

Taking Metaphysics Seriously: Kant on the Foundations of Ethics

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Ask most philosophers for an example of a moral rationalist, and they will probably answer “Kant.” And no wonder. Kant’s first great work of moral philosophy, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, opens with a clarion call for rationalism, proclaiming the “necessity to work out for once a pure moral philosophy, completely cleansed of everything that may be only empirical and that belongs to anthropology” (G 4:389). Such a “metaphysics of morals,” as Kant calls it, is the indispensable foundation of ethics, understood as a system of laws or duties. It is not that empirical and anthropological considerations play no role in ethics; he does after all speak of an empirical counterpart of metaphysics, under the name “practical anthropology.” It is just that these considerations play no role in the foundations of ethics, no role in establishing the system of laws or duties. Or so it has seemed.

Recent commentators have by and large resisted this austere rationalist reading of Kant. Of course, they say, the moral law, the first principle of ethics, must be pure. But it does not follow from this that more particular laws, the second principles of ethics—e.g., duties of truthfulness, beneficence, etc.—must be pure as well.¹ Indeed, though Kant doesn’t really argue for such principles in the *Groundwork*, what little he does say there about them suggests that they do make essential use of empirical and anthropological considerations. For instance, his discussion of the famous four examples following the first two formulations of the Categorical Imperative clearly relies not just on the empirical particularity of the agent’s maxim but also on general features of human nature, such as material dependence. We cannot know what the principle means for us without knowing something about us.

Now, one might say that this just shows that the second principles cannot belong to metaphysics. After all, metaphysics is pure and these principles are not. But this is too quick. For one, if they do not belong to metaphysics, then it seems they should

belong to practical anthropology. But they do not belong to practical anthropology, since Kant is clear that the business of such anthropology is not to establish moral laws but to implement them, to make them “effective *in concreto* in the conduct of [our] lives” (G 4:389). Moreover, when one looks beyond the *Groundwork* to the work it grounds, the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant seems to say outright that the second principles belong to metaphysics, the consequence of showing what in “the particular nature of human beings, which is cognized only empirically,...can be inferred from universal moral principles” (MS 6:217). Indeed, if they did not so belong, then that work, the aim of which is clearly to argue for such principles, is horribly misnamed.

The issue is not merely terminological. It matters quite a lot whether the second principles really belong to metaphysics or not, since to call them “metaphysical” is not merely to label them but to assert their position in a particular philosophical enterprise. We have not appreciated this point because we have not paid sufficient attention to Kant’s claim that the metaphysics of morals is the practical counterpart of the metaphysics of nature (MS 6:205, 6:216-217). In making this claim, Kant is not simply telling us that practical philosophy, no less than theoretical philosophy, must have a priori foundations underwriting its laws. He is telling us something very specific about how these foundations are to be understood and so the relevant laws established. *Qua* metaphysics, both of these parts of philosophy employ a common methodology, a methodology that generates significant parallels in both form and content. In particular, metaphysics in general has two ordered parts: the first, which is wholly a priori, setting the stage for the second, which is partly empirical. If this is right, then it is not just the case that the metaphysics of morals does encompass second principles. It must. For the provision of such principles, impure though they are, is in fact the very point of metaphysics.²

As I shall explain, taking the metaphysics of the metaphysics of morals in this way seriously sheds significant light on the foundations of Kantian ethics. First, as I have already suggested, bringing the second principles into the remit of metaphysics tells us something important and perhaps surprising about how they are to be established. In particular, it tells us that the way to establish these principles is not, as many have thought, by subjecting maxims to a Categorical Imperative test but by providing an anthropocentric specification of generically rational ends. Second, it deepens our understanding of the rationalist character of Kantian ethics, and this in two ways. On the one hand, it seems to attenuate his rationalism, insofar as it makes empirical considerations essential aspects of the metaphysical foundations of ethics. But on the other hand, it seems to accentuate his rationalism, insofar as the fact that empirical considerations enter only at the second stage of metaphysics implies that only certain kinds of empirical considerations are relevant. Since, as I have already suggested, these considerations are paradigmatically anthropological, it is a consequence of this that our a priori concept of rational nature, as it figures in the first stage, in fact constrains our empirical concept of human nature, as it figures in the second. In this way, by illuminating the Kantian conception of metaphysics, we also and thereby illuminate the Kantian conception of ourselves.

I

I begin with the *Groundwork*, in which Kant first introduces his conception of ethics. As I have already suggested, it is the resolute rationalism of the *Groundwork* that lends support to the view that metaphysics must be pure. It will be important, then, to say how I understand what Kant is claiming here and, more importantly, what he is not.

The key text is the Preface. Kant begins the Preface with a broad taxonomy of philosophy, endorsing the Ancient division of the field into the three sciences of physics, ethics, and logic. Logic, he says, is merely formal philosophy, insofar it concerns “the universal rules of thinking in general, without distinction of objects” (G 4:387). Physics and ethics are material philosophies, insofar as they are concerned with “determinate objects and the laws to which they are subject” (ibid.) The former is concerned with nature and its laws; the latter is concerned with freedom—that is, free action—and its laws.

Since logic concerns only the laws of thought as such, it is wholly a priori. Since physics and ethics concern the objects of thought and their laws, they have both a priori and empirical parts. The a priori part he calls “metaphysics,” and he distinguishes a metaphysics proper to physics—a metaphysics of nature—and a metaphysics proper to ethics—a metaphysics of morals. The empirical part lacks a common name. On the theoretical side, he simply refers to empirical physics, and on the practical side, he speaks of something he calls “practical anthropology.”

