

Immanuel Kant: *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*
First Section
 Summary Dialogue by Micah Tillman¹

¶1 (*Ak. 393*, ¶1)

Tedrick: Hey Kant!

Kant: Yes, Tedrick?

Tedrick: Is *anything* good?

Kant: Had a bad day, huh?

Tedrick: Not really. It's more a detached, philosophical curiosity. Doing some basic ontology. You know. That kind of thing.

Kant: I'm eyeing you suspiciously.

Tedrick: No, I'm serious. Is there anything good?

Kant: Sure there is.

Tedrick: Like what?

Kant: Well, two kinds of things, actually.

Tedrick: There are two kinds of good things?

Kant: Yes. Some things are only good *for some purpose*, or only good *at some point in time*, or only good *in some situations*, or only good *in a certain way*, or only good *if you use them right*.

Tedrick: Okay, I get the point. Just give me one name for the whole bunch.

Kant: Those things are "good with qualification." Or "good in a qualified sense." Or "good qualifiedly." They are, you might say, "extrinsically good."

Tedrick: Philosophers and their bizarre terminology. Okay, what's the other kind of good things?

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¶1 [Ak. 393, ¶1]

Kant: The other kind are the things that are good *period*. They're just good. Period. They're not good only sometimes, or only in some situations, or only for some purposes, or only whatever. They're always good everywhere all the time, simply because of what they are.

Tedrick: And I assume you have some fancy philosophy name for things like that?

Kant: Yep. Those things are "good without qualification." They are, you might say, "intrinsically good."

Tedrick: I want me some of that.

Kant: And you should.

Tedrick: Where might I find something that is good period? Or good without qualification. Or intrinsically. Or whatever.

Kant: There's only one such thing.

Tedrick: Really? Only one. There's only one thing that is absolutely good always and all the time and everywhere?

Kant: Yep.

Tedrick: What is it?

Kant: A good will.

Tedrick: You're an Augustinian, aren't you?

Kant: A what?

Tedrick: Forget I said it. What I want to know is why you think a good will is the only thing that is good period. What about . . . I don't know, like . . . like "intelligence, wit, judgment, and whatever talents of this kind one might want to name"?²

Kant: What? What just happened there?

Tedrick: Or, I don't know, things like "courage, resolution, [and] perseverance."³

² Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals with On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns*, 3rd ed., trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1993), I, 7 (Ak. 393).

³ Kant, *Grounding*, I, 7 (Ak. 393).

¶1 [Ak. 393, ¶1]

Kant: Did you just start quoting something?

Tedrick: Did I start what now?

Kant: You rattled off a list of things. Like virtues or something.

Tedrick: Right. “Intelligence, and wit, and judgment, and talents and courage and resolution and perseverance and stuff.”

Kant: Right. But . . . Um. But what about them? Now I’m confused.

Tedrick: Well, aren’t those virtuous-talent-things good *period*. I mean, *Aristotle*, man! Didn’t Aristotle base his entire ethics on virtuous stuff like that? When is intelligence ever bad? Or talent? I mean. Come on! *Talent*, man. When is talent ever bad?

Kant: You mean like being talented at kicking puppies the farthest? Or intelligence for plotting the destruction of cute little baby bunnies?

Tedrick: Um. No. Not really what I had in mind. But what about courage? That’s one of the Cardinal Virtues!

Kant: You mean like the courage to stand up to your friends who are all telling you to do the right thing? You mean, being resolute in doing the wrong thing instead?

Tedrick: Um.

Kant: See? Just because all those talents and virtues are good *sometimes* doesn’t mean they’re good *all the time*.

Tedrick: Okay. So, I see you disagree with Aristotle. But what is it that makes a talent or a virtue good?

Kant: Your will. If your will is good, it uses your talents and virtues in the right way, and that makes your talents and your virtues good.

Tedrick: So, you’re saying that talents and virtues and whatnot are good *with qualification*, and that they get their goodness from the will?

Kant: Yes.

