

## **The Foundation of Ethics**

### *El fundamento de la ética*

FEDERICO RAMPININI\*

Università di Roma Tre-Università di Tor Vergata, Italia

**Review of: H.F. Klemme, *Kants »Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten«. Ein systematischer Kommentar*, Reclam, Stuttgart, 2017, 249 pp., ISBN: 9783150194737**

The deep distrust of unitary and solid *Weltanschauungen*, based on the belief of the existence of fundamental foundations of knowledge and action, and the preference for “weak” or “unstable” forms of thought, which characterize the post-modern age, put Kant’s practical philosophy to the test, because of the notions of “categorical imperative”, *Verbindlichkeit* and *Allgemeinheit*. Kant himself knew the unclear places of human soul: contingency, arbitrariness, interests that make our actions, from the noblest to the vilest. Reason has its boundaries, but we have no alternative. Having said that, if one does not want to collapse the building of morality, reducing it to a mere appendage of psychology or anthropology, it is necessary to set up his project on the solid and necessary grounds, which according to Kant find their origin within the pure reason.

The Autumn of 1784 inaugurates a new age in philosophy: in the issue of November of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* is published the essay *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in Weltbürgerlicher Absicht*; in December, always in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, Kant intervenes in the dispute about *Aufklärung* with *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*, with the well-known answer: «Aufklärung ist der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbst verschuldeten Unmündigkeit. [...]. *Sapere aude!* Habe Muth dich deines eigenen Verstandes zu bedienen! Ist also der Wahlspruch der Aufklärung» (AA viii 35). Always at the end of the 1784 Kant concludes the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*,

---

\* PhD in Philosophy at Università degli Studi di Roma Tre-Università degli Studi di Roma “Tor Vergata”.  
Email adress: [federico.rampinini@uniroma3.it](mailto:federico.rampinini@uniroma3.it)

published late in April of the following year. This word is the object of the fine and detailed analysis that Professor Klemme develops in his last book: *Kants »Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten«. Ein systematischer Kommentar*. This work does not adopt a methodological approach based for example on analytical or meta-ethical models, nor it looks for an answer to irrelevant questions, such as the deontological or teleological, internalist or externalist nature of the Kantian ethics, nor does it deal with the problem of the actuality of practical philosophy (Klemme will analyse these arguments perhaps in the forthcoming book, dedicated to the actuality of Kantian ethical reflection). Klemme's book aim to examine how the *Grundlegung's* doctrine of categorical imperative is developed, starting from the awareness of its historical-cultural background, namely the Kant's polemic against Wolff, Eberhard, Garve, Meier, Sulzer, and the whole Scottish moral tradition, Hume, Hutcheson, Smith, Kames. For that reason, this commentary refrains from comparing with the secondary literature, in order to avoid «die Gefahr, den Blick für das Wesentliche zu verlieren: Kants philosophisches Anliegen und die Art und Weise, in der er seine Argumentation entwickelt» (p. 9). Therefore, the structure of the Klemme's book follows faithfully the organization of the Kant's text; after a *Vorwort* (pp. 7-11), an *Einleitung* (pp. 12-20), and the explanation of some premises and a brief comparison with the Christian Wolff's philosophy (*Grundlagen und Voraussetzungen*, pp. 21-40), the analysis gets to the heart of Kant's text, with three chapters: *Vorrede und erster Abschnitt: „Übergang von der gemeinen sittlichen Vernunftkenntnis zur philosophischen“* (pp. 41-85); *Der zweite Abschnitt: „Übergang von der populären sittlichen Weitweisheit zur Metaphysik der Sitten“* (pp. 86-172); *Der dritte Abschnitt: „Übergang von der Metaphysik der Sitten zur Kritik der reinen praktischen Vernunft“* (pp. 173-223). The volume closes with the chapter *Ausblick* (pp. 224-232), a selected bibliography (pp. 233-239) and the index of concepts (pp. 240-246) and of names (pp. 247-248).

