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Expanding the Horizon of Kant's Ethics: Recent Interpretations of the Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals

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The "Standard Interpretation" of the *Foundations*

During the twentieth century, the English language philosophical world developed a "standard interpretation" of Kant's ethics, focused on the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* as its central text.¹ There is a large body of secondary literature, the work both of Kant scholars and of moral philosophers, which has articulated and developed the standard interpretation and has pointed out the key texts that lend it plausibility. In the last thirty or so years, however, other scholars have opened up a new horizon on Kant's ethics which encourages readers of the *Foundations* to re-think a number of the central claims made by the standard interpretation. In this essay, I will thus first sketch key features the standard interpretation as it is often presented in textbooks, in undergraduate courses in ethics and the history of modern philosophy, and even in graduate level courses on Kant. In the second section of the essay, I will then sketch a new horizon against which recent scholarship invites us to read the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*.²

The basic claims of the standard interpretation are:

- The principal text that contains the essential elements of Kant's ethics is *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, a work that Kant published in 1785.
- The primary emphasis in Kant's ethics is on the *formal* features of our moral concepts and reasoning--in particular, their *universality* and their *unconditional necessity*.

Reconstructing Structures of Trust in Africa

- Kant seeks to derive the specific requirements of moral life from the Categorical Imperative, which is a formal statement of what he takes to be the supreme principle of morality.
- Parallel to this emphasis on formality, Kant is most fundamentally interested in (moral) rationality *as such*, rather than in the particular features of human moral rationality. In other words, Kant's ethics does *not* involve a *moral anthropology* and/or a theory of *human nature*.
- Kant's ethical system is primarily a *deontological* one; it emphasizes the concept of moral *rightness* and the *obligation* consequent upon it. It thus gives little or no place to notions of *human good* and or even *moral goodness*, especially if these concepts arise from a *teleological* understanding of human nature.
- Kant has profound reservations about the role and the worth of human inclinations and desires in the making of moral choices. He holds that it is the fact that we have sensible inclinations that leads us to make choices that go against our moral obligations
- The notion of *autonomy* most fundamentally concerns the moral integrity of the *individual* choices I make as a moral agent; and, it is a notion that stands in contrast to the requirements on my action that are based on my relationship to a *society* or a *community*. And, finally,
- Kant's ethics can stand apart from the larger philosophical claims he makes in the other parts of his “critical project.” One can thus be a Kantian in ethics without having to be a Kantian on other philosophical topics, such as questions of epistemology or metaphysics.

For the sake of clarity and simplicity, I think it will be helpful to boil this list down to three key claims:

1. Kant's ethics, inasmuch as it is concerned with the *formal* features of human rationality, does not require us to have a notion of human nature or to develop a moral anthropology.
2. Kant's ethics, inasmuch as it is *deontological* and concerned with what is “right”, stands as the paradigmatic contrast to

teleological ethics, concerned with what is “good,” such as that found in Aristotle.

3. Kant's ethics, inasmuch as it is concerned with *the moral integrity of individual choices* I make as a moral agent, requires neither the development of an account of moral virtue nor a social philosophy.

The strength of the “standard view” lies in the fact that most of its claims can be supported from the text that it normally takes to be definitive of Kant's ethics, *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. In fact, most of its claims can be supported from the first two parts of that work, without having to delve into the conceptually more complex third part, where Kant wrestles--neither for the first time nor for the last time--with the concept of freedom. In the text of the *Foundations*, one finds a Kant who clearly emphasizes the formality of his inquiry into human moral life; a Kant who emphatically states that his project does not require a moral anthropology because it is a project that concerns morality as it applies to all rational beings, not just to the specific kind of rational beings humans are; a Kant who, to show that it is the form of the law which imposes categorical obligation on us, would have us put aside, in the making of our moral decisions, all considerations of the good to which teleology, desire, and inclination draw us; a Kant who seems deeply suspicious of our inclinations because of the power they have to draw us away from what we ought to do; a Kant who, following the various formal statements of the Categorical Imperative, then seems to employ them to derive particular kinds of duties incumbent upon us.