In both cases, Kant is clear, the a priori must precede the empirical. He is rather less clear, though, about why. That said, I think we can infer Kant’s reason from his argument that there must be such a metaphysics in the first place. In both cases the leading thought is familiar: laws are necessary and universal; necessity and universality demand a priori grounds; so, where there are laws, there must be a priori grounds.³ Thus, if ethics, no less than physics, is concerned with determinate objects and *the laws to which they are subject*, then ethics, no less than physics, requires metaphysical foundations.⁴

Now, it is natural to suppose that by identifying metaphysics as the a priori part of ethics, Kant intends this metaphysics to be wholly a priori, such that not only are its

principles a priori but all the concepts that figure in them are a priori as well; in the terms that Kant introduces in the B-edition of the first Critique, they are “pure a priori” (*KrV* B3). So much seems suggested by Kant’s repeated remarks that the metaphysics of morals must be “cleansed of everything that may be only empirical and that belongs to anthropology (*G* 4:389),” as well as his claim that the ground of obligation he seeks “must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in concepts of pure reason” (*ibid.*). Indeed, throughout the *Groundwork* Kant is extremely anxious about (and frequently admonishes against) allowing anything empirical to enter his argument at all. This is not to say, of course, that the empirical has no role to play in ethics. It is just to say that it has no role to play in the *metaphysics* of ethics. Once this metaphysics is complete, experience can enter in the guise of practical anthropology, the main concern of which seems to be the implementation of moral laws, already established, in human beings, who do not do what they ought simply because they ought.

Again, this a natural supposition. But it is mistaken. Kant’s comments about the purity of metaphysics, so clear at the beginning of the Preface, must be read in light of a distinction he makes within metaphysics at the end of the Preface. For though Kant often speaks of the metaphysics of morals as a singular, unitary thing, it is clear that he thinks of this metaphysics as proceeding in two distinct stages. In the first stage, the focus is exclusively on the identification and justification of the supreme principle of morality, the first principle of ethics. In the second stage, the focus is on the application of this principle, and so the transition from the first to the second principles of ethics, the system of particular laws and duties that constitute the substance of the science. As Kant makes clear, his ambition in the *Groundwork* is simply to execute the first stage. The second is deferred to a future work—presumably, to the work the *Groundwork*

grounds, the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

It is clear enough that empirical, anthropological considerations play no role in the first stage of metaphysics. Since Kant believes that the supreme principle of morality, the moral law, holds for all rational beings as such, it must be grounded in rational nature as such, which can only be cognized a priori. To this extent, Kant's cleansing claim seems apt; if the point is to search for and establish this principle, empirical, anthropological considerations really are irrelevant. But what about the second stage? Are empirical, anthropological considerations relevant to the application of the law, to the transition from the first to the second principles of ethics, and so to the determination of moral laws and duties? Must this second stage be cleansed too?

Again, to be clear, the kind of application at issue here is *internal* rather than *external* to metaphysics. In particular, it is not the kind of application Kant assigns to the empirical counterpart of metaphysics, practical anthropology, which he does sometimes characterize as applied moral philosophy.⁵ That empirical, anthropological considerations are relevant here is obvious. My question, though, is: are they also relevant to the *metaphysical* application that this *non-metaphysical* application presupposes, one that concerns the laws themselves and not simply the conditions of their implementation?⁶ And my answer is: the *Groundwork* doesn't rule it out; and when we look past the *Groundwork*, to the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant in fact rules it in, that is, he affirms it.

The main point is this. Kant tells us next to nothing in the *Groundwork* about how this second stage of metaphysics is to proceed. His focus is exclusively on the first stage. Indeed, he is explicit that he will forgo the advantages to be gained from "the application of the [supreme] principle to the whole system," focusing instead on "rigorously investigating and weighing it in itself and without any regard for what

follows from it" (G 4:392). Again, given the narrowness of Kant's concern, his anxiety about the empirical and anthropological makes perfect sense. For such considerations really are irrelevant at best and ruinous at worst with respect to the task he has set himself. But it does not follow from this that once we shift our focus to the second stage, to the application that Kant has here forgone, that this irrelevance or ruinousness still holds. So far as I can see, then, for all Kant has said in the *Groundwork*, it could well be the case that empirical, anthropological considerations are not simply not irrelevant or ruinous but are indeed essential to the completion of the second stage of metaphysics. And this, I think, is just what we find when we leave the *Groundwork* and turn to the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

II

For our purposes, the key discussion in the *Metaphysics of Morals* is the first section of the Introduction. Kant begins as he does in the *Groundwork*, by drawing parallels between theoretical and practical philosophies. Just as natural laws must be grounded in a system of a priori principles, a metaphysical science of nature, so must moral laws be grounded in a system of a priori principles, a metaphysical science of morals—and for the very same reason, viz., they concern laws. But he ventures into new territory when he begins to detail, in a way he does not in the *Groundwork*, the structure of this metaphysics. For immediately after asserting that there must be a metaphysics of morals, on a par with a metaphysics of nature, he adds the following, important qualification:

But just as there must be principles in a metaphysics of nature for applying those highest universal principles of a nature in general to objects of experience, a metaphysics of morals cannot dispense with principles of application, and we shall often have to take as our object the

particular *nature* of human beings, which is cognized only by experience, in order to *show* in it what can be inferred from universal moral principles. But this will in no way detract from the purity of these principles or cast doubt on their *a priori* source (*MS* 6:216-7, Kant's emphasis).

If one comes to the *Metaphysics of Morals* acquainted only with the *Groundwork*, this remark may seem quite surprising—indeed, profoundly un-Kantian. For instead of his usual admonitions against letting the empirical into the metaphysical, Kant here seems to be cautioning against leaving the empirical out of the metaphysical. The threat isn't illicit *impurity*. The threat is illicit *purity*. To be sure, there is still a part of metaphysics that is pure: the part that provides the aforementioned universal moral principles, represented presumably by the various formulations of the Categorical Imperative. But Kant here seems to countenance another part of metaphysics, one that is impure: a metaphysics that takes those universal principles, applies them to the human case, and yields non-universal principles, determining distinctively human duties.