The *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* is the outcome of a ten-year study on morality and problems concerning the possibility of obligation (*Verbindlichkeit*) and the universality (*Allgemeinheit*) of the categorical imperative. For this purpose, the concept of freedom, and its relationship with the moral law, becomes the keystone of the problem (see pp. 21-26; 173-187); freedom is not in contrast with the obligation of moral law, and indeed it frees the human being from the domination of natural laws, elevating him above all natural things, only if the moral law itself is thought of as originated in the subject and at the same time destined for him. In *Grundlegung* and in the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, Wolff is strongly criticized for having ignored the concept of pure reason (reducing all practical causes to the experience alone and therefore denying the normativity of moral), for having inappropriately distinguished the practical material principles between sensual and intellectual, and for having equated knowledge with the virtue (see pp. 27-40). Nonetheless, he has underscored how the subject, thanks to freedom and using the reason, is able to put a law to himself: «die Rechtswissenschaft nicht aus den zwölf Tafeln, noch aus den Befehlen der Prätores, sondern allerdings aus dem innersten der Philosophie herzuholen sey» (*Grundsätze des Natur- und Völkerrechts*, 1754, *Vorrede*, IV). The idea

of a mediation between freedom and law, which alone makes man truly free, had already been formulated in the sphere of political philosophy by Jean-Jacques Rousseau; he, first among the moderns, puts the concept of freedom at the heart of the definition and destiny of the human being: «Ce que l'homme perd par le contrat social, c'est sa liberté naturelle et un droit illimité à tout ce qui le tente et qu'il peut atteindre; ce qu'il gagne, c'est la liberté civile et le propriété de tout ce qu'il possède [...] la liberté morale, qui seule rend l'homme vraiment maître de lui; car l'impulsion du seul appétit est esclavage, et l'obéissance à la loi qu'on s'est prescrite est liberté» (*Du Contract Social*, 1762, Livre I, Chapitre VIII). Furthermore, according to Georg Friedrich Meier the free will has an essential role within the system of the faculties of the human mind: she is «die Krone aller Kräfte der menschlichen Seele» (*Allgemeine praktische Weltweisheit*, 1764, I, § 8). Despite these precedents, as the protestant theologian Carl Friedrich Stäudlin has already pointed out, the *Grundlegung* inaugurates «eine neue Epoche in der Geschichte der Philosophie» (*Geschichte der Lehre von dem Gewissen*, Halle, 1824, p. 96): this derives on the one hand from the introduction of the concepts of „pure practical reason“ and “moral law”, on the other hand from the sharp critique of eudemonism. Instead, according to Kant, the moral worth and duty cannot have something to do with the achievement of happiness: only the pure reason can formulate a moral duty, otherwise the moral law would not be universal, the imperative would be hypothetical, not categorical. As professor Klemme puts it: ««Niemals zuvor ist in der Geschichte der Ethik der Versuch unternommen worden, den Bedeutungsgehalt eines praktischen Prinzips aus verschiedenen epistemischen Perspektiven zu beleuchten, die nach einer bestimmten Logik aufeinanderfolgen [...]. Und niemals zuvor hat ein Autor sich zu schreiben erlaubt, dass die Analyse der „gemeinen sittlichen Vernunftkenntnis“ in eine „Kritik der reinen praktischen Vernunft“ münden wird, in der das, was die gemeine Vernunft dunkel denkt, zur begrifflichen Deutlichkeit gebracht werden wird. Kant nimmt sich die Freiheit, den Egalitarismus von Rousseau, der [...] in die natürliche Sittlichkeit des Menschen betont hat, mit der Metaphysik von Wolff und [...] Baumgarten [...] zusammenzuführen» (pp. 17-18). Indeed, according to Kant every human being has in himself the knowledge of moral law, however hidden, but only the critical philosopher can bring it to light (see AA iv 392). The Kant's method, which analyses popular moral philosophy to locate the supreme principle of morality, is not unusual: for example, Ebehard «dient die in der Tradition der schottischen Moralphilosophie [...] stehende Analyse unserer gewöhnlichen moralischen Urteilspraxis als Sprungbrett für die eigentliche philosophische Tätigkeit, für das metaphysische und kritische Denken über unsere moralischen Verbindlichkeit» (p. 58).

