

KANT'S ETHICAL THOUGHT

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INTRODUCTION

1. An Enlightenment moralist

Kant's ethical thought is perhaps both the finest and the most characteristic product of the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung, éclaircissement*). This was an intellectual movement, and to some extent also a social and political movement. In its original form it accompanied, reflected, and contributed to the European bourgeoisie's growing economic, social, and political power and influence. But the Enlightenment was never committed to the interests of a single social class, nation, or segment of humanity. The Enlightenment still exists today, since many people throughout the world still struggle for the expansion of liberty in human thought and action, equality in the social, political, and economic spheres, and tolerance regarding religious and cultural diversity. The thoughts of the movement's eighteenth-century founders are still the driving forces behind most of these struggles, at least to the degree that they occur in cultures influenced by European thought.

The Enlightenment was never a monolithic movement. Its underlying principles have always been subject to change, reinterpretation, and continuing dispute. Any attempt to define it is both a theoretical exercise and a part of an ongoing praxis that aims at supporting, opposing, or transforming the movement itself. The struggle over the identity of the Enlightenment had already begun in Kant's time. From the beginning, its conservative enemies have held it responsible for what they perceive as the moral chaos and spiritual decline of modern society. Enemies arising from within its own ranks attempted to use its own values against it, just as today self-styled critics of 'modernity' undertake to deconstruct Enlightenment thinking as part of their attempts to reconfigure intellectual and social options and alliances. If we read eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers with sensibilities trained under the

influence of such opponents, we are apt to blame those thinkers for not being already what they, more than anything else, have made us to be.

Because the Enlightenment still influences the course of things, Kant's ethical thought is the (direct or indirect) source of much that is now standard in normative theories in ethics, political philosophy, and public policy. Many think of Kant's ethical theory (in John Rawls's apt words) "not as a morality of austere command but an ethic of mutual respect and self-esteem."¹ Kantian ethics is grounded on the dignity of rational nature. It requires not only respect for individual rights and the equal worth of human beings, but also the idea of a cosmopolitan community in which the ends of all rational beings must form a unity to be pursued collectively.

For the same reason, however, Kant's ethical thought is also a focus of controversy, often an object of strong aversion. Many regard it as a metaphysical system of mindless rule-following, grounded on an ineffable moral command. For them, to be a "Kantian" about any ethical issue is to be irrationally inflexible about it and irresponsibly heedless of the consequences of one's actions.

The detractors find support for their views in some of Kant's moral opinions about particular topics, some of which seem to them excessively strict to the point of inhumanity. Kant infamously maintains that it is wrong to lie even to a would-be murderer in order to protect his intended victim (MS 6:429–431; Ak 8:425–430). He maintains that suicide violates a strict duty to oneself because "to annihilate the subject of morality in one's own person is to root out the existence of morality itself from the world, as far as one can" (MS 6:423). For the crime of murder Kant thinks the punishment of death is so strictly required that "even if a civil society were to be dissolved by the consent of all its members . . . , the last murderer remaining in prison would first have to be executed, so that . . . blood guilt does not cling to the people" (MS 6:333).

Kant's views about sex are repugnant to nearly everyone today (just as they were to many in his own time). He thinks sexual intercourse is "a degradation of humanity" because it is an act in which "people make themselves into an object of enjoyment, and hence into a thing" (VE 27:346). He regards sex as permissible only within marriage, and even there it is in itself "a merely animal union" (MS 6:425). "Unnatural" sexual practices, such as masturbation, "are still viler than suicide" and turn a human being into "a loathsome object," lower than a beast (VE 27:347, MS 6:425). "Paederasty" (like rape) should be punished with castration, while "bestiality" deserves permanent expulsion from human society (MS 6:363).²

Nor can any enlightened person today approve Kant's opinions about race and gender. Kant distinguishes four races: (1) White, (2) "Yellow Indian," (3) Negro, and (4) "copper-red American." He ranks the characteristics of these respective races in descending order as regards their inborn talent for perfecting human nature, and conjectures that henceforth human progress is to be expected solely from the white race (VPG 9:316, VA 25:1187–1188; cf. BM 8:93–94).³ Kant thinks that although women are rational beings, they are not suited by temperament or intellectual endowment to be treated as full adults in the public sphere.⁴

