***Critique of Practical Reason* by Immanuel Kant**

Introduction: On the Idea of a Critique of Practical Reason

In this short section, Kant simply outlines the broad goals of this second critique; namely, to discover whether pure reason is alone sufficient to determine the will, or whether it can fulfil this task only as empirically conditioned, and to ascertain whether we are actually free.

**Part One: Doctrine of the Elements of Pure Practical Reason**

Book I: The Analytic of Pure Practical Reason

*Principles* are propositions which determine the will; that is, which demand that one act in a certain way. Principles are *maxims* when they are subjective, or hold only for the individual in question. On the other hand, they are *laws* when they are objective, or apply to the will of every rational being. If the will of a being is not solely determined by reason (i.e. if other factors compete to determine the will) the laws are *imperatives*, meaning that they come with the prescription that one ‘ought’ to follow them. Imperatives can, in turn, be divided into *hypothetical* and *categorical*. The former only apply in relation to a desired effect (if you want x, you ought to do y), and Kant calls them *precepts* rather than laws. The latter determine the will irrespective of the effect.

By the phrase “object (matter) of the faculty of desire,” Kant simply means an object which is desired, and which therefore is connected with the pleasure or displeasure of the subject. All practical principles, then, that presuppose such an object are always empirical, and cannot be practical laws, although they can be *maxims*. The reason for this is that these types of practical principles always belong to sense (feeling), not the understanding, and therefore Kant thinks of them as concerned only with self-love, or one’s own happiness. In addition, since these precepts depend on pleasure and displeasure, they can never be said to hold universally (because the object of the precept (namely, my pleasure) is different for every person). Even if every rational being were to agree on a precept, so that it could actually be called universal, it could still not be considered an objective law because the unanimity would still only be contingent.

Thus, if a maxim is to be a universal law, it must be the determining ground of the will, not as regards its *matter* (i.e. an empirical object), but as regards its *form*, which is all that is left if one separates from it everything material. Basically, this means that a practical law cannot refer to any particular object; instead, it must be completely general.

Next, Kant considers two problems. First, he asks what the will must be like if its only sufficient determining ground were a practical law (i.e. a maxim referring to form, not matter). He concludes that only a *free* will could be grounded in such fashion. Second, he asks what type of practical law could determine a will if that will were free. The answer here is only a law that was independent of the matter; i.e. that contained nothing more than form. So, we see here that freedom and unconditional practical law reciprocally imply each other.

How is it that we first become conscious of the practical law; i.e. from freedom or the law itself? Since we cannot be immediately conscious of freedom, it must be the law itself, which Kant here calls the *moral law*. The basic idea here is that it is because of the moral law that we first become aware of our freedom, not the other way around. The example Kant gives is of someone who claims they cannot refrain from acting on their lustful desire. Imagine, he says, that a gallows is erected outside the house where this young man will satisfy his urge, and he will be hanged immediately afterwards. Would he still maintain he could not control his inclination? His love of life would easily prevail. Then ask the same man whether it would be possible for him to refrain from giving false testimony against an innocent man, even if he were ordered to do so by his prince on pain of the same execution. Our young man may hesitate to assert whether he would refrain, but he would definitely affirm that it would be possible for him to do so despite his (already established) love of life. “He judges, therefore, that he can do something because he is aware that he ought to do it and cognizes freedom within him, which, without the moral law, would have remained unknown to him.” (p.27)

This brings us to the *fundamental law of practical reason*; “So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal law.” (p.28) Given that this law has been derived solely from reason without the input of empirical considerations, it is clear that pure reason is also practical, and it is through this faculty that we obtain the moral law.

Kant now emphasises the *autonomy of the will* as opposed to the *heteronomy of choice*. This leads to a further discussion concerning the difference between the maxim of self-love (dictated by the heteronomy of choice) and the moral law (governed by the autonomy of the will). First, the former merely *advises*, whereas the latter *commands*. One cannot be commanded to do what one already wants. Second, the correct action as dictated by autonomy, is easily discerned, while the correct action in line with the presupposition of heteronomy of choice is difficult to see; “in other words, what *duty* is, is plain of itself to everyone, but what brings true lasting advantage, if this is to extend to the whole of one’s existence, is always veiled in impenetrable obscurity…” (p.33) The reason for this is that satisfying the categorical command of morality requires nothing more than that one consider the maxim itself. An empirically conditioned precept of happiness, on the other hand, also requires consideration of one’s powers and physical abilities to acquire the desired object. Finally, transgressing the moral law deserves punishment. Failing to secure happiness, on the other hand, doesn’t.