This strength of the standard view--that it finds support for most of its claims in a single work of Kant--and in a work that is brief and, by comparison to a work such as the *Critique of Pure Reason*, relatively accessible in its content and argumentation even to a novice in philosophy--is, not surprisingly, one of its weaknesses as well. Since Kant continued to write about fundamental questions in ethics and the moral life for almost a decade and a half after the publication of the *Groundwork*, it is quite appropriate to ask the following questions: What if *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* does not by

itself contain the definitive statement of Kant's ethics? What if it represents just one step in the development of Kant's thinking about human moral life, a development which does not get completed until sometime in the next decade and for which writings from that later period are crucial--writings such as the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), and the book promised in the *Foundations* of 1785 but not produced until 1797, *The Metaphysics of Morals*? What if, in these later writings, Kant changed his views on some key matters?

These are clearly crucial questions--and they are precisely the ones that more recent scholarship on Kant has been asking. This new horizon on Kant does not deny that the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Moral* is a defining text for Kant's ethics. But it does propose that we read this text against the background of other writings of Kant that are also fundamental for understanding his ethics. This simple shift in perspective—from a fixed focus on the *Foundations* to placing it against the larger horizon of Kant's other writings in ethics--has significant consequences for the way one reads even the text of the *Foundations* itself. One begins to notice "new" things in the text: things that Kant clearly says but to which the "standard interpretation" has generally paid little attention.

Before I set forth some details of this new horizon for reading the *Foundations* let me say something further about the larger historical framework for Kant's writings out of which it arises. This is important, because this new horizon stresses the continuity and interconnection among Kant's various writings--especially those which were published between 1781 and 1798--i.e., from the 1st edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* until a few years before Kant's death in 1804. There is substantial evidence, both in Kant's published writings and in his correspondence, that, as early as the 1760s, he had planned to write a major treatise in moral philosophy. There is also substantial evidence that his thinking about moral philosophy and its role within his larger philosophical project of critique went through a number of changes between the 1760s and the publication, some

twenty years later, of the *Foundations*. Finally, there is evidence within the text of his writings that, subsequent to the publication of the *Foundations*, he has to rethink both the arguments and the major concepts he presented in that work. The first instance of such rethinking is the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), but the rethinking continues through the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) and into *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) and *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), as well as in some of the essays, such as “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View” (1784) and “Perpetual Peace” (1795), that he published from the mid-1780s into the 1790s. As a result, one major question that this new interpretation poses is whether it does full justice to Kant's moral philosophy to take the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* as the only text from which to interpret any or all of the others. As one distinguished Kant scholar, Allen Wood, has put it: What is the final form of Kant's practical, (i.e., moral) philosophy? Wood's answer, interestingly enough, proposes that the final form of Kant's moral philosophy is at least as likely to be found in the 1797 *Metaphysics of Morals*—a long work which only the most dedicated of Kant students ever read in its entirety—as it is in the 1785 *Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals*, which just about every undergraduate student who takes a course in ethics is likely to read—at least in part!³

Neither this question—nor the answer Wood gives—is intended to downplay the significance of the *Foundations* as a text in which Kant articulates some of the fundamental concepts of his ethics. In fact, the scholarship proposing this new horizon is more likely to argue that placing the *Foundations* against the larger context of Kant's other writings enables us to see it as an even richer source for the study of Kant's ethics, even as we recognize that it does not, by itself, provide us the full picture.

A New Horizon for Reading Kant's Ethics

Let me now turn to a sketch of this new horizon. First, it is important to mention the names of some of the scholars whose work has contributed to its development. One important group consists of students of John Rawls at Harvard: Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of*

Reason; Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*; Thomas Hill, *Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant's Moral Theory*; Christine Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*; Susan Neiman, *The Unity of Reason and Evil in Modern Thought*; Allen Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion*; *Kantian Ethics*; Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*; Keith Ward, *The Development of Kant's View of Ethics*; Sullivan, *Immanuel Kant's Moral Theory*; *An Introduction to Kant's Ethics*; Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*; Richard Velkley, *Freedom and the End of Reason*; Michel Despland, *Kant on History and Religion*; Patrick Riley, *Kant's Political Philosophy*; Nancy Sherman, *Making a Necessity of Virtue*; Marcia Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost without Apology*; Robert Louden, *Kant's Impure Ethics*; Felicitas Munzel, *Kant's Concept of Moral Character* and Jeanine Grenberg, *Kant and the Ethics of Humility*⁴ deal with questions about Kant's treatment of sensibility, inclinations, virtue and character—topics about which the standard interpretation often found little of substance in Kant's writings. Finally, there have been influential studies that have, from a variety of interpretive perspectives, have highlighted—in contrast to a tradition of Kant interpretation that construes his account of autonomy in individualistic terms—the social character of Kant's ethics. A notable precursor for this line of interpretation can be found in Lucien Goldmann, *Immanuel Kant*; Sharon Anderson Gold, *Unnecessary Evil*; Philip J. Rossi, *The Social Authority of Reason*; Pablo Muchnik, *Kant's Theory of Evil*; Stephen Engstrom, *The Form of Practical Knowledge* and Sidney Axinn, *Autonomy and Community*⁵ in which many contributors challenge the antithesis between autonomy and community that is frequently presupposed in the standard interpretation.