Tedrick: But that’s like only one category of things. What about the things we use our talents and virtues to get—if we’re lucky enough and things work out right. What about things like “power, riches, honor, even health, and that complete well-being and contentment with one’s condition which is called happiness”?⁴

⁴ Kant, *Grounding*, I, 7 (Ak. 393).

¶1 [Ak. 393, ¶1]

Kant: Tedrick, if you do that one more time, I will turn this car around.

Tedrick: Turn the beat around, for all I care, I still want to know how you could think that health or happiness could ever be a bad thing. After all, Aristotle said we do everything we do so that we can be happy. Even great ethicists like Epicurus and John Stuart Mill . . .

Kant: John Stuart Who?

Tedrick: John Stuart Mill. Oh. Right. He hasn't been born yet, has he? Never mind. Anyway, even people like Epicurus said that, like, being happy or pleasure or whatever is the main thing. So, maybe the virtues are only good if we use them correctly, but surely the things we use the virtues to get (if we're lucky enough to succeed), like health and happiness and money and whatnot are just plain old good.

Kant: Nope. It still depends. If you use your health and money to do good things like help little hedgehogs escape from the clutches of brutal tyrants, then your health is good. Your will is using your health and money in the right way, so they're good. But if your will uses your health and money to go chasing around wallabies with a pointy stick, then your health and money are bad. Same goes for happiness. And besides, if you're happy, but you don't have a good will, then you don't deserve to be happy. So your happiness is a bad thing.

Tedrick: I agree; people with bad wills are bad people, and therefore should *not* be happy. That's just messed up.

Kant: I know, right?

Tedrick: So, you really think that all the things we normally think are good, are only good *if our wills use them correctly*, but are bad *if our will uses them incorrectly*?

Kant: I do.

 ¶2 (Ak. 393, ¶2 – Ak. 394, ¶0)

Tedrick: Wow, Kant.

Kant: What?

Tedrick: Has anyone ever told you you're hardcore?

Kant: My bandmates, yes.

Tedrick: Oh, right. I forgot you were in a rock band.

¶2 [Ak. 393, ¶2 – Ak. 394, ¶0]

Kant: We're called The Deontologists. Our first album was "Categorical Imperative." Our next album will be "Autonomy of the Will."

Tedrick: German metal, eh?

Kant: Must be.

Tedrick: You know what, Kant?

Kant: What?

Tedrick: It still gets me that you don't think the virtues are good *period*. After Aristotle and all them said the virtues were like the greatest thing ever (next to happiness, of course), you come along and say that they are only good with qualifications. Or good extrinsically. Or whatever.

Kant: "*Next to happiness, of course.*" Look, even the virtues are only good because they are the way to happiness. They are good *for getting happiness*. That means they're good only with qualifications. It's happiness that has the real value, for Aristotle and all them.

Tedrick: Huh. Well, we don't want badguys running around with virtues like courage and intelligence. That just makes them worse!

Kant: Exactly.

 ¶3 (Ak. 394, ¶1)

Tedrick: But couldn't you say something similar about the will itself?

Kant: Like what?

Tedrick: Well, just like the virtues are only valuable because they help you achieve happiness or success or whatever, couldn't you say the will is only good because it helps you achieve good results?

Kant: You *could* say that, but you'd be wrong. Look, remember when Aristotle and St. Thomas and all those guys talked about "telos"?

Tedrick: No.

¶3 [Ak. 394, ¶1]

Kant: Well, then, I shall remind you. They thought that everything has a telos. That means everything has an essential function, based on the kind of thing it is. The telos of a knife is its essential function: to cut things. The telos of a chair is its essential function: to be sat on. The telos of a TV is its essential function: to play entertaining pictures and sounds.

Tedrick: They talked about all that stuff?

Kant: No, but the point still stands. Now be quiet. What they said was that a thing is good if it fulfills its telos. That means it's good if it performs its essential function in an excellent way. If a knife is excellent at cutting (it's sharp and easy to handle and strong), it's fulfilling its telos and is therefore a good knife. If a chair is excellent for sitting in (it's steady, and solid, and comfortable), then it's fulfilling its telos and is therefore a good chair. If a TV is excellent at displaying entertaining images and sounds (it's clear and large enough and in the right place where everyone can see and hear it) then its fulfilling its telos and is a good TV.

