value is absolute, and that what we morally ought to do is to be discovered by an analysis of actions having moral value. Actions having moral value are one and all actions from duty. What, then, is the nature of action from duty? If we can come up with a description of the principles that are operative in action from duty, we will thereby come up with a criterion of right action, a criterion by the use of which we can determine what we ought to do. Now this statement of Kant's argument seems to support the following two theses about Kant's moral philosophy: (1) That Kant is basically a teleologist (holding to a kind of self-realization theory), since he makes the basis for the rightness of actions the degree to which they contribute to our self-realization or perfection.[34] (2) Kant in the *Groundwork* is not doing moral philosophy, as such, but is simply descriptively analyzing moral action. This view is advanced by A. R. C. Duncan.[35] However, what Kant says in Chapter I and our analysis of his argument do not support either of these views.

For (1) to gain support from this analysis, it would have to be assumed that the concept with which Kant begins in his exposition is the basic moral concept for him. But Kant has told us that his procedure will be "analytical" (*G*, 392)—he will begin with some commonly accepted truth (e.g., the absolute value of a good will, or, the necessary truth of mathematical propositions) and will analyze it to discover the principles on which it is based. If this is his procedure, we may expect more primitive concepts to appear at the end of the section, not at the beginning.

It may be that no one has ever held the view that Kant is a "teleologist" or "perfectionist" of this kind. Nevertheless this possible interpretation is interesting to consider because (a) the "perfectionist" view was an influential view in Kant's own time, and one that Kant actively opposed in his critical ethics and (b) there is a certain kind of truth in this "teleologist" or "perfectionist" interpretation. That is, it is true that actions in accord with duty and done from the motive of duty *are* expressive of the moral perfection of the agent; it is for this reason that

the basic moral principle can be discovered by an analysis of the nature of morally good action, as Kant has done in Chapter I. Also, the concept of moral perfection, as an end or goal which it is morally obligatory to pursue, comes to occupy an important part of Kant's moral philosophy in *The Doctrine of Virtue*, the second half of Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*.

Thesis (2) seems to be supported by the fact that, according to the present interpretation, Kant in Chapter I is simply descriptively analyzing the nature of moral action, thereby deriving a moral principle. Thus, within the scope of this chapter, at least, Kant's main aim seems to be purely descriptive and analytical. And perhaps the best way to discover the principle of right action is through a descriptive analysis of action from duty. But all of these facts are consistent with the claim that the *Groundwork* is a piece of ethical philosophy. If, for example, the formal principle arrived at in Chapter I is then used to derive particular moral obligations, where such derivation is one of Kant's major aims in the *Groundwork*, then Duncan's critical interpretation would be false. Thus the present account of Chapter I is consistent with either the truth or the falsity of Duncan's thesis, and does not either strongly confirm or disconfirm that thesis.

## V

I have shown that Chapter I of Kant's *Groundwork* contains a continuous argument by which Kant seeks to derive a statement of the "supreme principle of morality" from an analysis of the concept of moral goodness. This supreme principle of morality, which in Chapter II Kant calls the "categorical imperative," is the principle on which a morally good man acts. It is also a criterion of morally right action, as Kant's model application to show that it is wrong to make a false promise (*G*, 402) is designed to make clear. The connection between the categorical imperative as a criterion of right action and the categorical imperative as the principle on which a morally good man acts seems to be the following: To perform a morally good action (i.e., to act from duty rather than merely in accord with duty) is to do what is right for the reason that it is right. That is, when an action is done *from duty* the empirical beliefs and the moral principle which together yield an argument *justifying* a particular moral conclusion, e.g., that one shouldn't make false promises, are the beliefs and principles that *motivate* one

to perform the action. It is for this reason that the categorical imperative can be used both to describe the motivation of the morally good man, and to serve as a moral test for determining what one ought to do.

*Appendix: "Achtung"*

The third proposition, which we did not consider in the analysis of Chapter I with which this essay began, considers the nature of action from duty, *subjectively* regarded. It is as follows: "Duty is the necessity to act out of respect for the law" (*G*, 400). In his discussion of this proposition, Kant attempts to show that respect, though it is a feeling, is a feeling which is of a quite special sort, and hence that it is such that it is characteristically moral. Feelings have objects to which they are attached or directed. One can feel inclination, but not respect, for an object (or, we might add, a state of affairs) which is an effect of a possible action. Nor can inclination itself be an object of respect; at most it can be an object of approval or love.

