

RETHINKING THE WESTERN TRADITION

*Groundwork for  
the Metaphysics  
of Morals*

*Immanuel*  
**Kant**

*Edited and translated by* ALLEN W. WOOD

*Contributors*

J. B. Schneewind

Marcia Baron

Shelly Kagan

Allen W. Wood

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# Rethinking the Western Tradition

*The volumes in this series  
seek to address the present debate  
over the Western tradition  
by reprinting key works of  
that tradition along with essays  
that evaluate each text from  
different perspectives.*

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IMMANUEL KANT

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*with essays by*

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## Editor's Preface

Kant's little book of 1785 is one of the most significant texts in the history of ethics. It has been a standard of reference — sometimes a model to be developed and expanded on, sometimes a target of criticism — for moral philosophers from the German idealist and German Romantic traditions, for Victorians of the utilitarian school such as Mill and Sidgwick, for later British idealists such as Green and Bradley, for the neo-Kantians, for twentieth-century philosophers in both the continental and the anglophone traditions, and for moral philosophers of all persuasions right down to the present day. From the standpoint of the depth and originality of the ideas it contains, it undoubtedly deserves this influence. But in the development of Kant's own moral thinking, it occupies a place that ought to make us question the wisdom of treating it, the way moral philosophers customarily do, as the definitive statement of Kant's views on ethics.

Kant first gave notice of his intention to produce a system of moral philosophy under the title “metaphysics of morals” about 1768. It took him eighteen years to deliver even the first installment of the promised system, which he gave a title indicative of the tentativeness and incompleteness of what he thought he had so far accomplished: he was only *laying the ground for* a “metaphysics of morals” by seeking out and establishing its first principle.

Kant apparently began composing the *Groundwork* late in 1783. Letters written by Kant's brilliant but eccentric friend J. G. Hamann report that he began writing about moral philosophy in order to provide an ‘anticritique’ of Christian Garve's 1783 book on Cicero's treatise *On Duties*. But according to Hamann, during the spring of 1784 this critical discussion of Garve on Cicero was transformed into something quite different, a “Prodromus der Moral” (Ak 4:626–28). The title “Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten” is first mentioned in a letter from Hamann in September 1784.

Hamann's correspondence reveals him to be an avid Kant-watcher, sometimes a helpfully critical one. But there is reason to be skeptical about his account of the genesis of the *Groundwork*. Hamann's account has in-

spired scholars as reputable as Klaus Reich and H. J. Paton to seek in the *Groundwork* for allusions to Cicero, and even to think that they have found them. But there are no explicit references either to Cicero or to Garve's book about him. Kant may have been drawn to the subject of ethics in part by reading and reflecting on Garve's book or Cicero's classical treatise, but it seems unlikely that the *Groundwork*, as we now have it, could have grown out of a critical discussion of Garve on Cicero. The "Prodomus der Moral" would seem to be a project independent of any 'anticritique' of Garve that Kant could have been undertaking.

Kant was working on other topics in 1784 whose affinity with the ethical theory presented in the *Groundwork* is also worth noting. For instance, he was reviewing Herder's *Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity* and writing two other short essays, *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Standpoint* and *Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* that reflect on human history, the social sources of the evil in human nature, the role of autonomous reason in directing our lives, and the rational prospects for the moral progress of the human species. But perhaps no special explanation is needed for the fact that Kant finally got around to addressing a subject he had been promising to write on for the past sixteen years.

Whatever the actual history of its genesis, the *Groundwork* went into press with Johann Hartknoch of Riga late in 1784. Throughout the winter, and into the spring of 1785, Kant's followers waited impatiently for its appearance (Ak 4:628). Apparently the first copies were available on April 7. A second edition, altered in a number of passages throughout (but never very greatly in any of them), appeared in 1786. This second edition went through six more reprintings during Kant's lifetime.