Tedrick: It's not like you to give examples, Kant.

Kant: I know. I don't know what came over me. But look: a thing is good if it fulfills its telos, according to Aristotle, and a thing's telos is its essential function, and a thing's essential function depends on the kind of thing it is. So, what about the will? What's the will's function? What does it *do*?

Tedrick: Um. It wills. I guess?

Kant: Exactly. The will *wills*. That's its essential function. So, the question is whether it wills well.

Tedrick: What?

Kant: The question is whether your will wills in the right way or in the wrong way. If it wills in the right way—if it wills excellently—then it's fulfilling its function excellently. And that means if it wills excellently—if it wills in the right way—then it's a good will. It's not the *consequences* of the will's willing that make the will good; it's the will's willing well that makes it good.

Tedrick: Now you sound like Dr. Seus. Except I can understand Dr. Seus. But you have these painfully long sentence.

Kant: Sorry.

Tedrick: I forgive you. It's just I may have to go back and read what you said again a couple times.

¶3 [Ak. 394, ¶1]

Kant: How can you do that? We're just talking. There's nothing to read.

Tedrick: Oh. Right. I forgot to mention. I've got Fredward over there behind that bush, writing down everything we say.

Kant: I see. Well. There you go. My point was just that the will has a function to fulfill. Its function is to will. And if it wills in the right way, it's a good will, no matter what the consequences are.

¶4 (Ak. 394, ¶2 – Ak. 395, ¶0)

Tedrick: How do we know whether our will is willing well, then?

Kant: Reason. It's reason's job to tell your will how to will.

Tedrick: That's not what I heard!

Kant: Allow me to explain.

¶5 (Ak. 395, ¶1)

Tedrick: You *better* explain, because I always figured that Reason's job was to help us figure out how to be happy.

Kant: Look, if it was the essential function of Reason to help us get happy, then it would be terrible at its job. I mean, look at how miserable most people are, even though they have Reason, and look at how happy most animals are, even though they don't have Reason.

Tedrick: Good point.

Kant: And what is it that animals have instead of Reason?

Tedrick: Instinct.

Kant: Exactly. Instinct is way better at making things happy than Reason is.

Tedrick: Does that mean that Reason has no function, then?

Kant: No. It just means Reason must have some function *other than* making us happy.

¶6 (Ak. 395, ¶1 – Ak. 396, ¶0)

Tedrick: Does that mean Reason *can't* help us figure out how to be happy?

¶6 [Ak. 395, ¶1 – Ak. 396, ¶0]

Kant: Not necessarily. But look. Have you ever noticed how the more you think about things, the more problems you see?

Tedrick: Yeah. Sometimes I'll start thinking about something, and then wish I had never started. Sometimes I wish I were ignorant, like when I was a kid. Ignorance is bliss, man.

Kant: Exactly. Even if Reason can help you figure out how to be happy to some extent, the fact that using Reason a lot doesn't usually make people happy shows us that it must have some other purpose.

Tedrick: If Reason has some other purpose, we really should figure out what it is.

Kant: I agree. Reason is the most important thing we've got as humans. So, whatever its function is, it must be really important.

¶7 (Ak. 396, ¶1)

Tedrick: And? What is it?

Kant: What is what?

Tedrick: What is the function of Reason?

Kant: The function of Reason is to make the will good. The function of Reason is to tell the will how to will well. The function of Reason is to get the will to will in the right way.

Tedrick: But sometimes when I make a decision that I know is right, it ends up making me sad, not happy.

Kant: Yep. That happens. Sometimes doing the right thing keeps you from feeling good. But there's not much we can do about that in this life. In this life, our job is to use our Reason as well as we can, in order to will as well as we can.

¶8 (Ak. 397, ¶1)

Tedrick: We better figure out what it means to will well, then. I mean, we need to figure out what a good will is.

Kant: Sounds good to me. Allow me to explain.

Tedrick: What? Are you going to just make it up on the spot?

