



THE  
DEVELOPMENT OF  
KANT'S  
VIEW OF  
ETHICS



KEITH WARD



WILEY Blackwell



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## PREFACE

This is not a general introduction to Kant's ethics; it is not primarily concerned with expounding the *Groundwork*, the Analytic of the *Critique of Practical Reason* or the *Metaphysic of Morals*; excellent commentaries now exist on all those central ethical works. I have written for the reader or student who has some knowledge of Kant's ethical doctrine, as it can be found in one or more of the texts mentioned, but who has not the time to read all those other works in Kant's voluminous output which are relevant to and often of great importance for his view of ethics. My aim is to put the well-known doctrines in the overall context of Kant's developing philosophy. And I am concerned, not so much with the ethical doctrines themselves, as with Kant's view of the nature of morality—what he took morality to be—as it developed throughout his life. If to put something in context is to understand it better, then such a programme will help in attaining a general view of Kant's concerns in ethics; and it may well hold some surprises for those whose Kantian diet has been confined, say, to the *Groundwork*.

I think it is true to say that general verdicts on Kant's ethics are still common which such a fuller view shows to be quite inaccurate—for instance, that he was not concerned with ends of action, or that the postulates of practical reason are irrelevant additions to his central doctrines, or that he is the stern prophet of 'duty for duty's sake', without regard to considerations of human fulfilment or happiness. Such mistaken views are less common in Britain now than they used to be; but there is still widespread lack of knowledge of many of Kant's writings which are important for his ethical views, such as the *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* and the essays on history. This book deals with most of Kant's published writings, in so far as they are relevant to ethics,

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and so it provides a general view of the origins, development and metaphysical context of his ethical theory.

It is probable that many readers will wish to study what I have to say on specific topics in Kant, without having to consider material which is of secondary importance for their purposes. Consequently, I have divided the text into numbered sections with appropriate headings, and have included an analytical table of contents in which the various main topics are listed.

Finally, it should be noted that I have consistently used the word 'metaphysics' in a non-Kantian sense—i.e. to mean, not *a priori* elements of knowledge, but a general speculative account of the nature of reality, derived from whatever source. I have found it convenient to use the word in this sense; and, as long as it is remembered that it is a non-Kantian sense, it should cause no confusion.

I should like to thank the editor of the *Philosophical Quarterly* for permission to use material from 'Kant's Teleological Ethics' (1971). I am also grateful to Leslie Stevenson and those who read the manuscript for my publishers, who made very helpful comments.

## LIST OF TEXTUAL REFERENCES

To avoid frequent use of footnotes, I have put all references to Kant's works in the text. I have first put the page number of the English translation, where there is one; followed by the page number of the German text, thus:

(o, 61; Ber. 2, 218.)

Almost all references to the German text are to the edition issued by the Royal Prussian Academy, now the German Academy of Sciences, in Berlin (published from 1902 onwards). This is abbreviated as 'Ber.', followed by the volume and page number. An exception is *Eine Vorlesung Kant's uber Ethik*, ed. Menzer (Pan Verlag Rolf Heise, Berlin, 1924), which is abbreviated as 'Vor.'

In quoting from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I have followed the traditional practice of citing page numbers from both the 1781 ('A') edition and the 1787 ('B') edition, thus:

(A. 561; B. 589.)

The abbreviations for the English translations I have used are listed below, in order of their appearance in the text:

- ND: *Nova Dilucidatio*, 1755 (*Principiorum Primorum Cognitionis Metaphysicae*), trans. F. E. England, in *Kant's Conception of God*, pp. 211-52 (Allen and Unwin, London, 1929).
- TH: *Theory of the Heavens* (General History of Nature and Theory of the Heavens), trans. W. D. Hastie, in *Kant's Cosmogony* (Maclehose, Glasgow, 1900).
- R: *Kant, A Study* (selected translations), G. Rabel (Oxford University Press, 1963).
- ID: *Inaugural Dissertation* (On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible World) in SPW (below).
- O: *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, trans. J. T. Goldthwait (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1960).