Now, one might doubt that Kant is really saying this. Perhaps by speaking here of application, Kant is signaling a shift away from metaphysics, in one of two ways. First, and most obviously, one might think that the application Kant has in mind is not metaphysical but anthropological. Indeed, immediately after this passage, Kant says “[t]his is to say, in effect, that a metaphysics of morals cannot be based on anthropology but can still be applied to it,” a remark he follows by introducing “the counterpart of a metaphysics of morals,” which he now identifies as “moral” rather than “practical” anthropology, and which “deal[s] only with the subjective conditions in human nature that hinder people or help them in *fulfilling* the laws of a metaphysics of morals” (*MS* 6:217, Kant's emphasis).

Second, one might concede that the application in question is not

anthropological, while at the same time denying that it is metaphysical. Since the determination of duties is at issue, and not just the conditions of their fulfillment, it falls outside the scope of anthropology. But since the duties in question are distinctively human duties, and so must take account of distinctively human beings, which we cognize by experience, it falls outside the scope of metaphysics.⁷

I don't think either of these readings can be right. The reason is that, as we saw in our discussion of the *Groundwork*, not all application is *external* to metaphysics. There is also a kind of application *internal* to metaphysics, one that effects the transition from the first to the second principles of ethics. And it is this kind of application, I suggest, that is at issue in this passage. We transition from the first to the second principles of ethics by applying the first principle, which holds of all rational beings, to a specific kind of rational being—in this case, the human being. The descent from the rational to the human, then, is a move *within* a metaphysical argument. It does not force us out of metaphysics. It just forces us from the first stage to the second.

While I think this is what a straightforward reading of the passage suggests, the strongest evidence in its favor is the analogy Kant explicitly draws between the theoretical and practical cases. For in the theoretical case, it is very clear that the application he has in mind—one in which the highest universal principles of a nature in general are applied to objects of experience—is one that occurs *within metaphysics itself*. So, if the metaphysics of morals is structured in the same way as the metaphysics of nature, as Kant is plainly inviting us here to think, then there should be no doubt that the partly empirical, impure metaphysics that Kant countenances in the former should have its analog in the latter.

What I propose to do next, then, is to discuss the relevant parts of Kant's metaphysics of nature, as articulated in his *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*,

the work that Kant explicitly identifies as the theoretical counterpart of the *Metaphysics of Morals* (MS 6:205). Since I think Kant is actually much more explicit in the *Metaphysical Foundations* than in the *Metaphysics of Morals* about his methodology, Kant's procedure in the former will provide us a model for understanding his procedure in the latter.

III

I turn, then, to the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. The main text for us is the Preface, in which Kant lays out the project of the book. As usual, Kant begins by identifying his quarry; natural science is a science of nature, understood as "the sum total of all things, insofar as they can be objects of our senses, and thus also of experience" (MAN 4:467). And as usual, he insists that such a science requires metaphysical foundations. What is most significant for present purposes, however, is Kant's elaboration of the structure of these foundations. The key passage is this:

[The metaphysics of nature] must always contain solely principles that are not empirical (for precisely this reason it bears the name of a metaphysics), but it can still either: *first*, treat the laws that make possible the concept of a nature in general, even without relation to any determinate object of experience, and thus undetermined with respect to the nature of this or that thing in the sensible world; in which case, it is the *transcendental* part of the metaphysics of nature; or, *second*, concern itself with a particular nature of this or that kind of thing, for which an empirical concept is given, but still in a manner that, outside of what lies in this concept, no other empirical principle is used for its cognition (for example, it takes the empirical concept of matter or of a thinking thing as its basis, and it seeks that sphere of cognition of which reason is capable *a priori* concerning these objects), and here such a science must still always be called a metaphysics of nature, namely, of corporeal or of thinking nature. However [in this second case] it is then not a general but a *special* metaphysical natural science (physics or psychology), in which the above

transcendental principles are applied to the two species of objects of our senses (*MAN* 4:469-70; translator's interpolation, Kant's emphasis).

This is an extremely difficult and dense passage, even by Kantian standards, but it clearly makes two important points.⁸ First, the metaphysics of nature has two parts: a general, transcendental part and a special part. Second, while general metaphysics is purely a priori, special metaphysics is not. That is to say, though special metaphysics is still metaphysics, and thus a priori, it is not wholly a priori. It is partly empirical.

Start with the transcendental or general metaphysics of nature. This concerns the laws that make possible the concept of a nature in general, even without relation to any determinate object of experience. It is clear, I think, that these laws of a nature in general are the laws that Kant articulates in the first Critique—in particular, the laws of the Analytic of the Transcendental Logic. Such laws, represented by the categories and their correlative principles, provide an account of, as Kant puts in the Critique, an object in general. They do not tell us anything about the particular objects that populate nature. They merely lay down formal, or constitutive, conditions for being an object, and so of belonging to nature, considered as a whole. So, for example, Kant thinks, without knowing anything about what objects are in nature—whether, say, they are all material or not—we can and do know that those objects must be substances standing in reciprocal causal relations with one another, viz., the three Analogies of Experience.

In addition to this general metaphysics of nature, however, there is also a special metaphysics of nature. Where general metaphysics concerns the laws of a nature in general, special metaphysics concerns the laws of a particular kind of natural object. Thus, special metaphysics requires that we move beyond pure concepts, which leave the (kind of) object undetermined, to an empirical concept, which determines the (kind of) object. Nonetheless, Kant is clear, in order to retain the status of metaphysics, this

special science must restrict itself to a priori cognition of this empirically determined object. More specifically, it must restrict itself to what can be cognized simply through the application of the laws of general metaphysics to the relevant empirical concept. So, though special metaphysics does go beyond general metaphysics, it nonetheless presupposes it. For only then, Kant thinks, can we arrive at an account of genuine laws, albeit ones that are less than fully general, since they do not govern all natural objects, considered as such, but only a particular kind of natural object, though still considered as such.

