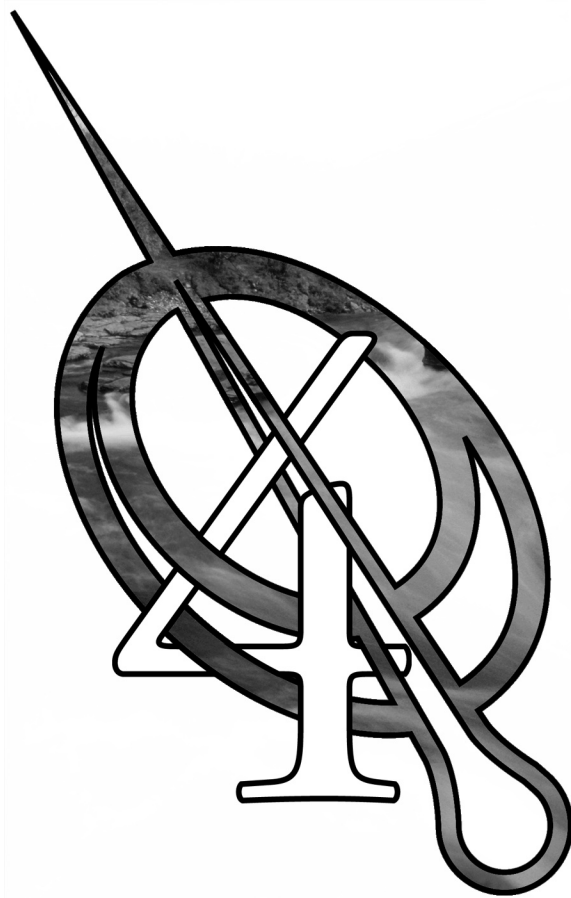


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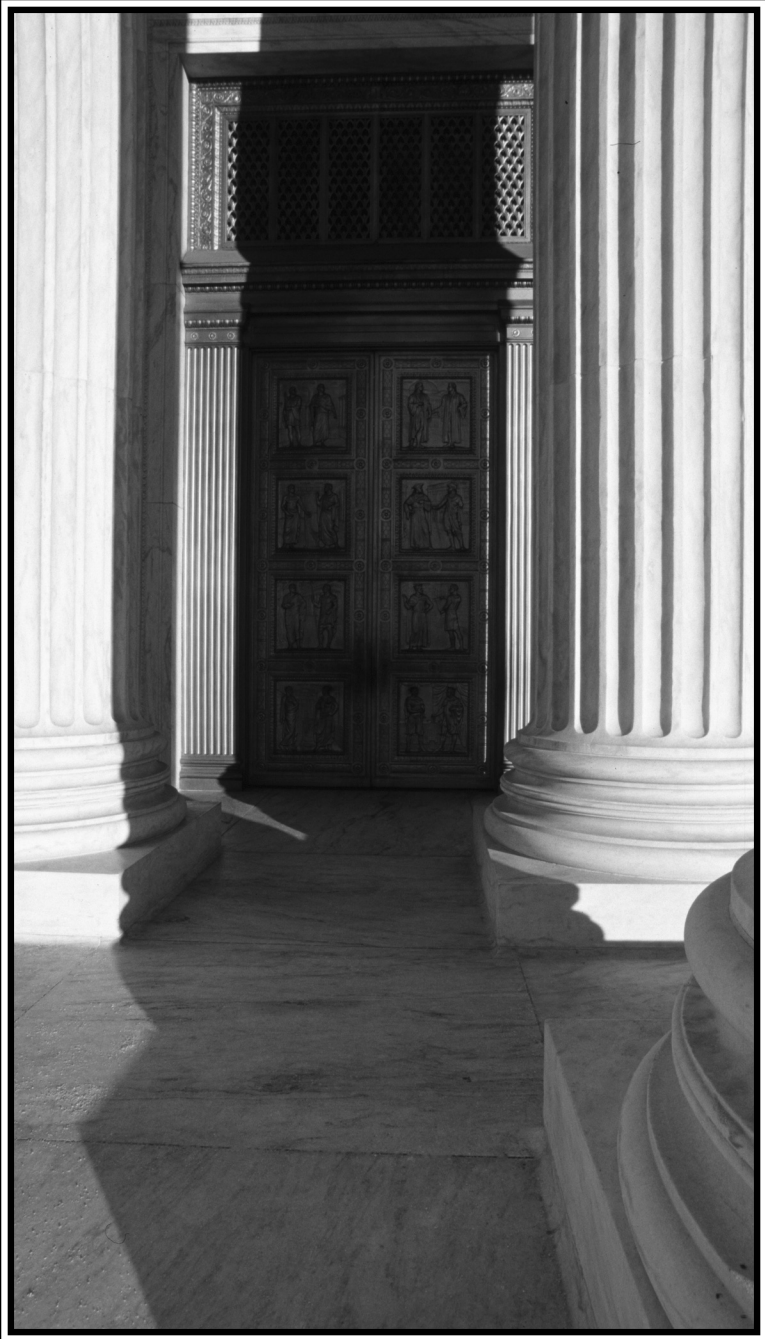