In the first section, Kant pays attention to the notion of “good Will”, the only one thing that is good in itself and that do not derive their goodness from something else: power, wealth, health, etc., presuppose always a good will, that makes good use of them. Nonetheless, and this is disconcerting, «der gute Wille ist nicht durch das, was er bewirkt oder ausrichtet, nicht durch seine Tauglichkeit zu Erreichung irgend eines vorgesetzten Zweckes, sondern allein durch das Wollen» (AA iv 394). One cannot judge on what a will makes in empirical

world, because it is too much variable: according to Kant, «eine besondere Ungunst des Schicksals, oder [...] kärgliche Ausstattung einer stiefmütterlichen Natur» (*ibidem*) cannot undermine the judgment about the morality of our behaviours. Nonetheless, the will should not be confused with the mere desire to perform an action: we have to really want the good. As Kant pointed out: «der gute Wille (freilich nicht etwas also in bloßer Wunsch, sondern als die Aufbietung aller Mittel, soweit sie in unserer Gewalt sind)» (AA iv 394). To better analyse the concept of good will, Kant introduces the notion of duty, as an act to which we are morally bound, and distinguishes among: in first place, the case in which a person clearly acts contrary to duty; in the second place, the case in which a person's actions coincide with duty, but are not motivated by duty; in the third place, and the case, the only one moral, in which a person's actions coincide with duty because they are motivated by duty.

A paragraph is dedicated specifically to the feeling of respect and to his function. The problem of how the moral law can be the transcendental principle of determination, is the problem of how pure reason can be practical. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the idea has spread that the reasons of human behaviour were passions, denying any effect of reason on will, as thought Hume. Indeed, it was developed the theory of “moral sentiment”, as in Adam Smith's thought: only passions and feelings can induce an action. Otherwise, Kant have to explain how pure reason, thanks to the representation of the moral law, produces an effect in human soul, and what it is. This is why Kant introduces the notion of “respect“, which «hat eine Brückenfunktion: Es vermittelt zwischen reiner Vernunft und unserem Gemüt» (p. 78). The gulf that separated pure reason and the practical motives is overcome thanks to the action of the reason itself, which gives rise to the particular feeling of respect, which on the one hand humiliates our self-love, but on the other hand it elevates us to above all our sensitive determinations. In this respect, as professor Klemme says: «in Zusammenhang mit der Achtung ist das Gefühl nicht mehr das ganz Andere der Vernunft. Im Gefühl der Achtung materialisiert für uns Menschen die Vernunft als ein Gefühl. Das rein rationalistische Projekt einer durch und durch vernünftigen Bestimmung unseres Willens wäre zum Scheitern verurteilt» (pp. 79-80).

In the first section Kant identifies the notion of good will, through the analysis of the concept of duty; in the second section, «müssen wir das praktische Vernunftvermögen von seinen allgemeinen Bestimmungsregeln an bis dahin, wo aus ihm der Plicht entspringt, verfolgen und deutlich darstellen» (AA iv 412). At the beginning of the second section, Kant remembers that «wenn man dem Begriffe von Sittlichkeit nicht gar alle Wahrheit und Beziehung auf irgend ein mögliches Object bestreiten will, man nicht in Abrede ziehen könne, daß sein Gesetz von so ausgebreiteter Bedeutung sei, daß es nicht bloß für Menschen, sondern alle vernünftige Wesen überhaupt, nicht bloß unter zufälligen Bedingunge und mit Ausnahmen, sondern schlechterdings notwendig gelten müsse » (AA iv 408). In contrast to Johann Georg Sulzer's thought, Kant aims to found a metaphysics of morals far from the fields of theology, anthropology or psychology. The debate between