Now, Kant offers two examples of a possible special metaphysics of nature, corresponding to two empirical concepts of two kinds of natural objects: matter (the generic object of outer sense) and a thinking being (the generic object of inner sense). But, for reasons beyond the scope of this paper, he thinks that only the first metaphysics—a “metaphysics of corporeal nature,” as he calls it—is actual. What he endeavors to do in the rest of the book, then, is to provide just such a metaphysics, and in just the way we should expect given what I have said. That is to say, he brings “all determinations of the general concept of a matter in general” under “the four classes of [pure concepts of the understanding],” which he expounds in the first Critique, from which we learn “all that may be either thought a priori in this concept, or presented in mathematical construction, or given as a determinate object of experience” (MAN 4:474-5, translator’s interpolation).

So, for example, just as the Analogies of Experience in the first Critique tell us what follows from the application of the categories of relation—substance, cause, and community—to the concept of an object of possible experience, so does Kant, in the Mechanics section of the *Metaphysical Foundations*, tell us what follows from the application of these same categories, and their correlative principles, to the concept of

matter, viz., the three Laws of Mechanics, very roughly, Kant's version of Newton's Laws.⁹ Thus, special metaphysical laws, like the Laws of Mechanics, realize or instantiate the general metaphysical laws, like the Analogies of Experience, in the material world. They characterize the nature and so behavior of specifically material substances, endowed with specifically material powers, exercised reciprocally with other such substances: laws not of nature in general but of material, corporeal nature in general.

In the theoretical case, then, Kant seems fully committed to the view that metaphysics, though a priori, need not be cleansed of everything empirical; general metaphysics is, but special metaphysics is not. Nor does this seem to be something he tries on here and casts aside. It is clearly in evidence in the B-edition of the first Critique, published a year after the *Metaphysical Foundations*: both in his first explicit statement of the distinction between pure and impure a priori cognitions (*KrV* B3), as well as his offering the Laws of Mechanics rather than the Analogies of Experience as paradigms of the "pure natural science" he intends there to investigate (*KrV* B17-18, B20-21). That is to say, in asking in the Critique after the possibility of synthetic a priori theoretical cognition, he is asking (at least in significant part) after the possibility of impure, special metaphysics rather than its pure, general counterpart. This, it now seems, is his real quarry.

This centering of impure, special metaphysics is also clear in the third Critique, where Kant goes so far as to restrict the designation "metaphysical" to just this case. He says,

A transcendental principle is one through which the universal a priori condition under which alone things can become objects of our cognition at all is represented. By contrast, a metaphysical principle is one that represents the a priori condition under which alone objects whose concept

must be given empirically can be further determined a priori (*KU* 5:181).

Notably, he goes on to offer an example, identifying as a transcendental principle, what is in effect the Second Analogy, and identifying as a metaphysical principle, what is in effect the Second Law of Mechanics. Here, then, at least, Kant seems to think that it is only the special metaphysics that is properly metaphysical. The general metaphysics, as transcendental philosophy, seems merely a prelude.

Though Kant is not always so restrictive in his use of the term “metaphysics,” of course, his inclination to be so here is telling. For it reflects, I think, his apparent view that though general metaphysics must precede special metaphysics, there is an important sense in which the true *telos*, so to speak, of metaphysics is found only in the latter.¹⁰ After all, general metaphysics tells us that nature is a lawful order, and so amendable to scientific investigation. But it does not yet tell us what this order is. It tells us, among other things, that natural objects are substances standing in reciprocal causal relations. But it does not yet tell us which substances or which relations. In order to cognize these further things—that is, in order to cognize not just the lawfulness of nature but nature’s laws—we must supplement the purely a priori general metaphysics with an impurely a priori special one, realizing or instantiating the former in the latter. It is here, and only here, Kant thinks, that we move beyond the possibility of natural science to its actual practice.

IV

Return, then, to the Introduction to the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Though Kant does not use the same language there as he uses in the Preface to the *Metaphysical Foundations*, I think he is clearly signaling that the structure of the metaphysics articulated in the

former work mirrors the structure of the metaphysics articulated in the latter. That is to say, there is a general metaphysics of morals that lays out universal moral principles, which govern free action in general; as well as a special metaphysics of morals that takes those universal moral principles, applies them to an empirical concept of a particular kind of action, and lays out laws governing that kind of action in general.¹¹ Again, while the general metaphysics is wholly a priori, the special metaphysics is not, since it makes essential use of an empirical concept, viz., human action.¹² The result is an impurely a priori metaphysics of morals, one that tells us all we can know a priori about human morality: the laws of human action in general.

If this is right, then it is clear that the account of the metaphysics of morals provided in the *Metaphysics of Morals* is quite different from that typically drawn from the *Groundwork*. For it is clear here, even if it was not there, that the metaphysics of morals is not and cannot be “cleansed of everything that may be only empirical and that belongs to anthropology” (G 4:389). On the contrary, Kant insists here on a role for empirical, anthropological considerations *within the scope of metaphysics itself* and not merely in the application of a completed metaphysics to the special case of human beings.

Again, I don’t think this is necessarily at odds with the *Groundwork*. If one maps the *Metaphysics of Morals’* distinction between general and special metaphysics onto the *Groundwork’s* distinction between the stage of metaphysics that provides the first principle of ethics and the stage of metaphysics that provides the second, there need be no contradiction at all. For, we can now see, in providing the first principle of ethics, the moral law, the *Groundwork* is simply executing the pure, general metaphysics of morals—in which case Kant’s cleansing claim makes perfect sense.¹³ But this kind of metaphysics must be supplemented by another, an impure and special metaphysics that effects the transition from the first to the second principles by applying the first

principle to an empirical concept of human action. This is the task of the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

Thus, we can understand the *Groundwork* and the *Metaphysics of Morals* as complementary in exactly the way that the first Critique and the *Metaphysical Foundations* are complementary. The metaphysical project initiated in the former is completed only in the latter.