Kant: No. We all already know what it means to have a good will. Even if we've never thought about it explicitly. We just have to clarify what we already know.

¶8 [Ak. 397, ¶1]

Tedrick: Okay. And how are we going to do that?

Kant: We're going to talk about what it means to do our duty.

Tedrick: What?

Kant: We're going to talk about what it means to do what we ought to do, or to do what we should do. You know, our duty.

Tedrick: Um. Okay. But why?

Kant: Because we already know that a good will is a will that does what it should do—that does what it ought to do. That is, a good will is a will that does its duty.

Tedrick: Oh. I gotcha. So, if we figure out what it means for a will to do its duty, we'll figure out what it means for a will to do what it should do—or to do what it ought to do—and thus we'll figure out what a good will is.

Kant: Right.

¶9 (Ak. 397, ¶2)

Tedrick: You know what I find helpful sometimes when I'm trying to figure out what something is?

Kant: No, what?

Tedrick: I try to figure out what the opposite of it is. So, like, if I'm trying to figure out what a crooked line is, I begin by trying to figure out what a straight line is.

Kant: Interesting. But let's not do that here.

Tedrick: Um. Okay. Well, if we're not going to study the actions that are the opposite of our duty, then we'll have to study actions that actually match our duty. We'll have to study actions that are the things we should do.

Kant: Right. But there are like three kinds of those. Sometimes when we do our duty, we do it because we hope to get something good out of the action somewhere down the road. But that's not being good. That's just being "smart." And we're trying to figure out what being good is.

Tedrick: Okay, well, what about when we do an action that we should do, and we do it because it makes us feel good just to do that action?

¶9 [Ak. 397, ¶2]

Kant: Nope, not even that kind of action will help us. When we choose an action because it makes us feel good, our will is trying to satisfy our emotions and desires. And that means it's not trying to be a good will; it's trying to be a good servant to our emotions and desires. But we're not trying to figure out what a good servant of emotions and desires is, or what will satisfy our emotions and desires. We're trying to figure out what a good will is.

¶10 (Ak. 397, ¶3 – Ak. 398, ¶0)

Tedrick: Wait a second. So, we are supposed to keep living and not kill ourselves, right? What we should do is live. That's our duty.

Kant: Agreed.

Tedrick: And we all have like a preservation instinct, or whatever. We not only should keep living, but we kind of have this internal desire or drive to keep living. So, we want to do our duty.

Kant: True. But the question is *why* we want to do our duty. Do we want to do it because we have a drive to do it, or because we're scared of dying, or because we have a desire to live? Or do we do it because it's the right thing to do, and we want to do the right thing?

Tedrick: Well, it seems to me that if you do your duty *because it's your duty*, then that's really when you are being good. That's when your will is willing well, rather than simply obeying your emotions.

Kant: That's what I think too.

¶11 (Ak. 398, ¶1 – Ak. 399, ¶0)

Tedrick: But what about people who enjoy doing good things for other people? Isn't that a good thing? Aren't they willing well?

Kant: It depends on why they're doing what they're doing. If they're helping other people because it makes them feel good to help other people, then their will isn't trying to be good; it's trying to satisfy their emotions and desires. And what's so important about emotions and desires? Some people's emotions and desires are really messed up!

Tedrick: So, even if someone does his duty by helping someone else, his will isn't being good if he's helping the person so he can make himself feel good?

Kant: Exactly. If you help someone else just to make yourself feel good, then you're doing your duty, but you *aren't* being good. It's only when you do your duty *because it's your duty* that your will is really being good.

¶11 [Ak. 398, ¶1 – Ak. 399, ¶0]

Tedrick: So, a good will is a will that wills what it should because that is what it should will?

Kant: Right. A good will is a will that wills what it ought to will, and wills it *because* that is what it ought to will. A good will is a will that does its duty, and does it *because* that is its duty.

¶12 (Ak. 399, ¶1)

Tedrick: What about happiness?

Kant: What about it?

Tedrick: Is it our duty to be happy?