We now get a summary of the practical material determining grounds in the principle of morality:

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| Practical Material Determining Grounds  *in the principle of morality are* | |
| *Subjective* | |
| *External*  Of education  (according to Montaigne)  Of the civil constitution  (according to Mandeville) | *Internal*  Of physical feeling  (according to Epicurus)  Of moral feeling  (according to Hutcheson) |
| *Objective* | |
| *Internal*  Of perfection  (according to Wolff and the Stoics) | *External*  Of the will of God  (according to Crusius and other theological moralists) |

So, autonomy of the will has shown us that pure reason can be practical without the input of anything empirical, and this has, in turn, revealed that the will is free. Inasmuch as we belong to the sensible world, we are subject to the laws of causality, but we are also conscious of ourselves under another aspect; namely, as a being in itself, determinable in an intelligible order of things. This intelligible order also accords with a determinate law of causality; the moral law.

Regarding a deduction, or proof, of the objective reality of the moral law, Kant holds that this is impossible. The reason is that being a purely *practical* postulate, no effort of theoretical reason, speculative or empirically supported, could provide a route to such a proof. Nevertheless, Kant argues that it is absolutely, objectively real simply because we are forced to accept it as a practical postulate. We know it from our experience of living even though both it and the postulate of the freedom of the will can never be realised in thought. Neither of these postulates enhance speculative reason’s knowledge at all, even as we must admit they are absolutely, undoubtedly real (although only in a practical sense). This objective reality of the pure will is obviously given *a priori* in the moral law.

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Before moving on, Kant summarises what we have established so far. “In the moral principle we have presented a law of causality which puts the determining ground of the latter above all conditions of the sensible world; and as for the will and hence the subject of this will (the human being) we have not merely *thought* it, as it is determinable inasmuch as it belongs to an intelligible world… we have also *determined* it with respect to its causality by means of a law that cannot be counted as any natural law of the sensible world…” (pp.43-4)

Kant now turns to the possible *objects* of practical reason, of which he holds there to be only two; the *good* and the *evil*. Kant’s concern here is that we not make the mistake of determining the good and the evil by reference to representations which arouse *pleasure* and *displeasure*; that is to say, which involve *feelings*. The reason is that feelings can only supply rules of behaviour for individual subjects, which therefore lack universal validity. In addition, the object at which any practical maxims we were to obtain from feelings wouldn’t be any actual good in itself; rather, they would aim at an object that is merely good *for something*; i.e. useful, and that for which it would be useful would be outside the will, in feeling.

Instead, good and evil must always be appraised by reason; i.e. through concepts, which can therefore be universally communicated such that the good is the object of the faculty of desire in the judgement of every rational human being, and evil the object of aversion. In fact, Kant will affirm that good and evil, rather than being objects, actually refer to the way the will is determined by the law of reason to make something its object. As we’ve seen, the will is never determined directly by the object (as the empiricist would claim); rather, it is “a faculty of making a rule of reason the motive of an action (by which an object can become real). Thus good or evil is, strictly speaking, referred to actions, not to the person’s state of feeling…” (p.51) The good and evil, then, are the way of acting, and only the acting person can rightly be called good or evil, not a thing.

This brings Kant to what he calls the *paradox of method* in the *Critique of Practical Reason*; namely, that the concepts of good and evil must only be determined *after* the moral law, not before it. If one attempted to reverse this and begin with the concept of the good object (which is what is usually done), since this would have lacked a practical *a priori* law for its standard, it would end by being based on nothing more than pleasure or displeasure. “Only a formal law, that is, one that prescribes to reason nothing more than the form of its universal lawgiving as the supreme condition of maxims, can be a priori a determining ground of practical reason.” (p.54)

The concepts of good and evil have pure practical principles, which Kant calls the *categories of freedom* because they are directed to the determination of a free choice. These categories, unlike the categories of speculative reason which are drawn from the form of intuition (space and time), as practical concepts, have their basis in the “*form of a pure will* as given within reason and therefore within the thinking faculty itself…” (p.55). The precepts of practical reason, then, become cognitions immediately, and do not have to wait for sensibility to give them meaning.

