

What is the ‘First Proposition’ Regarding Duty in Kant’s *Grundlegung*?

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Exploring the concept of duty in *GMS I*, Kant mentions a ‘second’ and ‘third’ proposition.¹

The *second* proposition is this: an action from duty has its moral worth not in the purpose to be attained by it, but in the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon, and thus does not depend upon the realization of the object of the action, but merely upon the principle of volition in accordance with which the action is done irrespective of all objects of the faculty of desire (399, 35, my italics, Kants italics neglected).

Having commented on this ‘second’ proposition, Kant continues:

The *third* proposition, as a consequence of the two preceding, I would express as follows: duty is the necessity of an action from respect for law (400, 17, my italics, Kant’s italics neglected).

Since there is a ‘third proposition’ (P 3) and a ‘second proposition’ (P 2) regarding duty, there obviously must be a ‘*first*’ proposition (P 1) as well. The question merely is: What is P 1? In the text itself such a ‘first’ proposition is never directly mentioned.

There are three possible answers: First, P 1 could be the *very* first proposition in *GMS I*; it is conceivable that Kant does not mention P 1 explicitly, because he refers to the *very first* proposition anyway. Secondly, Kant could refer to a specific proposition indeed written down in *GMS I* which he, however, neglects to call the ‘first proposition’. But he could also, thirdly, refer to a proposition which as a proposition can not really be found in *GMS I* and which is rather to be understood as the abstract quintessence of the first part of his thoughts about the concept of duty.

Let us first bring to mind very briefly the structure of *GMS I*.² Kant commences with the concept of a good will (393-396). In order to “explicate” (397, 6) this concept, he then analyses the concept of duty, “which contains

¹ 399, 35 and 400, 17. – The *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (GMS)* as well as the *Critique of Practical Reason (KpV)* is quoted according to The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy* (1996); Kant’s lecture *Moral Mrongovius II (MM II)* is quoted according to *Lectures on Ethics* (Cambridge Edition, edited by Peter Heath and J. B. Schneewind, translated by Peter Heath). However, I have made changes (partly using Paton’s translation); numbers in brackets refer to the pagination of the Akademieausgabe.

² Cf. the ‘Einleitung’ in *Kraft/Schönecker* (1999) and at length *Schönecker* (1999).

that of a good will though [the concept of a good will that is] under certain subjective limitations and hindrances” (397, 7). Kant distinguishes between a will that is always good and a will that can be good but is not necessarily so because it is “exposed also to subjective conditions (certain incentives)” (412, 36). For a being whose will “is not by its nature necessarily obedient” (413, 7) to the grounds of reason, the moral law implies a necessitation – for such a being the moral law is a categorical imperative and hence duty. Due to the difference between a perfect and an imperfect will the concept of duty ‘contains’ the concept of a good will, and not vice versa. For there is a good will for which the moral law is not a categorical imperative and therefore not duty.³ So there clearly is a passage in *GMS I* (397, 1-10) in which Kant makes a transition to the concept of duty which is then set forth in P 1, P 2 and P 3 (397, 11-401). What follows is a first formulation of the categorical imperative (402-403, 33) and a discussion of common rational moral cognition (403, 34-405).

Taking into account this structure of *GMS I*, the first of the above-mentioned answers is already dismissed – P 1 cannot be the very first proposition of *GMS I*. It is only in 397 that the concept of duty comes into play – it is only there that Kant makes the suggestion to “set before ourselves the concept of *duty*” (397, 6). It is highly implausible that the first possibility is correct because Kant would be describing the ‘third proposition’ regarding *duty* (P 3) as ‘consequence of the two proceeding’ the first of which then would be stated before the transition to the concept of duty is even made.⁴ Since the analysis of the concept of duty begins in 397, 11 and since the transition to P 2 takes place in 399, 35, P 1 must be found in paragraphs 9-13 (397, 11-399, 34).

The thesis that P 1 is the very first proposition of *GMS I* is, as far as I know, advocated by *Duncan* (1957, S. 70), *Liddell* (1970, S. 40 ff.) and *Marshall* (1991, S. 186). A variant of this claim is been argued for by *Freudiger* (1993, S. 78). According to *Sullivan* (1994, S. 30), P 1 must be understood as the answer to the question in what does the good will consist; the answer (and hence P 1), Sullivan claims, is to be found in 394-396, i. e. before the transition to the concept of duty is made.