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A Compact Rational Moral Commentary

DISCUSSING *Kant's Ethical Thought* WITH ALLEN W WOOD

AN INTERVIEW BY
JOSHUA M HILL &
ANTHONY O'ROURKE

HILL & O'ROURKE: Let's begin with the relevance of Kant's thought to contemporary issues. In the preface to your book, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, you state that your interest in Kant stems from your experience of the present age. What do you feel to be the merit of examining Kant's ethics with respect to those social and ethical problems confronted by the contemporary philosopher—or, for that matter, cosmopolitan citizen—as an heir of the Enlightenment?

WOOD: This is a very open-ended question. I would not expect to derive from Kant's ethical theory any very precise prescriptions about particular social problems, and that was not my intention at all in the passage to which you refer. What I was trying to do there is to explain to my reader (and myself) why I find appealing certain themes in Kantian ethics that I emphasize in the book—especially the equal dignity of all rational beings and the Kantian theory of human nature, which makes human society fundamentally a scene of competitiveness and portrays people as very reluctant to acknowledge this equal dignity in practice, and very much disposed to lie to themselves by way of rationalizing their propensity to seek an imagined superiority over others. My point, to put it slightly differently from the way I did there, was that the age in which we have been living is one in which most people would acknowledge the equal dignity of all people, but also one in which human inequality is on the increase. It is also an age in which dominant ways of thinking, especially in this country, are transparent rationalizations for greed, ambition and the lust to dominate others. Social Darwinist ideologies play a role here, so does the fetishistic worship of the so-called “free market” (an oxymoronic term if ever there was one, since market forces keep most people in a condition of unfreedom).

Kant himself was of course living in a very different time, and I don't think he fully appreciated the practical implications of his own principle of the equal dignity of all rational beings (his views about political representation and the role of women in society, for instance, are bound to strike us today as very much at odds with his own principles.) But I think he the best articulation and defense that has been given of a system of ethical value based on human dignity and equality, and that it is important to us not only to have this set of ideas properly articulated and defended, but also to understand the historical tradition through which those ideas have come down to us. My focus in a book like this is on those points, and not on recipes for applying such principles to our current situation. My own view is that Kantian principles require much more egalitarian political and economic arrangements than now exist or than Kant would have advocated. But to argue that point was not one of the aims of my book.

If someone wonders why it is important to articulate our values clearly and why it is vital to understand the history of the theories in which this has been done, then that raises much larger questions about the value of philosophy itself and the value of historical self-understanding (and the close relationship that exists between these two values). I don't think there is space here to answer those questions.

You contrast the Kantian themes of the equal dignity of all rational beings and the individual's reluctance to acknowledge this equal dignity in practice. In so doing, you appeal to Kant's anthropology. Has the anthropology been an influence on your interpretation of Kant's ethical thought, or do you attribute your interpretation more toward your focus on orienting the *Groundwork* toward Kant's later ethical writings?

These questions get to some of the basic issues about the interpretation of Kant's moral philosophy. So I'll be a bit expansive in answering them, and I hope you will then focus in a bit more on what you want to ask about. To take the very last question right away, this is not a matter of either/or. In studying Kant's writings over the years I have become increasingly aware of the way readers of the *Groundwork*, especially in Anglophone philosophy, have both neglected the anthropological side of Kant's thought and have

tended to use the contents of the *Groundwork* to triangulate on all sorts of specific ethical issues while ignoring what Kant himself actually says in the *Metaphysics of Morals* and other later writings about how these issues are to be addressed. The *Groundwork* is what it says it is—it *lays the ground* for a metaphysics of morals by formulating and establishing the fundamental principle of morality. It specifically refers to a ‘metaphysics of morals’ which is to be a philosophical system of duties distinct from this groundwork, and it says that the *a priori* moral principle is to be applied only through an empirical ‘practical anthropology’ that is not supplied in the *Groundwork*. So the *Groundwork* itself contains enough for you to know that it should not be read or used in the way many people have read and used it. In particular, Kant’s four illustrations of the formula of universal law are *not* intended as a general model of how moral reasoning is supposed to proceed. They are merely attempts to give the reader of the *Groundwork* an intuitive feel for the way in which this first, most abstract formulation of the moral principle might relate to our ordinary conception of our moral duties, and thereby to lend some credibility to Kant’s claim that the principle he has derived is the one that common rational moral cognition always has (tacitly) before its eyes in making its judgments.

