

Reading Guide Deontology

Readings for 22 February 2011

READINGS (REQUIRED)

[A] Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, selections. From Tamar Gendler, Susanna Siegel & Steve Cahn, eds. *The Elements of Philosophy: Readings from Past and Present*, pp. 105-111.

READINGS (SUPPLEMENTARY)

[B] Onora O'Neill, "A Simplified Account of Kant's Ethics." From Tamar Gendler, Susanna Siegel & Steve Cahn, eds. *The Elements of Philosophy: Readings from Past and Present*, pp. 112-114.

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Background

The 18th century German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is among the most important philosophers ever to have lived. His writings range across nearly all of philosophy, including important works in metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, aesthetics, political philosophy, philosophy of religion and philosophy of history. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* has 15 distinct entries devoted to aspects of his work (<http://plato.stanford.edu/contents.html#k>)

The selections we are reading come from his *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, originally published (in German) in 1785. The title of the book (*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*) is sometimes also translated as *The Groundwork of the Metaphysic(s) of Morals* or *The Foundations of the Metaphysic(s) of Morals*. It is often referred to by the short title "Kant's Groundwork."

You can read more about Kant's moral philosophy at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-moral/> . You can read about his philosophical development at: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-development/>

Passages to focus on/passages to skim

The selection is short: please read it in full.

That said, Kant is notoriously difficult to understand. You will need to read the text slowly and carefully at least twice.

You may also find it helpful to read through the brief (3-page) supplementary reading, in which the British philosopher Onora O'Neill offers (as the title suggests) "a simplified account of Kant's ethics."

Terms, Concepts and Examples

Be sure that you understand and are able to distinguish among the following:

Terms and Concepts: good will; inclination; duty; maxim; hypothetical and categorical imperatives; perfect and imperfect duties

Examples: the honest shopkeeper (the "dealer" who does not "overcharge the inexperienced purchaser"); the four men (the man reduced to despair; the man who borrows money; the man who fails to cultivate his talents; the man who fails to benefit others]

Reading Questions

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

- (1) What does Kant mean when he says that only the good will can be regarded as "good without qualification" (106)? What contrasting examples does he discuss? How does this connect to the distinction made by Plato's Socrates between intrinsic ("good for its own sake") and instrumental ("good for the sake of what comes from it") value?
- (2) What are the three "propositions of morality" that Kant presents on 107? (See also questions (3) and (4).)
- (3) What does Kant mean by claiming that (as the translator put it) that "an act must be done from a sense of duty to have moral worth" (107 footnote *)? Would the utilitarian agree with Kant? [Try to find the specific passage in Mill that addresses this question.] Would Aristotle? [Ditto] Do you?
- (4) What does Kant mean by a "maxim" (107 – see also footnote 1 on 111)? What role does the notion of a maxim play in his moral theory? What does Kant mean by "respect for the law" (107)? What role does this play in his moral theory?
- (5) What is the Categorical Imperative (as formulated on 108 – see footnote *)? How does this "Supreme Principle of Morality" relate to the three principles of morality that Kant has just enumerated?
- (6) Why does Kant think it is immoral to make a false promise (108)?
- (7) What does Kant mean by "perfect" and "imperfect" duties? By "duties to ourselves" and "duties to others"? How do the four examples (109-110) illustrate these four kinds of duties? How does Kant analyze these examples?

[Posted 02/12/2011]