The table of the categories of freedom looks as follows:

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| Table  *of the categories of freedom with respect to the concepts of the good and evil* | |
| 1.  Of quantity  Subjective, in accordance with maxims (*intentions of the will* of the individual)  Objective, in accordance with principles (*precepts*)  A priori objective as well as subjective principles of freedom (laws) | |
| 2.  Of quality  Practical rules of *commission* (*praeceptivae*)  Practical rules of o*mission*  (*prohibitivae*)  Practical rules of *exceptions*  (*exceptivae*) | 3.  Of relation  To *personality*  To the *condition* of the person  *Reciprocally*, of one person to the condition of others |
| 4.  Of modality  The *permitted* and the *forbidden*  *Duty* and what is *contrary to duty*  *Perfect* and *imperfect* duty | |

Whether an action is permitted according to the moral law falls to practical judgement, which must decide whether “what is said in the rule universally (*in abstracto*)… [can be] applied to an action *in concreto*.” (p.57) But, isn’t this an absurdity, to ask whether a law of freedom (in the intelligible, super-sensible world) could apply to a law of nature (the determined world of the sensible)? Kant resolves this by noting that bringing an action possible for me in the sensible world under a pure practical law isn’t actually asserting the possibility of the action as an event in the sensible world. Rather, reason is merely *appraising* the possibility in accordance with the law of causality, which is a pure concept of the understanding (one of the categories). Kant calls this the *type* of the moral law.

The rule of judgement then, is “ask yourself whether, if the action you propose were to take place by a law of the nature of which you were yourself a part, you could indeed regard it as possible through your will.” (p.58)

Kant now talks about the incentives of pure practical reason. The only incentive that will work for *morality* is that the action is performed for the sake of the law only. If an action is done in accordance with the moral law but by means of a feeling, then it contains *legality*, but not *morality*. We may praise the actions of others (and ourselves) only if they are performed out of respect for the moral law, and were not motivated even slightly by subjective feeling. Even compassion and sympathy, if they precede the moral law in our considerations are, while not necessarily bad, certainly “burdensome to right-thinking persons… [and bring] their considered maxims into confusion…” (p.96)

Our inclinations are moved by regard for oneself. Kant divides this love for oneself into *self-love* (a benevolence towards oneself), and *self-conceit* (a satisfaction with oneself, that amounts to self-love making itself the lawgiving practical principle). Pure practical reason restricts the former bringing it into agreement with the law (which Kant then calls *rational self-love*), but it completely strikes down the latter.

Given that the moral law goes against our inclinations, it *humiliates* us. This is its negative aspect. However, as the determining ground of our will, even as it humiliates us, it also awakens *respect* for it. Both of these together are the grounds in us for what Kant calls a *moral feeling*, although this is not a feeling, as such, which is necessarily sensible in nature. This respect we have for the moral law is the sole moral incentive. This incentive awakens an *interest*, and the interest grounds the *maxim*. In this way, everything comes to rest on the moral law. Given that we have to exclude our inclinations from our motives, acting in accordance with the moral law is called *duty*, and is, in fact, as *submission* to a law, a *command*.

Everything we are talking about here can apply only to finite beings because “they all presuppose a limitation of the nature of a being, in that the subjective constitution of its choice does not of itself accord with the objective law of a practical reason…” (p.66) In other words, finite beings will always have inclinations that urge them to act in their own interest, so they will always have to overcome these urges to act in accordance with the moral law. If we didn’t have to overcome our natural inclinations (a state of affairs Kant calls *holiness* and associates with the Deity), we would no longer be finite human beings; an impossible circumstance. Not only that, morality would no longer be possible for us because “there would not be in [us] even the possibility of a desire that would provoke [us] to deviate from them [all moral laws]…” (p.69), meaning the law wouldn’t act on us as a command or duty, and compliance with it would then cease to be a *virtue*.

