

“The Origins of the Good Will: Kant’s Moral Philosophy in the 1760s”

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1. 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. (G 4:393)
2. We can now end where we set out from at the beginning, namely with the concept of an unconditionally good will. (G 4:437)

The “Prize Essay” (1762 / 1764)

3. Metaphysical cognition of God is thus capable of a high degree of certainty in all those areas where no *analogon* of contingency is to be encountered. But when it comes to forming a judgment about His free actions, about providence, or about the way in which He exercises justice and goodness, there can only be, in this science, an approximation of certainty, or a certainty which is moral. For there is still a great deal of obscurity surrounding the concepts which we have of these determinations, even when they occur in ourselves. (PE, 2:297)
4. In order to make this claim clear I shall merely show how little even the primary (*erste*) concept of *obligation* is yet known, and thus how far practical philosophy must still be from furnishing the distinctness and the certainty of the fundamental concepts and the fundamental principles which are necessary for certainty in these matters. (PE, 2:298)
5. The formula by means of which every obligation is expressed is this: one *ought* to do this or that and abstain from doing the other. Now every *ought* expresses a necessity of the action and is capable of two meanings. To be specific: either I ought to do something (as a *means*) if I want something else (as an *end*), or I *ought immediately* to do something else (as an *end*) and make it actual. The former may be called the necessity of the means (*necessitas problematica*), and the latter the necessity of the ends (*necessitas legalis*). The first kind of necessity does not indicate any obligation at all. ... all the actions which are prescribed by morality under the condition of certain ends are contingent. They cannot be called obligations as long as they are not subordinated to an end with is necessary in itself. (PE, 2:298)
6. Having convinced myself after long reflection on this matter, I can now briefly show the following. The rule: perform the most perfect action in your power, is the first *formal ground* of all obligation *to act*. Likewise, the proposition: abstain from doing that which will hinder the realisation of the greatest possible perfection, is the first *formal ground* of the duty *to abstain from acting*. ... no specifically determinate obligation flows from these two rules of the good, unless they are combined with indemonstrable material principles of practical cognition. (PE, 2:299)
7. It is only recently, namely, that people have come to realize that the faculty of representing the *true* is *cognition*, while the faculty of experiencing (empfinden) the *good* is *feeling* (*Gefühl*), and that the two faculties are, on no account to be confused with each other. ... there is an unanalyzable feeling of the good (which is never encountered in a thing absolutely but only relatively to a being endowed with sensibility (*empfindendes*)) ... if [the good] is simple, then the judgment: ‘This is good’, will be completely indemonstrable. ... Take for example the principle: love him who loves you. This is a practical principle which is, it is true, subsumed, albeit immediately under the supreme formal and affirmative rule of obligation. ... It is rather subsumed immediately under the universal rule of good actions. ... An immediate ugliness is to be found in the action, which conflicts with the will of Him, from whom all goodness comes and to whom we owe our existence. ... Hence, the proposition: do what is in accordance with the will of God, is a material principle of morality. ... Hutcheson and others have, under the name of moral feeling, provided us with a starting point from which to develop some excellent observations. (PE 2:299-300)
8. It has yet to be determined whether it is merely the faculty of cognition, or whether it is feeling (*das Gefühl*) (the first, inner ground of the faculty of desire) which decides [practical philosophy’s] first principles. (PE, 2:300)

H1 There are some other Reasons assigned in Words differing from the former, but more confused, such as these: “ ’Tis our Duty to study publick Good. We are obliged to do it. We owe Obedience to the Deity. The whole is to be preferred to a Part.” But let these Words Duty, Obligation, Owing, and the meaning of that Gerund, is to be preferred, be explained ... Many other confused Definitions have been given of Obligation, by no obscure Names in the learned World. (Francis Hutcheson, *Essay* (1728/1742) II.I)

H2 But that our first Ideas of moral Good depend not on Laws, may plainly appear from our constant Inquiries into the Justice of Laws themselves; and that not only of human Laws, but of the divine. ... It must then first be suppos’d, that there is something in Actions which is apprehended absolutely good; and this is Benevolence ...; and that our moral Sense perceives this Excellence. (Francis Hutcheson, *Inquiry* (1726) II.VII.V)

Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime (1762 / 1764)

9. True virtue can only be grafted upon principles, and it will become the more sublime and noble the more general they are. These principles are not speculative rules, but the consciousness of a feeling that lives in every human breast and that extends much further than to the particular grounds of sympathy and complaisance. I believe that I can bring this altogether if I say that it is the *feeling of the beauty and the dignity of human nature* (*das Gefühl von der Schönheit und der Würde der menschlichen Natur*). The first is a ground of universal affection (*Wohlgewogenheit*), the second is a ground of universal respect (*Achtung*). (*Beob*, 2:217)

