

Section I
Transition from common rational to
philosophic moral cognition

Nils' Annotations
 [commentary in square brackets]

The good will alone is absolutely morally good--that is, good without qualification. Everything else that seems good is good in a qualified way (i.e. only under certain conditions).

It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a **good will**. Understanding, wit, judgment³ and the like, whatever such *talents* of mind⁴ may be called, or courage, resolution, and perseverance in one's plans, as qualities of *temperament*, are undoubtedly good and desirable for many purposes,⁵ but they can also be extremely evil and harmful if the will which is to make use of these gifts of nature, and whose distinctive constitution⁶ is therefore called *character*, is not good. It is the same with *gifts of fortune*. Power, riches, honor, even health and that complete well-being and satisfaction⁷ with one's condition called *happiness*, produce boldness and thereby often arrogance⁸ as well unless a good will is present which corrects the influence of these on the mind and, in so doing, also corrects the whole principle of action and brings it into conformity with universal ends⁹ – not to mention that an impartial rational spectator can take no delight in seeing the uninterrupted prosperity of a being graced with no feature of a pure and good will, so that a good will seems to constitute the indispensable condition even of worthiness to be happy.

Some qualities are even conducive⁹ to this good will itself and can

³ *Geistes*. Compare Kant's use of *Geist* in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (7:225) and of *Geisteskräfte* in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (6:445).

⁴ *in mancher Absicht*, perhaps "in many respects"

⁵ *Beschaffenheit*, occasionally translated as "character." "Constitution" is also used to translate *Einrichtung* and sometimes *Anlage*, which is used rather loosely in the *Groundwork*.

⁶ Kant uses a great variety of words for what could be called "pleasure" (*Lust*) in the most general sense. Although he later draws broad distinctions among pleasures in terms of their origins (e.g., between the pleasure of taste and that of sensation, and between both of these and moral pleasure), these distinctions still leave a number of words problematic. Within the *Groundwork* (4:396) he suggests a distinction between *Zufriedenheit* or "satisfaction" in general and reason's own kind of *Zufriedenheit*, which in that context I have translated as "contentment." However, his vocabulary is not consistent, and I have not attempted to make it so.

⁷ *Mut . . . Übermut*

⁸ *allgemein-zweckmäßig mache*

⁹ *beförderlich*. Compare *The Metaphysics of Morals* (6:407–9). *Befördern* is usually translated as "to further" or "to promote."

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make its work much easier; despite this, however, they have no inner unconditional worth but always presuppose a good will, which limits the esteem one otherwise rightly has for them and does not permit their being taken as absolutely good. Moderation in affects and passions, self-control, and calm reflection are not only good for all sorts of purposes but even seem to constitute a part of the *inner* worth of a person; but they lack much that would be required to declare them good without limitation (however unconditionally they were praised by the ancients); for, without the basic principles of a good will they can become extremely evil, and the coolness of a scoundrel makes him not only far more dangerous but also immediately more abominable in our eyes than we would have taken him to be without it.

The good will's absolute goodness means it is also intrinsically good, good in itself and not because of what it accomplishes.

A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, because of its fitness to attain some proposed end, but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself and, regarded for itself, is to be valued incomparably higher than all that could merely be brought about by it in favor of some inclination and indeed, if you will, of the sum of all inclinations. Even if, by a special disfavor of fortune or by the niggardly provision of a stepmotherly nature, this will should wholly lack the capacity to carry out its purpose – if with its greatest efforts it should yet achieve nothing and only the good will were left (not, of course, as a mere wish but as the summoning of all means insofar as they are in our control) – then, like a jewel, it would still shine by itself, as something that has its full worth in itself. Usefulness or fruitlessness can neither add anything to this worth nor take anything away from it. Its usefulness would be, as it were, only the setting to enable us to handle it more conveniently in ordinary commerce or to attract to it the attention of those who are not yet expert enough, but not to recommend it to experts or to determine its worth.