Kant holds that it is always unjust to rebel against the existing government or depose a head of state, no matter how unjust the rulers themselves might be. One must, on the contrary, obey all the commands of the authorities (except when they command us to do something that it is in itself wrong, such as bear false witness against an innocent person) (TP 8:297–303, MS 6:317–323, 370–372; cf. KpV 5:30, 155–156). Kant's views may often strike us as politically conservative in other ways, too. For example, while advocating representative political institutions (such as did not exist at all in his own nation) Kant accepts the property and occupational restrictions on political participation that prevailed where there were such institutions. These restrictions relegate all wage laborers, servants, and peasants (and, of course, all women) to the status of "passive citizens": they have civil rights, but take no part in the legislation or government of civil society (MS 6:314–315; cf. TP 8:295).⁵

To Kant's detractors, such views are only what we should expect from a theory that accords moral worth only to actions done from duty, treats our entire emotional nature as worthless, and places moral principles ahead of human happiness at every turn. Kant's high-minded talk about duty and personality is an empty formalism that can easily become a pretext for any sort of tyranny or manipulation.⁶ Kant's admiration for "good will" is an unhealthy individualism focusing on the agent's inner intentions rather than their social setting. Those who see Kant this way regard it as entirely suitable to the inhumanity of his ethical doctrine that he locates his good will entirely outside nature, in an unknowable noumenal world.

To correct such utterly erroneous images of Kant's ethical thought, we must begin by asking why we should study the history of ethics at all. Our chief purpose is one that belongs squarely within the Enlightenment tradition: to improve our understanding of ethical issues so that we may justify, criticize, and correct our opinions about them. For this

we need knowledge of the historical roots of these issues, and of the theories that address them. A critical understanding of the history of ethics is indispensable for our ethical thinking.

To read historical philosophers critically is to read them with intellectual sympathy, but it is never to treat them as oracles whose pronouncements on any subject we should accept blindly on trust. The point is not piously to admire their wisdom and virtue, which, since they are human and bound by the limitations of their age, are always far from perfect. Such piety teaches us nothing, and that approach only sets us up for unedifying disillusionment. The point is instead to further our own philosophical thinking, by understanding the history of the issues we now face. We often learn most from past philosophers when we come to understand why we think their opinions should be rejected.

We need to respect the unity of a philosopher's thought because we can learn most from a set of doctrines by seeing how some depend on others in ways that are not obvious. But respecting the unity of Kant's thought is not only compatible with but even requires distinguishing the teachings that are central to it from those that are peripheral, and separating the conclusions that actually follow from his principles from the conclusions he may have drawn but do not follow. Such respect is utterly incompatible with treating a philosopher's thought as a monolith, or using Kant's deplorable views about race and gender as some sort of hidden key to the "real meaning" of his principle that all beings are possessed of equal dignity.

The sole measure of what might deserve to be called Kant's "greatness" is how far it is possible for us to learn about *philosophy* from studying his writings (whatever might be the final mix of our agreement and disagreement with what they say). It is a sad form of intellectual bigotry to treat our first, emotional reaction to a philosopher's isolated opinions as if it were a reliable gauge of that potential. When we let that reaction shape an invidious image whose main function is to keep us at a distance, we succeed only in depriving ourselves of whatever we might have learned by studying Kant.

"Enlightenment," as Kant understood it, is a gradual process through which not only individuals but even an entire public attains maturity and increases its self-understanding through critical reflection and open communication. If this is what enlightenment is, then it would speak badly for the Enlightenment if two hundred years later the movement's heirs had not been able to make some important corrections in Kant's own beliefs about morality, society, and politics. It would speak

well both for the movement and for Kant's principles if such corrections followed a trajectory marked out by those principles. And in fact they do. Kant's views about gender and race offend us not merely because we now see them as false (for not all errors of past ages are *morally offensive* to us), but rather because we see them as demeaning to the *human dignity* of women and nonwhites. Likewise, we object to a morality of stern duty and rigid rules because we think moral rules are grounded on the values human beings place on themselves, their feelings and desires, and their capacity to direct their own lives. The most influential philosophical articulation of these values is Kant's theory of moral autonomy, grounded on the dignity of humanity as an end in itself.