Kant never presented a system of ‘practical anthropology’, so we do not know what he thought one would look like. When he came to write the *Metaphysics of Morals* (after some 30 years of putting it off, since the first announcement that he intended to write a work of this title), he actually integrated an empirical theory of human nature into the system of duties contained in that work. So despite this reworking, he retained the basic idea that the principle of morality can be applied only through an empirical theory of human nature.

It might make sense to interpret Kant’s ethics in the traditional Anglophone way if it led to a better theory than Kant’s actual one. But there are notorious problems applying the formula of universal law as if it were supposed to be a general moral criterion—there are many ‘maxims’ for which the universalizability tests simply yield the wrong results. People who consider themselves Kantians still continue, out of a misguided sense of loyalty, to search for an interpretation of this principle that would make it defensible when it is understood as a universal criterion for what to do. But this quest of theirs for a Kantian philosopher’s stone in ethics is misguided, because it is motivated not by anything with a good philosophical basis, or even by

an exaggerated loyalty to Kant himself, but only by a foolish loyalty to one traditional *misreading* of the *Groundwork*.

The greatest appeal of this traditional reading, in my opinion, is that it feeds into a certain picture of what moral principles are for. A moral principle (such as the principle of utility or Kant's formula of universal law) is viewed as a sort of ethical pocket calculator, to be whipped out whenever you face a decision and used to figure out what to do. This isn't the way sensible people have ever made their moral decisions, though, and it isn't the way suggested by Kant's actual moral theory in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. It even seems to me wrongheaded to think that what we should want a moral theory to do is to tell us what to do. For a mature rational being, what we are to do is up to us. In difficult moral situations, it is not even clear that there always is any one thing that the agent ought to do. Rather, a conscientious moral agent should always weigh different considerations and decide for herself what to do. Sometimes it is true that there is only one morally acceptable course, but this is by no means always true, and in those cases where we are most in need of philosophical reflection, it is very seldom true. What a moral theory should do is systematize to some extent the way we should think about what to do in making decisions for ourselves. In my opinion, Kant's way of doing this in the *Metaphysics of Morals* has a lot to recommend it. The other thing we should want from a moral theory is a grounding for our thinking about what to do in the basic value or values on which moral thinking should be based. The function of these basic values (or of a 'supreme principle' that lies close to them) is very different from the moral rules or patterns of reasoning about what to do that we should apply when making decisions.

It fundamentally mistakes the proper role of a 'supreme principle' in moral thinking, treating it as if it were like an everyday moral rule or rule of thumb (such as "Don't break your promises")—only a rule that's supposed to be without exceptions and to direct action in every situation. The actual role of a moral principle is not directly to tell you what to do here and now but only to provide the fundamental context in which to ground a general conception of what our aims in life should be and what sorts of moral constraints there should be on our pursuit of them.

In applying a principle in that way, you also need a theoretically rich conception of the empirical situation in which you are applying it. This

means, at the fundamental level of moral theory, a conception of the human condition—what human needs are, what human beings are like, how they tend to relate to each other. Then you can see what your fundamental moral values dictate about which needs to satisfy and how to satisfy them, and how people should relate to each other—consequently, how their behavior toward one another needs to be regulated. Kant has often been read as a philosopher whose theory is based on a denial of these obvious facts about the task of moral philosophy and its relation to life. But that too is due to a fundamental misreading of his theory—even of the Preface to the *Groundwork*, where he says that practical anthropology is an essential part of moral philosophy. His only negative point there about the study of human nature is that it is not the source of the fundamental principle of morality. But of course it is required for any application of such a principle.

You stress the importance of “common rational moral cognition” as a starting point in Kant’s *Groundwork*. However, in doing so you claim that common rational moral cognition “will support the claims of his ethical theory only if it is supplemented or even corrected by philosophical arguments.”² If we know that our common starting point will require argumentative correction, then why not just begin our moral considerations with rigorous philosophical argumentation?