Kant seems always to have treated the *Groundwork* as a successful laying of the ground for the ethical theory presented in his later writings. But clearly he soon came to regard it as not providing a complete or wholly clear presentation even of the foundations of his system, for only three years later he wrote a *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) with the aim of clarifying those foundations, correcting misunderstandings, and answering criticisms of his moral philosophy that had come from readers of the *Groundwork*. It is a matter of controversy how far what is said in the second *Critique* involves revisions of what Kant said in the *Groundwork*, but many scholars think that Kant meant to supplant the argument of the Third Section, where the *Groundwork* establishes freedom of the will and relates freedom to the moral law. In the following decade Kant wrote a number of essays and treatises on topics involving the application of his moral philosophy to politics, history,

international relations, education, and religion. But it was only after he had retired from university teaching, and as he began to realize that his mental powers were beginning to fail him, that he finally assembled from the notes and drafts of many years a work he called the *Metaphysics of Morals*, which was published as one of his very last works.

Kant's essays and treatises of the 1790s, and especially the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1798), give us explicit accounts of many matters on which readers of the *Groundwork* customarily try to deduce the "Kantian view" (by triangulation, as it were) from what he says in this little foundational treatise. Many doctrines standardly attributed to Kant on the basis of these triangulations — on topics such as the nature of moral motivation, the relation between reason and feeling in human action, the structure of everyday moral reasoning, and the nature of the will's freedom — do not harmonize very well with what Kant actually says in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, or other later works. This discrepancy strongly suggests that the *Groundwork* does not give us Kant's final word on everything, and implies that where the *Groundwork* itself is not entirely explicit, it ought perhaps to be interpreted (often very differently from the customary ways of interpreting it) in light of his other, later, more explicit writings. But so influential has the *Groundwork* been, in comparison with his other ethical writings, that Kant will perhaps always be burdened with what the long tradition of moral philosophers have read of (and sometimes read into) what he said in his first foundational text on moral philosophy.

The *Groundwork* is unquestionably the starting point not only for any study of Kant's moral theory, but for any attempt to understand, develop, or criticize any of the wide variety of "Kantian" ideas that have exercised such a powerful influence on people's thinking about morality, politics, and religion in the centuries since this little book was first published. The translator and editor of this volume, as well as the writers of the four essays that follow the text, hope they have presented Kant's *Groundwork* in a way that will further its ongoing appropriation by everyone who thinks about the fundamental issues raised in it.



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## A Note on the Translation

Kant's *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* has had many English translations. The most estimable are those by Thomas K. Abbott (1883), H. J. Paton (1948), Lewis White Beck (1949, revised several times, most notably in 1959 and 1990), and Mary J. Gregor (1996). Yet I have found even these fine translations unsatisfying at certain points because, in order to provide a smoother English reading, they are too often content to remain at a distance from what Kant actually said, and because they sometimes commit themselves too much to one possible interpretation where the original text is tantalizingly ambiguous. Also, over the years I have come to be aware that some of their words and phrases, even some that now echo in the ears of us who have for many years been reading the *Groundwork* in translation, are not the very best choices to translate precisely what Kant was saying.

In the present translation my aim has been to place the English reader, as far as possible, in the same interpretive position as the German reader of the original. Doing so has dictated taking pains to achieve accuracy and literalness in the translation, as far as this can be made consistent with intelligibility. It has also led to the attempt to preserve, as far as possible, a consistency in terminology, not only with technical terms but even with nontechnical ones. Where variations in meaning or context require the same term to be translated in different ways, a numbered footnote informs the reader of what is going on. (The unnumbered footnotes are Kant's own.) Kant's paragraphing and even sentence structure have been respected, because Kant's sentences often constitute units of argument, and modifying them for the sake of more graceful English prose often makes the argument harder to comprehend. Further, since my aim has been to put the English reader in the same interpretive position as the German reader of the original, I have not attempted to make the translation clearer or more elegant than Kant's German is; in fact, where Kant's writing is obscure or awkward, I have tried to reproduce the same murkiness and cumbersomeness in English that the German reader would encounter.

For these reasons, some will perhaps find this translation less smooth

and readable in places than the existing ones. Yet greater literalness and transparency in a translation can often be as clarifying as confusing, as much an invitation to ponder the meaning of the text as an obstacle to understanding it. In such cases, the increased difficulty is, I believe, more than compensated for by greater consistency, accuracy, and precision. I am translating for those who want to know, insofar as they can know it from an English translation, exactly what Kant said, so that they can have an accurate basis for their own thinking, exegetical and critical, about what Kant said. That sort of person will not be looking for easy reading.