This new horizon encompasses a wide range of topics within Kant's ethics. A brief discussion of three of the most important ones—formality, anthropology, and teleology-- should be sufficient, however, to indicate how it can help to expand our understanding of the *Foundations*. The first topic this new horizon encourages us to rethink is the so-called “formality” of Kant's ethics. This has been recognized--almost from the publication of the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*--as one of its significant strengths and also as

one of its major weakness. Hegel, who can legitimately be considered to be the most powerful thinker among Kant's successors, severely criticized the "emptiness" of the Categorical Imperative even as he recognized that, by its formulation, Kant had articulated an important moment in the unfolding of reason's consciousness of itself. The formality of Kant's ethics consists in his proposing a general, abstract criterion or test by which to measure any or all of our proposals for moral action: can it be "universalized?" Am I able and willing to make the particular action I am proposing to do one which every else, in similar circumstances ought also to do, without exception?

Behind this general, abstract test of our decisions (or, to use Kant's own technical terms, our "maxims")--so the "standard interpretation" holds--lies Kant's understanding of "rationality" as a formal, abstract procedure (or a set of rules) which is not affected by the specifics of our human condition. I perform this test, and make my decision as "a moral agent"--i.e., as one who can see him/herself as abstracted from the particularities of this time and this place--or, to use another key term of Kant's, I make my moral decisions as a member of a timeless "intelligible world." Posed in these terms, Kant's account of morality seems quite literally abstracted from the flesh and blood reality of human beings who have to make moral decisions in the concrete circumstances of the here and now of daily life. If, to this picture of abstract rationality, we add Kant's negative assessment of the value of inclinations such as benevolence and sympathy in the determination of the moral worth of our proposals for action, it is quite easy to believe that Kant's ethics are those of a cold and stern Prussian taskmaster, an ethics suited more to the disembodied rationality of angels than to living and breathing human beings. Even more damaging and damning, the formality of Kant's ethics leads some to hold that it lies behind the pleadings of the Eichmanns of the world: "I was only carrying out my orders."

In the face of this picture of abstract rationality, what does more recent scholarship on Kant's ethics say? One of the first things it says is: *look at Kant's texts* to see if this is, indeed, what he says about "how to make our moral decisions." When we follow this advice, it

turns out that results are a bit surprising. It turns out that Kant, rarely, if ever, tells us *how* to make our moral decisions. He rarely, if ever, tells us that the proper way to form our maxims is to imagine ourselves as disembodied spirits--and the relative absence of such an abstractly rational "decision making procedure" holds true even in the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. What Kant does say, instead, is let us carefully examine (his term is "analyze") the moral decisions we actually make to see what principles of action *are already functioning* in them. If we do this, we will see that what is already present in those decisions is an awareness that our actions *already stand under* the fundamental principle of morality--the principle that Kant calls the Categorical Imperative. If we look carefully at what Kant says, we will see that he advances very modest claims about what his philosophical work in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* seeks to do and what it accomplishes. He does not claim to have discovered a "new" principle for our moral decision-making. All that he claims he has done (at least in the first two parts) is simply give a proper philosophical *formulation* to a principle that we *already* employ whenever we make a morally worthy and proper decision. It is a principle, moreover, of which we are also (always) aware *even* when our decision is *not* one that is morally worthy and proper.

This rethinking of the formality of Kant's ethics has implications for the second topic, namely, whether his ethics requires a *philosophical anthropology*. Once we become alert to what Kant understands himself to be doing in this text, we begin to see things--important things in the text--that we are likely to overlook by following only the standard interpretation. Among those important things are elements in Kant's discussion which indicate that his ethics is quite deeply rooted in a certain way of understanding the specific and unique character of our human condition and our human rationality--i.e., in an *anthropology*. Let me suggest just a couple of these since they will, in their turn, provide a way to say a few things, in conclusion, about the third heading, *teleology*, under which this new horizon expands our view of Kant's ethics beyond that provided by the standard interpretation.

