Summary of

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF THE METAPHYSIC OF MORALS

(Also better known as the Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals)
by Immanuel Kant (1785)

Summary composes by Philip McPherson Rudisill
Of a translation by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott

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Section 1

We are in pursuit of the meaning of morality and we begin with an examination of a good will. A good will is not good because of what it accomplishes, but solely in terms of the purpose. There are lots of character traits that seem good, but can still be used for evil. For example fortitude is good in so many ways, but in an evil person this can accentuate the evil. And so a good will is good on its own and uniquely so.

As we continue our investigation we will be speaking of duties. The duties are the required and expected actions of a good will, but in the person of someone who often has reason not to comply. For example, I am duty bound to tell the truth to a questioning policeman (or to anyone), but I may find it beneficial to lie to him.

What are the characteristics of duty?

1. actions must be undertaken for the sake of duty.
2. actions must arise from a maxim and not from the expected effects.
3. duty is to act out of respect for the law.

For example (and to use a legal case) people with a drivers license have a duty to drive according to the speed laws, and not because they might be punished if they don't, but simply in order to respect these laws.

In brief then the pre-eminent (moral) good consists in the conception of law in general, i.e., that law is something we must respect and comply with. But what sort of law could that be, that we respect in this way? Since we have removed (in our thinking) all impulses arising for obedience, there is only this remaining: I am never to act otherwise than in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.

For example, may I lie if it is profitable to me? Now it may be quite prudent to tell the truth because of the danger of getting caught and ruining one's reputation. But this is based on the fear of the consequences of the lie. The quick way to resolve the matter is to ask: "May anyone lie if it is advantageous?" This cannot hold as a universal law because then no one would believe promises and assertions. Thus lying is morally wrong. Probably for the common understanding the question might be put as: how would it be if all people acted in this way?

And so here, still with common and ordinary reasoning and understanding we have come to the principle of morality. And we can conclude here:

> a good will is a will which is determined by a universal law, i.e., by a principle which could be approved by all persons as (theoretically) possible recipients of the proposed action; and furthermore: a good person is a person whose maxim is to derive his actions from this universal law, i.e., to possess a good will.

But we cannot leave the matter here because innocence cannot maintain itself very well and is easily seduced. Accordingly we need to turn to science, not to establish the meaning of the moral, but to secure its precepts against the powerful inclinations and desires which so often work against morality. Accordingly we turn to philosophy to secure this understanding of morality and to strengthen it against drives of the human to the contrary.

Section 2

We note very quickly that morality and what is moral cannot arise from empirical foundations. Even the Holy One of the Gospels must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before we can recognize Him as

such; and so He says of Himself, "Why call ye Me (whom you see) good; none is good (the model of good) but God only (whom ye do not see)?" But whence have we the conception of God as the supreme good? It arises merely from the idea of moral perfection, which reason frames *a priori* and connects inseparably with the concept of a free will. In other words, morality arises entirely from reason.

Now nature works according to laws while rational beings can act from the *representation* of laws. If reason does not sufficiently determine the will then what reason comes up with is objectively necessary while the actions are subjectively contingent (depending to some extent upon desires and inclinations and not reason). Any objective principles of action is called an imperative. The practical good determines the will objectively via conceptions of reason, and not based on subjective grounds. Hence they hold for all rational creatures.

There are three classes of imperatives. The first two are hypothetical and depend on whether some particular purpose is desired.

1. **Rules of skill**. For example: if you want to build a house you must provide a secure foundation.

2. **Counsels of happiness**. Since happiness varies from person to person and even from time to time in the same person, and since no one is certain what will produce happiness, there are no rules for happiness but rather recommendations, e.g., if you want to be secure in old age, then work and save while you are young. But like building a house or not, if a person does not believe he will live long, this would not be binding.

3. **Categorical**. Here a certain conduct is required without any particular purpose being assumed. And what is essentially good in it consists in the mental disposition, let the consequence be what it may. And this imperative may be called that of morality.