If you are asking me why Kant began with common rational moral cognition, I think it is because he wanted to begin with an appeal to the moral common sense of his readers, since he was confident that it would endorse the main ideas of his theory, if they were presented correctly. He thought his theory captures the healthy human reason of all moral agents, and so he chose to begin by presenting his theory in that light. My own view is that Kant *grossly* underestimated the extent to which his theory represents a revision of moral common sense (or the accepted moral thinking of people in his day), even if his theory can be grounded (as he thought) on healthy human reason. Consequently, I think the First Section of the *Groundwork*, and especially the discussion of acting from duty, is more controversial than he thought. The First Section is not, in my opinion, as rhetorically effective a presentation of Kant’s theory as he hoped, and what he was saying there has been subject to pervasive misunderstandings, not only by his critics

² *Kant’s Ethical Thought*, 26.

but even by his sympathizers. Your question may imply that I think Kant would have done better to skip the arguments of the First Section and proceed directly to the more philosophical arguments of the Second Section. In a way, I do think that, but I also understand his need to begin by representing his principle as an expression of people's healthy rational convictions—which I also think it is. So I can't endorse the view that he should have simply skipped the First Section. But I do wish that he had done more to prevent his central claims there from being misunderstood.

The social, political and intellectual climate of our time is much different than Kant's. His ethical theory, supposedly, is formulated such that the law is applicable and binding regardless of this change. If there is such a strong connection between common rational moral cognition and rigorous moral thought, does this mean that the social, political, and intellectual spheres have little (if any) influence on pre-philosophical moral thought?

As I would interpret Kant's theory, it formulates the fundamental principle of morality in three basic ways that form an interdependent system. I interpret this as a fallible attempt to articulate the ultimate rational grounds on which we ought to act. Because it is fallible, we certainly can imagine revising it, and even without revising Kant's formulations, we certainly can imagine reinterpreting them, or at least interpreting them differently from the way Kant did (or from the way his contemporaries could have), based on changed circumstances and our changed knowledge. For example, we might reinterpret what it is to treat rational nature as an end in itself based on growth in our knowledge about what 'rational nature' consists in. Such knowledge might include, for instance, greater awareness of the ways of life of different human cultures (which constitute the only instances of rational nature with which we are acquainted) and greater awareness of the biological, psychological or neural bases of our rational faculties. We certainly should reinterpret the demands made on social institutions by the dignity of rational nature, in such matters as the rights of women and the rights of all citizens to active political participation.

Kant tended to stress the continuity between his own moral theory and (what he called) "common rational moral cognition" (which he apparently

thought every rational agent possessed simply as part of their rational faculty). But clearly Kant's principles entail a revision of some common sense moral beliefs in his time—for instance, they require us to consider all rational beings as moral equals, contrary to the aristocratic assumptions that still dominated a lot of moral common sense in his day. And as I have just suggested, it is quite defensible to argue that Kant's principles require a more radical critique of moral common sense than Kant himself was willing to entertain. But I do not understand why you think this might imply that “the social, political, and intellectual spheres have little (if any) influence on pre-philosophical moral thought.” On the contrary, it is all too obvious that pre-philosophical moral thought is much influenced by these matters (for better or worse). Even philosophical moral thought, both as regards the (always fallible) formulation of the fundamental principle of morality and as regards the continuing reinterpretation of our best formulations of that principle, is and ought to be influenced by social, political and intellectual changes, insofar as these increase our knowledge and lead us to formulate and interpret moral principles in new and superior ways.

Even though you hold Kant's formulation to be fallible, you seem to agree with his claim that the fundamental principle of morality, whatever it is, is an *a priori* principle. A different approach seems more popular these days: there are no such principles, and the failure of a monumental moral philosopher to produce such a principle is simply indirect evidence.

The epistemic status of any proposition has to be distinguished from our degree of certainty about it, or the degree of fallibility we ascribe to ourselves regarding our judgments about it. To say that a proposition is such that if it is known, it must be known *a priori* is not to decide one way or another about its truth, or how certain we may be about it, or even whether it is knowable by us at all.

In Hume's *Dialogues*, Demea seems interested in *a priori* arguments for God's existence, and uninterested in empirical arguments for it, because he thinks the *a priori* arguments promise absolute certainty, whereas the empirical ones offer only probability. Maybe this is because propositions in mathematics, which most people take to be the paradigm case of *a priori*

knowledge, are typically also paradigm cases of certainty. But Demea is utterly wrongheaded here. I myself think that if there is any good argument for God's existence, it is probably the ontological argument (the most *a priori* argument there could be for anything). But if you ask me whether I think the ontological argument is sound, I must confess I have no firm position on that. (Even if it is, I should perhaps emphasize, what it proves still leaves us some light years away from endorsing anything like any of the theistic religions through which people have tyrannized over their own minds and which still mislead them in all sorts of ways.) I don't think the ontological argument has been clearly refuted by the standard objections to it (for instance, Kant's). On the other hand, there are too many reasons for doubting the ontological argument's whole way of looking at such things as existence, reality, the meaning of predication, and so on, and for doubting that we have cognitive access to such properties as supreme perfection and the like, for us to be at all sure that the argument is anything that should convince us of anything. And of course having proven metaphysically the existence of a supremely perfect entity or a being than which no greater can be thought would do exactly nothing to render rational the things that most religious people believe, feel and do.