A proper understanding of Kant's ethical thought also requires the correction of errors about it which are still unfortunately common even among Kant's sympathizers. These include not only its supposed "individualism" and its alleged unconcern with the history and social context of morality, but also the exaggerated emphasis usually placed on the Formula of Universal Law in expounding Kant's approach to moral reasoning. We shall see in the early chapters of this book that this formula is only a stepping stone on the argumentative path leading to a more adequate, concrete, and systematic formulation of the principle in the Second Section of the *Groundwork*.⁷

2. Human equality

We have found it easy to be offended by some of the opinions expressed in Kant's writings. On other subjects, however, Kant expressed far more creditable opinions having a far more direct and demonstrable affinity with his basic principles. A frequently quoted passage from Kant's early reflections acknowledges the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in shaping his moral outlook:

I am an inquirer by inclination. I feel a consuming thirst for knowledge, the unrest which goes with the desire to progress in it, and satisfaction at every advance in it. There was a time when I believed this constituted the honor of humanity, and I despised the people, who know nothing. Rousseau set me right about this. This blinding prejudice disappeared. I learned to honor human beings, and I would find myself more useless than the common laborer if I did not believe that this attitude of mine can give worth to all others in establishing the rights of humanity. (Ak 20:44)

People tend to judge themselves better than others on various grounds: birth, wealth, honor, power, or (in Kant's case) learning.

These judgments, Kant holds, whatever their basis, are never more than false opinions based on self-conceited illusions. “The opinion of inequality makes people unequal. Only the teaching of M. R[ousseau] can bring it about that even the most learned philosopher with his knowledge holds himself, uprightly and without the help of religion, no better than the common human being” (Ak 20:176).

Kant’s commitment to the equal worth of all human beings pervades his ethical thought. For this reason alone, by no reasonable standard could he be considered conservative in relation to the issues of his day. Certainly not in *politics*; living under an absolute monarchy, he openly subscribed to republicanism, calling a republican constitution the only one consistent with the idea of right (EF 8:349–350). Nor in *religion*, where his defense of liberty and toleration and his support of the Enlightenment earned him a royal reproof and a stern command not to teach or write on religious topics unless he altered his opinions (SF 7:6). Nor in *education*, where he was an early supporter of the liberalizing innovations of the Philanthropin academy (Ak 2:445–452). What looks like conservatism is often only an expression of Kant’s conviction that the human race still has very far to go on the path toward a free and cosmopolitan realm of ends. Our social life is thoroughly corrupt and in need of radical reform, but even our grip on the institutions that promote progress is still so precarious that it may put all our hopes at risk if we call too much into question all at once.

Kant’s egalitarianism shows itself in his conviction that the republican form of government is the only one that accords with the idea of right because it respects the freedom, equality, and independence of its citizens (EF 8:349–351; cf. TP 8:290–296, MS 6:311–318). Living under a government that was never more than a harsh military despotism, Kant was a consistent and impassioned defender of freedom of belief and expression (WA 8:35–42, KrV A738–757/B 766–785, O 8:143–146). Kant’s essay *Toward perpetual peace* was the first, and is still the most significant, attempt by a major figure in the history of philosophy to articulate principles aimed at achieving a condition of just and permanent peace between nations, and ending the arms race which (he believed) poses the greatest lasting danger to the moral, political, and material progress of the human species. Despite his principled opposition to civil insurrection, and his pessimistic assessment of the practical prospects of the French Revolution, he continued to feel (and express) a “wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm” for the *ideals* of the Revolution, even after the terrifying deeds of the revolutionaries had turned many younger enthusiasts against these ideals (SF 7:85).