The hypothetical imperatives (1 & 2 above) are understood as analytical and are understandable, i.e., if you will the end, then you will the means to that end. The categorical imperative, on the other hand, is synthetical, which

means that a justification is called for to understand how it is binding. The analytical contain a self-evident action, but the synthetic (categorical) imperative is not self-evident and calls for a justification.

There is a single categorical imperative (although several formulations), namely act only on a maxim (subjective principle of action) which you can also will to be a universal law.

We can examine the four "sorts" of duty and find that they all can be derived from this formulation. Suicide is not permitted for that contradicts itself as a universal law; and the same with lying to people. Refusing to develop one's own talents is not contradictory, but still such a world could not be rationally willed, and the same holds with the refusal to aid people who are in distress. Thus we see how all duties depend on the same principle with regard to the nature of the obligation (not the object of the action).

We might note the universality in passing in this regard. Whenever we transgress our duty we do not mean that there is no duty, but only that we are skipping obedience this one time.

Interim conclusion: Duty can only be expressed as a categorical imperative.

Question: is it necessary for all rational creatures to judge of their actions by maxims which they can will to serve as universal laws?

In search for the answer we must turn to metaphysics (pure reason).

The purposes which a rational being proposes to himself per his whim are only relative and give rise to hypothetical imperatives. But every rational being exists as a purpose on his own. Beings whose existence depends on nature, if not rational beings, are things. Rational beings are called persons because their very nature points this out, and they cannot be considered just or merely as means. These then are objective purposes. Thus: rational nature exists as an end or purpose in itself. The imperative then is: Always so act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, likewise as a purpose, and never merely as a means.

If we use this formulation we can look at the same four cases and come up with the same conclusions as earlier. And so this is essentially the same as the requirement to universal one's maxims as laws. And this arises from pure reason and is not taken from what people actually consider to be a purpose.

The third formulation is the idea of the will of every rational being as a universally legislative will. This joins with the first (universalizing one's maxims) and the second (rational beings as end purposes on their own).

On this principle all maxims are rejected which are inconsistent with the will being itself a universal legislator. Thus the will is not subject simply to the law, but so subject that it must regard itself as giving the law and, for this reason only, subject to the law (of which it can regard itself as the author). This is the principle of autonomy. And since we are acting here (in metaphysics) as legislators, we exclude all personal interest.

We can now see why earlier systems of morality have failed, for while we knew that man was bound to laws of duty, it was not clear that these laws were only those each person makes on his own. If the laws were externally imposed, then some interest had to be involved. But now we see that all personal interest is excluded by this autonomy of each individual.

Now this conception leads to the idea of a realm of purposes (and where realm means a union of different rational beings under common laws). Since all rational beings come under the law that each of them must treat itself and all others never merely as means, but in every case at the same time as purposes in themselves, they can be considered to be in a systematic union of rational beings.

A rational being belongs as a member to the realm of purposes when, although giving universal laws in it, he is also himself subject to these laws.

Morality then consists in the reference of all action to the legislation which alone can render a realm of purposes possible. If now the maxims of rational beings are not by their own nature coincident with this objective principle, then the necessity of acting on it is called practical necessitation, i.e., duty.

In the realm of purposes everything has either value or dignity. Things of value can be replaced, but what is above valuation has dignity. Skill and diligence in labor have a market value. Wit, lively imagination, and humor, have fancy value. On the other hand, fidelity to promises, benevolence from principle (not from instinct), have an intrinsic worth. In general then, autonomy is the basis of the dignity of human and of every rational nature.

We can now end where we started at the beginning, namely, with the conception of a will which is unconditionally good. That will is absolutely good which cannot be evil--in other words, whose maxim, if made a universal law, could never contradict itself.

We can briefly note that all other systems of morality fail. There are two empirical ones of personal happiness and moral feeling (as opposed to moral law) and two rational ones of personal perfection and Divine edict.

