

INTRODUCTORY

IT is important to grasp what Kant means by a metaphysic of morals. This he elucidates in his preface. He adopts a division of philosophy current among the Greeks—the division into physics, ethics, and logic—and attempts to lay bare the principle on which this division rests. All rational knowledge either is material and 'considers some object*', or is formal and 'concerned only with the form of the understanding and of the reason itself'. The latter is logic; the former is divided into physics, which studies the laws of nature, and ethics, which studies the laws of freedom. Logic cannot have any empirical part; physics and ethics have both a pure and an empirical part. The two parts of ethics are metaphysic of morals and practical anthropology (Kant's name for what we call psychology).

This is sufficiently vague, but we may get some light on the distinction within ethics by considering the distinction within physics. In physics, it seems, we can distinguish certain principles which reason sees to be universally necessary, e.g. the law of causation, that of uniformity of nature, and the first law of motion. There are others which are established inductively, and these embrace almost the whole of natural science. In somewhat the same way, Kant means to say, there are principles which can be discovered by merely contemplating the nature of a moral agent in general, and others which require investigation of the nature of man as a being subject to particular emotions, having a body, being divided into sexes, &c. It will easily be seen that the moral laws forbidding greed or drunkenness or lust, for example, are of the latter kind, since they would have no application to a disembodied will. But it

may be doubted whether Kant perfectly observes his own distinction. He cites the precept 'Thou shalt not lie', and indeed all the moral laws properly so called,¹ as being pure or *a priori*. But in order to attach meaning to the dictum 'Thou shalt not lie' we have to think not only of a moral agent, but of a moral agent who is not solitary but is one of a number of intelligent beings and can communicate with them, can produce beliefs in them. True, when we contemplate a being so situated, we can perhaps *set a priori* that he ought not to lie. But, to be precise, the dictum seems to be of the kind which in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant calls *a priori* but not pure *a priori*. 'Thus, for instance, the proposition, "every alteration has its cause", while an *a priori* proposition, is not a pure *a priori* proposition, because alteration is a concept which can be derived only from experience.'² So too, even if, on contemplating the notion of a lie, we can see that it must be wrong, the notion itself contains an element drawn from experience. This distinction Kant does not draw in the *Grundlegung*.

What, we may ask, makes Kant so sure that a pure metaphysic of morals independent of experience is possible? The answer must be, the awareness which he considers that he has that the laws of duty are universally binding. Mere experience cannot yield awareness of absolute obligation (any more than, in the sphere of natural science, it can yield awareness of necessity), but only awareness of the expediency of doing something particular if some particular end is desired.

The pure part of moral philosophy, Kant goes on to say,³ is its fundamental part. What is needed besides is 'a judgement sharpened by experience' of man's actual nature,

¹ P 389, K 3-4, F 4.

² B 2-3, S 43.

³ P 391, K 4, F 4.

in order to do two things—to distinguish in what cases the *a priori* laws are applicable, and to procure for them influence on the will. The *a priori* part is necessary not only from the point of view of speculation, but also from that of practice, because without it morals are subject to all kinds of corruption.

The distinction between the pure and the empirical part now¹ takes a new turn; Kant connects it with the distinction between acting for the sake of the law and acting in conformity with it. More precisely, Kant seems to be saying that in order to be morally good, an action must not merely conform to the moral law, but must also be done in order to conform with that law. This assumption can hardly be admitted as it stands without further consideration; it may be maintained that actions done without thought of a law, from direct devotion to another person or other persons, have moral value. Whether we say this, or say that they have value, but not moral value, is perhaps only a question of terminology; what we *can* say is that the two kinds of action are at any rate different in quality. We can at least agree with Kant that mere conformity with the moral law does not make an action morally good, and that action done in order to conform with the moral law is morally good. But now comes the further assumption that only a law discovered purely *a priori*, by examination of the nature of a rational being in general, can be made the object of such devotion, and thus give rise to morally good action. This connexion seems to be unsound: I may perceive a certain law to be binding on me, and on others situated like me, in consequence of the circumstances in which humanity finds itself; and I may act not merely in conformity with such a law but for the sake of obeying it.

¹ P 390, K 4-5, F 5.

That I may act for the sake of the law, it is not necessary that the law be something apprehended without an appeal to experience. Nor again would the fact that a law is apprehended *a priori* furnish any guarantee that action in conformity with it is also done for the sake of conformity with it.