Another notable consequence of Kant's egalitarian principles is that he conspicuously declines to infer from the racist beliefs we noted earlier that there is any difference in the *human rights* possessed by different peoples. His attitude toward European colonialism is therefore one of strong and unqualified disapproval. European nations, he says, invade and conquer non-Europeans as though the inhabitants of other parts of the earth had no claim on their land and even no rights as human beings (EF 8:357–359; MS 6:352–353; see also Chapter 9 § 2.4). Though he thinks Europeans more civilized than other peoples, Kant regards their civilization itself as directly unfitting them for their gratuitously self-appointed task of civilizing others. Perhaps the best testimony on this point comes from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critics, who accused Kant of failing adequately to appreciate the diversity of races and cultures, and consequently the incapacity of non-European peoples to relate to Europeans on equal terms.⁸

Kant agrees with Rousseau that the social inequalities of honor, power, and wealth are fundamentally unjust, even when they result from transactions consistent with principles of right. Hence he agrees that the “civil equality” of citizens required for a legitimate form of government is consistent with large disparities of wealth (TP 8:291). Nevertheless this inequality constitutes a “general injustice” throughout society. Because this injustice arises not from individual acts of wrong but from the entire social system, those who benefit from it generally turn a blind eye toward it, and ascribe to their own merit whatever pitiful steps they may take to remedy it.

In accordance with [benevolence], people are merciful to others and show beneficence to them after they have earlier taken from them, even though they are conscious of no injustice to anyone. But one can participate in the general injustice, even if one does no injustice according to the civil laws and institutions. Now if one shows beneficence to a wretch, then one has not given him anything gratuitously, but has given him only what one had earlier helped to take from him through the general injustice. For if no one took more of the goods of life than another, then there would be no rich and no poor. Accordingly, even acts of generosity are acts of duty and indebtedness, which arise from the rights of others. (VE 27:416)

In our present condition, when general injustice is firmly entrenched, the natural rights of the lowly cease. They are therefore only debtors, the superior owe them nothing. Therefore, these superiors are called ‘gracious lords’. But he who needs nothing from them but justice can hold them to their debts and does not need to be submissive. (Ak 20:140–141)

The general injustice prevailing in society produces a systematic deception in regard to people's benevolent feelings. It leads them perniciously to exaggerate the moral importance of feelings of sympathy and generosity, which permits them systematically to misinterpret as voluntary beneficence what they really owe the poor by right:

Many people take pleasure in doing good actions but consequently do not want to stand under obligations toward others. If one only comes to them submissively, they will do everything; they do not want to subject themselves to the rights of people, but to view them simply as objects of magnanimity. It is not all one under what title I get something. What properly belongs to me must not be accorded to me merely as something I beg for. (Ak 19:145)

The last two passages I have quoted belong to some of Kant's earliest reflections on morality, when the influence of Rousseau's ethical writings was both strong and fresh. Kant retained these convictions to the end of his life, however, and expressed them even in his final ethical work, the *Metaphysics of morals*, written nearly thirty-five years later:

Having the resources to practice such beneficence as depends on the goods of fortune is, for the most part, a result of certain human beings being favored through the injustice of the government, which introduces an inequality of wealth that makes others need their beneficence. Under such circumstances, does a rich man's help to the needy, on which he so readily prides himself as something meritorious, really deserve to be called beneficence at all? (MS 6:454)

3. Morality and human nature

The passages just quoted assert that all human beings are equal and ought to treat one another as such. They also contain another message, perhaps less obvious but just as important for Kant's ethical thought, not about how human beings ought to treat one another but about how they *in fact* tend to treat one another and *why*. Though people are of equal worth, this equality is something they are disposed to deny – as Kant himself admits he did when he thought his learning constituted “the honor of humanity” and made him better than the ignorant; or as the “gracious lords” do when they think their noble birth or wealth entitles them to look down on those who lack these privileges. The deepest theme of the preceding passages is therefore not that people are equal, but that people's equal worth must be vindicated against a

powerful propensity in human nature to claim for oneself an imagined worth greater than that of others.