The moral law is holy; by which Kant means *inviolable*. Human beings, as belonging to the intelligible world (that aspect of us which Kant calls *personality*) as well as the sensible, are autonomous rational beings. Thus, despite a person’s obvious unholiness, the *humanity* in him or her (that autonomous, rational nature) that connects them to the moral law must also be holy. What this means in a practical sense is that we must treat every rational creature (including ourselves) as an end in itself, and never as a means: “by virtue of the autonomy of his freedom he is the subject of the moral law, which is holy.” (p.72)

Regarding our freedom, Kant overcomes the problem of determinism by placing natural causality in the sensible world of appearances, which we are a part of, while placing the absolute spontaneity of freedom in the intelligible world where we are a thing-in-itself that is not subject to the restrictions of the sensible (including time and causality). He even asserts that this fact (that we inhabit two separate worlds) means that it would be possible to calculate with absolute certainty a person’s conduct for the future, while maintaining that that person’s conduct is still nevertheless free.

So, what about the fact that God, as original being, is the cause of the existence of substance. This would mean that our actions must be grounded in God, not ourselves, rendering us a marionette or automaton. Kant resolves this with a similar move to the one we saw above. God created us as noumena (things-in-themselves), not as appearance. This means that the fact that we are created is an intelligible fact; i.e. one that doesn’t pertain to the world of appearances. Since we only act in the world of appearances, this is where our freedom manifests, and “since creation has to do with [our] intelligible but not [our] sensible existence [it] therefore cannot be regarded as the determining ground of appearances…” (p.83)

Book II: Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason

In this section, Kant looks to determine the concept of the *highest good*. The highest good can be understood in two ways; the supreme (that which is not subordinated to any other) or the complete (that which is not a part of a greater whole). *Virtue*, as worthiness to be happy (by following the moral law), is the supreme good, and *happiness* is the complete good. These two goods must be connected in such a way that one is the ground and the other the consequent. Epicurus placed happiness first, so that to be conscious of one’s happiness is virtue, while the Stoics reversed this, asserting that to be conscious of one’s virtue is happiness. Being unresolvable analytically and having nothing to do with experience, the combination of these two elements is therefore synthetic and *a priori*, meaning that it will require a *transcendental* deduction.

*The Antinomy of Practical Reason*

So, either the desire for happiness is the motive to virtue, or the maxim of virtue is the efficient cause of happiness. As we’ve already determined that the desire for happiness contains no morality, the former is clearly impossible. However, the latter is also impossible because in the world of appearances, where causality depends on the laws of nature, not on the moral disposition of the will, there can be no necessary connection between happiness and virtue.

*Resolution of the Antinomy of Practical Reason*

While the first proposition is *absolutely false*, the second is only *conditionally false*; the condition being that one assumes existence in the sensible world to be the only kind of existence of a rational being. Since I know I also exist in the intelligible world as a noumenon, and that the moral law is the purely intellectual determining ground of my causality (in the sensible world), it is not impossible for morality to be connected with happiness in such a way that the former causes the latter.

The happiness, which we have called the complete good, cannot be mere pleasure though. Rather than a positive, subjective feeling, Kant concludes that the happiness we are dealing with here is more a negative satisfaction with one’s existence, which he calls *intellectual contentment*. What this contentment offers is freedom, or independence, from the inclinations.

*Postulate: Immortality of the Soul*

Complete conformity with the moral law is holiness, and is unattainable for finite rational beings. Nevertheless, conformity with the moral law is required as a practical necessity, so it must be possible. The way Kant squares this is to stipulate that the requirement is therefore “*endless progress* toward that complete conformity…” (p.99). The only way this can be possible is “on the presupposition of the *existence* and personality of the same rational being continuing *endlessly* (which is called the immortality of the soul).” (p.99) Hence, the soul is immortal.

*Postulate: Existence of God*

In the practical task of pure reason; that is, in the pursuit of the highest good, a connection between morality and one’s proportionate happiness (contentment), is postulated as necessary. “Accordingly, the existence of a cause of all nature, distinct from nature, which contains the ground of this connection, namely of the exact correspondence of happiness with morality, is also *postulated*.” (p.101) Such a cause must also be an *intelligence*, and the cause that it grounds must therefore be his *will*. Furthermore, in order to vouchsafe this connection, he must be *omnipotent*, *omniscient,* and *omnipresent*. Such a being is God.