> Only something which is conjoined with my will solely as a ground and never as an effect—something which does not serve my inclination, but outweighs it or at least leaves it entirely out of account in my choice (*Wahl*)—and therefore only bare law for its own sake, can be an object of respect and therewith a command. (*G*, 400)

Now if we can accept this account of *Achtung*, we can see that it would be a feeling closely connected with morality, for it has the following characteristics: (1) Its object is never an *effect* or object of the will, but a ground of the determination of the will. What is never an effect or object of the will must be purely formal in nature, and thus respect must be respect for "only bare law for its own sake" (*G*, 400). (2) Respect is an effect of the moral law, and not a cause of the law. In contrast, the feeling of hunger is, or may be, a cause of the adoption of a certain maxim of action. The feeling of moral respect does not function as a cause in this way, for if it did, to act out of respect for the law would be to act on the basis of a feeling or matter of the will (*G*, 401n). (3) This feeling is not produced by some outside influence, but is rather "*self-produced* by a rational concept, and therefore specifically distinct from feelings, [which are so produced,] all of which can be reduced to inclination of fear" (*G*, 401n).

Thus the feeling of respect is unique in its cause, its object, and its effects in action. It is not clear, however, what role the concept of respect plays in action having moral value, or in Kant's moral philosophy generally. From what is said in the present passage, it seems that respect does not enter into the maxims of actions from duty in the way that sensuous feelings enter into maxims which are sensuously determined. On the other hand, it seems that respect is at least a necessary concomitant of action from duty and of our awareness of the moral law.[56] If it is a consequence of the will's determination by the moral law, then it is an effect which arises only after a morally good maxim has been formed and adopted—it does not determine such a maxim, but is determined by it. From what Kant says later, it seems that it is a necessary element in our awareness that we do fall under the moral law, and that we are capable of acting from duty. I.e., unless the feeling of respect for the law were present in us, we might act from moral motives, but we could never be aware of being under obligation, or of the fact that pure practical reason does have an influence on our will.

Kant writes,

> Now an action done from duty has to set aside altogether the influence of inclination, and along with inclination every object of the will; so there is nothing left able to determine the will except objectively the *law* and subjectively *pure respect* for this practical law, and therefore the maxim of obeying this law even to the detriment of all my inclinations. (*G*, 400)

This passage suggests that respect is simply the subjective side of the law itself, and that the subjective and objective side of the law are inseparable from one another in action from duty. Kant writes a bit later,

> Therefore nothing but the *representation* (*Vorstellung*) *of the law in itself, which admittedly is present only* in a rational being—so far as it, and not an expected result, is the ground determining the will—can constitute that pre-eminent good which we call moral, a good which is already present in the person acting on this idea and has not to be awaited merely from the result. (*G*, 401)

The representation of the law, then, like any other representation, has a side or aspect relating merely to the subject in his capacity of being affected and another side or aspect which does not have reference merely to the subject, but to conditions which are valid independently of any state of such a subject. These latter, or objective, features of

a *Vorstellung*, are those which are universally valid, because they are expressions of reason itself. Now in spite of this necessary concomitance of the objective law and the subjective feeling of respect, the former is said to be the cause of the latter; they are concomitants in the *Vorstellung* of the law. If the effect of the law (respect) were not present, neither would there by any *Vorstellung* of the cause.

The feeling of respect is thus not a separate additional element in the maxims of actions from duty. It is rather a necessary concomitant of the representation of any such maxim, and plays no role in its formation.

Thus Kant's third proposition states the nature of duty from its subjective side, whereas the second proposition and its discussion gave a preliminary analysis of the nature of the will's determination to action in action from duty, objectively considered. It is with the objective nature of the moral law and the morally good will that the greatest interpretive difficulties remain. Kant's brief remarks about *Achtung* in Chapter I have set forth the essentials of his doctrine concerning morality's subjective side.

## Notes

1. References to the *Groundwork* will be given in the text in this form: (*G*, 402). The translations in the text are from Paton (*The Moral Law* [3rd ed.; London: Hutchinson University Library, 1956].) In some cases I have altered Paton's translation.

2. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1947). Ross, *Kant's Ethical Theory* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954). A. R. C. Duncan, *Practical Reason and Morality: A Study of Immanuel Kant's Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1957). T. C. Williams, *The Concept of the Categorical Imperative* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968). Robert Shope, "Kant's Use and Derivation of the Categorical Imperative," pp. 253–291 in Robert Paul Wolff (ed.), *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals with Critical Essays* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969).

3. See *op. cit.*, p. 52, and Chapter IV (pp. 57–74).

4. See *op. cit.*, pp. 1–4.

5. The title of Chapter I is "Passage from Ordinary Rational Knowledge of Morality to Philosophical."

6. Cf. *G*, beginning of Chapter II, 406.

7. (3) is similar to what Paton (*op. cit.*, pp. 18–19) takes to be the "first proposition." A. R. C. Duncan on p. 59 of *Practical Reason and Morality* re-

gards Kant's opening statement (our proposition (1)) as Kant's "first proposition." It makes no difference who is correct.