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- MM: 'The Doctrine of Virtue' (Part 2 of the *Metaphysic of Morals*), trans. Mary Gregor (Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1964).
- PE: *Prize Essay* ('Enquiry Concerning the Clarity of the Principles of Natural Theology and Ethics') in SPW (below).
- S: *Kant's Pre-Critical Ethics*, P. A. Schilpp (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1960).
- D: *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, trans. E. F. Goerwitz, ed. F. Sewall (Swann Sonnenschein, London, 1900).
- LE: *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1963).
- SPW: *Kant: Selected Pre-Critical Writings*, trans. G. B. Kerferd and D. E. Walford (Manchester University Press, 1968).
- KPC: *Kant: Philosophical Correspondence, 1759-99*, trans. A. Zweig (University of Chicago Press, 1967).
- A and B: The first and second editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (Macmillan, London, 1933).
- P: *Prolegomena*, trans. P. G. Lucas (Manchester University Press, 1953).
- CPR: *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. L. W. Beck (Bobbs-Merrill, New York, 1956).
- CTJ: *Critique of Teleological Judgment*, trans. J. C. Meredith, (Oxford University Press, 1952).
- G: *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics, (Groundwork)*, trans. T. K. Abbott (Longmans, London, 1959).
- MEJ: 'The Metaphysical Elements of Justice' (Part 1 of the *Metaphysic of Morals*), trans. W. Hastie, in *Kant's Philosophy of Law* (T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1887).
- CAJ: *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford University Press, 1952).
- OH: *On History*, trans. L. W. Beck, R. E. Anchor and E. L. Fackenheim (Bobbs-Merrill, New York, 1963).
- Rel.: *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1960).

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## CHAPTER ONE

# THE RATIONALIST BACKGROUND

### I. I INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is to provide an exposition of the relation between Kant's ethical and metaphysical views, with special reference to works other than the first two *Critiques* and the *Groundwork*. In particular, I hope to show that, though Kant certainly did stress, as no one had previously, the categorical nature of moral obligation, yet Kantian ethics is, in a fundamental sense, a teleological ethic, concerned above all with ends of action, human fulfilment and happiness. Thus it is essentially bound up with metaphysical doctrines of human nature and destiny and cannot be adequately understood in isolation from them.

The study of Kant has always constituted a major part of philosophy courses in British Universities; and in recent years a number of new critical commentaries have added to the already impressive list of British and American Kant studies. Almost all of these commentaries, however, have confined themselves to an exposition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*; and then have often been chiefly concerned with the 'Transcendental Logic'. In ethics discussion has centred almost entirely on the *Groundwork to the Metaphysic of Morals* and, sometimes, the *Critique of Practical Reason*. The so-called pre-Critical works—those written before the first *Critique*, in 1781—and the later works—*Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, the *Essays* and even the *Metaphysic of Morals* itself—have been almost totally neglected.

Some of this neglected ground has been covered in *Kant's Philosophy of Religion*, by C. J. Webb, and in Mary Gregor's commentary on the *Metaphysic of Morals*. But all that exists to date on Kant's pre-Critical ethics is Paul Schilpp's work of that title—which is, as I shall indicate, rather idiosyncratic in its interpretation—and parts of Teale's book on *Kantian Ethics*.

This, however, is primarily an attempt to construct an original moral thesis on Kantian foundations, rather than an historical account of Kant's thought. There is no work in English which attempts to trace the overall development of Kant's ethical views, in relation to his metaphysical doctrines.

The consequence of this restricted treatment of Kant is that many philosophy graduates are left with the impression that Kant's chief aim was to outlaw all forms of speculative, transcendent metaphysics and to construct a purely descriptive account of the way in which we talk about the ordinary world—namely, as a world of causally interacting substances in one space and time. In ethics he is thought to have attempted, perhaps rather grotesquely, to establish that the fundamental principle of morality is the criterion of 'universalisability'—namely, that a principle is a moral principle if and only if one is prepared to apply it impartially to all agents in sufficiently similar circumstances.

These two aspects of Kant's thought—the descriptive analyses of fact-stating language and moral language—are rarely brought into an integral relation to each other. Further, the whole pre-Critical background to Kant's thinking; the problems which drove him towards a 'Critical philosophy'; the doctrine of Idealism, albeit 'Transcendental'; the 'moral proofs' of God in the two later *Critiques*; the underlying teleological view of nature; and the full working-out of a moral theology towards the end of his life—all these remain unknown to or unconsidered by a great number of those who successfully complete university courses on Kant.

I believe these less explored parts of Kant's philosophy to be of major interest in themselves, raising, as they do, the difficult and important problem of the relation between ethical and metaphysical beliefs, which was one of Kant's central concerns. They are also an essential foundation of any interpretation of Kant which seeks an accurate historical perspective. I have therefore tried to outline the development of Kant's metaphysical and ethical views in a way which may illuminate some of his better-known doctrines by tracing their origin and setting them in the wider context of his thought.