Kant: Sort of. If you're happy, it's easier to do your duty. And doing things that help you do your duty is good. So being happy is a kind of duty.

Tedrick: But we all want to be happy, because it will make us feel good. Nobody wants to be happy because it's his duty to be happy.

Kant: Perhaps so. But, if someone were to will to be happy, because it is her duty to be happy, then her will would be willing well. She would have a good will.

Tedrick: So, what you're saying is that my will is only good when it wills what it should, and wills it because that is what it should will.

Kant: Exactly. Only the actions you do *from* duty (that is, only the actions that are your duty, *and* that you do simply because they are your duty) are actually good. If you think long enough about it, that's something that everybody kind of automatically believes, whether they realize it or not.

Tedrick: So, what you're saying is that we all actually think that satisfying our emotions and desires is irrelevant to whether our actions are good? It's not satisfying our emotions and desires that makes our actions good.

Kant: Right. Everybody agrees to that, whether they realize it or not. After all, some people have really messed up emotions and desires, and satisfying those emotions and desires would be wrong!

¶13 (Ak. 399, ¶2)

Tedrick: But doesn't the Bible say that some emotions are good? Like, it says to love your neighbors. And love is an emotion, right?

¶13 [Ak. 399, ¶2]

Kant: It doesn't mean to *feel* love for your neighbors. It means to *show* love to your neighbors—to be loving to them—by actually doing something for them. How you act toward other people is something your will can control, and so loving someone, in the sense of willing to do good things for them, is what the Bible commands

¶14 (Ak. 399, ¶3 – Ak. 400, ¶0)

Tedrick: Okay. Well, if making yourself feel good isn't what makes an action good, maybe it's the consequences of an action that make it good.

Kant: No, we kind of talked about this already. Sort of. An action is good if it's a good action. Its consequences are something else altogether. When we want to know whether an action is good, we want to know whether the *action itself* is good, not whether something that happens outside the action (called a "consequence" or an "effect") is good.

Tedrick: Um.

Kant: Look. If you do an action from duty—that is, if you do your duty, and you do it simply because it's your duty—the reason that action is good is because it's the right thing to do, not because something else will happen outside of the action called "an effect" or "a consequence."

Tedrick: Okay. So, it's not our emotions or desires that make an action good. An action is good only if it's done from duty (that is, if it is what we should do, and we do it simply because it is what we should do). Furthermore, it's not the consequences of our actions that make them good. An action that is done from duty is good simply because it is our duty.

Kant: Right. It's good because it obeys the rules of morality, not because of its consequences.

Tedrick: Rules?

Kant: Yeah. Every action is following some kind of rule, whether you realize it or not. The rule that an action is following is its "maxim." So, an action you do from duty is good because of its maxim—because it is following the right rule—not because of its consequences.

Tedrick: So, what you're telling me is that if I want to do something that is actually good, I have to do it because it's my duty, not because it will make me feel good, or because I like its consequences.

Kant: Yep. What you feel, or what consequences you like, is irrelevant to whether an action is good or not. Some people like one thing. Some people like another. What matters is whether the action itself is the right thing to do.

¶15 (Ak. 400, ¶1 – Ak. 401, ¶0)

Tedrick: But what motivation could I possibly have for doing something if not because it will make me feel good, or because I like its consequences?

Kant: Respect.

Tedrick: Respect?

Kant: Yeah. Respect for the law.

Tedrick: What?

Kant: Look, when you recognize that some action is right—that it's your duty—you feel something. When realize that some action is what you should do—that it's what you ought to do—you feel something.

Tedrick: And that feeling is called “respect”?

Kant: Yep. When you realize that you have to do some action because its maxim—the rule that it follows—is the rule that you should be following, you feel respect for that rule. You recognize that the rule applies to your will, and is, therefore, a rule your will should choose to follow.

Tedrick: And the feeling of respect can motivate me to will the action?

Kant: Right.

¶16 (Ak. 401, ¶1)

Tedrick: Um, so Kant?

Kant: Yeah Tedrick?

Tedrick: Let's repeat what we just said.

Kant: Why? Isn't Fredward writing it all down so we can review it later?