Consequently, I think we can conclude, as we did in the theoretical case, that though the general metaphysics must precede the special metaphysics, the true *telos* of this metaphysics is found only in the latter.¹⁴ For, again, the general metaphysics, in effect, tells us that the object of the science is a lawful order and so amenable to scientific investigation. But it does not tell us what this order is. So, in the practical case, the *Groundwork*, as an exercise in the general metaphysics of morals, tells us that freedom is a lawful order, subject not to the law of natural causality but the law of rational causality, the moral law. More specifically, in the guise of the Categorical Imperative, it tells us that free actions (or their maxims) must be universal, rightly related to rational nature, and consistent with the autonomy of the will. But it does not tell us which actions (or their maxims) meet these conditions.¹⁵ In order to cognize this further fact—and so, in order to cognize not just the lawfulness of freedom but freedom's laws—we must supplement the purely a priori general metaphysics with an impurely a priori special one, realizing or instantiating the former in the latter. It is here, and only here, that we move beyond the possibility of ethical science to its actual practice.¹⁶

To wit, trying to do ethics with just the *Groundwork* is like trying to do physics with just the first Critique. It can't be done. But it's not supposed to be done. The real scientific work happens only in the sequel.¹⁷

Now, as I noted in my earlier treatment of the *Metaphysical Foundations*, the body of that work is concerned with Kant's detailed discussion of how to transition from general to special metaphysics. As he puts it in the Preface, he will do this by bringing "all determinations of the general concept of a matter in general" under "the four classes of [pure concepts of the understanding]," expounded in the first Critique (*MAN* 4:474-5). Given this, one might well expect the body of the *Metaphysics of Morals* to consist of parallel arguments, in which all determinations of the general concept of a human action in general are brought under the various formulations of the Categorical Imperative expounded in the *Groundwork* or, perhaps, the corresponding categories of freedom, expounded in the second Critique. And yet, this is not exactly what one finds. First, Kant does not appear to explicate the concept of human action in the detailed way he explicates the concept of matter. And second, Kant does not appear to bring this concept of human action, such as it is, under the Categorical Imperative or the categories of freedom, at least not in anything like the explicit and systematic way he does in the *Metaphysical Foundations*. So, it remains obscure how exactly he intends, as he puts it, to "show in [the practical nature of human beings] what can be inferred from universal moral principles" (*MS* 6:216-7). That said, it is not difficult to interpret the *Metaphysics of Morals* as at least attempting such an inference. Here is a sketch of how this might go.¹⁸

Start with the universal moral principles, which are disclosed by the general metaphysics of morals, executed in the *Groundwork*. As I have already said, I think these principles—which, I take it, are meant to encompass the various statements of the one supreme principle, the moral law—tell us, in sum, that freedom is a lawful order. This certainly seems at the fore in Kant's initial statement of the principle, in terms of

universal law. But, of course, Kant does not stop there. He continues to spell out the principle in new terms, inviting us to think not just about its content—universality—but the authority that grounds it—rational nature as an end-in-itself—as well the ultimate explanation of this authority—autonomy—which reveals that in acting in accord with the principle, a rational being is simply acting in accord with her own rational nature. This last point is, I think, the most important. For it makes plain what seems to me the upshot of the *Groundwork*, which is that all morality asks of a rational being—indeed, all it *could* ask of a rational being—is for that being to be itself, to express in action what it truly is. Or, to put the point in imperatival terms, what the *Groundwork* really tells us is that rational beings ought always to act in ways that protect and promote rational functioning, their own and others’.

Suppose this is right. It would tell us something important about morality. But it would not yet tell us what morality would bid us do. That is, it would not yet tell us which ways of acting actually protect or promote rational functioning, *not in us and not in any other kind of rational being*. In order to know this further fact, we must fix the kind of rational being in question. Only when we know what it is for beings of this kind to act—and, in particular, how their acting bears, constitutively and instrumentally, on their rational functioning—can we know how it is they should act.

Put another way, the moral story told by the *Groundwork* does not determine duties, human or otherwise, but only sets the correct parameters for determining duties, human or otherwise, by telling us which features of a being are relevant to such determination, viz., those features that bear on its rational functioning. The *Metaphysics of Morals*, as I read it, is Kant’s attempt to apply such parameters in the case of specifically human beings. It is, to that extent, an anthropocentric specification of the generic rational end of rational functioning.¹⁹

Now, judging from the structure of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, it seems that the first fundamental fact about human action that Kant emphasizes is that such action admits of a distinction between outer and inner, external and internal.^{20,21} By this he seems to mean that human actions can be considered in two respects: with respect to their worldly existence and effects and with respect to their psychological causes or determining grounds. Consequently, human action is subject to two kinds of evaluation, one keyed to the external, abstracted from the internal, and one keyed to the internal, abstracted from the external. This is (more or less) the principle by which Kant divides the *Metaphysics of Morals* into two parts: the Doctrine of Right, concerned with external evaluation, and the Doctrine of Virtue, concerned with internal evaluation.

So, as Kant says in the Introduction to the Doctrine of Right, the concept of right has to do “only with the external and indeed practical relation of one person to another, insofar as their actions, as deeds, can have (direct or indirect) influence on each other” (MS 6:230). Such influence matters morally because, again, it bears on our rational functioning. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of the body. The fundamental way in which we humans function as rational agents in the world—and, moreover, the fundamental way in which we can affect each other’s rational functioning—is through the use of our bodies. Thus, Kant thinks, morality, which is protective of rational functioning, must protect our use of our bodies, a protection captured by Kant’s account of our one innate right, the right to freedom. Add that we can act in the world through the use of other bodies too, both of persons and things, and we get the categories of acquired right: property, contract, and status. Taken together, these rights delimit spheres of effective agency among embodied beings occupying a common world.