8. *G*, 400n., cf. *G*, 421n.; *Critique of Practical Reason*, 18–19; *Metaphysics of Morals*, VI, 225.

9. See the *Critique of Practical Reason*, 18–19.

10. *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, 6:32–36.

11. *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:388–389.

12. Kant argues that an agent is responsible only for "a rule made by the faculty of choice for the use of its freedom, that is, in a maxim." (*Religion*, 6:21.)

13. For example, see *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:388–389.

14. The examples of the application of the categorical imperative in Chapter II of the *Grundlegung* (*G*, 421ff.) seem to be this way.

15. That emerges from the discussion of action from duty, *G*, 397ff. Also see *G*, 407ff. and *Religion*, Book I, *passim*.

16. We omit here a discussion of Kant's third proposition, "Duty is the necessity to act out of respect for the law" (*G*, 400). This proposition is discussed in the Appendix.

17. This point is discussed in my paper, "How to Apply the Categorical Imperative," *Philosophia* 5 (1975): 395–416.

18. In particular, its imperatival nature and the fact that it commands unconditionally or categorically are to be explained in Chapter II. Also a number of alternative formulations will be given of it there.

19. It is thus surprising that Kant should say, as he does at *G*, 447, that "An absolutely good will is one whose maxim can always have as its content itself considered as a universal law" is *synthetic* a priori. Kant's argument in Chapter I seems to show that it is analytic. This passage has caused some interpreters of Kant much pain.

20. See Lewis White-Beck, "Kant's Theory of Definition," in his *Studies in the Philosophy of Kant* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965).

21. It may seem that here and elsewhere in this section I am adopting the infamous Schiller interpretation of Kant, which held that "1. An action has no moral worth if any inclination to do the action is present or if any pleasure results from the satisfaction of this inclination; and 2. An action has no moral worth if any satisfaction arises from the consciousness of doing one's duty" (quotation from Paton, *op. cit.*, p. 48). But I think that all that Kant and I say here (I am in this section aiming to give a close account of Kant's own words) is that actions *motivated by* any kind of inclination have no moral worth. This claim sometimes shades into the Schiller thesis if (1) it is noted that the presence of an inclination to do what is morally required likely prevents us from *knowing* for certain whether the action in accord with duty has any moral worth, or (2) if Kant puts forward his thesis, advanced throughout his critical ethical works (see *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:386) that our *inclination* to pursue our own happiness, under ordinary circumstances, at any rate, prevents us from having an obligation to do that same thing. To make it quite clear that the Schiller interpretation is a distorted version of the Kantian doctrine as a whole, one needs to discuss the account of dispositions and the process of

building moral strength of will that constitutes moral perfection, points that Kant puts forth in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, and the *Metaphysics of Morals*. But to introduce these matters here is not appropriate to our present purposes.

22. Kant in later ethical works says that in such a case the actual duty is that of promoting our own moral character; avoiding unhappiness is simply a means to this obligatory end, and hence not obligatory in itself. See *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6: 387.

23. Kant's justification of the categorical imperative consists of showing that it is possible to act out of purely moral motives, i.e., of showing that an adequate moral basis for any morally required action is within the power of the agent. On this point, see the discussion of the question "How are all these imperatives possible?", *G*, 417–420, and the discussion of the "fact of pure reason," *Critique of Practical Reason*, 31ff.

24. See *G*, 436; *Critique of Practical Reason*, 26–27; *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:384.

25. Shope, *op. cit.*

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 264–265.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

28. *CPracR*, 21 ff.

29. *Op. cit.*, p. 268.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, p. 270.

33. See both *G*, 432–433, and *Critique of Practical Reason*, 21ff.

34. John Silber sometimes seems to hold to this view in "The Ethical Significance of Kant's *Religion*," printed as an introduction to Kant's *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. by T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), pp. lxxix–cxxxiv. See especially p. lxxxv. Also Paton in *op. cit.*, p. 45, writes, "We have now completed the examination of Kant's starting point and found it in the absolute and unique goodness of a good will. This requires to be stressed, because as the argument advances we shall find ourselves talking a great deal more about duty than about goodness. Kant is so commonly regarded as the apostle of duty that if we are to get his doctrine in true perspective we must remember that for him goodness is fundamental; and there is no warrant for supposing that he even entertained the conception of a duty divorced from goodness."

35. In *Practical Reason and Morality* (op. cit).

36. Compare Kant's remarks on respect in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Chapter III, and in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:402–403.