Kant proceeds¹ to point out that the general practical philosophy of Wolff (the author of the standard textbooks of philosophy current in Germany in Kant's time) is not a metaphysic of morals in the sense defined. It does not take account of a will of any particular kind—say, one determined entirely by *a priori* principles—but of volition in general. It differs from metaphysic of morals as general logic does from the transcendental philosophy of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which treats of the particular acts and canons of pure thought. The function of metaphysic of morals, similarly, is the 'critical examination of a pure practical reason'. Kant sometimes, as for instance in naming his first two Critiques, opposes pure to practical reason: and that usage is apt to provoke criticism, seeming as it does to imply two different reasons within us. *Here* he intimates that pure reason can be practical, and practical reason can be pure. The truth is that he realizes that (as he says here²) we have but one reason, which can be applied now to theoretical questions and now to questions of the form 'What ought I to do, in such or such circumstances?'

Kant intimates his intention of writing later a *Metaphysic of Morals* based on the supreme principle of morality, and this he in fact did, under that title. The present treatise is not a whole metaphysic of morals, but the fundamental part of one—the investigation of the supreme principle of morality. The work falls into three parts:

¹ P 390, K 5, F 6.

² P 39* > K 7, F 8.

- (1) transition from the common rational knowledge of morality to the philosophical;¹
- (2) transition from popular moral philosophy to the metaphysic of morals;²
- (3) final step, from the metaphysic of morals to the critique of the pure practical reason.³

While he divides the work into three parts, he also divides it into analysis (passing from common knowledge to the determination of its ultimate principle) and synthesis (passing from the examination of this principle and its sources to the common knowledge in which we find it applied). It is not immediately obvious how this twofold division is related to the threefold division. But from a later passage⁴ it becomes clear that the first two transitions are meant to be analytic, and the last to be synthetic. Thus the first part is meant to be an analysis of common notions about morality, until they are seen to imply the ordinary notions of moral philosophy (such as were current in Kant's time), and the second to be an analysis of the latter, until they are seen to imply the more fundamental notions of Kant's own moral philosophy. The third part would then be synthetic, in the sense that it would build up on these notions a justification of the moral consciousness as it actually exists. In the passage just referred to, Kant points out that all he has done in the first two transitions is to show what is implied in the notion of morality, namely that the will is autonomous, gives itself its own laws. He has still to prove that morality is no 'creation of the brain', i.e. that we can by a synthetic act know that there are certain types of action which it is right to do.

¹ P 393-405> K 9-22, F 10-26.

² P 406-45, K 23-64, F 27-77.

³ P 446-63, K 65-84, F 78-102.

⁴ P 445* K 64, F 77.

We should, then, expect the third section, in contrast to the first two, to be synthetic, i.e. to build up on the notions laid bare in the first two transitions an account of at least the general lines of the content of duty. But Kant's thought actually takes a different turn. What he proposes to offer us in the third part is a critical examination of the faculty of reason, as a preliminary to showing that a synthetic use of pure practical reason is possible.¹ He does not claim to show this in the *Grundlegung*. And in fact the third part turns out to be simply a study of the implication which he holds to exist between the existence of duty and the freedom of the will. Thus by his own admission he does not in the *Grundlegung* prove the existence of duty. He only succeeds in showing what, in his view, must be true *if* duty is objective, what is presupposed in duty's being objective. And he nowhere undertakes the task which he here disclaims.

It is not very clear what Kant means by the transitions of which he speaks. Does *lie* mean (i) that the common rational knowledge of morality is mistaken, and that we must abandon it, first taking refuge in a popular moral philosophy, and then seeing the error of this and advancing to metaphysic of morals and to critique of the pure practical reason? The word 'knowledge', if taken seriously, would refute this interpretation, since knowledge cannot be mistaken; but Kant might be using the word 'knowledge' loosely. Or does he mean (2) that the common rational knowledge of morality is correct but does not go deep enough, and that the same is true of popular moral philosophy? As regards the first transition, at least, this is his meaning. For he says² that the notion of a will that deserves to be highly esteemed for itself 'exists already in

• t' 445, K 64, F 77.

J, 307. K 12—13, F 14-15.

the sound natural understanding, and requires to be cleared up, rather than taught*. This, the notion of a will good in itself, is the common rational knowledge of morality from which Kant starts and of which he essays to bring out the deeper implications. And what he says on a later page¹ implies that the second transition is viewed in the same light—not as correcting but as going deeper than the previous section.

¹ P 445, K 64, F 77.