The priorities in translating a text must obviously depend on the nature and purpose of the text itself. Poetry should probably be translated only by poets; philosophy certainly needs to be translated by philosophers. What matters in a philosophical text is almost exclusively *what it means*. What a philosophical text means is constituted by the range of possible alternative constructions that a reader's philosophical imagination can justifiably put on the words in which the text expresses its questions, doctrines, and arguments. A translation succeeds, therefore, to the extent that it provides a reliable basis for this work of imagination, neither constraining the reader to adopt the translator's own preferred imaginings nor suggesting possible meanings that the original text cannot bear. Faithfulness to the precise wording of the text is one way of achieving this; another is the use of a consistent terminology, even if the reader must adjust slightly to an English idiolect needed to convey the thoughts Kant expressed in German.

To a philosophical mind, the meaning of the text, taken in this sense, matters incomparably more than the smoothness of the prose; difficult prose is even an advantage if it provokes the kind of questioning, or even the bewilderment, that leads to fruitful philosophical reflections that are also really about what Kant was saying. To such a mind, in fact, there is something intellectually offensive about a translation that merely gestures in the direction of what Kant said, leaving it to the common sense of readers (that is, to the philosophical prejudices that a great historical text should help them to unlearn) not merely to resolve the ambiguities, but even to determine where they are. Likewise, there is even something aesthetically repugnant about a translation whose smoothness of style glosses over philosophical difficulties for the sake of achieving a facility of comprehension or a rhetorical elegance that were not in the original text.

Abbott's translations of Kant's foundational writings on ethics were remarkable for their time because Abbott attempted accuracy when other translators of philosophical works were often content with highly interpretive paraphrases, or sought to interpose their own idiosyncratic readings of

a text between it and the English reader. Paton, Beck and Gregor are superior to the degree that they represent increasing attentiveness to what the text says. Such a trend seems healthy or even inevitable. The more carefully a text is studied, the more closely and subtly it will be read, and the more sensitive its readers will become to the need for translations that reproduce as far as possible precisely the same interpretive situation as that confronted by a reader of the original. Once a translation is available that achieves this to a higher degree, philosophical readers will adjust to the inconveniences they must incur in order to obtain the advantage. Readers who want to think hard about what the text says will not be content with something less accurate just because it is easier to read.

Another direct incitement to do a new translation of the *Groundwork* at this time was the availability of the new edition of the German text, published by Bernd Kraft and Dieter Schönecker in Felix Meiner Verlag's Philosophische Bibliothek series. This text of the *Grundlegung* was used as the basis for the present translation. One of the special virtues of the new Meiner Verlag edition is its attention to variations between the two earliest versions of the text, the first published in 1785, the second a year later. The edition usually follows the 1786 version, but notes inform the reader of the differences. The present translation does likewise wherever textual differences make a difference in translation (which they usually do). In a few places I have also followed the editors of the new text in making textual emendations where the sense seems to require it. But I have done this only reluctantly (and less often than the editors of the original text did); wherever emendations are made, of course, a numbered footnote informs the reader; in some cases, a note suggests a possible emendation, and what it would have meant in the translation, but without actually adopting it.

This translation has benefited greatly from careful comments by, and long discussions with, Dieter Schönecker. His care, precision, and linguistic expertise and his intimate knowledge of the text of the *Grundlegung* saved me from many errors and led to many improvements in the translation. Schönecker and Kraft also made available to me a draft of their editorial notes; I tried to reciprocate this favor by providing them with some informational notes they did not yet have. Also helpful were textual corrections and thoughtful stylistic suggestions made by Derek Parfit. In identifying Kant's references to classical philosophy and literature, I also benefited from the expertise, erudition, and generosity of Tad Brennan, John Cooper, and Elizabeth Tylawsky.





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# Abbreviations

Like this translation of the *Groundwork*, most writings of Kant available in English provide marginal volume: page numbers from the definitive German edition (Ak). In the footnotes to this text of the *Groundwork*, the writings of Kant are cited by title in English and by Ak volume:page number. In the essays, they are cited by abbreviations listed here.