- H3** The moral Sense, if we form true Opinions of the Tendencies of Actions, and of the Affections whence they spring, as it is the Fountain of the most intense Pleasure, so it is in itself constant, not subject to Caprice or Change. If we resolutely encourage this Sense, it grows more acute by frequent Gratification, never cloy, nor ever is surfeited. We not only are sure never to want Opportunities of doing good, which are in every one's power in the highest Degree; but each good Action is Matter of pleasant Reflection as long as we live. These Pleasures cannot indeed wholly secure us against all kinds of Uneasiness, yet they never tend naturally to increase them. ... These moral Pleasures do some way more nearly affect us than any other: They make us delight in our selves, and relish our very Nature. By these we perceive an internal Dignity and Worth; and seem to have a Pleasure like to that ascribed often to the Deity, by which we enjoy our own Perfection, and that of every other Being. // It may perhaps seem too metaphysical to alledge on this Subject, that other Sensations are all dependent upon, or related by the Constitution of our Nature, to something different from our selves; to a Body which we do not call Self, but something belonging to this Self. That other Perceptions of Joy or Pleasure carry with them Relations to Objects, and Spaces distinct from this Self; whereas the Pleasures of Virtue are the very Perfection of this Self, and are immediately perceived as such, independent of external Objects. (Francis Hutcheson, *Essay* (1728/1742) I.V.X.4)

- M1** One must become acquainted with the true dignity of the human being and consider the sublimity of the human being's ethical nature in the proper light. As an ancient philosopher put it, if someone has the appropriate respect for himself, then he will be all the more inclined to obey the voice of virtue. The shortest path to ethical depravity is to have a low estimation of human nature. ... With true humility in his heart, a person may be proud of the human being's dignity and of the rank which humanity occupies in creation. We must be something important in our own eyes, and what we do and refrain from doing must be of some significance, if we are to espouse the cause of the good with zeal and energy. (Moses Mendelssohn, *Rhapsody* (1761) I:480)

10. But what if the secret language of his heart speaks thus: I must come to the help of this human being, for he suffers; not that he is my friend or companion, or that I hold him capable of sometime repaying my beneficence with gratitude. There is now no time for ratiocination and stopping at questions: He is a human being, and whatever affects human beings also affects me. Then his conduct is based on the highest ground of benevolence in human nature and is extremely sublime, on account of its unalterability as well as the universality of its application. (*Beob*, 2:221)

- “Moral Herder” (Winter 1763–4)**
11. The moral feeling is unanalyzable, a basic feeling, the ground of conscience ... How do we cognize goodness: physical goodness through a physical feeling ... moral goodness through a moral feeling. ... with moral feeling there is never a doubt ... my moral feeling can only [err] if I place custom before natural feeling, but in that case it is merely implicit reason ... and my last yardstick remains moral feeling. ... In order not to err in moral matters, I must seek the 1st proposition of the good. (VMo-H, 27: 5–6)
12. Ethics explained through a doctrine of virtue is good inasmuch as virtue belongs solely before the inner tribunal; but since virtue indicates not just morally good actions, but simultaneously a great possibility of the contrary, and thus includes an inner struggle, this is therefore too narrow a concept [of ethics], since we can also ascribe ethics, but not virtue (properly speaking), to the angels and to God; for there is assuredly holiness but not virtue in them. (VMo-H, 27:13)
13. [Baumgarten] always wrongly supposes the broad concept of obligation, to which he ascribes merely the motive of usefulness (*Nutzens*), in an improper understanding of ethics. For since one only performs a morally good action, who does it from principles, not as a means, but as an end. (VMo-H, 27:14)
14. The sole moral rule ... is this: *Act according to your moral feeling!* (VMo-H, 27:16).
15. The universal moral law—Representations of the good, etc. Impelling causes are merely the ground of desiring. *Universal law* Do what is *good*. Subjectively what you cognize *as* good, objectively what is good in itself. Subjectively universal according to which humans actually act (as with the laws of motion) in the *objective* sense what is good for itself (not according to every *sensible* desire) this is the ground of all obligation. As with the principles of all human cognition there are 2 formulae: so there are two principles of all praxis (do positively the good, omit negatively the evil)[.] These are

practically indemonstrable: the practical indemonstrables in the material sense: what is good? Here I get an intermediate mark (*notam intermediam*)—with every cognition one can consider either the relation to the matter, or on our feeling. The *most universal* law 1) 2) formally 2) materially: what would be good fundamentally, we judge immediately without proof. ... finally I must stop with something which is immediately agreeable: as it is with our concepts which cannot all be analyzed; so also, some feeling immediate and in itself good, for example, gratitude. (VMe-H, 28:883–4 = 97–8)

