

Swarthmore College

Works

Philosophy Faculty Works

Philosophy

1987

Review Of "Immanuel Kant: Ethical Philosophy" Translated By J. W. Ellington

Hans Oberdiek

Swarthmore College, hoberdi1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Hans Oberdiek. (1987). "Review Of "Immanuel Kant: Ethical Philosophy" Translated By J. W. Ellington". *Kant-Studien*. Volume 78, Issue 1. 120-121.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy/126>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by . It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

any way serving as a substitute for reading Kant himself. The edition also has an excellent index to both works, useful glossary, and numerous footnotes which supply helpful references both internal and external to the texts.

Ellington's translation of the *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue* (Part II of the *Metaphysics of Morals*) originally appeared in 1964 as part of the Library of Liberal Arts series; his translation of the *Grounding* first appeared in 1981 in the Hackett Publishing Company series of philosophical classics. Both translations merit high marks for accuracy and style, so that one gives up nothing in depending on them over, say, Paton, Beck, or Gregor and gains much by having a consistent translation by one individual.

Will anyone but scholars read the *Tugendlehre*? Certainly anyone concerned to teach Kant's ethics responsibly would wish his students to be familiar with substantial portions of it, if only to curb one's temptation to caricature Kant. But more than that, the *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue* show that Kant took seriously the ambiguities and complexities of moral life. Especially in those sections entitled "Casuistical Questions" which follow his discussions of specific duties, we find Kant challenging not only our intuitions but his own judgments. Kant condemns suicide, for instance, "... only when it can be shown that the killing is really a crime committed either against one's own person, or against another person through one's own suicide (e.g., when a pregnant person kills herself)" (Ak 422). But that does not end the matter, as Kant illustrates: "Bitten by a mad dog, a man already felt hydrophobia coming upon him. He declared that since he had never known anybody cured of it, he would destroy himself in order that, as he said in his testament, he might not in his madness (which he already felt gripping him) bring misfortune to other men too. The question is whether or not he did wrong" (Ak 423-4).

Even lying comes in for some moderate excuse, if not justification. Untruths from politeness seem to be excused, so long as no one is deceived, and even flattery and puffery seem acceptable, at least if one is caught off guard, as when asked by an author, "How do you like my work?" (Ak 431). Indeed, Kant says something worth considering on almost every topic, from avarice to conscience to weakness of will. Not surprisingly – given the influence of Stoicism on his thought, Kant's discussion of friendship deserves a place alongside the far better-known account offered by Aristotle: "Moral friendship . . . is the complete confidence of two persons in the mutual openness of their private judgments and sensations, as far as such openness can subsist with mutual respect for one another" (Ak 471). Here is no dried-up, unfeeling abstract formalist, but a man of great heart and sensitivity reflecting that "Friendship (in its perfection) is the union of two persons through equal mutual love and respect" (Ak 469). His honesty, moreover, compels him to admit when he cannot satisfactorily explain why certain conduct – usually sexual – violates duty even when his revulsion does not permit him to challenge the taboos of conventional morality.

The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue, printed here with the Preface and Introduction to *The Metaphysics of Morals*, also supplements the *Grounding* by clarifying the distinction between acting *from* and *according* to duty, showing the proper relationship between religion and ethics, and numerous other matters only touched upon in the far more widely read and studied work.

For reasons of accuracy, insight, and completeness, then, Kant's *Tugendlehre* deserves to be better known. Because Hackett Publishing has wisely paired it with the *Grundlegung*, perhaps it will be read and appreciated at last.

Hans Oberdiek, Swarthmore/Pennsylvania

Immanuel Kant: Ethical Philosophy. Translation by James W. Ellington. Introduction by Warner A. Wick. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company 1983, pp. lxii and 250.

Ellington and Hackett Publishing Company deserve praise for providing English-reading students and scholars with this fine yet moderately priced translation of Kant's *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* and *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Tugendlehre*. Grouping the two works should help dispel the notion that Kant was no more than an arid and empty formalist. Taking a clue from a footnote at Ak 421, Ellington justifies his pairing: „*The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue* sets forth the complete and systematic specification of the categorical imperative (formulated in the *Grounding*) to particular ethical duties. To combine the *Grundlegung* with the *Tugendlehre* means to go from the general to the specific“ (ix). A splendid introduction to Kant's entire theory by Warner Wick further enhances the edition: it provides the student with an overall sense of Kant's project and the crucial elements in it without in