The first, and perhaps most important, "anthropological" element to note in Kant's discussion is the deep respect that he has for "ordinary" moral knowledge and judgment. We can become so accustomed to the view that Kant's arguments function on a high level of abstraction that we can easily miss the fact that, at crucial points of his arguments, he makes a direct appeal to such things as "the common idea of duty and moral laws" (*Gr* 4: 389), "natural sound understanding" (*Gr* 4: 397), "the common reason of mankind" (*Gr* 4: 402), and "the moral knowledge of common human reason" (*Gr* 4: 403). Such appeals are not simply matters of rhetoric; we have Kant's own testimony that it was his reading of Rousseau that was crucial in the development of his own appreciation of the humanity in every individual, whatever his or her status or condition in society.⁶ Such appeals, however, are also problematic, in view of the fact that, in the very same text of the *Foundations*, Kant also insists that what he is doing does not rest on "anthropology" (*Gr* 4:389). On this point, what I have been calling a "new horizon" on Kant raises some rather intriguing questions about the consistency between what Kant claims to be doing--and the way he actually proceeds in his arguments. For it does seem that what Kant is actually doing in such appeals to ordinary moral judgment and experience--despite his claims to the contrary--is proceeding on the basis of what is, at least implicitly, an anthropology--an account of what is specific to us as the kind of finite, embodied rational beings that we are.

When we place Kant's ethics within the larger context of his critical project, the fact that it is deeply embedded in his anthropology should not be all that surprising. This is so because--at least in my judgment--Kant's whole critical project is anthropological. His fundamental concern is with the unique position human beings occupy in the cosmos: humanity is the one species we know in which there is a juncture between nature and freedom--and the "vocation" our human species is to bring about the conditions under which freedom and nature work together for the attainment of what Kant terms "the highest good."⁷ There is, moreover, an especially well known text in which Kant expresses this anthropological focus--the text in which he

poses the three questions which he sees guiding his critical project: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope for?⁸ The new horizon on Kant's ethics seeks to remind us that he takes the three questions to be interconnected, that the point of the first two is to make it possible for us to answer the third, and all three questions, as he notes in his *Lectures on Logic*, are summed up in a fourth question: What is the human being?⁹

This, finally, gets us to *teleology*. If it is the case, as I have been suggesting, that Kant's ethics is anthropological--at least in the sense that it is a component of his larger critical project, which has a fundamental anthropological thrust--then we also have to acknowledge that Kant's ethics is teleological as well. This is so because his anthropology is thoroughly teleological. For Kant, it is quite clear that human beings have an end--and a quite momentous end--to which they and their activities are ordered both by the workings of nature and by the exercise of human moral freedom. Here, once more, we have to go back to the simple principle--look at Kant's text--to show the presence of teleology at this most basic level of Kant's thinking. The standard interpretation has generally encouraged us to pass over lightly discussions, such as the one found at the beginning of the first part of the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Gr 4; 395-396), in which Kant speaks of the purposes of nature with respect to our human capacities of reason and will (i.e., "practical reason"). In tending to dismiss or explain away these passages, I believe that the "standard interpretation" turns its "lens" for reading Kant into a "mirror": Since we, good citizens of the scientific culture of the 20th and 21st centuries can no longer take the notion of nature's purposes seriously, we have to prescind from that in interpreting Kant's text; Kant would have known better if he were living today. The problem with this move, however, is that the text makes it clear that *Kant* took quite seriously the notion that reason--and specifically the kind of reason human beings have--has a purpose which is given to it by nature. It is a purpose, moreover, with which much of his later work on the critical project, such as the *Critique of Judgment*, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, and the occasional essays on the topics of politics and history are centrally

concerned: The attainment of the highest good for humanity as a species.

There is much more that can be said about these and other elements of the new horizon on Kant developed in recent scholarship. Above and beyond the particular points these scholars propose, however, is the crucial activity they ask of us in dealing with Kant's work: to look closely and carefully at what Kant writes. That is not so much a new horizon as it is an old and still sound principle for effective learning and for good scholarship. We should have no hesitation in applying it to our study of Kant.

