

**Sally Sedgwick**

*Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: An Introduction.*

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Sedgwick aims in this book to 'provide a guide to Kant's text that follows the course of his discussion virtually paragraph by paragraph' (ix). The book is divided into four main chapters, paralleling the Preface and three sections of Kant's *Groundwork*. It also includes a twenty-eight page introduction on Kant's life and approach to practical philosophy, as well as a short bibliography.

Overall, the book is successful in providing explanations and commentaries on Kant's claims and arguments in the *Groundwork*. The discussion is broken up into short sections and it makes good use of brief passages from the text, without burdening the reader with lists of secondary citations or considerations of complex interpretive issues. The explanations are clear and straightforward. There are helpful discussions of the formulations of the categorical imperative and how they relate to each other, the four examples of duties, worries about prudential reasoning in Kant and about rigorism, analytic and synthetic method, and more.

Sedgwick strikes a nice balance between explaining Kant and commenting on him (both raising criticisms and defending him). She acknowledges places where Kant's text is unclear or unpersuasive but she goes on to offer proposals of what Kant's claim or argument must have been. For example, when discussing Kant's fourth example involving the testing of a maxim of non-beneficence, she says: 'It is difficult to ignore the fact that the considerations Kant draws to our attention here seem entirely prudential... Contrary to appearances, Kant's reasoning here cannot be prudential. We will thus have to provide an alternative interpretation' (120-121). On p. 154, she discusses Kant's claim that some heteronomous principles are rational, and she argues that 'to establish that he is not guilty of inconsistency, we need to consider more closely what he has in mind.' She then looks to the *Critique of Practical Reason* for help.

On the other hand, the introduction to the book ends rather abruptly after a discussion of several arguments for 'saving freedom'. A beginning reader of Kant would likely benefit from some additional attention to Kant's context and influence. In particular, there might have been a consideration of how Kant was responding to the ethical traditions before him or how he would reply to his critics. Especially helpful would be some attention to the practical impact of Kant's philosophy: What is he known for? How has he influenced subsequent ethical or political thinking? This would have

offered new readers a fuller view of what to look for in Kant's *Groundwork*.

In Chapters 4 and 5, there are also several matters of interpretation that call for further discussion. In Chapter 4, Sedgwick offers an account of categorical and hypothetical imperatives that seems to lose sight of the essential difference between the two kinds of imperatives. In her effort to show that all actions have ends and purposes—certainly a correct interpretation of Kant's view—she tends to set aside the passages where Kant distinguishes categorical imperatives (as commanding without regard for ends and purposes) from hypothetical imperatives (as grounded on ends and purposes). Instead, she argues that the structure of the two sorts of imperatives is the same. 'All imperatives command actions in the service of achieving some purpose or end' (94); and 'Like all imperatives, the categorical imperative expresses a command "for the determination of action that is necessary in accordance with the principle of a will which is good in some way." It, too, may be expressed in the form: "In order to achieve *X*, I ought to will *Y*"' (105). But it may be that this emphasis on the similarity of all imperatives takes away from or hides the central difference between categorical and hypothetical imperatives, namely, that the former commands unconditionally while the latter commands only conditionally.

Kant says at 414 (page number from the Academy edition of the *Groundwork*) that 'if an action would be good merely as a means *to something else* the imperative is *hypothetical*; if the action is represented as *in itself* good, hence as necessary in a will in itself conforming to reason, as its principle, *then it is categorical*.' Again, at 441, Kant claims that 'If the will seeks the law that is to determine it *anywhere else* than in the fitness of its maxims for its own giving of universal law—consequently if, in going beyond itself, it seeks this law in a property of any of its objects— ... [t]his relation ... lets only hypothetical imperatives become possible: I ought to do something *because I will something else*. On the contrary, the moral and therefore categorical imperative says: I ought to act in such or such a way even though I have not willed anything else.'

To be fair, Sedgwick has not entirely omitted these passages, but she has under-emphasized them in order to highlight the way in which all imperatives have ends. Finally, the point is one of timing and emphasis. While it is true and important to the *Groundwork* to establish that practical reason has its own necessary and unconditional end (namely, rational nature), it is also important to account for the passages where the categorical imperative is taken to be fundamentally different in kind from hypothetical imperatives. It is not necessary to give up this logical difference in order to discover later in the *Groundwork* that practical reason too has an end, again fundamentally unlike the ends of hypothetical imperatives.

In Chapter 5, Sedgwick argues that Kant's justification of the categorical imperative shows both that we are 'entitled to think of ourselves as beings standing outside the world of sense' (193) and that 'we "must" think of ourselves in this way'

(193). We must because, she says, ‘our scientific or theoretical knowledge—our knowledge of nature—depends for its very possibility on the presupposition of an uncaused or spontaneous cause’ (193-4). In other words, ‘theoretical or scientific inquiry requires the practical point of view as a condition of its very possibility’ (194). This account enables her to give a strong argument for the objective reality of freedom (194, 197), but it may overstate the case. Her account seems to stress the objective reality of freedom more than Kant does, and it seems to offer a theoretical justification for freedom although Kant focuses more on a practical justification. Kant, for instance, states that, ‘Freedom however, is a mere idea, the objective reality of which can in no way be presented in accordance with laws of nature and so too cannot be presented in any possible experience’ (459). He concludes: ‘Thus the question, how a categorical imperative is possible, can indeed be answered to the extent that one can furnish the sole presupposition on which alone it is possible, namely the idea of freedom, and that one can also see the necessity of this presupposition, which is sufficient for the *practical use* of reason ...’ (461). In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant does claim to provide a proof of the objective reality of freedom, but it is not clear, despite Sedgwick’s claims, that he has provided one in the *Groundwork*. In addition, it is the practical necessity to presuppose freedom in a rational being who is conscious of having a will that is highlighted in this section.

Finally, Section 3 of the *Groundwork* introduces the concept of an interest that human beings take in the moral law (460). Kant describes this interest as a product of reason, related to moral feeling, and reflecting a feeling of pleasure in the fulfillment of duty (460). Sedgwick mentions the passages in her summary of this section in Chapter 5, but she offers no explanation or hint of what the passages mean or how important they may be (197). A bit more might have been said about these concepts here, given that in the *Critique of Practical Reason* there is expanded discussion of practical reason’s interest, incentives, and the self-contentment that follows from acting from duty.

Overall, the book succeeds in providing a read-along guide to the *Groundwork*. Both first time readers and more advanced students of Kant will find the book helpful as they attempt a careful and detailed reading of Kant’s work.

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