- Ak *Immanuel Kants Schriften*. Ausgabe der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1902–)
- Ca *Cambridge Edition of the Writings of Immanuel Kant* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992–)
- G *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (1785), Ak 4  
*Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*
- KrV *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781, 1787), cited by A/B pagination  
*Critique of Pure Reason*, Ca
- KpV *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (1788), Ak 5  
*Critique of Practical Reason*, Ca *Practical Philosophy*
- MA *Mutmasslicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte* (1786), Ak 8  
*Conjectural Beginning of Human History*, Ca *Anthropology, History and Education*
- MS *Metaphysik der Sitten* (1797–1798), Ak 6  
*Metaphysics of Morals*, Ca *Practical Philosophy*
- R *Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (1793–1794), Ak 6  
*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Ca *Religion and Rational Theology*
- VA *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (1798), Ak 7  
*Anthropology from a Pragmatic Standpoint*, Ca *Anthropology, History and Education*
- VE *Vorlesungen über Anthropologie*, Ak 25  
*Vorlesungen über Ethik*, Ak 27  
*Lectures on Ethics*, Ca *Lectures on Ethics*

- VL *Vorlesungen über Logik*, Ak 9, 24  
*Lectures on Logic*, Ca *Lectures on Logic*
- WA *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* (1784), Ak 8  
*An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* Ca *Practical Philosophy*

## Formulations of the Moral Law

Kant formulates the moral law in three principal ways. The first and third of these have variants which are intended to bring the law closer to intuition and make it easier to apply. These five principal formulations of the moral law are abbreviated as follows.

First formula:

FUL *The Formula of Universal Law*: “Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (G 4:421; cf. G 4:402)

with its variant

FLN *The Formula of the Law of Nature*: “So act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a **universal law of nature**” (G 4:421; cf. G 4:436)

Second formula:

FH *The Formula of Humanity as End in Itself*: “Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as end and never merely as means” (G 4:429; cf. G 4:436)

Third formula:

FA *Formula of Autonomy*: “the idea of the will of every rational being as a will giving universal law” (G 4:431; cf. G 4:432) or “Not to choose otherwise than so that the maxims of one’s choice are at the same time comprehended with it in the same volition as universal law” (G 4:440; cf. G 4:432, 434, 438)

with its variant,

FRE *The Formula of the Realm of Ends*: “Act in accordance with maxims of a universally legislative member for a merely possible realm of ends” (G 4:439; cf. G 4:433, 437, 438)

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Groundwork  
for  
the Metaphysics of Morals

[Ak 4:385]



Ancient Greek philosophy was divided into three sciences: **physics**, **ethics**, and **logic**.<sup>1</sup> This division is perfectly suitable to the nature of the thing and one cannot improve upon it, except only by adding its principle, in order in this way partly to secure its completeness and partly to be able to determine correctly the necessary subdivisions.

All rational cognition is either *material*, and considers some object, or *formal*, and concerns itself merely with the form of the understanding and of reason itself and the universal rules of thinking in general, without distinction among objects.<sup>2</sup> Formal philosophy is called **logic**, but material philosophy, which has to do with determinate objects and the laws to which they are subjected, is once again twofold. For these laws are either laws of **nature** or of **freedom**. The science of the first is called **physics**, and that of the other is **ethics**; the former is also named ‘doctrine of nature’, the latter ‘doctrine of morals’.

Logic can have no empirical part, i.e., a part such that the universal and necessary laws of thinking rest on grounds that are taken from experience; for otherwise it would not be logic, i.e., a canon for the understanding or reason which is valid for all thinking and must be demonstrated. By contrast, natural and moral philosophy can each have their empirical part, because the former must determine its laws of nature as an object of experience, the latter must determine the laws for the will of the human being insofar as he is affected by nature—the first as laws in accordance with which everything happens, the second as those in accordance with which everything ought to happen, but also reckoning with the conditions under which it often does not happen.

[Ak 4:388]

One can call all philosophy, insofar as it is based on grounds of experi-

1. According to Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers* 7.39, this division was first devised by Zeno of Citium (335–265 B.C.) and was characteristic of the Stoics. See, e.g., Seneca, *Epistles* 89.9; Cicero, *On Ends* 4.4.

