Immanuel Kant’s *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*

I. The Good Will (“First Section”)

A. Why is it that “Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world ... which can be called good without qualification, except a good will”? (17)

1. Why are such things as “intelligence, wit, judgement” and some of the other apparent goods Kant mentions not good without qualification?
2. What about happiness? In what way could it possibly be bad?
3. Kant has argued that nothing except a good will is good without qualification. But what is a good will and what makes it good? Much of the rest of this First Section is devoted to answering these questions.

B. Why does Kant believe that a good will is “good in itself”? Why would we not want to say that someone’s will was good “because of what it performs” or “its aptness for the attainment of some proposed end”? Does this mean that a good will is a “mere wish” to do good? (18)

C. Good Will and Duty

1. What is the connection between having a good will and duty? (21)
2. How does Kant distinguish those acts which “agree with duty” and those which are “done from duty”? Why does Kant believe only acts done “from duty” have moral worth? (22)
   (Note: Kant’s discussion of the duty to maintain one’s life - not to commit suicide - provide a good illustration of his point.)
3. Why does Kant distinguish acting from duty and action from one’s natural inclination? (22-23)
4. Why does Kant believe that “Duty is the necessity of acting from respect for law”? (25)
   (Note: whenever Kant uses the expression “practical law” he means “moral law”)

D. Transition to Second Section; the Idea of Universal Law (Remainder of First Section)

In the remainder of the First Section Kant attempts to give us a principle for recognizing what the moral law commands of us (what our duty is, in other words) by saying “I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (27). The only problem is 1) he doesn’t really illustrate what this point means well here and 2) he doesn’t provide an adequate argument for why this is the key to the moral law. Treat this bit, then, as a bit of a preface. We’ll get some answers to these two questions in the rest of the book.

II. Morality and the Categorical Imperative (“Second Section”, 33-55)

A. What does Kant mean when he asserts “we must admit that its (morality’s) law must be valid, not merely for men, but for all rational creatures generally, not merely under certain contingent conditions or with exceptions, but with absolute necessity”? (35) In what way might this point be true of what we mean when we speak of morality? Think of it, when we say its wrong to murder (to kill a person with no good reason such as, perhaps, self-defense) do we mean that its wrong for some people but not for others or for everyone, absolutely?
B. Moral Reason and Imperatives

1. Morality cannot constrain the will to act automatically (i.e., knowing what is right does not necessarily mean we will do what is right) but can only tell us what we ought to do. For this reason, Kant begins on p. 40 to analyze the structure of commands or imperatives (which tell us what we ought to do) to gain some insight into what the nature of morality is.

2. What does Kant mean by the distinction between a hypothetical and a categorical imperative (41-42)
   a. What does Kant mean by “rules of skill” and “counsels of prudence” and how do they illustrate what he means by a hypothetical imperative? (44-46)
   b. In his discussion of categorical and hypothetical imperatives, Kant takes it for granted that the moral law must take the form of a categorical imperative (only categorical imperatives can express moral commands). Why do you think hypothetical imperatives are such obviously unfit candidates for Kant to serve as moral laws?

C. The Categorical Imperative and Acting according to Universal Laws

1. On p. 49, Kant proposes that “There is, therefore, but one categorical imperative: Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law” and proceeds to show on p. 50 how four different moral duties (or what Kant supposes we would all tend to agree are moral duties) can be derived from that one imperative. Pay close attention to the second example where he talks about the duty to not make false promises to people (or, put positively, to keep our promises)? How is that making a promise we don’t intend to keep could not be willed as permissible under a universal law (that would make it permissible for everyone)?

2. How does Kant propose to derive his other three examples of moral duties from the categorical imperative?

3. What is the connection between being rational and following the categorical imperative? In what way does the very act of trying to provide a reason for one’s actions commit one to a form of impartiality in evaluating whether it ought (or ought not) to be done? And how is this impartiality the key to Kant’s categorical imperative? (These questions will be discussed in class lecture. Kant does not address them directly.)

4. On p. 52, Kant argues that when we do things we would ordinarily think of as immoral, we do not attempt to act according to a universal law but “assume the liberty of making an exception in our own favor”. In what way might all immoral behavior involve making an exception of ourselves from standards of conduct we would still expect other people to conform to? How does this point reinforce Kant’s thesis that acting morally is acting in the light of what we can will as universally permissible according to a law that would apply to everyone, including ourselves?

III. The Dignity of a Rational Being (“Second Section”, 56-70)

A. Having discussed the good will in terms of acting according to universal laws (the categorical
imperative), Kant now turns to the end or object of the good will. That is, what is it that we seek to bring about when we will what is good?

B. What does Kant mean when he asserts that “man and generally any rational being exists as an end in himself, not merely as a means to be arbitrarily used by this or that will ...” (56)?

C. How does Kant’s observation about how rational beings are ends in themselves pair up with his related observation that “the idea of the dignity of a rational being” lies in “obeying no law but that which he himself also gives”? (63)

D. How does the idea of respecting the dignity of all rational beings give rise to Kant’s conception of a “kingdom of ends”? (62) What does he mean by a kingdom of ends?

E. How does Kant’s discussion of the dignity of a rational being give us the end or object of the good will? Is morality ultimately all about what we do to pay respect to this dignity, this “intrinsic worth” (64) of rational beings?