Where the Doctrine of Right cares simply about what we do, the Doctrine of

Virtue cares also about why we do it. This brings the internal aspect of action into view, and so, on Kant's account, the ends to which our actions are directed. Thus, Kant thinks, a morality concerned with rational functioning must prescribe ends, the pursuit of which allows us to see ourselves as effectively realizing that functioning. Such a prescription is captured, for example, by Kant's account of the obligatory ends. As I understand it, this account starts from a view of human nature in which the pursuit of happiness—the ordered achievement of our various natural ends—is the prime venue for the development of rational agency. Though we do not originally pursue happiness in order to develop ourselves, it is through the pursuit of happiness that we do in fact develop ourselves. Thus, morality does not tell us to abandon happiness but to transform it so that what makes us happy also makes us good, in the sense of rational well-functioning. The two obligatory ends mark the different ways of achieving this aim in the case of self and other.²²

There is, of course, much more to say. In distinguishing the external and internal aspects of action, in emphasizing our embodiment and our orientation toward happiness, Kant has moved down a level of abstraction. Over the course of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he will want to move down further still, exploring increasingly determinate conceptions of human practical nature and showing how they bear on rational functioning.²³ This is evident, for example, in his clear concern with the fact that the conditions of our happiness are deeply social. As he says, “only in comparison with others does one judge oneself happy or unhappy,” a comparison that is itself mediated by others' opinion of one's worth (R 6:26-27).²⁴ This obviously complicates the way in which the pursuit of happiness can be rationalized, opening up both pro-moral (egalitarian) and anti-moral (inegalitarian) possibilities. And so it should be no surprise that much of Kant's discussion in the Doctrine of Virtue is dedicated toward

managing just these complications, as in his discussion of the duties of love and respect—e.g., beneficence, gratitude, etc.—and the various vices that oppose them—e.g., envy, arrogance, etc.

Now, describing all of these arguments and, especially, showing how they might be systematized, is a large project, which I cannot begin to undertake here. I offer this sketch simply as a proof of concept: to show how the *Groundwork* and the *Metaphysics of Morals* could be understood as executing the two-stage metaphysics I describe, and so how the latter might be thought to realize or instantiate the principles of the former by providing an account of human rational functioning.

VI

We can see, then, that despite his reputation as arch rationalist, Kant actually thinks that rational and empirical elements are intimately related in the metaphysics of morals, a relation that should serve to transform our understanding of both. First and most obviously, our understanding of the rational is transformed because it is clear that reason's function, though fundamental, is limited. It sets us a task that we must go beyond reason to complete. For again, though reason itself delivers the generic rational end of rational functioning, it does not specify the content of this end and so what any (kind of) rational being must do in order to realize it. For that, we must make recourse to an empirical concept of a particular kind of rational being, and so, in our case, the human being.

To this extent, Kant is perhaps less of a rationalist than typically thought. But in another sense, he is perhaps more of a rationalist, insofar as the rational elements of metaphysics in fact shape the empirical elements, and so our conception of human nature. Again, empirical, anthropological considerations do not have independent

standing in the theory. They have what standing they do because they are brought into the remit of the rational in the way I have described. Consequently, as I put it earlier, though the pure moral law does not itself determine duties, it sets the correct parameters for determining duties by telling us which features of a being are relevant to such determination, viz., those features that bear, instrumentally and constitutively, on its rational functioning. But if that's right, then it should be obvious that, though we must make recourse to an empirical concept of the human being, not just any such concept will do.

We can make the point by distinguishing a theoretical and a practical concept of the human being, that is, a concept of the human being as it figures in theoretical philosophy and a concept of the human being as it figures in practical philosophy. To be clear, this distinction concerns the *function* of the concept, not its *content*, though the function will have implications for its content. In the present context, since the function of the concept of the human being *as it figures in the metaphysics of morals* is to specify the conditions of specifically human rational functioning, only certain features of the human being will be relevant to the function and so possible elements of its content. More specifically, features of the human being that bear on its rational functioning are in, and features of the human being that do not bear on its rational functioning are out. Thus, we might say, though the content of the concept of the human being is empirical—we must observe the human to discern its specific features—the practical function of the concept establishes a priori constraints on that content.

The point can be easy to miss, since Kant himself thinks there is substantial overlap between the theoretical and practical concepts of the human being. Or, at least, he thinks there is, if one thinks of the human being, like other parts of living nature, teleologically rather than mechanistically.²⁵ Indeed, he argues in a number of places

that the natural (biological) purpose of the human is the development of its rational capacities, at least at the level of the species (*G* 4:395-6, *IAG* 8:18-19). So, rational functioning figures prominently in both the theoretical and practical concepts.

To make the distinction and its significance more evident, it helps to shift from Kant's biology to our own. For example, the fact that the quality of human reasoning is dependent on testimony, and so on reliable channels of communication, does directly bear on our rational functioning and will plausibly figure in the practical concept of the human being;²⁶ while the fact that such dependency is realized in certain neural structures, determined by certain genetic sequences, reflecting a certain evolutionary history does not so bear, at least not as such, and so will plausibly not figure in that concept. Of course, these facts may well figure in a theoretical concept of the human being, one that represents the human as just another natural object. But that is just the point. The practical concept and the theoretical concept, though both empirical, may differ in their content because they differ in their function. They play different roles in different kinds of philosophical projects.²⁷

Thus, though Kant thinks that the practical philosopher must make essential use of an empirical concept of the human being, he is not, as one might think, proposing that she simply open a biology textbook and import what she finds. Such information will certainly be of interest to her, insofar as it sheds light on the range of human powers and their material conditions; but she will always interpret the information with an eye to its relation to rational functioning. For again, her concern with human nature is not a theoretical one. It is a practical one, structured by the moral metaphysical project of which it is a part.