Tedrick: Sure. But it'll be fun anyway.

Kant: I doubt it.

Tedrick: C'mon!

¶16 [Ak. 401, ¶1]

Kant: Okay. Here goes: When we think about what is right—about what we should do, about what we ought to do—we realize that there are rules. When we think about the rules that tell us what it is right to do—what we ought to do, what we should do—we recognize those rules as applying to our wills. They are rules that tell our wills what it is their duty to do, and we recognize them as such. This recognition gives us a certain feeling called “respect,” and motivates us to will the actions that follow those rules. Our will is good, then, when it recognizes the rules that tell it what it should do, and it wills to follow those rules. Our emotions don’t make our wills good, and the consequences of our actions don’t make them good. It’s following the rules about what-is-right-to-will that makes our wills good.

¶17 (Ak. 402, ¶1)

Tedrick: So, there are some laws out there, floating around or something, that we can just recognize as applying to our wills? And when we recognize these laws, we’ll feel respect, and this will give us motivation for following those laws?

Kant: Yep. Well, basically, anyway.

Tedrick: But emotions are irrelevant. And effects are irrelevant. So what are these laws about? They can’t be about feeling some kind of emotion. And they can’t be about achieving some kind of effect. But what else could a law be about?

Kant: That’s a great point. What is left over after you realize that emotions and effects are irrelevant? It’s just the action and the rule that it’s following that matters. Well, really, it’s only the rule that matters. The action only is good because it’s following the rule.

Tedrick: But the rule can’t be about emotions or effects, because those are irrelevant to whether an action is good.

Kant: You said that already.

Tedrick: I know. I’m just kind of exasperated. What kind of rule doesn’t say anything about emotions or effects?

Kant: The most general rule you could possibly have. It would have to be completely general, since it wouldn’t apply only to people who have certain emotions, or only to people who want to achieve certain effects. Emotions and effects are irrelevant, so it wouldn’t matter what emotions you have, or what effects you like.

Tedrick: So what kind of law are we talking about?

Kant: “I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law.”⁵

⁵ Kant, *Grounding*, I, 14 (Ak. 402).

¶17 [Ak. 402, ¶1]

Tedrick: What?! Was that even a sentence?

Kant: Yes.

Tedrick: Say it again.

Kant: “I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law.”⁶

Tedrick: I don’t think that is even a sentence. It’s like a jumble of words.

Kant: Okay, let me rephrase it for you. Every action is following some rule—some “maxim”—right?

Tedrick: Right.

Kant: Okay, then: I am allowed to perform an action that follows some rule if, *and only if*, I can will that *everyone* must follow *the same rule*.

Tedrick: Um.

Kant: In other words, if I want to follow some rule, then I have to ask myself: Could *everybody* follow this rule? If I perform an action that follows a rule that *not* everyone can follow, then I’m not doing the right thing.

Tedrick: So, that’s the rule I should follow? The rule I should follow is that I should follow only the rules that everyone can follow?

Kant: Actually, it’s: “I should follow only the rules that I could will everyone else to follow.”

Tedrick: How could you “will” someone else to do something?

Kant: Just imagine you had a choice. Imagine that when you chose to follow some rule, you were also choosing to make that rule the law for everyone else. If you can’t genuinely choose to make the rule you’re following into a law that everyone has to follow, then you shouldn’t be following that rule.

 ¶18 (Ak. 402, ¶2 – Ak. 403, ¶0)

Tedrick: I need an example.

Kant: Okay. Imagine that you and I go to Starbucks to get some coffee.

⁶ Kant, *Grounding*, I, 14 (Ak. 402).

¶18 [Ak. 402, ¶2 – Ak. 403, ¶0]

Tedrick: Starbucks doesn't exist yet.

Kant: Just imagine.

Tedrick: Okay.

Kant: Now, imagine that when we get to Starbucks, and are about to pay for our drinks, I realize I have no more money left in my checking account, and no cash in my wallet.

Tedrick: Okay.

Kant: So, I turn to you and say, "Hey, man, I'm fresh outta dough. Could you get this for me, and I'll buy yours next time we're here?"

