

What is Kantian Ethics?

The Structure of Moral Philosophy:

“In such a wise there arises a twofold metaphysics, the idea of a metaphysics of nature and a metaphysics of morals. Physics will thus have its empirical but also a rational part; and ethics likewise; although here the empirical part in particular could be called *practical anthropology*, but the rational part could properly be called *morals*” (*Groundwork* 4:388).

“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 through 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 those principles or cast doubt on their *a priori* source. – This is to say, in effect, that a metaphysics of morals cannot be based upon anthropology but can still be applied to it” (*Metaphysics of Morals* 6:216-217).

Reason:

“Reason must subject itself to critique in all its undertakings, and cannot restrict the freedom of critique through any prohibition without damaging itself and drawing upon itself a disadvantageous suspicion. Now there is nothing so important because of its utility, nothing so holy, that it may be exempted from this searching review and inspection, which knows no respect for persons. *The very existence of reason depends upon this freedom*, which has no dictatorial authority, but whose claim is never anything more than the agreement of free citizens, each of whom must be able to express his reservations, indeed even his *veto*, without holding back” (*Critique of Pure Reason* A738/B766).

“The maxims of common human understanding are:

1. To think for oneself
2. To think in the position of everyone else.
3. Always to think in accord with oneself.

The first is the maxim of the **unprejudiced** way of thinking, the second of the **broad-minded** way, the third that of the **consistent** way. The first is the maxim of a reason that is never **passive**. The tendency toward the latter, hence toward heteronomy of reason, is called **prejudice**; and the greatest prejudice of all is that of representing nature as if it were not subject to the rules on which the understanding grounds it by means of its own essential law: i.e. **superstition**. Liberation from superstition is called enlightenment, since although this designation is also applied to liberation from prejudices in general, it is superstition above all (*in sensu eminenti*) that deserves to be called a prejudice, since the blindness to which superstition leads, which indeed it even demands as an obligation, is what makes most evident the need to be led by others, hence the condition of a passive reason. As far as the second maxim of the way of thinking is concerned, we are accustomed to calling someone ‘limited’ [*eingeschränkt*] (**narrow-minded [borniert]**), in contrast to **broad-minded [erweitert]** whose talents do not suffice for any great employment (especially if it is intensive). But the issue here is not the faculty of cognition but the **way of thinking** if he sets himself apart from the subjective private conditions of the judgment, within which so many others are as if bracketed, and reflects on his own judgment from a **universal standpoint** (which he can determine only by putting himself into the standpoint of others). The third maxim, namely that of the **consistent** way of thinking, is the most difficult to achieve, and can be achieved only through the combination of the first two, and after frequent observance of them has made them automatic. One can say that the first of these maxims is that of the understanding, the second that of judgment, the third that of reason” (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:294-295).

Freedom:

“Freedom is treated here only as a transcendental idea, through which reason thinks of the series of conditions in appearance starting absolutely through what is sensibly unconditioned, but thereby involves itself in an antinomy following its own laws, which it prescribes for the empirical use of the understanding. [To show] that this antinomy rests on a mere illusion, and that nature at least **does not conflict** with causality through freedom – that was the one single thing we could accomplish, and it alone was our sole concern” (*Critique of Pure Reason* A558/B586)