The idea of a will being good totally independently of what it accomplishes sounds a bit odd, especially since our will is determined by a rational faculty that seems designed to figure out which means to take to accomplish which ends. So, let's probe this idea of an absolutely good (rational) will further.

There is, however, something so strange in this idea of the absolute worth of a mere will, in the estimation of which no allowance is made for any usefulness, that, despite all the agreement even of common understanding with this idea, a suspicion must yet arise that its covert basis is perhaps mere high-flown fantasy and that we may have misunderstood the purpose of nature in assigning reason to our will as its governor. Hence we shall put this idea to the test from this point of view.

² *zweckmäßig zum Leben eingerichteten*. *Zweck* is translated as “end” except when it occurs as part of *zweckmäßig*, *Zweckmäßigkeit*, and *zwecklos*.

In order to clarify the idea of the good will, let's look at the concept of duty; a will acting from duty is a will constrained in a way that makes it good.

Since I'm explicating what it is to act 'from duty', I'm going to ignore actions done in violation of duty.

We have, then, to explicate^d the concept of a will that is to be esteemed in itself and that is good apart from any further purpose, as it already dwells in natural sound understanding and needs not so much to be taught as only to be clarified – this concept that always takes first place in estimating the total worth of our actions and constitutes the condition of all the rest. In order to do so, we shall set before ourselves the concept of **duty**, which contains that of a good will though under certain subjective limitations and hindrances, which, however, far from concealing it and making it unrecognizable, rather bring it out by contrast and make it shine forth all the more brightly.

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I here pass over all actions that are already recognized as contrary to duty, even though they may be useful for this or that purpose; for in their case the question whether they might have been done *from duty* never arises, since they even conflict with it. I also set aside actions that are really in conformity with duty but to which human beings have *no inclination* immediately^e and

^c *Anlagen*

^d *entwickeln*. In the context of organisms generally, and more specifically with reference to man's talents and capacities, this is translated as "to develop." However, in the context of analytic and synthetic propositions, see the Jäsche *Logik* (9:111, *Anmerkung 1*), where it is said that in an implicitly identical proposition (as distinguished from a tautology), a predicate that lies *unentwickelt (implicite)* in the concept of the subject is made clear by means of *Entwicklung (explicatio)*.

^e *unmittelbar*. Kant occasionally uses *direkt* as a synonym; no temporal reference is intended.

I'm also going to set aside actions that are merely consistent with duty but performed only to satisfy some incidental desire ('inclination')--e.g. as when a prudent shopkeeper sets her prices fairly, not because she recognizes that morality requires it, nor because she feels compelled to be nice to her customers, but because she calculates that she will make the most profit that way--i.e. because she judges that honesty is the most profitable policy.

Preserving one's life is a moral duty [Kant thinks]. Doing so out of inclination--such as fear of death or a desire to live--has no true moral worth. But doing so when there is no inclination, no desire or impulse to preserve one's life, or even when there's a desire to die, and only because one recognizes that it's one's moral duty to keep living--this has moral worth.

More general point: even when the inclination to act is for the sake of the thing itself ('I just want to live', 'I just want to be nice'), rather than for some unrelated ulterior purpose ('being nice gains me more profit'), even this has no true moral worth, though we might admire the person who instinctively wants the right things (e.g. being nice, continuing to live...).

which they still perform because they are impelled^f to do so through another inclination. For in this case it is easy to distinguish whether an action in conformity with duty is done *from duty* or from a self-seeking purpose. It is much more difficult to note this distinction when an action conforms with duty and the subject has, besides, an *immediate* inclination to it. For example, it certainly conforms with duty that a shopkeeper not overcharge an inexperienced customer, and where there is a good deal of trade a prudent merchant does not overcharge but keeps a fixed general price for everyone, so that a child can buy from him as well as everyone else. People are thus served *honestly*; but this is not nearly enough for us to believe that the merchant acted in this way from duty and basic principles of honesty; his advantage required it; it cannot be assumed here that he had, besides, an immediate inclination toward his customers, so as from love, as it were, to give no one preference over another in the matter of price. Thus the action was done neither from duty nor from immediate inclination but merely for purposes of self-interest.

