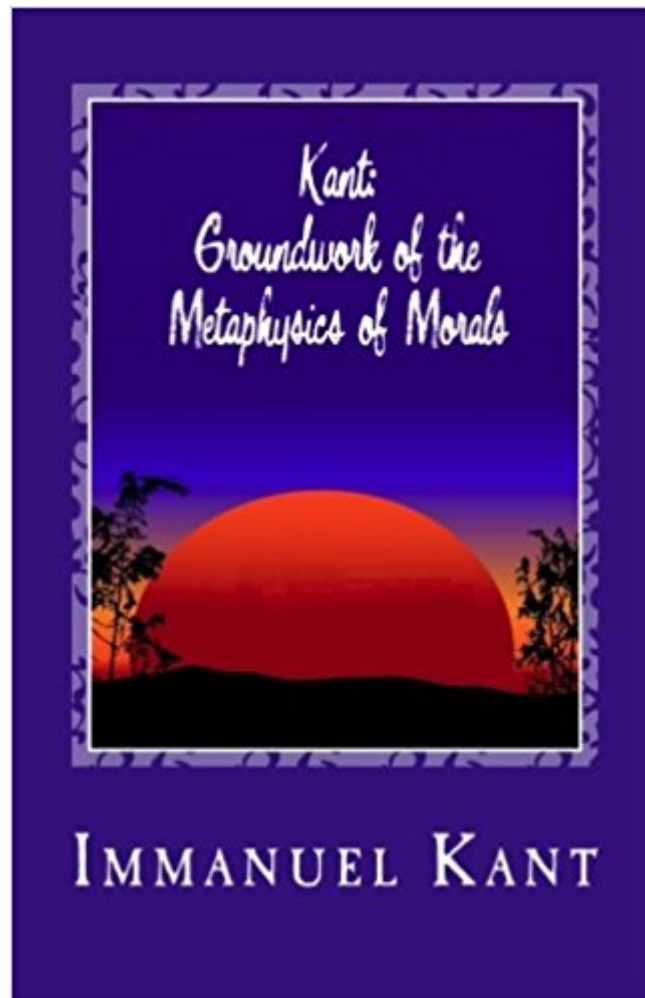




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Kant: Groundwork Of The Metaphysics Of Morals



Synopsis

Immanuel Kant's "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals" is probably the single most influential work of philosophical ethics since Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics. While Kant himself considered this a sort of introduction to ethical thinking, it's come to be his most influential and widely read work on ethics. Despite its short length, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals" is a work of remarkable depth and intellectual insight. Kant's ideas in "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," while subtle and sometimes elusive, are profound and original, and this book is a must-read for anyone interested in philosophical ethics. The recent resurgence of Kantian moral thinking in the English-speaking world makes "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals" even more important for our time.

Book Information

Paperback: 94 pages

Publisher: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform (October 23, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1449566065

ISBN-13: 978-1449566067

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.2 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 6.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (18 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #810,994 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #58 in Â Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Movements > Rationalism #1606 in Â Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Philosophy #1661 in Â Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > History & Surveys

Customer Reviews

As translator H.J. Paton states in his introduction, 'Kant's "Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals" is one of the small books which are truly great' despite the unapproachability of the title. Many rank this book alongside Aristotle's 'Ethics' and Plato's 'Republic'. Its main topic is the supremacy of morals and moral action, and Paton gives a section by section analysis of Kant's book. The purpose of this work is not to work out all of the implications and difficulties with the a priori part of ethics, but rather to set a foundation of the supreme principle of morality. The centerpiece of the Groundwork is Kant's most famous proposition, the Categorical Imperative. While this is often equated with the Golden Rule (do unto others as you would have them do unto you), the Categorical Imperative

argues for a more universal set of moral action - for example, if one does not mind being lied to, then lying does not become a problem, according to the Golden Rule, but for Kant, this would be unacceptable as it is a violation of the rational principles of what morals are. Kant proceeds to look at issues of law, duty, free will and the good will, and autonomy of action. Kant argues strongly for the need for philosophy to guard against whim, taste and personal desire from becoming normative agents in the way we construct the moral universe. He argues for objective principles to govern the will, and categorises these as either hypothetical or categorical. 'All imperatives command either hypothetically or categorically. Hypothetical imperatives declare a possible action to be practically necessary as a means to the attainment of something else that one wills (or that one may will).

'Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals' by Immanuel Kant is easily the most important work devoted exclusively to thinking about morality in the history of Philosophy, especially considering its size. The cornerstone of the work, and the end result of Kant's analysis is the categorical imperative which says that a moral law are only those for which you can state should be true of all people. In one fell swoop, Kant marginalizes all thinking about relativism in morality and at the same time distinguishes moral from religious thinking. If you pair this up with St. Paul's statements in his letter to the Romans (3:19-28) which states strongly that adherence to the law has virtually nothing to do with salvation, it should make things pretty clear to all concerned. Unfortunately, things are rarely that simple. As important as Kant's conclusion is, it is necessary but not sufficient for a complete analysis of morality. One excuse may be that this work is really Kant's version of 'Cliff Notes' to his moral argument. His full presentation comes in the 'Critique of Practical Reason', which, however, is not often read. Note that contrary to another review of this edition, the translator and commentator is the noted Kant scholar of 70 years ago, H. J. Paton. To people who are not used to reading philosophy, I will not hide the fact that Kant is tough going. He may not be quite as tough as Hegel, the Existentialists, or the ancient Greeks, but he is definitely harder to understand than any modern nonfiction book I can think of. The biggest argument against the 'Groundwork' and the categorical imperative is usually the fact that it does not rule out trivial rules, such as 'you must always eat a starch at least once a day'.

Kant's "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals," despite its forbidding name and demanding content, is perhaps the most eloquent and thought-provoking book on the foundations of rational ethics (or more precisely, moral reasoning) ever published. It certainly is the most influential and revolutionary essay ever about the subject. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most difficult texts of

moral philosophy ever written and for this reason lends itself to different interpretations and translations. I recommend relying on the classical translation by H.J. Paton (1964), which comes with a useful "Analysis of the Argument" by the translator (pp. 13-60). In addition, I find B.E.A. Liddell's (1970) modern version of the Grundlegung quite helpful. Kant begins his argument with these famous words, which immediately get us to the heart of the matter: "It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will.... A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes - because of its fitness for attaining some proposed end; it is good through its willing alone - that is, good in itself." (Paton p. 61f, B1-3) The crux of the problem of grounding ethics - the core problem of practical reason - consists in the question of how reason can identify and justify an action as "good" (i.e., as the right thing to do). There are only two ways in which this is conceivable, Kant tells us: either, because the action serves to accomplish some other good that is presupposed to be good, or else because this way of acting is good in itself, that is, it has an unconditional quality of being right, in the sense that it may be said to be good under all circumstances.

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