It was also from Rousseau that Kant derived the idea that human beings in the social condition inevitably acquire the illusion of inequality. For Rousseau this deception is the ugly secret of all “civilization,” raising troubling questions about the trajectory of human history. If the progress of culture only makes us more unequal, deceptive, and evil, does it make sense to want to improve the human lot in history? Can we believe in a purposiveness in the natural history of our species or a divine providence cooperating with our rational efforts to improve ourselves and our condition? (This set of problems about ourselves as rational, social, and historical beings preoccupied the greatest thinkers of the eighteenth century; it might be called “Mandeville’s dilemma.”⁹)

In the mid-1760s, Kant apparently decided that Rousseau also had satisfactory answers to these questions: “Rousseau was the first who discovered, beneath the manifoldness of the forms assumed by the human being, his deeply hidden nature and the concealed law according to which destiny is justified by his observations. . . . According to Newton and Rousseau, God is justified” (Ak 20:58–59). Throughout his life Kant struggled with Rousseau’s conception of human nature, attempting to provide an interpretation of it that justifies both the quest for a natural purposiveness in history and a faith in providence as governing that history. Kant’s ethical thought can be properly appreciated only when it is seen in relation to this problematic.

The composition of Kant’s first mature ethical work, the *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* (1785), coincides with his study of an alternative interpretation of Rousseau developed by Johann Gottfried Herder (who had been Kant’s own student in the 1760s while he was discovering the social thought of Rousseau). It was in this context that Kant wrote his first two important essays on the philosophy of history: *Idea toward a universal history with a cosmopolitan aim* (1784) and *Conjectural beginning of human history* (1786). Kant’s continuing interest in the philosophy of history is displayed in a number of later works, including the *Critique of the power of judgment* (1790), the essay on theory and practice (1793), *Religion within the boundaries of mere reason* (1794), *Toward perpetual peace* (1795), the *Conflict of the faculties* (1798), and *Anthropology from a pragmatic standpoint* (1798).

The fact that Kant’s empirical conception of our human nature and his philosophy of history play a significant role in his ethical thought often comes as a surprise to those who know his ethical theory only

through the standard images, interpretations, and caricatures of it. Many of these are based on misinterpretations of Kant's important claim that the *fundamental moral principle* must be *a priori* and owe nothing to empirical anthropology (G 4:387–389). This claim is taken to mean that Kant's ethical thought attaches no importance to the empirical nature of human beings or the social and historical situatedness of moral thinking. Thus Bernard Williams contends that Kant "rejects any biological, historical, or psychological theory of morality."¹⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre comments that Kant's only conception of the human nature to which moral principles are applied involves merely "the physiological and non-rational side of man."¹¹ Richard Rorty declares that it is Kant's hope to "derive solutions to moral dilemmas from the analysis of moral concepts."¹² And Philippa Foot remarks that Kant holds "that an abstract idea of practical reason applicable to rational beings as such could take us all the way to [something like] our own moral code."¹³

But of course as a self-conscious representative of the Enlightenment, Kant never meant to deny the essential place in ethics of an empirical study of human nature.¹⁴ He is just as quick to criticize other moralists for ignoring human nature as others have been to criticize him:

One can, indeed, certainly consider practical philosophy even without anthropology, or without knowledge of the agent, only then it is merely speculative, or an idea; so the human being must at least be studied suitably. [Otherwise, moral philosophy becomes] tautologous repetitions of rules that everyone knows already, [which] strikes us as very tedious . . . , and pulpit orations on the subject are very empty, if the preacher does not simultaneously attend to humanity. (VE 27:244)

We can see immediately that Kantian ethics is very much concerned with empirical human nature as soon as we consider the *reasons* Kant gives for stressing the very point that the supreme principle of morality must be grasped as *a priori* and independent of the empirical nature of human beings. He declares it to be "of the greatest practical importance" to present the moral law unmixed with anthropological considerations (G 4:411). "Morals themselves are liable to all kinds of corruption" if we do not grasp "the moral law in all its purity" (G 4:390). Philosophical theories of virtue can accomplish much good in the world, but only if their teachers separate the pure moral law from everything empirical (G 4:410n). This is because pure respect for the law is the only motive which can subject our inclinations to reason (G 4:410).