2. Cf. *Critique of Pure Reason*, A50–55/B74–79.

ence, *empirical*, but that which puts forth its doctrines solely from principles *a priori*, *pure* philosophy. The latter, when it is merely formal, is called *logic*; but if it is limited to determinate objects of the understanding, then<sup>3</sup> it is called *metaphysics*.

In such a wise there arises the idea of a twofold metaphysics, the idea of a *metaphysics of nature* and of a *metaphysics of morals*. Physics will thus have its empirical but also a rational part; and ethics likewise; although here the empirical part in particular could be called *practical anthropology*, but the rational part could properly be called *morals*.<sup>4</sup>

All trades, handicrafts, and arts have gained through the division of labor, since, namely, one person does not do everything, but rather each limits himself to a certain labor which distinguishes itself markedly from others by its manner of treatment, in order to be able to perform it in the greatest perfection and with more facility. Where labors are not so distinguished and divided, where each is a jack-of-all-trades, there the trades still remain in the greatest barbarism. But it might be a not unworthy object of consideration to ask whether pure philosophy in all its parts does not require each its particular man, and whether it would not stand better with the learned trade as a whole if those who, catering to the taste of the public, are accustomed to sell the empirical along with the rational, mixed in all sorts of proportions<sup>5</sup> unknown even to themselves — calling themselves ‘independent thinkers’,<sup>6</sup> and those who prepare the merely rational part ‘quibblers’<sup>7</sup> — if they were warned not to carry on simultaneously two enterprises that are very different in their mode of treatment, each of which perhaps requires a particular talent, and the combination of which in a single person produces only bunglers: thus I here ask only whether the nature of the science does not require the empirical part always to be carefully separated from the rational, placing ahead of a genuine (empirical) physics a metaphysics of nature, and ahead of practical anthropology a metaphysics of morals, which must be carefully cleansed of everything

3. 1785: “understanding, is called”

4. Kant later includes “principles of application” drawn from “the particular nature of human beings” *within* “metaphysics of morals” itself, leaving “practical anthropology” to deal “only with the subjective conditions in human nature that hinder people or help them in fulfilling the laws of a metaphysics of morals” (*Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak 6:217).

5. *Verhältnisse*

6. *Selbstdenker*

7. *Grübler*

empirical, in order to know how much pure reason could achieve in both cases; and from these sources pure reason itself creates its teachings *a priori*, whether the latter enterprise be carried on by all teachers of morals (whose name is legion) or only by some who feel they have a calling for it. [Ak 4: 389]

Since my aim here is properly directed to moral philosophy, I limit the proposed question only to this: 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; for that there must be such is self-evident from the common idea of duty and of moral laws. Everyone must admit that a law, if it is to be valid morally, i.e., as the ground of an obligation, has to carry absolute necessity with it; that the command ‘You ought not to lie’ is valid not merely for human beings, as though other rational beings did not have to heed it; and likewise all the other genuinely moral laws; hence that the ground of obligation here is to be sought not in the nature of the human being or the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but *a priori* solely in concepts of pure reason, and that every other precept grounded on principles of mere experience, and even a precept that is universal in a certain aspect, insofar as it is supported in the smallest part on empirical grounds, perhaps only as to its motive, can be called a practical rule, but never a moral law.

Thus not only are moral laws together with their principles essentially distinguished among all practical cognition from everything else in which there is anything empirical, but all moral philosophy rests entirely on its pure part, and when applied to the human being it borrows not the least bit from knowledge about him (anthropology), but it gives him as a rational being laws *a priori*, which to be sure require a power of judgment sharpened through experience, partly to distinguish in which cases they have their application, and partly to obtain access for them to the will of the human being and emphasis for their fulfillment, since he,<sup>8</sup> as affected with so many inclinations, is susceptible to the idea of a pure practical reason, but is not so easily capable of making it effective *in concreto* in his course of life.

Thus a metaphysics of morals is indispensably necessary not merely from a motive of speculation, in order to investigate the source of the practical principles lying *a priori* in our reason, but also because morals themselves remain subject to all sorts of corruption as long as that guiding [Ak 4:390]

8. Kant’s text reads *diese*, which would be translated “the latter” and refer to “fulfillment”; editors suggest amending it to *dieser*, which would refer to ‘the human being’.



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