To this extent, we can say that our account of rational nature, as it figures in the first stage of metaphysics, actually shapes our account of human nature, as it figures in

the second. For whatever our best biology reveals about the human, we know, *as a moral metaphysical fact*, that the human being is a kind of rational being. And it is this knowledge that guides our investigation into just what this kind is: the specific nature of the human being determined by its distinctive, empirically discernable ways of rational functioning.^{28,29}

VII

My aim in this paper has been to argue that the second principles of Kantian ethics, no less than the first, belong to the metaphysics of morals, and that this matters. I have done this by taking seriously the metaphysics of the metaphysics of morals—more specifically, by understanding the metaphysics of morals alongside the metaphysics of nature. For, *qua* metaphysics, both employ a common two-stage methodology, in which both rational and empirical elements play essential roles. As I have explained, appreciating this common methodology sheds new light on how the second principles are to be established, as well as the reach of Kant's rationalism, especially as regards our knowledge of human nature.

Given the size of the topic, my remarks here have been largely programmatic. If successful, I have set the ground for a new way of thinking about the foundations of Kantian ethics. It remains to be seen, however, whether anything worthwhile can be built on that ground. I am optimistic, but that is work for another occasion.³⁰

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All references to Kant are to Kants gesammelte Schriften and employ the standard Akademie numbers. I will use the following abbreviations in citations: *Critique of Pure Reason* — KrV; *Critique of Practical Reason* — KpV; *Critique of the Power of Judgment* — KU; *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* — G; *The Metaphysics of Morals* — MS; *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* — MAN; *Lectures on Ethics: Mrongovious* — VMM; *A – Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*; *R – Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*; IAG – “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim.”

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¹ See, for example, Barbara Herman's remark: "Morality requires an a priori foundation that can only be had in the principles of pure practical reason: the Moral Law....The *application* of the Moral Law cannot be carried out, however, without empirical knowledge of the object of application" (Herman 1993, 232, her emphasis). This is a dominant theme in her work. See Herman 1993 and Herman 2007, as well as Korsgaard 1996, O'Neill 1989, Rawls 2000, and Wood 1999 and 2008.

² I am not the first to note that Kant counts these principles as metaphysical. See, for example, Allison 2011, Gregor 1963, Louden 2000, Siep 2009, and Wood 1999, 2002, 2008. I am not even the first to note the analogy between theoretical and practical metaphysics; Allison, Gregor, and Wood do, at least. But, so far as I know, I am the first to develop the analogy in detail and draw lessons for ethics.

³ The connection between necessity, universality, and a priority is elaborated at *KrV* B4. Kant often infers a priority from necessity and universality, in both theoretical and practical cases.

⁴ That freedom is a lawful domain is, Kant supposes, a bit of common sense, belonging to the "common idea of duty and moral laws" (G 4:389) and "the concept of morality" (G 4:408)—which is not to say that it does not admit of philosophical defense. The same can be said, of course, of the claim that nature is a lawful domain, a point to which I shall return.

⁵ Such characterizations are suggested at G 4:410n and *VMM* 29:599. See Louden 2000 for discussion.

⁶ Kant does sometimes refer in the Preface to another kind of non-metaphysical application: the application of laws to cases. Like implementational application, this casuistical application requires experience (G 4:389). And like implementational application, it presupposes the metaphysical application on which I focus here. (One must already have laws in order to apply them to cases.) Consequently, I set it aside.

⁷ This seems to be the view of L. Nandi Theunissen, leading her to conclude that the *Metaphysics of Morals*, insofar as it is concerned with such application, is not actually a metaphysics of morals at all (Theunissen 2013). This is an unwelcome conclusion. My argument allows us to avoid it.

⁸ For invaluable discussion of these points and the work as a whole, see Friedman 2013.

⁹ I say "very roughly" because while Kant's second law (inertia) and third law (equality of action and reaction) closely resemble Newton's first and third laws, Kant's first law (conservation of matter) doesn't appear among Newton's laws and Newton's second law ($F=ma$) doesn't appear among Kant's.

¹⁰ Cf. Kant's comment that "a separated metaphysics of corporeal nature does excellent and indispensable service for *general* metaphysics, in that the former furnishes examples (instances *in concreto*) in which to realize the concepts and propositions of the latter (properly speaking, transcendental philosophy), that is, to give a mere form of thought sense and meaning" (*MAN* 4:478, Kant's emphasis).

¹¹ Why is the relevant empirical concept a concept of a *particular kind of action*? Because Kant is engaged in practical philosophy, the proper object of which must be practical. As Kant says, “*the free act of choice*” is “the highest divided concept” of a metaphysics of morals (*MS* 6:218, his emphasis). It is to practical philosophy what “an *object in general*” is to theoretical philosophy (*ibid*). Thus, just as the relevant empirical concept in theoretical metaphysics must be a concept of a particular kind of (natural) object, so must the relevant empirical concept in practical metaphysics be a concept of a particular kind of (free) action. That said, I will follow Kant in sometimes referring to the concept of a kind of agent (e.g., the human being) rather than the concept of a kind of action (e.g., human action). I take it that we are interested in the former only because we are interested in the latter. As I shall explain in §VI, this has important implications for the kind of concept of the human being that is relevant to moral metaphysics.

¹² Why is the relevant empirical concept one of specifically *human action*? Because we are interested in the specifically human case. If we were interested in non-human (e.g., Martian) cases, then we would make use of a concept of non-human (e.g., Martian) action. Thus, though there is but one general metaphysics of morals, there could be as many special metaphysics of morals as there are kinds of action. Kant is, to this extent, a moral pluralist.

¹³ Notably, even in the *Groundwork* Kant analogizes his task there to that of the transcendental logic of the first Critique, which, as I have explained, belongs to the general metaphysics of nature (*G* 4:390; cf. *KpV* 5:90). Where the latter lays out the principles of pure thinking, the former lays out the principles of pure willing.

¹⁴ Cf. Kant’s comment that the special metaphysics of nature serves to “give a mere form of thought sense and meaning” (*MAN* 4:478)

¹⁵ That said, the Categorical Imperative might still rule things out. Plausibly, this is what failure of a maxim under universalization is meant to show. The contradiction is not logical but metaphysical. A maxim that cannot be universalized is like a rule that posits an uncaused cause: neither can serve as a law of its domain. But again, this tells us nothing about what the laws actually are.