On the other hand, to preserve one's life is a duty, and besides everyone has an immediate inclination to do so. But on this account the often anxious care that most people take of it still has no inner worth and their maxim has no moral content. They look after their lives *in conformity with duty* but not *from duty*. On the other hand, if adversity and hopeless grief have quite taken away the taste for life; if an unfortunate man, strong of soul and more indignant about his fate than despondent or dejected, wishes for death and yet preserves his life without loving it, not from inclination or fear but from duty, then his maxim has moral content.

To be beneficent^g where one can is a duty, and besides there are many souls so sympathetically attuned that, without any other motive of vanity or self-interest they find an inner satisfaction in spreading joy around them and can take delight in the satisfaction of others so far as it is their own work. But I assert that in such a case an action of this kind, however it may conform with duty and however amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth but is on the same footing with other inclinations, for example, the inclination to honor, which, if it fortunately lights upon what is in fact in the common interest and in conformity with duty and hence honorable, deserves praise and encouragement but not esteem; for the maxim lacks moral content, namely that of doing such actions not from inclination but *from duty*. Suppose, then, that the mind of this philanthropist were overclouded by his own grief, which extinguished all sympathy with the fate of others, and that while he still had the means to benefit

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^f *getrieben*. *Antrieb* is translated as "impulse."

^g *Wohltätig sein*. In view of Kant's distinction between *Wohltun* and *Wohlwollen* (6:393, 450 ff.), *Wohltun* and its cognates are translated in terms of "beneficence" and *Wohlwollen* in terms of "benevolence."

4:399 others in distress their troubles did not move him because he had enough to do with his own; and suppose that now, when no longer incited to it by any inclination, he nevertheless tears himself out of this deadly insensibility and does the action without any inclination, simply from duty; then the action first has its genuine moral worth. Still further: if nature had put little sympathy in the heart of this or that man; if (in other respects an honest^h man) he is by temperament cold and indifferent to the sufferings of others, perhaps because he himself is provided with the special gift of patience and endurance toward his own sufferings and presupposes the same in every other or even requires it; if nature had not properly fashioned such a man (who would in truth not be its worst product) for a philanthropist, would he not still find within himself a source from which to give himself a far higher worth than what a mere good-natured temperament might have? By all means! It is just then that the worth of character comes out, which is moral and incomparably the highest, namely that he is beneficent not from inclination but from duty.

It is undoubtedly in this way, again, that we are to understand the

^h *ehrlicher*. I have translated this as “honest” because Kant gives the Latin *honestas* as a parenthetical equivalent of such derivatives of *Ehre* as *Ehrbarkeit*. However, the context often makes it clear that he is not thinking of “honesty” in the narrow sense.

ⁱ *allgemeine*

passages from scripture in which we are commanded to love our neighbor, even our enemy. For, love as an inclination cannot be commanded, but beneficence from duty – even though no inclination impels us to it and, indeed, natural and unconquerable aversion opposes it – is *practical* and not *pathological*^j love, which lies in the will and not in the propensity of feeling,^k in principles of action and not in melting sympathy; and it alone can be commanded.

The second proposition is this: an action 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, and therefore does not depend upon the realization of the object of the action but merely upon the *principle of volition* in accordance with which the action is done without regard for any object of the faculty of desire. That the purposes we may have for our actions, and their effects as ends and incentives of the will, can give actions no unconditional and moral worth is clear from what has gone before. In what, then, can this worth lie, if it is not to be in the will in relation to the hoped for effect of the action? It can lie nowhere else *than in the principle of the will* without regard for the ends that can be brought about by such an action. For, the will stands between its a priori principle, which is formal, and its posteriori incentive, which is material, as at a crossroads; and since it must still be determined by something, it must be determined by the formal principle of volition as such when an action is done from duty, where every material principle has been withdrawn from it.