Such criticisms as I have made have been almost entirely internal ones, arising out of conflicts or obscurities in Kant's own texts. Although I think that Kant's work is relevant to much

contemporary discussion in ethics (particularly, perhaps, to discussion of the relation between moral obligation and human flourishing), I have thought it better to let such relevancies occur to the reader, who will bring his own background and interests to the texts. So I have not tried to defend some form of the Kantian theory I describe. I have outlined part of a positive view of ethics which has some Kantian affinities, though also many disaffinities, in *Ethics and Christianity* (Allen and Unwin, London, 1970). I have here simply tried to present an adequate account of the development of Kant's view of ethics, throughout a period of almost fifty years, from the writing of the *Nova Dilucidatio* and the anonymous publication of the *Theory of the Heavens*, in 1755, to the remnants collected in the *Opus Postumum*, written between 1800–1803. As well as illustrating the great range of his thought, I hope the exposition will reveal the continuing centrality for Kant's ethics of certain metaphysical or religious concerns and a continuous development in his treatment of them.

## 1.2 EARLY INFLUENCES

A vital key to the understanding of Kant's views is the fact that his parents were both devout members of the Pietist Church.<sup>1</sup> Like many evangelical Christian organisations, Pietism emphasised the doctrine of justification by faith alone and the necessity of 'rebirth' as a dramatic and personal experience of conversion and salvation. It stressed the value of Bible study and corporate prayer, made no distinction between clergy and laity, and demanded the cultivation of an intense devotional life, to be outwardly manifested in charitable works. Whatever the possible dangers of such a religion, it evidently found in Kant's parents, who were materially poor, an embodiment the memory of which always continued to impress him. Thus he had set before him, from his earliest years, an example of simple piety at its best; and his deepest religious convictions never moved far from this ideal of the religious life.

However, in his early school education he also saw this type of

<sup>1</sup> Accounts of Kant's early life and education can be found in: F. W. Schubert, in vol. 11 of Rosenkranz and Schubert's edition of the *Sammtliche Werke* (Leipzig, 1842). One of the fullest biographies in English is: J. H. W. Stuckenberg, *Life of Immanuel Kant* (Macmillan, London, 1882), which gives a list of primary sources.

Protestantism at its worst—where the outward show of extreme piety was valued above an undemonstrative sincerity; where moral worth was almost replaced by emotional intensity; where pupils were reminded constantly of their sins; and where attendance at long and no doubt dreary devotional sessions was obligatory. It is not hard to see, in this rigorous training, the cause of Kant's subsequent distaste for all forms of outward or communal expression of belief, all emotional expressions of faith and all ecclesiastical functions. His frequent castigation of love as a 'pathological feeling', entirely unconnected with moral worth—which contrasts so completely with the normal Christian profession—can possibly be seen as a reaction to those often hypocritical displays of religious emotion encouraged in his school days.

Besides Pietism, the other main influence on Kant's thought was the philosophical rationalism which derived from Leibniz, as systematised and elaborated by Christian Wolff. This was taught to Kant at the University of Königsberg by Knutzen, a teacher he greatly esteemed. Knutzen himself managed to combine Pietism and rationalism; and the combination of simple faith and rigorous intellect is very characteristic of his greatest pupil.

It is plain that the combination of these two schools of thought is not easily achievable. There is the difference of an era between the man of faith, who lives by Divine revelation and self-abnegation; and the man of the Enlightenment, for whom reason is the final judge in all matters, even those of religion, and who accepts only what he can see to be deducible from self-evident truths. There is no better expression of this tension of attitudes than the Critical philosophy itself, which asserts, at one and the same time, both the humility of reason—in its limitation to a world of appearance—and the absolute authority of reason—in its presentation of the categorically binding moral imperative.

Kant's pre-critical writings, however, show that the influence of Wolffian rationalism was uppermost, and indeed almost unchallenged in his thinking for many years. This is particularly clear in the work which he wrote in 1755, the *Nova Dilucidatio* ('A New Exposition of the First Principles of Metaphysical Knowledge'). It is worth giving a brief sketch of this little-known work, as it presents very clearly the rationalist doctrine of God and nature which formed the starting-point of Kant's thinking in metaphysics, and fundamentally influenced his view of the

nature of ethics. It may, I think, be claimed that without some knowledge of this rationalist background, the later development of Kant's view of ethics must be largely unintelligible, since that background set his problems and defined his aims in philosophy.

### 1.3 THE PRINCIPLE OF SUFFICIENT REASON

Kant's attitude in the *Dilucidatio* is entirely Wolffian; for though he quarrels with Wolff on some points, these are all matters of technical detail, which do not affect the general position. The world is considered to be a perfectly rational whole, the structure of which can be discovered by the human intellect, working in accordance with a few *a priori* principles—principles which are prior to, and not derived from experience. Ultimately, the logical key to the rational structure of the world is taken to be the subject-predicate proposition. All meaningful propositions assert that some subject has (or, according to Wolff, is identical with) a certain set of predicates; and any possible world can be completely described by a set of such propositions. The principle of sufficient reason (which Kant prefers to call the principle of determining reason) determines which states actually exist in this world. For it determines, for every particular thing, the set of predicates which hold of it, and it does this by excluding from it every other predicate from the sum total of possible predicates—including, of course, the negations of those predicates which do hold. There is thus a sufficient reason for every thing being as it is; and this reason operates through natural causality, whereby each state of affairs is brought into being by another state, its cause.