16. Moral perfection is moral as an end, and not as a means: precisely in that it moves and gratifies us, not through a relation to the effect, but rather immediately in itself.” (VMo-H, 27:13)
17. The immediate pleasure in free actions is called moral feeling (VMo-H, 27:4).
18. Moralists overreach, i.e., Hutcheson on actions from unselfishness (*Uneigennützigkeit*), because he only speaks of love and benevolence to others, although [some] actions immediately directed to ourselves can be morally good, without being directed to use, as means, but rather to immediate goodness. Our human *dignity* and greatness ought to be the incentive (*unsere Menschliche Würde und Größe soll Triebfeder sein*) – not the sensitive prick of favor, the sympathetic participation: those make for a beautiful morality, but the former makes for a true, earnest morality. (VMo-H, 27: 14–15)
19. Self-esteem is rooted in morality; not on the accumulated opinion of others. ... Rousseau’s conception of honor is purely internal, and as such, also is honorableness; a true self-esteem for one’s inner worth. The judgment of others is merely an *accessorium*. It takes *personal* strength to overcome the troubles of conventional morality (*Sittlichkeit*). (VMo-H, 27: 44, 53)
20. The scholar is the most covetous of honor, and thinks of nothing else; works for it, apports it himself and is the trumpet of fame. Knowledge as such is splendid ... but man must learn to recognize his limitations, not merely the logical but also the moral. ... Eagerness for knowledge can eventually throw us entirely out of our orbit. ... Learn to shun the drives that diminish morality, pursue the moral use of your cognitive powers. They may also be greatly cultivated in other things, but prematurely so; between the most sublime human spirit and the lowliest man, there is no true difference of merit, save in regard to morality. (VMo-H, 27:45)

Kant’s “Remarks” in the *Observations* (1764–5)

21. One must teach youth to honor the common understanding for moral as well as logical reasons. I myself am a researcher by inclination. I feel the entire thirst for cognition and the eager restlessness to proceed further in it, as well as the satisfaction at every acquisition. There was a time when I believed this alone could constitute the honor of humanity, and I despised the rabble who knows nothing. *Rousseau* has set me right. ... This blinding prejudice vanishes, I learn to honor human beings, and I would feel by far less useful than the common laborer if I did not believe that this consideration could impart a worth to all others in order to establish the rights of humanity. (BB35 = Ri 38)
22. The capacity to cognize something as a perfection in others does not at all have the consequence that we will feel gratification (*Vergnügen*) in it ourselves. But if we have a feeling for finding gratification in it, then we will also be moved to desire it and to apply our powers to it. Thus the question arises whether we feel gratification immediately in the well-being of another or whether the immediate pleasure (*Lust*) actually lies in the possible exercise of our power to promote [that well-being]. Both are possible, but which is actual. Experience teaches that a human being in the simple state regards the good fortune of another with indifference, but that, if he has promoted it, then it pleases him infinitely more. The ill fortune of another is commonly just as indifferent, but if I have caused it, then it mortifies me, likewise if another has done it. And as far as the participatory instincts of compassion and being well disposed are concerned, we have cause to believe that these are merely great strivings to ameliorate the ills of others, derived from the self-approbation (*Selbstbilligung*) of the soul, which brings forth these sentiments. We have gratification in certain of our perfections, but far more if we ourselves are the cause. Most of all if we are the freely acting cause. To subordinate everything to the free power of choice (*freien Willkür*) is the greatest perfection. And the perfection of the free power of choice as a cause of possibility [of the good] is far greater than all the other causes of the good even if they would produce the actuality [of the good]. (BB 114 = Ri 107–8)
23. The feeling of pleasure (*Lust*) and displeasure is either for something with respect to which we are passive (*leidend*) or is for ourself as an active *principium* through freedom, of good and evil. The latter is moral feeling (*moralische Gefühl*). Past physical evil ... makes us joyful (*erfreuet*), but [past] moral evil grieves us, and the kind of joy (*Freude*) that we take in the good that befalls us is entirely different from that we take in what we do. ... Since the greatest inner perfection, and the perfection that arises from it, consist in the subordination of all of the capacities and receptivities to the free power of choice, so the feeling for the goodness of the free power of choice must be immediately much different from and also greater than [that for] all of the good consequences that can thereby be actualized. (BB 116 = Ri 108–9)
24. The will is perfect insofar as in accordance with the laws of freedom it is the greatest ground of the good in general. The moral feeling (*Gefühl*) is the feeling of the perfection of the will. (BB 109 = Ri 102)
25. One can see that truthfulness does not depend on philanthropy, but on the sense of justice (*sensu juris*) through which we learn to distinguish what may be done from what may not be done. This sense, however, has its origin in the nature of