¹⁶ This way of relating the *Groundwork* and the *Metaphysics of Morals* is similar to the one described by Allen W. Wood (Wood 1999, Wood 2002, Wood 2008). But where Wood more or less just accepts this as Kant’s mature view — “the final form of Kant’s practical philosophy,” as he puts it — I think the analogy between theoretical and practical metaphysics allows us to give a rationale for it. Moreover, by doing so, I think we can say a bit more about the relation between the first principle (established in the *Groundwork*) and the second (established in the *Metaphysics of Morals*). Wood describes the relation between these as “hermeneutical” or “interpretive” (Wood 1996, 154; Wood 2008, 60). While I am not confident that I understand what he means by this, I think the instantiation/realization model drawn from the theoretical case at least suggests something different and perhaps more rigorous. I offer a preliminary sketch of this relation in the next section.

¹⁷ Thus, the Categorical Imperative really is empty, just as generations of critics have claimed. But this is not really a criticism, since the generative moral work does not belong to the general metaphysics of the *Groundwork* but to the special metaphysics of the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

¹⁸ Needless to say, all the details here are controversial.

¹⁹ In this respect, Kant’s way of determining duties seems to have more in common with typically Aristotelian approaches than with typically Kantian ones, which try to make the Categorical Imperative — usually the Formula of Universal Law but also the Formula of Humanity — do too much work.

In contrast with the Aristotelian, though, Kant begins at a higher level of abstraction, with rational functioning rather than human functioning. On the difference between these approaches, see Thompson 2008. I think Thompson overstates the difference, in part because he overlooks the points I make here about the stages of metaphysics, but he is right about their divergent starting points. The Kantian work that seems to me closest to the present proposal is Herman 2021.

²⁰ Though this may be essential to human action, it is plausibly not distinctive of it. Indeed, the concept of

human action and the various concepts of non-human action may well have much in common, at least with respect to their more general features. To this extent, even a Martian *Metaphysics of Morals* might include something quite like a Doctrine of Right and a Doctrine of Virtue, though the details will differ depending on more particular features of the agents and their actions, e.g., the ways in which they are vulnerable to each other, both physically and psychologically.

²¹ Interestingly, this distinction in aspects of action seems to mirror the distinction between inner and outer, between extended being and thinking being, that Kant makes use of in the *Metaphysical Foundations*. In a way, then, we can see Kant as claiming that while the special metaphysics of *nature* can only treat extended rather than thinking nature, the special metaphysics of *morals* can treat the human being at least, considered both as extended and as thinking, though only for practical purposes of course.

Note also that Kant actually makes use of the Third Law of Mechanics, part of the special metaphysics of nature, in his explication of the concept of right in the Doctrine of Right. He claims to provide, as it were, “the *construction* of that concept, that is, the presentation of it in pure intuition *a priori*, by analogy with presenting the possibility of bodies moving freely under the law of the *equality of action and reaction*” (MS 6:233, his emphasis). See the Appendix of Ripstein 2009 for discussion.

²² Why the difference? In brief: because the relation we bear to our own rational functioning is different from the relation we bear to others’. In my own case, it is direct, in that what I do in pursuit of my happiness can actually constitute my rational well-functioning. In the case of others, it is indirect, in that what I do in pursuit of your happiness only contributes to your rational well-functioning. More simply, *your* acting well is not something *I* can do. At best, I can help you act well by helping you pursue your happiness.

²³ This too has analogies on the theoretical side, where Kant begins with a very abstract account of matter as the movable in space but, over the course of the *Metaphysical Foundations*, makes the concept more and more empirically determinate.

²⁴ In the *Religion*, this falls under “the predisposition to humanity” (R 6:26-27). See also the discussion of unsocial sociability in “Idea for a Universal Purpose with a Cosmopolitan Aim” and of the passions in the *Anthropology*. It’s worth recalling in this context that Kant early on identifies Rousseau, whose account of *amour-propre* is clearly the ancestor of all this, as the Newton of human nature. Wood, especially, has emphasized the importance of this material to understanding Kant’s ethics (Wood 1999, Part II). For illuminating discussion of Rousseau on *amour-propre*, which may be useful for filling in some of the gaps in Kant’s account, see Neuhouser 2008.

²⁵ That we must think of living beings teleologically is one of the main theses of the third Critique.

²⁶ Something like this thought underlies Kant’s discussion of lying in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (MS 6:429).

²⁷ Kant himself makes something like this point, dismissing an account of memory in terms of “cranial nerves and fibers” not because it is false but because it is irrelevant; it contributes to a “physiological” account of human nature—“what *nature* makes of the human being”—but not a “pragmatic” account—“what [*the human*] as a free-acting being makes of himself or can and should make of himself” (A 7:119, Kant’s emphasis). What he is here calling a “pragmatic” account is roughly what I am calling a practical one.

²⁸ Though Kant was of course innocent of evolution, the autonomy, so to speak, of the practical concept is obviously of importance in thinking through the challenge that evolutionary theory presents to traditional accounts of human nature. I hope to discuss the practical concept and the evolutionary challenge more thoroughly in other work.

²⁹ In this, I appear to disagree with Wood, who thinks that the relevant account of human nature is and can only be theoretical, understanding “humanity as a biological species in the same way other animals are to be understood” (Wood 1999, 207). Wood seems to think that this must be the case, lest one be involved in a vicious circularity, since “the ends of morality are first to be determined by applying the principle of morality to practical anthropology. So at this stage of inquiry they are not yet available to

anthropological research" (ibid, 219). If by "ends of morality" Wood means here the obligatory ends, as elements of the special metaphysics, he is no doubt right. But there is an "end of morality" that is prior to this, the generic rational end of rational functioning, that belongs to the general metaphysics. I don't see how appealing to this end, as an a priori constraint on the concept of human nature at issue, need involve any circularity at all. For further discussion of Kant's views on human nature, see Louden 2000 and 2011, Brian and Jacobs 2003, and Frierson 2013.

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