Kant and his contemporaries, often overlooked, is frequently highlighted by professor Klemme, and this is one of the main values of his commentary. Sulzer, in a letter dated December 8th 1770, asked Kant «warum die Lehren der Tugend, soviel Überzeugendes sie auch für die Vernunft haben, doch so wenig ausrichten» (AA iv 410). Given that virtue is the only path to happiness, why cannot man reach it? Is Wolff right, in saying that the cause of man's lack of happiness is ignorance of virtue? In this letter Sulzer hoped that Kant would soon publish a work on morals, in which he hoped to find an answer to the question «Worin besteht eigentlich der physische oder psychologische Unterschied der Seele, die man tugendhaft nennt, von der, die lasterhaft ist» (I. Kant, *Briefwechsel*, hrsg. von O. Schöndörffer, Hamburg 1986, p. 86) According to Klemme, if Sulzer, who died in 1779, had read the *Grundlegung*, «hätte er [...] sich erschrocken über so viel Chuzpe von Kant abgewendet [...]. Denn Kants These von der bewegenden Kraft der reinen Vernunft muss für einen Philosophen wie Sulzer eine Neufassung der überwunden geglaubten Position von Wolff klingen, entsprechend der der Wille der Tugend folgt, wann immer er sie deutlich erkennt» (pp. 88-89).

As Klemme frequently pointed out, the detachment from Wolffian morality is carried out in the second section. Only the rational being, thanks to will, acts on the basis of representation of the moral law, yet its actions do not necessarily conform to it; respect for moral law is related to the consciousness of it, but the subject is also affected by inclinations in contrast with it. Therefore, the subject has the noteworthy responsibility to choose the reason of his action, being able to freely self-determine. For this reason, the rules of morality can only be an imperative, indicating a have to. Klemme analyse these arguments in some paragraphs specifically dedicated for example to the form of the categorical imperative (pp. 110-115), to the self-determination of the will (pp. 119-126), and to the dispute between autonomy and heteronomy (pp. 150-156).

The Klemme's commentary examines the five parts of the third section of *Grundlegung* in as many paragraphs: *Freiheit und Autonomie* (pp. 174-182), *Freiheit und Vernunft* (pp.182-187), *Vernunft und Interesse* (pp. 187-204), *Wie ist ein kategorischer Imperativ möglich?* (pp. 204-210), *Von der äußersten Grenze aller praktischen Philosophie* (pp. 210-222). The section's main theme is the freedom, inasmuch as it is condition of possibility of the categorical imperative. In the light of what was argued in the first *Critique*, the concept of freedom is very problematic, therefore Kant devotes many pages, examined in detail in the commentary, to explain how it may not conflict with the lawfulness of nature. In the impossibility of giving an account of the many interesting aspects analysed by Professor Klemme, I reckon important to briefly underline the particular meaning that Kant attributes to the notion of freedom. It can neither consist in necessarily following the knowledge of good, as Wolff believed, nor in being beyond the law. Rather, a free will «ist in allen Handlungen sich selbst ein Gesetz, bezeichnet nur das Prinzip, nach keiner anderen Maxime zu handeln, als die sich selbst auch als ein allgemeines Gesetz zum Gegenstande haben kann» (AA iv 447). However, as prof. Klemme identifies, for founding the concept of pure practical reason, Kant starts from an undeclared assumption: that reason must

consider itself «"Urheberin" der Prinzipien» (p. 183). If reason is the author of its own moral law, then it can also be practical, since the will is considered capable of giving itself the moral law, overcoming the contrast of sensitive inclinations.

In conclusion, I would underline that in the final pages of the commentary, Klemme exhorts readers not to reduce the Kant's moral philosophy to the doctrine of categorical imperative: this reduction could lead to a misleading reading of Kantian practical philosophy, as a impracticable and utopian thought. The categorical imperative is the principle of moral, but it is not the moral. «Unsere Wertschätzung darf sich nicht nur in unserer Gesinnung zeigen. Wir sollen auch dafür Sorge tragen, dass wir im äußeren Gebrauch unserer freien Willkür die Rechte der Menschen wahren» (p. 227). Therefore, in the theory of law and in political philosophy, Kant examines the conditions and principles on the basis of which men of flesh and blood can reach their highest political good, that is perpetual peace. Pure reason requires not only respect for the categorical imperative in the intention of the will; it also requires the creation of legal and empirical conditions under which man is no longer treated as one thing.

