

Ethical Theory

Duty & Respect for the Moral Law

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Readings

- *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, editor's introduction, paragraphs 15–20 (pp. xv–xvii) & first section, paragraphs 8–22 (pp. 12–20).

The book does not number the paragraphs, so you will need to number them yourself in the page margins. The editor's introduction has 59 paragraphs and the first section has 22.

Questions

1. Kant's strategy in this section is to use our commonsense intuitions about duty to discover why acting for the sake of duty has moral value. He begins (in paragraphs 9–13 of the first section) by presenting a series of examples: one about a shopkeeper, one about preserving your life, one about being beneficent, and one about securing your own happiness. Explain each of these examples, and what do they reveal about acting from duty? (This is Kant's unstated first proposition concerning duty and its connection to the good will.)
2. Kant's second proposition (in paragraph 14 of the first section) claims that the moral worth of an action comes from the maxim on which it is done. What is a maxim? Why does this give an action its moral value?
3. Kant's third proposition (in paragraphs 15–16 of the first section) says that actions done for the sake of duty show respect for the moral law. What does this mean? (Kant's footnote for paragraph 16 should help.)
4. Putting these three propositions together (in paragraphs 17–19), Kant believes he has isolated what makes the good will good: it is the will to adhere to the principle that "I ought to never proceed except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law". Use Kant's example of the false promise to explain what this means, and how it involves a form of reasoning that is different from prudence.
5. Kant ends the first section (in paragraphs 20–22) by claiming that everyone should already be aware of what he has established there, because it all comes from "common human reason". If this is true, then why does Kant maintain that moral philosophy is still necessary?