



## Critique of Kantian Ethics

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The fallacy of supposing moral law to be analogous to natural law in respect of asserting that some action is one which is always necessarily done is contained in one of the most famous doctrines of Kant. Kant identifies what ought to be with the law according to which a Free or Pure Will *must* act—with the only kind of action which is possible for it. And by this identification he does not mean merely to assert that Free Will is *also* under the necessity of doing what it ought; he means that what it ought to do *means* nothing but its own law—the law according to which it must act. It differs from the human will just in that, what *we* ought to do, is what *it* necessarily does. It is “autonomous”; and by this is meant (among other things) that there is no separate standard by which it can be judged: that the question “Is the law by which this Will acts a good one?” is, in its case, meaningless. It follows that what is necessarily willed by this Pure Will is good, not *because* that Will is good, nor for any other reason; but merely because it is what is necessarily willed by a Pure Will.

Kant’s assertion of the “Autonomy of the Practical Reason” thus has the very opposite effect to that which he desired; it makes his Ethics ultimately and hopelessly “heteronomous.” His Moral Law is “independent” of Metaphysics only in the sense that according to him we can *know* it independently; he holds that we can only infer that there is Freedom, from the fact that the Moral Law is true. And so far as he keeps strictly to this view, he does avoid the error, into which most metaphysical writers fall, of allowing his opinions as to what is real to influence his judgments of what is good. But he fails to see that on his view the Moral Law is dependent upon Freedom in a far more important sense than that in which Freedom depends on the Moral Law. He admits that Freedom is the *ratio essendi* of the Moral Law, whereas the latter is only the *ratio cognoscendi* of Freedom. And this means that, unless Reality be such as he says, no assertion that “This is good” can possibly be true: it can indeed have no meaning. He has, therefore, furnished his opponents with a conclusive method of attacking the validity of the Moral Law. If they can only shew by some other means (which he denies to be possible but leaves theoretically open) that the nature of Reality is not such as he says, he cannot deny that they will have proved his ethical principle to be false. If what “This ought to be done” *means* “This is willed by a Free

Will,” then, if it can be shewn that there is no Free Will which wills anything, it will follow that nothing ought to be done.

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And Kant also commits the fallacy of supposing that “This ought to be” means “This is commanded.” He conceives the Moral Law to be an Imperative. And this is a very common mistake. “This ought to be,” it is assumed, must mean “This is commanded”; nothing, therefore, would be good unless it were commanded; and since commands in this world are liable to be erroneous, what ought to be in its ultimate sense means “what is commanded by some real supersensible authority.” With regard to this authority it is, then, no longer possible to ask “Is it righteous?” Its commands cannot fail to be right, because to be right means to be what it commands. Here, therefore, law, in the moral sense, is supposed to be analogous to law, in the legal sense, rather than, as in the last instance, to law in the natural sense. It is supposed that moral obligation is analogous to legal obligation, with this difference only that whereas the source of legal obligation is earthly, that of moral obligation is heavenly. Yet it is obvious that if by a source of obligation is meant only a power which binds you or compels you to do a thing, it is not because it does do this that you ought to obey it. It is only if it be itself so good, that it commands and enforces only what is good, that it can be a source of moral obligation. And in that case what it commands and enforces would be good, whether commanded and enforced or not. Just that which makes an obligation legal, namely the fact that it is commanded by a certain kind of authority, is entirely irrelevant to moral obligation. However an authority be defined, its commands will be *morally* binding only if they are—morally binding; only if they tell us what ought to be or what is a means to that which ought to be.

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In this last error, in the supposition that when I say “You ought to do this” I must mean “You are commanded to do this,” we have one of the reasons which has led to the supposition that the particular supersensible property by reference to which good must be defined is Will. And that ethical conclusion may be obtained by enquiring into the nature of a fundamentally real Will seems to be by far the commonest assumption of Metaphysical Ethics at the present day. But this assumption seems to owe its plausibility, not so much to the supposition that “ought” expresses a “command,” as to a far more fundamental error. This error consists in supposing that to ascribe certain predicates to a thing is the same thing as to say that that thing is the object of a certain kind of psychical state. It is supposed that to say that a thing is real or true is the same thing as to say that it is known in a certain way; and that the difference between the assertion that it is good and the assertion that it is real—between an ethical, therefore, and a metaphysical proposition—*consists* in the

fact that whereas the latter asserts its relation to Cognition the former asserts its relation to Will.

Now that this is an error has been already shewn.... That the assertion "This is good" is *not* identical with the assertion "This is willed," either by a supersensible will, or otherwise, nor with any other proposition, has been proved; nor can I add anything to that proof. But in face of this proof it may be anticipated that two lines of defence may be taken up. (1) It may be maintained that, nevertheless, they really are identical, and facts may be pointed out which seem to prove that identity. Or else (2) it may be said that an *absolute* identity is not maintained: that it is only meant to assert that there is some special connection between will and goodness, such as makes an enquiry into the real nature of the former an essential step in the proof of ethical conclusions. In order to meet these two possible objections, I propose first to shew what possible connections there are or may be between goodness and will; and that none of these can justify us in asserting that "This is good" is identical with "This is willed." On the other hand it will appear that some of them may be easily confused with this assertion of identity; and that therefore the confusion is likely to have been made. This part of my argument will, therefore, already go some way towards meeting the second objection. But what must be conclusive against this is to shew that any possible connection between will and goodness *except* the *absolute* identity in question, would not be sufficient to give an enquiry into Will the smallest relevance to the proof of any ethical conclusion.

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G.E. Moore. *Principia Ethica*. Chapter 4. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903.

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