Only the *a priori* motive of duty is capable of producing good actions *reliably* (G 4:390, 411).

These are not claims about the epistemic status of the moral law. They are assertions about the effects on human conduct (human nature being what it is) of *presenting* the claims of morality in one way or the other. They amount to the claim that none of our empirical desires is naturally in harmony with the demands of morality, and further, that neither education nor habituation is capable of creating a dependable accord between reason and inclination. Taken together they amount to a highly controversial *empirical* thesis about human nature: our nature does not permit of an *inclination* to do what morality demands of us, or a *liking* to do what duty demands, and therefore that such impossible states are not suitable objects of moral admiration or striving; the thought of them serves only the ends of sentimental self-delusion and enthusiastic self-conceit (KpV 5:81–89).

Kant's critics often call attention to the deep distrust of human nature exhibited in his insistence on the opposition of reason and inclination and his reservation of moral esteem only to actions motivated by duty.¹⁵ (Even in Kant's own time, his ethical views were criticized on these grounds, by men such as Garve, Rehberg, and Schiller.¹⁶) But the critics display shortsightedness when they condescend to this feature of Kant's ethical thought (as by making snide references to his personality quirks or pietistic upbringing). They overlook the fact that Kant's interpretation of the *a priori* moral principle itself, as well as his conception of its application to the human will, depends on some quite distinctive views about human nature and history. In Part II of this book we will see that these views are worked out in his writings with a good deal of theoretical sophistication and constitute a vital component of his ethical outlook.¹⁷

4. Kant's ethical writings

Kant did not begin as a moral philosopher. He was first drawn to philosophy in the 1740s through his interest in the natural sciences. Kant's earliest published reflections on moral philosophy, in the early 1760s, are governed less by his substantive moral convictions than by concerns about the grounding of knowledge and the architectonic structure of a system of philosophy. His earliest piece of writing to address the role of morality in such a system is the *Inquiry concerning the distinctness of the principles of natural theology and morality* (written in 1762, published in

1764). Here he draws a distinction between actions that are necessary for an end (and whose goodness is therefore demonstrable by reference to that end) and actions that are immediately necessary in themselves (and whose goodness is therefore indemonstrable). Only the latter, he says, are truly *obligatory* (DG 2:298–300). As he does in his lectures of the same period, Kant toys with the moral sense theory of Francis Hutcheson as a way of making intelligible the idea of this unconditional moral necessity. About 1765, Kant begins to project his own system of moral philosophy under the name “metaphysics of morals.” This is evidently conceived as a decisive *rejection* of moral sense theory in favor of a theory grounding morality in rational concepts. Yet Kant does not begin to work seriously on this project until several years after he revolutionizes theoretical philosophy in the *Critique of pure reason* (1781).

When we consider the course of Kant’s career as a philosopher, however, we cannot help noticing his increasing interest in moral questions, the rising importance of the practical (or moral) standpoint within his conception of philosophy as a whole. Nothing is more characteristic of Kant’s critical system than the thesis that the metaphysical questions with which human reason is most profoundly concerned – questions about the existence of God, freedom of the will, and immortality of the soul – cannot be answered by theoretical or speculative reason, but can be addressed only from a practical (or moral) point of view. Kant’s chief enterprise in the last half of the 1780s was working out the fundamentals of a practical philosophy (in the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of practical reason*) and bridging what he saw as a serious gulf between theoretical and practical philosophy (in the *Critique of the power of judgment*). Kant’s chief works in the 1790s all deal with the application of practical philosophy to human life – to religion, as in *Religion within the boundaries of mere reason* (1793–1794) and to politics and international relations, and the human race’s vocation in history as in the essay on theory and practice (1793) and *Toward perpetual peace* (1795) – culminating in the completion (finally) of the *Metaphysics of morals* (1797–1798). Kant’s mature thought is at least as much a moral outlook on the world as it is a position on questions of epistemology, natural science or speculative metaphysics.