the human mind, through which one judges what is in itself categorically good (not useful), not according to private benefit or benefit to others, but rather by considering the same action in others: if in that case there arises opposition and contrariety, then [the action] displeases, but if there arises harmony and consensus, then it pleases. Hence, the capacity to put oneself into the place of others is a heuristic means to morality. Indeed, we are by nature social and could not sincerely approve in ourselves what we criticize in others. ... the common sense of good and evil (*sensus boni vel mali communis*) is the criterion of [good and evil]. Opposing minds would eliminate logical certainty, opposing hearts, moral certainty. ... the goodness of the will as a free principle is cognized not insofar as such forms of [private or public] utility arise from it, but rather so far as it is possible in itself. (BB 125 = Ri 116)

26. An action, when considered from the perspective of the general will of human beings, if it contradicts itself, is externally morally impossible (impermissible). Suppose I were about to take possession of the fruits of another. As I then see that no person would acquire anything under the condition that what he has acquired can be ripped from him, I would from a private point of view want that which belongs to another, but from a public point of view reject it. (BB 129 = Ri 119)
27. I can never convince another except by means of his own thoughts. I must, therefore, presuppose that the other has a good and correct understanding, otherwise it is futile to hope that he can be won over by my reasons. Likewise I can morally move no one except by means of his own sentiments; I must, therefore, presuppose that the other one has a certain *Bonitaet* of heart, for otherwise he will never feel abhorrence <at> my portrayal of vice and never feel incentives in himself at my praise of virtue. But since it would be impossible that some morally correct sentiments would be in him, and that he could assume his sentiments to be in unison with those of the whole human race, if his evil were evil through and through, I must grant him partial goodness (*das partiale Gute*) therein, and must depict the slippery resemblance of innocence and criminality as deceptive. (BB 27 = Ri 30)
28. I can make no one better except by means of the remnant of good (*Rest des Guten*) that is in him. (BB30 = Ri 32)
29. It must be asked how far internal moral grounds can bring a human being. ... They will perhaps bring him to be good if, in a condition of freedom, he does not have great temptations, but if the injustice of others or the force of delusion does him violence, then this inner morality does not have enough power. He must have religion and encourage himself by means of the rewards of the future life; and human nature is not capable of an immediate moral purity. But if, in a supernatural way, purity were brought about in him, then the future rewards would no longer have the property of being motivating grounds. (BB 22 = Ri 26–7)

Kant's "Reflections" in Baumgarten's *Elements*

30. Whatever contributes to the happiness of human beings does not thereby belong to their perfection. If the righteous man is unhappy and the vicious man is happy, then not human beings but the order of nature is imperfect. In duties toward oneself the worth of the person and not of the condition must comprise the motive (*Bewegungsgrund*). Soul and body and their perfection belong to one's person. Perfection does not consist in accidental goods, e.g. knowledge, elegance, etc., but in the essential. The perfection of one's body must be given preference over all gratification. Only in view of great obligations, e.g. to preserve one's chastity, [or] to fulfill the right of another, is the body no longer attributed to the person; accordingly, death itself, although not voluntary death, is bound up with the worth of one's person. (R 6590, 19:98, 1764–8? 1769? *BI XVI*)
31. The means are only the form of intention, or the method of execution, the end is the matter. Actions are rational with regard to the means or to the end; in the first case reason determines the form, in the second case reason also determines the matter of the intention. The understanding is only mediately good, as a means to another good or to happiness. The immediate good can be found only with respect to freedom (*nur bey der Freyheit angetroffen werden*). For, because freedom is a faculty to act even if it does not gratify (*vergnügt*) us, freedom is not dependent upon the condition of a private feeling; however, it always refers only to that which pleases (*beliebt*), so it has a relation to feeling and can have a universally valid relation to feeling in general. Hence nothing has an absolute worth but persons, and this consists in the goodness of their free power of choice. Just as freedom contains the first ground of everything that begins, so is it also that which alone contains self-sufficient (*Selbstständige*) goodness. (R 6598, 19:103, 1769–70? (1764–8?) *BI IV*)
32. Our system [of morality] is the doctrine of the power of choice subordinated to the essential laws of the pure will. It is the agreement of all actions with the personal worth of oneself. (R 6631, 19:119, 1769– 70? 1771– 2? *BI 1*)