The third proposition, which is a consequence of the two preceding, I would express as follows: *duty is the necessity of an action from respect for law*. For an object as the effect of my proposed action I can indeed have *inclination* but *never respect*, just because it is merely an effect and not an activity of a will. In the same way I cannot have respect for inclination as such, whether it is mine or that of another; I can at most in the first case approve it and in the second sometimes even love it, that is, regard it as favorable to my own advantage. Only what is connected with my will merely as ground and never as effect, what does not serve my inclination but outweighs it or at least excludes it altogether from calculations in making a choice^l – hence the mere law for itself – can be an object of respect and so a command. Now, an action from duty is to put aside entirely the influence of inclination and with it every object of the will; hence there is left for the will nothing that could determine it except

Since an action performed from duty doesn't derive its moral worth from what it accomplishes or seeks to accomplish, then where does it derive this value? Well, once we take away the ends to be accomplished, what's left? All that's left is an action as such or in general--something willed for a reason, or volition under a principle. So, an action must derive its moral worth from the reason, or rule, or 'principle', or 'maxim'--that the action embodies.

If there are no inclinations, e.g. desires, fears, impulses, that can move the will to act from duty, what can do this? To say that no inclinations can move the will to act from duty is to say that nothing external to the principle or 'maxim' the action embodies can move the will to so act. The only motivation left, then, is the agent's recognizing that willing an action on that maxim is required in itself. To see the action as required in this way is to see its maxim as laying down a rule or law--something that one must follow--something anyone must follow, since the need to act upon it isn't dependent on any inclination. The recognition that the maxim lays down a law is 'respect' for the law: this is the motivation to act--a respect in recognition of a maxim's being required.

^j *pathologische*, i.e., dependent upon sensibility

^k *Empfindung*. In the *Critique of Judgment* (5:206) Kant distinguishes an “objective sensation” (e.g., green) from a “subjective sensation” (e.g., pleasure) and suggests that misunderstanding could be avoided if “feeling” (*Gefühl*) were used for the latter. I have followed his suggestion, while indicating the German word in a note.

^l *bei der Wahl*

4:401 objectively the *law* and subjectively *pure respect* for this practical law, and so the maxim* of complying with such a law even if it infringes upon all my inclinations.

Thus the moral worth of an action does not lie in the effect expected from it and so too does not lie in any principle of action that needs to borrow its motive from this expected effect. For, all these effects (agreeableness of one's condition, indeed even promotion of others' happiness) could have been also brought about by other causes, so that there would have been no need, for this, of the will of a rational being, in which, however, the highest and unconditional good alone can be found. Hence nothing other than the *representation of the law* in itself, *which can of course occur only in a rational being*, insofar as it and not the hoped-for effect is the determining ground of the will, can constitute the preeminent good we call moral, which is already present in the person himself who acts in accordance with this representation and need not wait upon the effect of his action.†

Since all ends have been removed from what contributes to the good will's being absolutely good, the law that moves the good will to act on a maxim can't be a conditional law like 'if you want to be fit, get regular exercise', since the force of a law like that depends on achieving a particular end--being fit. So, the good will can't be moved to adopt a maxim because it recognizes the force of such a conditional law--one that helps achieve some desired end. The good will can only be moved to adopt the maxim out of the mere recognition that it is a law; that it lays down a universal requirement. Since what else is a law but a universal requirement?

But what kind of law can that be, the representation of which must determine the will, even without regard for the effect expected from it, in order for the will to be called good absolutely and without limitation? Since I have deprived the will of every impulse that could arise for it from obeying some law, nothing is left but the conformity of actions as such with universal law,^m which alone is to serve the will as its principle, that is,

*A *maxim* is the subjective principle of volition; the objective principle (i.e., that which would also serve subjectively as the practical principle for all rational beings if reason had complete control over the faculty of desire) is the practical *law*.