³ Note the “though” (, obzwar’) in 397, 7; it only makes sense if there is a will that is *not* ‘under certain subjective limitations and hindrances’. Likewise, Kant’s claim that “even *beyond*” (393, 5, my italics) the world all that could be considered good without limitation is a good will only makes sense on the assumption that there is a difference between an imperfectly and a perfectly good will; cf. for example 414, 1-11.

⁴ Kant’s concluding remark of his discussion of duty and the categorical imperative does not back up the first answer. In this remark Kant repeats “that the necessity of my actions from *pure* respect for the practical law is what constitutes duty” (403, 30); he then says that this is the “condition of a good will *in itself*” (403, 32). However, he does not refer to the very first sentence of *GMS I* (and to the ‘good will’ mentioned in it), because the concept of duty ‘contains’ the concept of an *imperfect* good will. Remember that the imperfect good will is “under certain subjective limitations and hindrances, which, however, far from concealing it and making it unrecognizable, rather *bring it out by contrast* and make it shine forth all the more brightly” (397, 7, my italics).

P 3, Kant writes, is a 'consequence of the two proceeding'. Therefore we might expect that the conceptual elements of P 3 are in some sense included in P 1 and P 2. As a matter of fact, this is the case but not explicitly, however – the concepts 'necessity' and 'respect' as well as the concept of 'law' are for the first time used only in P 3. If we know whether P 2 deals with the 'necessity of an action' or with the 'respect for law', we also know what P 1 is about; all we have to do then is to ascertain where the relevant concept is discussed in order to locate or formulate P 1.

Now, does P 2 deal with the 'necessity of an action' or with the 'respect for law'? In his concluding and very important remarks on the concept of duty Kant writes that "there is left for the will nothing that could determine it except objectively the *law* and subjectively *pure respect* for this practical law" (400, 31). This difference is very important, for what is at stake here is, in the end, the concept of duty and hence the concept of a being that does not necessarily strive for the good. Just like a perfect being, an imperfect being too must be determined by the law; unlike a perfect being it must also be determined by respect for law. In his discussion of P 2 Kant writes that "the will stands between its a priori principle, which is material, as at a crossroads; and since it must still be determined by something, it must be determined by the formal principle of volition as such" (400, 10). But this 'formal principle of volition as such' is the moral law; it is this principle that determines the will *objectively*. This is also illuminated by the second part of P 2 itself ('... and thus does not ...'). This part must be understood as an *explanation* of the first part of P 2 ('The second proposition is this ...'). So what P 2 really contains is this: The moral worth of an action depends upon the *principle of volition*.⁵ If one reads the whole paragraph (14) about P 2, it becomes clear that what is meant by this 'principle of volition' is indeed nothing but the moral law itself. For there it is said that the will "must be determined by the formal principle of volition as such when an action is done from duty, where every material principle has been withdrawn from it" (400, 13). The 'material principle' is the 'purpose' mentioned in the first part of P 2; in this paragraph it is also called an "a posteriori incentive" (400, 11). This 'material principle' is thus contrasted with the 'formal principle of volition as such'; the latter is also called the "a priori principle, which is formal" (400, 11). This 'principle of volition' ('principle of the will', 'a priori formal principle') can only be the

⁵ It is for this reason that (in my opinion) *Abbotts* (1981, S. 17), *Becks* (1976, S. 16), *Gregors* (1996, S. 55) and *Patons* (1964, S. 68) translations can be misleading. The connection between the two parts of P 2 (, hängt also') is translated 'therefore'; hereby the stress of P 2 is put on the 'maxim' in the first part of P 2 which might one make believe that Kant is discussing the 'subjective moment' of duty. Indeed, a maxim is "the subjective principle of volition" (400, 34); nonetheless P 2 is not concerned with the maxim as a *subjective* principle (i. e. not concerned with the moment of respect), but with the "objective principle" (400, 34) in accordance with which the maxim has to be. In 400, 2 ('Prinzip des Willens'), 400, 9 ('Prinzip des Willens') and 400, 14 ('Prinzip des Willens') Kant does not refer to the maxim as the 'subjective principle of volition', but to the 'objective principle', i. e. the moral law, which is also a 'principle of volition'.

moral law – otherwise it could hardly be understood why P 3 as a ‘consequence’ talks about a ‘law’, a term which has never been used before in P 3.

