



Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals: Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals (Immanuel Kant)

Immanuel Kant

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By Immanuel Kant

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Translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott

Ancient Greek philosophy was divided into three sciences: physics, ethics, and logic. This division is perfectly suitable to the nature of the thing; and the only improvement that can be made in it is to add the principle on which it is based, so that we may both satisfy ourselves of its completeness, and also be able to determine correctly the necessary subdivisions.

All rational knowledge is either material or formal: the former considers some object, the latter is concerned only with the form of the understanding and of the reason itself, and with the universal laws of thought in general without distinction of its objects. Formal philosophy is called logic. Material philosophy, however, has to do with determinate objects and the laws to which they are subject, is again twofold; for these laws are either laws of nature or of freedom. The science of the former is physics, that of the latter, ethics; they are also called natural philosophy and moral philosophy respectively.

Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals (1785; also known as the Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals and the Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals) is the first of Immanuel Kant's mature works on moral philosophy and remains one of the most influential in the field. Kant conceives his investigation as a work of foundational ethics—one that clears the ground for future research by explaining the core concepts and principles of moral theory and showing that they are normative for rational agents. Kant aspires to nothing less than this: to lay bare the fundamental principle of morality and show that it applies to us. In the text, Kant provides a groundbreaking argument that the rightness of an action is determined by the character of the principle that a person chooses to act upon. Kant thus stands in stark contrast to the moral sense theories and teleological moral theories that dominated moral philosophy at the time he was writing.

The Groundwork is broken into a preface, followed by three sections. Kant's argument works from common reason up to the supreme unconditional law, in order to identify its existence. He then works backwards from there to prove the relevance and weight of the moral law. The third and final section of the book is famously obscure, and it is partly because of this that Kant later, in 1788, decided to publish the Critique of Practical Reason.

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