In this way, Kant links the command of the moral law to God. Duty (in the moral sense, at least) is therefore a divine command. Nevertheless, he insists the whole thing remains disinterested because we ought not to be motivated to fulfil duty from feelings of fear or hope, which, being feelings, would destroy any moral worth of our actions. Furthermore, God’s final end in creating the world is not the happiness of the rational beings in it, but the highest good, which grants to those beings happiness (as contentment) in proportion to their moral worth. The glory of God then turns out to have nothing to do with his desire to be praised, but with following the moral law, because nothing glorifies him more than “respect for his command, observance of the holy duty that his law lays down upon us…” (p.106) The addition of God to the mix also provides nice support for the idea that every rational being is to be treated as an ends in itself, and never merely a means.

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Kant notes that none of this extends our cognition of *supersensible* reality. Any extension of our cognition is limited to reason in general, “insofar as *objects were given* to those ideas by the practical postulates…” (p.109) Theoretical reason has led us to acknowledge the necessary existence of these objects on practical grounds, even as it prohibits us from acquiring any genuine knowledge about them. They are “*immanent* and *constitutive* inasmuch as they are grounds of the possibility of *making real the necessary object* of pure practical reason (the highest good), whereas apart from this they are *transcendent* and merely *regulative* principles of speculative reason, which do not require it to assume a new object beyond experience but only to bring its use in experience nearer to completeness.” (p.109)

Kant gives one last argument of note in the *Dialectic*, and that is to refute the idea that our finitude in knowledge makes us inferior, or is a weakness, in any way. Imagine, he says, that we had a perfect capacity for insight or enlightenment. What would be the outcome? Our inclinations to happiness would still act upon us before the command of the moral law, but, instead of the conflict that now ensues between the moral disposition and the inclinations, the command of the moral law would quickly win out because *God and eternity with their awful majesty* would stand unceasingly *before our eyes*.” (pp.117-8) No one would violate the law, but this would only be out of fear or hope for our future, which we are able to perceive with perfect clarity. Essentially, Kant is arguing that our finitude and limitations are necessary features of our existence, and indispensable for morality.

**Part Two: Doctrine of the Method of Pure Practical Reason**

In this last section, Kant addresses the concern over whether, and how, it could even be possible for pure virtue to overpower our natural inclinations and lead us to prefer the law over pleasure. To the first question, Kant believes that simply attending to normal conversations will reveal that everyone is naturally interested in discussions about the moral worth of peoples’ actions. He claims there is a “propensity of reason to enter with pleasure upon even the most subtle examination of the practical questions put to them…” (p.123) This receptivity to topics of a pure moral nature indicates the moving force it has to determine action.

If this is true, it then follows that we ought to encourage thought on *pure* morality, and refrain from mixing this with a view to anyone’s welfare or happiness. It is therefore “contrapurposive to set before children, as a model, actions as noble, magnanimous, meritorious, thinking that one can captivate them by inspiring enthusiasm for such actions.” (p.125) As we have seen, *feelings* can only lead to behaviour that contains legality, but not morality. It is rational *principles* built on concepts that must be cultivated.

Given these considerations, the *method* for making the moral law the determining ground of our actions consists of two steps. First, we must make the “appraisal of actions by moral laws a natural occupation…” (p.127), and sharpen this habit “by asking first whether the action objectively *conforms with the moral law*, and with which law…” (p.127) Secondly, we must always add to this a consideration of whether “the action was also done (subjectively) *for the sake of the moral law*, so that it has not only moral correctness as a deed but also moral worth as a disposition by its maxim.” (p.127)

This second step will bring the pupil’s attention to his or her *freedom*, which, although at first, excites a feeling of pain (at the required renunciation of pleasure), will allow them to become aware of “a deliverance from the manifold dissatisfaction in which all those needs entangle him and his mind is made receptive to the feeling of satisfaction from other sources. The heart is freed and relieved of a burden that always secretly presses upon it, when in pure moral resolutions, examples of which are set before him, there is revealed to the human being an inner capacity not otherwise correctly known by himself, the *inner freedom* to release himself from the impetuous importunity of inclinations so that none of them, not even the dearest, has any influence on a resolution for which we are now to make use of our reason.” (p.128)

*Conclusion*

Here Kant utters that famous quote: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*.” (p.129) The first annihilates our importance as *animal creatures*, reminding us of our insignificance in the universe, but the second raises our worth as *intelligences* through our personalities, lifting us up above our animality and even the whole sensible world letting us, for just a moment, touch the infinite.