P 2 must therefore be concerned with the ‘necessity of an action’ and hence with the *objective* necessity of the moral *law*. Kant discriminates this objective necessity from *subjective* necessity: “Necessity and necessitation are different: the former is objective necessity” (MM II, 611). Necessitation involves obligation, and therefore Kant defines duty as the “objective necessity of an action from obligation” (439, 33). What is *objectively* necessary is for human beings subjectively *not* necessary and hence involves necessitation: “In man, the objective necessity of acting in accordance with the moral laws, is necessitation. Necessitation is *making necessary* [Nothwendigmachung]” (MM II, 611, my italics). As we already saw, these conceptual connections come into play in paragraph 8 of *GMS I* (397). There Kant argues that the concept of duty ‘contains’ the ‘concept of a good will under certain limitations and hindrances’. When it comes to a perfectly good will moral actions are not only “objectively necessary” (412, 32), but also “*subjectively necessary*” (412, 32, my italics). For an imperfect will, however, moral actions are “objectively necessary” (413, 2), but “subjectively *contingent*” (413, 3, my italics). This subjective contingency stems from the fact that imperfect beings are ‘under certain limitations and hindrances’. Because of these “subjective conditions (certain incentives)” (412, 36) moral actions are for human beings always actions *from duty*, as opposed to perfect beings: “A perfectly good will thus also would equally stand under objective laws (of the good), but it could not on this account be conceived as *necessitated* to actions in conformity with law” (414, 1). On the contrary, what determines an imperfectly good will is, again, not only “objectively the law” (400, 32) but also “subjectively *pure respect* for this practical law” (400, 32). These two moments of determination of a good but imperfect will are therefore the two moments of the concept of duty as well. When Kant in his discussion of P 2 argues that the imperfectly good will is determined ‘by the formal principle of volition as such’, he clearly refers to the ‘objective moment’ and therefore to the ‘objective necessity of an action’. Consequently, P 1 is concerned with the ‘subjective moment’ and therefore with the ‘respect for the law’.

As we saw, P 1 must be found in paragraphs 9-13. However, it is not possible to identify in these paragraphs a *single* proposition as P 1. If P 1 were such a particularly formulated proposition, it had to describe in a single and summarizing proposition the subjective moment of ‘respect’ (that is already clear). But such a single proposition cannot be found (again, the term ‘respect’ first makes its appearance in P 3). It is rather that all five of these paragraphs deal with P 1. Thus, out of the three possible answers to our basic question only the third is plausible: Kant does not refer to a specific proposition actually written down in *GMS I*, but to a proposition which is the abstract quintessence of his thoughts about the ‘subjective moment’ of the concept of duty. Kant leaves it up to his readers to formulate this proposition. What then is P 1?

The concept of respect is not elaborated upon in *GMS*; the most important passage is merely a footnote (401). However, the characteristics Kant delineates

in this footnote can be traced back to paragraphs 9-13. This too shows that what is under discussion in these paragraphs is the concept of respect and thus P 1. Respect, Kant writes in that footnote, is a feeling not “*received* by means of influence; it is, instead, a feeling *selfwrought* by means of a rational concept” (401, 20); at another place Kant also calls it “the *subjective* effect that the law exercises on the will” (460, 5). Furthermore, respect means “consciousness of the *subordination* of my will to a law without the meditation of other influences on my sense” (401, 23). What this means is the crucial point that an action must be done, not from inclination ‘but from duty’⁶ in order to deserve the qualification ‘morally good’.⁷ An action done from duty is merely done because duty (objectively) commands the action as necessary; the *motive* of an action done from duty is merely the respect for the dignity of the moral law. Kant’s well-known examples in paragraphs 9-13 illuminate this point.

Although the concept of respect never actually shows up in paragraphs 9-13 – as a matter of fact, that concept is for the first time discussed *after* P 3 has been introduced – there can be no doubt that it is indeed this concept that Kant has in mind. Subjectively considered, an action has true moral worth only when it is done from respect for the moral law. An action done from duty thus is an action done from respect, and vice versa. On this difference between the (objective) accordance with the law and the (subjective) respect for it “rests the distinction between consciousness of having acted *in conformity with duty* and *from duty*, that is respect for the law” (*KpV*, 81).⁸ This difference between the legality and morality of an action is worked out by Kant in paragraphs 9-13 by showing what an action done from duty, i. e. ‘from respect for law’ consists in. With this in mind, the following retrospect becomes intelligible: “We have seen in the first Section that in the case of an action from duty we must look not to interest in the object but merely to the action itself and its principles in reason (the law)” (414, 34). The ‘interest in the action itself’ is nothing but the interest in an action that is commanded by the categorical imperative. This interest therefore is nothing but moral interest. Interest again is the “dependence of a contingently determinable will on principles of reason” (413, 27) which is why a perfectly good will can take no interest. Since all “so-called moral *interest* consists simply in *respect* for the law” (401, 40) what we have ‘seen in the first Section’ is this, that an action from duty consists, subjectively considered, in respect for law and, objectively considered, in this law itself.