†It could be objected that I only seek refuge, behind the word *respect*, in an obscure feeling, instead of distinctly resolving the question by means of a concept of reason. But though respect is a feeling, it is not one *received* by means of influence; it is, instead, a feeling *self-wrought* by means of a rational concept and therefore specifically different from all feelings of the first kind, which can be reduced to inclination or fear. What I cognize immediately as a law for me I cognize with respect, which signifies merely consciousness of the *subordination* of my will to a law without the mediation of other influences on my sense. Immediate determination of the will by means of the law and consciousness of this is called *respect*, so that this is regarded as the *effect* of the law on the subject, and not as the *cause* of the law. Respect is properly the representation of a worth that infringes upon my self-love. Hence there is something that is regarded as an object neither of inclination nor of fear, though it has something analogous to both. The *object* of respect is therefore simply the *law*, and indeed the law that we impose upon *ourselves* and yet as necessary in itself. As a law we are subject to it without consulting self-love; as imposed upon us by ourselves it is nevertheless a result of our will; and in the first respect it has an analogy with fear, in the second with inclination. Any respect for a person is properly only respect for the law (of integrity and so forth) of which he gives us an example. Because we also regard enlarging our talents as a duty, we represent a person of talents also as, so to speak, an *example of the law* (to become like him in this by practice), and this is what constitutes our respect. All so-called moral interest consists simply in *respect* for the law.

^m *die allgemeine Gesetzmäßigkeit der Handlungen überhaupt*

This provides the first categorical imperative: only act on maxims that you recognize as having the form of a law. What is a law? Something universal! So, only act on maxims that one could universalize.

I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law. Here mere conformity to law as such, without having as its basis some law determined for certain 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. Common human reason also agrees completely with this in its practical appraisals and always has this principle before its eyes. Let the question be, for example: may I, when hard pressed, make a promise with the intention not to keep it? Here I easily distinguish two significations the question can have: whether it is prudent or whether it is in conformity with duty to make a false promise. The first can undoubtedly often be the case. I see very well that it is not enough to get out of a present difficulty by means of this subterfuge but that I must reflect carefully whether this lie may later give rise to much greater inconvenience for me than that from which I now extricate myself; and since, with all my supposed *cunning*, the results cannot be so easily foreseen but that once confidence in me is lost this could be far more prejudicial to me than all the troubles" I now think to avoid, I must reflect whether the matter might be handled *more prudently* by proceeding on a general maxim and making it a habit to promise nothing except with the intention of keeping it. But it is soon clear to me that such a maxim will still be based only on results feared. To be truthful from duty, however, is something entirely different from being truthful from anxiety about detrimental results, since in the first case the concept of the action in itself already contains a law for me while in the second I must first look about elsewhere to see what effects on me might be combined with it. For, if I deviate from the principle of duty this is quite certainly evil; but if I am unfaithful to my maxim of prudence this can sometimes be very advantageous to me, although it is certainly safer to abide by it. However, to inform myself in the shortest and yet infallible way about the answer to this problem, whether a lying promise is in conformity with duty, I ask myself: would I indeed be content that my maxim (to get myself out of difficulties by a false promise) should hold as a universal law (for myself as well as for others)? and could I indeed say to myself that every one may make a false promise when he finds himself in a difficulty he can get out of in no other way? Then I soon become aware that I could indeed will the lie, but by no means a universal law to lie; for in accordance with such a law there would properly be no promises at all, since it would be futile to avow my will with regard to my future actions to others who would not believe this avowal or, if they rashly did so, would pay me back in like coin; and thus my maxim, as soon as it were made a universal law, would have to destroy itself.

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[Kant here offers a test to see whether lying is permissible: could one still act on the lying promise maxim if it were universalized? No, he says, since the practice of promising requires honesty. A world in which lying promises were universalized would make promising impossible. The maxim is, in this sense, self-defeating, so one could not will the maxim to become a universal law. The test will be elaborated a little later on in the book].

I do not, therefore, need any penetrating acuteness to see what I have

" *alles Übel. Übeln* is translated as "troubles" or "ills." "Evil" is reserved for *Böse*.