¹ The number of English translations and editions of Kant's 1785 *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* that have been issued since the second half of the twentieth century provides one marker of the importance and widespread use of this text. The title has been variously translated as *The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. A late nineteenth century translation was by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (1889), followed a half century later by Otto Manthey-Zorn (1938). Since H. J. Paton's translation, titled *The Moral Law* (1948), there have been no less than six more: Lewis White Beck (1959), Brendan E. A. Liddell (1970), James W. Ellington (1981), and Mary Gregor (1998), including two new ones so far in the twenty-first century, one by Allen W. Wood (2002), the other by Arnulf Zweig (2002).

² Kant's text will be cited as *Gr*, with page references to Volume 4 of the critical German edition, *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin: Prussian Academy of Sciences, 1903, 1911. The translations in the text are based on Abbott's translation.

³ For Wood's exploration of this question see "The Final Form of Kant's Practical Philosophy," in *Kant's Metaphysics of Morals: Interpretive Essays*, ed. Mark Timmons, New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 1-22.

⁴ Onora O'Neill (*Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Barbara Herman (*The Practice of Moral Judgment*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), Thomas Hill (*Dignity and Practical Reason in Kant's Moral Theory*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), Christine Korsgaard (*Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); of special note is the work of Susan Neiman (*The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University

Press, 1994 and *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). Other scholars whose work has contributed to developing this new perspective include Allen Wood (*Kant's Moral Religion*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970; *Kantian Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Paul Guyer (*Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Keith Ward (*The Development of Kant's View of Ethics*, Blackwell, 1972), and Roger Sullivan (*Immanuel Kant's Moral Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Sullivan's shorter study, *An Introduction to Kant's Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) is an excellent text for introducing undergraduates to Kant's moral philosophy. Allen Wood's *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) is probably the best single volume commentary on Kant's ethics available in English. Important studies placing Kant's ethics within the larger context of his critical project have been written by Richard Velkley (*Freedom and the End of Reason: On the Moral Foundation of Kant's Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), Michel Despland (*Kant on History and Religion*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1973), and Patrick Riley (*Kant's Political Philosophy*, Rowman and Littlefield, 1983). Studies by Nancy Sherman (*Making a Necessity of Virtue: Aristotle and Kant on Virtue*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Marcia Baron (*Kantian Ethics Almost without Apology*, Ithaca: Cornell, 1995), Robert Louden, (*Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Felicitas Munzel (*Kant's Concept of Moral Character: The "Critical" Link of Morality, Anthropology, and Reflective Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), and Jeanine Grenberg (*Kant and the Ethics of Humility: A Story of Dependence, Corruption and Virtue*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁵ Lucien Goldmann, *Immanuel Kant* (London: NLB, 1971); more recent contributions have been made by Sharon Anderson Gold (*Unnecessary Evil: History and Moral Progress in the Thought of Immanuel Kant* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), Philip J. Rossi (*The Social Authority of Reason*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), Pablo Muchnik, (*Kant's Theory of Evil*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), and, from an analytic perspective, Stephen Engstrom (*The Form of Practical Knowledge: A Study of the Categorical Imperative*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); also of note is a collection of essays edited by Jane Kneller and Sidney Axinn (*Autonomy and Community: Readings in Contemporary Kantian Social Philosophy*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

⁶"I myself am a researcher from inclination. I feel the entire thirst for knowledge and the eager unrest to go further in it as well as the satisfaction with every acquisition. There was a time when I believed that this alone could compose the honor of mankind and I despised the rabble that knew of nothing. Rousseau brought me around. This blinding

preference vanished, I learned to honor human beings and I would think myself less useful than the common laborer if I did not believe that this consideration of everything else could impart worth in establishing the rights of mankind" ("Remarks on the *Observations on Feelings of the Beautiful and the Sublime*," *KantsGesammelteSchriften* 20: 44).

⁷ For a helpful discussion of the systemic importance of the highest good for Kant's critical project see Frederick C. Beiser, "Moral Faith and the Highest Good" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*. Ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 588-629.

⁸ *Critique of Pure Reason* A 804-805/B 832-833.

⁹ "The field of philosophy in the cosmopolitan sense can be brought down to the following questions:

What can I know?

What ought I to do?

What may I hope?

What is the human being?

Metaphysics answers the first question, *morals* the second, *religion* the third, and *anthropology* the fourth. Fundamentally, however, we could reckon all of this to anthropology, because the first three questions refer to the last one" (*KantsGesammelteSchriften*, Jäsche *Logik* 9:25).