The standard answer to our question can presumably be found in *Allison* (1990, S. 120), *Aune* (1979, S. 9 ff.), *Högemann* (1980, S. 42 ff.), *Johnson* (1995, S. 615), *Kaulbach* (1988, S. 27), *Kuhlmann* (1992, S. 103), *Paton* (1964, S. 21), *Ross* (1954, S. 18 f.), *Scott* (1924, S. 57) and *Wolff* (1973, S. 65 ff.). According to this interpretation, the ‘first proposition’ is: ‘To have moral worth an action must be

⁶ For this formulation cf. 398, 6; 398, 19; 399, 1; 399, 25. For the formulation ‘from duty’ cf. 397, 13; 397, 18; 397, 31; 398, 1; 398, 6; 398, 26; 399, 2; 399, 25; 399, 29.

⁷ For this formulation cf. 398, 7; 398, 14; 398, 27; 399, 26.

⁸ In Kant’s *KpV* these concepts are clearly identified (e. g. *KpV*, 85).

done from duty' (as a matter of fact, *Beck* [1976, S. 16] even includes this proposition into his translation). If this interpretation understands 'respect' as a concept that is thematically introduced only after P 3 is stated, it does and cannot succeed in understanding P 3 as a 'consequence' of P 1 and P 2. Thus, Paton (1964, S. 21) writes that P 3 "cannot be derived from the first two unless we can read into them a good deal more than has been explicitly stated: both 'reverence' [Paton's translation of 'Achtung', D. S.] and 'the law' appear to be terms which we have not met in the premises". Along the same lines Aune (1979, S. 27): "To derive it [i. e. P 3, D. S.] we need *extra premises* about practical laws, the *respect* they inspire in us, and perhaps other matters as well" (my italics.); also cf. Högemann (1980, S. 50) und Wolff (1973, S. 83). Köhl (1990) eventually subscribes to the standard interpretation; his own interpretation fails because he believes that the terms 'from duty' and 'from respect' represent "zwei verschiedene Motive" (S. 124). Messer's interpretation (1929, S. 11) misunderstands the composition of Kant's argument: He finds the moment of 'respect' in P 2, the moment of 'objective necessity' he finds in P 1. According to *Hutchings* (1972, S. 249 ff.) the whole discussion of duty is confused (or at least confusing). *Tugendhat* (1993, S. 129) correctly observes that the "reine Motivation durch das Moralische selbst" is described in paragraphs 9-13 and then again "im Begriff der Achtung aufgenommen". In the main, our interpretation coincides with Tugendhat's (1993, S. 103 ff.).

We are now in a position to briefly reconstruct Kant's thoughts and propositions about the concept of duty. Kant begins with his famous claim that all that could be considered good without limitation is a good will.

(0) It is a good will alone that is good without limitation.

Kant's second step is to specify this thesis with regard to human beings and thus with regard to beings whose wills are not perfectly good. The question then is by what an imperfect will must be determined in order to be good. The answer is: Objectively, it must be determined by the moral law, subjectively (and as opposed to perfect beings), it must be determined by respect for this law. The subjective moment of determination is captured in P 1:

(P 1) An action from duty is an action from respect for the moral law.

P 2 captures the objective moment:

(P 2) An action from duty follows a maxim that is necessarily commanded by the moral law.

The principle of a morally valuable action must be the categorical imperative; this is the 'objective' requirement. The 'subjective' requirement is respect for the moral law. P 3 therefore is:

(P 3) Duty is the necessity of an action from respect for law.

The 'consequence' simply is to combine the subjective moment with the objective: If duty, subjectively considered, is respect for law; and if duty is, objectively considered, the necessity of an action commanded by the law; then duty *consequently* must be 'the necessity of an action from respect for law'.

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