An absolutely good will, then, the principle of which must be a categorical imperative, will be indeterminate with regard to all objects and will contain merely the form of volition generally, and that as autonomy, to wit: the capability of the maxims of every good will to make themselves a universal law, is itself the only law which the will of every rational being imposes on itself, without having to assume any incentive or interest as a foundation.

We have not proven the fact of the categorical imperative or morality, but have come to understand the meaning. We turn now to see how such an imperative can be possible, i.e., that we are imposed upon by a categorical imperative of morality.

Section 3

Freedom cannot be chaos and so requires a law, but this is the law of one's own making, the autonomy of will.

Freedom must be presupposed for all rational beings, i.e., all would act under the assumption of freedom and so practically speaking are free.

But why should I or anyone care about a moral law or a categorical imperative? It seems as though there is a circle here, we assume freedom in order to hold ourselves morally responsible, and then we respond to the moral law because we are free. There is a way out of this quandary, namely the distinction between a person as a thing on its own and a person subject to the laws of nature. In this way we can conceive of a person as free and subject to the moral law while at the same time we can also treat that person as totally determined by laws of nature. Even common people have a concept of this distinction.

Since, however, the world of understanding contains the foundation of the world of sense, and consequently of its laws also, and therefore is immediately legislative with respect to my will (which belongs wholly to the world of understanding) and must be conceived of as being so, it follows that, although on the one side I must regard myself as a being belonging to the world of sense, yet on the other side I, as an intelligence, must recognize myself as being subject to the law of the world of understanding, i.e., to reason, which contains this law in the idea of freedom, and therefore as subject to the autonomy of the will. Consequently I must regard the laws of the world of understanding as imperatives for me and the actions which conform to them as duties.

Consider the case of the rational criminal who must admit that he would prefer to be a decent fellow but has trouble with his strong inclinations. But he proves the point by conceiving of himself in this two-fold manner and by looking at himself as a member of this intelligible realm of free being, he realizes that he is free and subject to the categorical imperative. The moral "should" is therefore its own, necessary "would" as member of an intelligible world, and is thought as a "should" only to the extent that he simultaneously thinks of himself as a member of the sense world.

Finally it is necessary that reason show that there is no contradiction between thinking of man as a sensitive being and subject to the laws of nature and also as an intelligible being and subject to the laws of freedom. Once philosophy shows this reconciliation then it will be possible to discover the fact of freedom in a critique of practical reason as a necessary hypothesis.

It is not because morality interests us that we hold it valid for us, but because it is valid for us we must take an interest.

The question then as to how a categorical imperative is possible, can be answered to this extent, that we can assign the only hypothesis on which it is possible, namely, the idea of freedom. We can also discern the necessity of this hypothesis, and this is sufficient for the practical exercise of reason, that is, for the conviction of the validity of this imperative, and hence of the moral law; but how this hypothesis itself is possible can never be discerned by any human reason.

On the hypothesis, however, that the will of an intelligence is free, its autonomy, as the essential formal condition of its determination, is a necessary consequence. Moreover, this freedom of will is not merely quite possible as a hypothesis (not involving any contradiction to the principle of physical necessity in the connection of the phenomena of the sensible world) as speculative philosophy can show: but further, a rational being who is conscious of causality through reason, that is to say, of a will (distinct from desires), must of necessity make it practically, that is, in idea, the condition of all his voluntary actions. But to explain how pure reason can be of itself practical without the aid of any drive of action that could be derived from any other source, i.e., how the mere principle of the universal validity of all its maxims as laws (which would certainly be the form of a pure practical reason) can of itself supply a drive, without any matter (object) of the will in which one could antecedently take any interest; and how it can produce an interest which would be called purely moral; or in other words, how pure reason can be practical--to explain this is beyond the power of human reason, and all the labor and pains of seeking an explanation of it are lost.

End of Summary