However, everything cannot be determined by something other than itself, for in that case there would be no truly sufficient reason for anything. Consequently, there must exist a determiner of all things which is not itself determined by anything else. If nothing determines the nature of this 'first cause', it must by the simple fact of its existence determine itself to be what it is and exclude all other possible predicates from itself—including, again, the negation of all the predicates which constitute it. But anything which, by its mere existence, excludes the possibility of its negation must be a necessarily existing being. The non-existence of such a being is absolutely impossible. Thus the first cause must be a necessary being.

Kant now argues that one can only conceive a being to be necessary in its existence if its nonexistence removes any possibility of conception (if it is unthinkable). This is only possible if the necessary being is in some sense itself the ground of all possibilities. For then, if it did not exist, no possibilities would remain at all. Since one can only conceive what is possible, the nonexistence of a necessary being is strictly inconceivable. So the first cause, which necessarily exists, is also the unitary ground of all possibilities. 'Whatever there is of reality in every possible notion must exist necessarily' in one unlimited being. (ND, 224; Ber. 1, 395.) This being, God, contains all possibilities in a super-eminent way, and all contingent realities must be thought of as participations in and limitations of his all-reality. God must, moreover, be purely actual, eternal and immutable; for all change implies transition from potentiality to actuality, and God must be the totally actual ground which is prior to all possibility whatsoever.

Finally, Kant claims to have provided a proof of the principle of sufficient reason itself. For, as he claims to have shown, if anything exists which is not subject to that principle, then its existence must be absolutely necessary. But a necessary being must also contain in itself the ground of all possibility, and there can be only one such ground, by definition. Therefore the plurality of finite things must be completely determined by the principle of sufficient reason.

The unsatisfactoriness of these proofs need not be laboured; in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant examines them in detail and rejects them as founded on insupportable presuppositions. In particular, in the *Dilucidatio*, Kant assumes that there must be a reason why everything is determined to be just what it is, even if this reason in the ultimate analysis is that things must necessarily be so. But that is just what needs to be proved. The importance of this paper is that it clearly demonstrates that Kant's first philosophical interest was to defend and amplify the structure of Wolffian rationalism, and it introduces the dominant Kantian notions of 'necessity', 'totality' and 'causality' in their original, if to us unfamiliar, dress.

On the view Kant presents, there is a totality of all possible predicates. Out of this totality, the principle of determining reason determines one set of predicates in a subject, with the exclusion of all other predicates, and thus provides a reason for

the being of every finite, contingent thing. The chain of reasons, which is also the chain of efficient causes, extends back to the first state of the world. Given the actual contingent existence of a first state of the world, all its subsequent states follow necessarily, according to the principle of determining reason; but the positing of that first state itself was an act of free choice on the part of God.

The act of creation, however, is not free, in the sense that it is quite arbitrary; such a view would reduce the origin of the world to blind chance. There is, it seems, a sufficient reason in God which determines that just this first state of the world should come into being and no other. And that is simply that this is the best of all possible worlds. As Kant remarks in his little paper *On Optimism*, there is only one possible world which is worthy of being created by God, since it is the best of all possible worlds, and so God must create it. His act is nonetheless free, because it is determined by motives of perfect intelligence which incline the will, and not by a mere blind power of nature.

Kant maintains that the perfect intelligence of God can, in one intuitive act, bring before his mind all possible combinations of identity and incompatibility of subjects and predicates. (Cf. ND, 219; Ber. 1, 391.) God can envisage all possibilities because his own being is the ground of them all, though in him they are unlimited by any determining principle of exclusion or logical principle of contradiction. God knows his own essence completely; and he knows with absolute certainty what contingent worlds he could bring into being, by limiting his own all-reality by the principles of identity and determining reason.

According to his perfect intelligence, then, he knows all possible worlds that could be brought into being. According to his perfect morality, his will inclines towards the best of these possible worlds; that is, the world which results in 'the greatest perfection of created things, and the greatest happiness of the spiritual world'. (ND, 237; Ber. 1, 404.) And according to his perfect power, he brings that world into being which the motives of his perfect intelligence and morality have determined. Thus the first state of the world 'directly exhibits God as Creator', for it is determined by motives of perfect intelligence and will, and it finds its sufficient or determining reason in that limiting exclusion of opposing predicates which actualises the most perfect