Of course as Hume beautifully demonstrates in the *Dialogues*, Demea's basic motivations—in particular, his craving for 'absolute certainty' in religious matters—are both ugly and pernicious. (They are part of one kind of pernicious religious way of thinking, that is obviously still with us). Demea isn't really a 'rationalist'—he's an anti-rationalist, as we see clearly throughout the *Dialogues*, especially in his comically life-hating speeches in Section X, after he has apparently lightheartedly (and lightheadedly) abandoned the *a priori* argument for God's existence in the face of Cleanthes' objections (which are pretty shallow and dogmatic, if you ask me). About the deepest matters in life, people have to accustom themselves to uncertainty and modesty regarding their own opinions and faculties. A person who cannot do this, who has an irresistible emotional need to cling to some "faith", is always a dangerous person.

Thinking in the area of ethics that is similar to Demea's would be equally wrongheaded and pernicious. Someone who wanted to bolster a closed-minded moral dogmatism by declaring the moral principle to be *a priori* would be just as nasty a character as Demea is portrayed to be. To think of Kantian ethics as doing anything of this sort would be to refuse to take it seriously and to

misunderstand what it is all about in the most basic way imaginable.

Any honest person must admit that what is fundamentally true in ethics is bound to be a matter of controversy for the foreseeable future, and that no one can claim anything resembling infallibility in such matters. One explanation of this might be that ethics fundamentally involves empirical matters where the evidence is mixed. This is no doubt true regarding particular ethical issues, and may explain why some of them are endlessly controversial and uncertain, and no one can claim infallibility about them. But I don't think that is the correct explanation when it comes to fundamental principles of ethics. I think the problem there is not at all that the empirical facts are unclear, but that the fundamental concepts are up for grabs, and the way we should interpret even the most evident empirical facts is murky and unclear.

I tend to be convinced by some of Kant's reasons for thinking that the fundamental principle of morality must be *a priori*. The most convincing consideration to me is that morality is fundamentally a matter of our self-government by our rational faculties, and whatever proceeds from our faculties (as distinguished from what proceeds from the evidence given to them from outside) counts as *a priori*. In this way, empiricists interpret claims of *a priority* exactly wrongly when they think of them as excluding critical thinking and inquiry. On the contrary, to say that something is *a priori* is to say that its source is only in our thinking about things. In effect (to put it in Kantian language) to say that the moral principle is *a priori* is to say no more and no less than that it is the principle of rational autonomy.

In this way, it by no means follows from the fact that the principle comes from our rational faculties that we can be sure what the principle is, or how to formulate it. This may in fact make whatever we think about the foundations of morality even more murky and fallible than if the issues were empirical ones, about which we had some idea how to investigate them. It seems to me one of the serious blind spots in the utilitarian tradition that some have been attracted to this position through the illusory belief that ethical issues could be settled with certainty through empirical investigations (into the felicific tendencies of actions or rules or whatever). It is an advantage of a position that takes ethics to be fundamentally a matter of *a priori* principles that it can give a more correct account of why ethical matters seem so problematic.

But even the utilitarians (the best of them, anyway) were aware of the difficulty and uncertainty of what they were undertaking. One of the best statements ever made of the difficulties of thinking about ethical theory is the final page or so of the Preface of Bentham's *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, where he professes not to know whether his aims are achievable and concludes that there is no 'King's Road' to legislative science. Although Kant conceives the project of a metaphysics of morals very differently from the way Bentham conceives his project, I think a Kantian should say the same things that Bentham did about the difficulty and uncertainty of the task.

The first principle (or principles) of ethics are problematic because our basic thinking about ourselves, our place in the world, and what we should do, is still extremely confused, and there are such a variety of thoughts about it that have some plausibility but not much self-evidence. The fault, that is to say, is not in the state of the empirical evidence, but in ourselves as seekers and interpreters of the evidence. In other words, I think it is a confirmation of the view that the principle of morality is *a priori* that this view gives the correct account of why we are so fallible regarding moral questions.