Tedrick: That sounds fine to me.

Kant: And it would be, except for this: I know that we'll be coming back on Thursday, and I don't get paid till Friday. So, I know there's no way I'll be able to pay for your coffee on Thursday. I'm just making you a promise in order to get myself out of a jam. It's a promise I know I can't keep.

Tedrick: Okay. So, you're lying to me.

Kant: Right. Now, the question is how I know that lying to you is wrong.

Tedrick: How do you know?

Kant: I know by asking myself the following question: Could I will that the rule I'm following become a rule that everyone has to follow?

Tedrick: Which rule are you following?

Kant: I'm following the rule, "Make false promises whenever you are in trouble."

Tedrick: What's wrong with that rule?

Kant: What's wrong with it is that I couldn't genuinely choose to make it a law that everyone has to follow.

Tedrick: Why not?

¶18 [Ak. 402, ¶2 – Ak. 403, ¶0]

Kant: Because if everybody has to follow the law, “Make false promises whenever you are in trouble,” then everyone would try to make false promises to everyone else. I mean, imagine if this were a law that everyone had to follow, and that everyone knew everyone had to follow. If everyone knows that everyone else has to make false promises to them whenever they are in trouble, then no one will be able to trust anyone. And if no one trusts anyone, no one will be able to make promises to anyone. So, if you chose to pass a law that everyone has to make false promises (whenever they are in trouble), then people would stop being able to make promises to each other. The law wouldn’t work, and so you couldn’t actually choose to make it a law for everyone. And since you can’t choose to make it a law for everyone, you shouldn’t choose to follow it yourself.

 ¶19 (Ak. 403, ¶1)

Tedrick: Okay. Well, that’s a lot to process. But what you’re saying is that I shouldn’t follow a rule if I couldn’t want everyone to follow the same rule.

Kant: That’s basically it. And when you do choose to follow a rule that you wouldn’t want everyone to follow, you’re doing it because of some personal emotions or because you personally like the consequences of the action. You’re not doing it because you respect the rule you’re following. After all, if the rule doesn’t apply to everyone, it’s not really a very impressive rule. It’s not the kind of thing you can respect.

Tedrick: And if I’m not doing what I do out of respect for the rule I’m following, then my will is just obeying my emotions and desires. And thus my will isn’t actually being a good will.

Kant: Exactly.

 ¶20 (Ak. 403, ¶2 – Ak. 404, ¶0)

Tedrick: Well, there you go.

Kant: There you go indeed. And you know what?

Tedrick: What?

Kant: This basic law—that you should only follow the rules that you would want everyone to have to follow—is what everybody already believes anyway.

Tedrick: We just talked for like 17 pages, only to come to the same conclusion that everyone already believes without doing any philosophy at all?

Kant: Yep.

¶20 [Ak. 403, ¶2 – Ak. 404, ¶0]

Tedrick: What's the point in doing philosophy about morality then, if even non-philosophers already know the truth?

¶21 (Ak. 405, ¶1)

Kant: We need philosophy to counterbalance our emotions and desires and needs. We need philosophy to keep us from being led astray by our search for happiness. Without philosophy to clarify what we should and should not do, it can be easy to ignore the rules of morality, and to follow our own emotions and desires instead.

¶22 (Ak. 405, ¶2)

Tedrick: So, normal people are caught in a struggle between their emotions and desires and needs (on the one hand) and their Reason (on the other hand), and they need philosophy to help them see more clearly and assuredly what Reason actually tells them to do.

Kant: Right. It can be easy to confuse what your emotions are telling you to do with what Reason is telling you to do. So, you need philosophy to help you distinguish between the two.

Tedrick: Okay then. Have we done enough philosophy now?

Kant: Actually, no. We've just used philosophy to discover what everybody implicitly assumes. Now we have to use philosophy to figure out why we should assume what everyone assumes, and what it is exactly that we should believe about morality.

Tedrick: If you say so, but I think it's time for lunch first.

Kant: Okay. Lunch, then more philosophy.