Despite its brevity, the *Groundwork* is one of the greatest and most influential achievements in the history of philosophy. Nevertheless, it must be said that a disproportionate amount of scholarly attention has been paid to it. For Kant intends this little book not as a complete exposition of his ethical theory but only as an attempt to identify and se-

cure the fundamental principle on which a system of ethics might be based. Nor does acquaintance with the *Critique of practical reason* do much to correct the one-sided impressions created by the *Groundwork*, for it, too, is conceived as a foundational work, a critical propaedeutic to ethical theory, and not a statement of Kant's ethical theory itself. The foundational works will mislead us unless we attend to the *Metaphysics of morals*. At the same time, the system of duties presented in that work will be even harder to understand unless we already appreciate the foundation on which it rests. Kant's other writings on ethics, politics, and religion, which also make important contributions to our understanding of his ethical thought, are equally dependent on the foundational writings but are also important for the proper interpretation of them. Since Kant's empirical theory of human nature (his "anthropology" and philosophy of history) are just as crucial for an understanding of his ethical thought as his conception of the *a priori* foundations of morality, both the foundational writings and the resulting system of duties in the *Metaphysics of morals* must also take them into account.

The proper way to treat Kant's ethical thought would be to begin with (1) an exposition of its foundations in the *Groundwork*, supplemented by the *Critique of practical reason*, but also using the *Metaphysics of morals* and other writings as a clue to their interpretation. Then (2) we must try to understand Kant's theory of human nature and its consequences for the application of the foundational principles. Only then are we in a position to provide (3) a systematic exposition of the *Metaphysics of morals* as the definitive form of Kant's practical philosophy. That was the plan I intended to follow in writing this book, but it eventually became evident that the entire plan is too ambitious for any single book. Therefore, although I will make significant reference to the *Metaphysics of morals* in the course of the book and provide a brief exposition of it in the Conclusion, the full execution of stage (3) of the plan must be deferred to a future occasion.

5. The structure of this book

The first three chapters will deal with themes far more familiar in the Kantian literature than the last six. What I say about these themes is intended to gain a hearing for the later parts of the book by showing that many of the controversies that have surrounded the more familiar themes are of less significance for Kantian ethics than is usually appreciated.

Part I will deal with the metaphysical foundations of Kant's ethical theory. It will be structured as an exposition of the *Groundwork*. Chapter 1 will consider Kant's famous appeal to common rational moral cognition in the First Section of the *Groundwork*. Chapter 2 will take up the Second Section's philosophical account of the will and rational imperatives. Chapters 3–5 will be devoted (one each) to Kant's three main formulations of the supreme principle of morality. Chapter 5 includes Kant's grounding of the moral law in the practical presupposition of freedom and Kant's final conception of the moral law in the *Groundwork*, as a system constituted by all three formulas.

Part II turns to Kant's application of the moral principle to human nature. Chapter 6 discusses Kant's conception of "anthropology," the study of human nature, tracing his method to its basis in his theory of teleological judgment. Chapter 7 expounds Kant's theory of history, contrasting it with the views of Herder and showing how it anticipates later views, especially the historical materialism of Marx. Chapter 8 explores Kant's theory of natural feeling and desire, the social basis of human passions, and Kant's reasons for mistrusting sociable inclinations as moral motives. The chapter ends by treating a badly neglected topic: Kant's theory of friendship. Chapter 9 discusses Kant's account of our moral destiny in history.

The Conclusion uses the contents of the nine chapters to indicate certain notable features of the ethical theory with which Kant presents us in the *Metaphysics of morals*. After briefly expounding the theory behind Kant's system of duties, the Conclusion focuses attention on two themes Kantian ethics has often been thought to neglect or mishandle: namely, moral *ends* and moral *virtues*.

Kant's ethical thought is one of the few products of the history of philosophy that exercises such a strong and continuing influence on us that replacing commonly accepted ideas about it with more accurate and less oversimplified ones might help to transform our conception of our own history and of ourselves as heirs of the Enlightenment. The aspiration of this book is to contribute in some small way to that revolution.