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KANT ON PRACTICAL JUDGMENT AND THE UNITY OF REASON

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ABSTRACT

In the Preface to the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant states that reason is “only one and the same,” despite the distinction between its theoretical and practical uses. Also in the *Groundwork*, he introduces the idea of autonomy to solve the problem of the possibility of human moral actions. Since human beings are finite rational beings, we represent the principle of autonomy as a categorical imperative. Recently, Patricia Kitcher supported Onora O’Neill’s thesis that the principle of autonomy is not only the supreme principle of morality but also the highest principle of the unity of reason. Against this thesis, I claim that the categorical imperative cannot play this role in Kant’s system. First, O’Neill’s original thesis and Kitcher’s additional evidence for it seem to conflate autonomy and spontaneity. Second, if rational actions grounded on hypothetical imperatives are free yet heteronomous, then the principle of autonomy cannot unify reason, even in its practical use. This result leads me to analyze moral judgment. I assume that every determination presupposes reflection and seek to unveil an unknown reflecting aspect in moral judgment in addition to its well-known determining aspect. On my thesis, the reflecting power of judgment, which Kant investigates from the *First Introduction to the Critique of the Power of Judgment* on, already operates in the *Groundwork*. Unveiling the reflecting aspect of determination in moral judgment opens a path to explore the principle of the unity of reason in the third *Critique*.

Keywords: Kant, reason, autonomy, practical judgment, reflection

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INTRODUCTION

In the Preface to the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant refers to the unity of reason, which is diverse only in its application:

I require for a critique of a pure practical reason that if it is to be completed, its unity with the speculative [reason] in a common principle [*Prinzip*] must be at the same time exhibited, because it can in the end be only one and the same reason that is distinguished merely in its application. (4: 391)

Kant restates this requirement in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), in the chapter on the “Critical Elucidation of the Analytic of Pure Practical Reason.” He there maintains the reference not to a foundational proposition [*Grundsatz*], from which it would be possible to deduce theoretical and practical propositions, but to a “principle [*Prinzip*]” of “the unity of the whole pure rational capacity [*Vernunftvermögens*] (theoretical as well as practical)” (5: 91).¹ Instead of searching for and establishing such a principle, Kant announces the “expectation of perhaps being able some day” (5: 91) to attain insight into that unity. Human reason, he explains, requires deriving everything “from one principle” because reason “finds complete satisfaction only in a complete systematic unity [*vollständig systematische Einheit*] of its cognitions” (5: 91).

In Kant scholarship, some commentators consider the principle of autonomy not only the supreme principle of morality but also the supreme principle of the unity of the theoretical and practical uses of reason. As Kant introduces it in the *Groundwork*, the principle of autonomy solves the problem of the possibility of human moral actions. Since human beings are finite rational beings, we represent this principle as a categorical imperative.² Onora O’Neill (1989) argues for a thesis

1. Béatrice Longuenesse comments on Kant’s use of the words *Kraft* and *Vermögen*, and suggests translating the latter as ‘capacity’. Béatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge: Sensibility and Discursivity in the Transcendental Analytic of the Critique of Pure Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 7-8. Despite the equivalence between the German term *Vermögen* and the Latin term *facultas*, Longuenesse’s argument is compelling: the term ‘capacity’ “emphasizes the idea of a mere potentiality that gets realized when we actually judge” and avoids the psychological connotation of the term ‘faculty’. Béatrice Longuenesse, “Kant on A Priori Concepts: The Metaphysical Deduction of the Categories,” *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 164.

2. The proof of the real possibility of human moral actions occurs in *Groundwork* III, subsection 4, titled “How is a categorical imperative possible?”

according to which the categorical imperative is the ground of the unity of reason. More recently, Patricia Kitcher endorses this thesis:

When Onora O'Neill took on the project of finding the unity of practical and theoretical reason for Kant, she argued that the supreme principle for both must be the categorical imperative (1989, p. 51). In essence, I have just offered additional evidence for the correctness of her solution. She must be right, because for Kant there is only one moral law.³

An enormous controversy surrounds Kant's claims on the unity of reason: the approach to the problem is ambiguous in the literature and there is no consensus on whether Kant attains this unity or, if he does, on what the common principle that unifies the whole pure rational faculty is.⁴ We can mention at least three possible approaches: (1) ascribe to theoretical reason the role of unifying the practical and theoretical (including speculative) uses of reason;⁵ (2) ascribe this role to practical

3. Patricia Kitcher, *Kant's Thinker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 248.

4. Pauline Kleingeld ("Kant on the Unity of Theoretical and Practical Reason," *The Review of Metaphysics* 52, No: 2 (1998): 311-339) divides the literature between those who argue that Kant presents a coherent account of the problem of the unity of reason in his critical works of the 1780s, and those who argue that Kant addresses adequately the problem only in the 1790s in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Among those who claim that the unity of theoretical and practical reason has not been solved in Kant's writings, see Gerold Prauss, "Kants Problem der Einheit theoretischer und praktischer Vernunft," *Kant Studien* 72, No: 3 (1981): 286-303, and Jens Timmermann, "The Unity of Reason: Kantian Perspectives," in *Spheres of Reason: New Essays in the Philosophy of Normativity*, ed. Simon Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 183-198. Timmermann argues that Kant takes this unity for granted, but he alludes to the possibility that the principle that unifies theoretical and practical reason is the "assumption of a wise and benevolent God who has created a teleological world that coheres with morality" (Timmermann, "The Unity of Reason," 197).

5. The general assumption of this interpretation is that reason's activity is a form of cognition and its practical use consists in practical cognition. Accordingly, the supreme theoretical principle is the regulative command to seek cognitive unity. See, for example, Stephen Engstrom, *The Form of Practical Knowledge*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009; Marcus Willaschek, *Kant on the Sources of Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018; and to some extent Karl Schafer, *Kant's Reason: The Unity of Reason and the Limits of Comprehension in Kant*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. In his recent and extensive work, Schafer presents the problem of the unity of theoretical and practical reason in terms of a unified capacity for theoretical and practical comprehension (*Begreifen*). He claims that comprehension expresses the highest form of human cognition (see Schafer, *Kant's Reason*, 236). According to him, reason is the capacity for systematic comprehension and, to play this role, must be autonomous and so self-governing and self-organizing. The core of Schafer's reading is that "the unity of theoretical and practical reason can only be fully understood if we understand the unity of comprehension and autonomy" (Schafer, *Kant's Reason*, 25). On his reading, these two ways of conceiving reason's functions, comprehension and autonomy, are ultimately equivalent. Although autonomy of reason plays an essential role in his argument, Schafer distances himself from O'Neill's thesis, emphasizing that his "explanation of reason's unity does not privilege either theoretical or practical reason in the manner many more familiar accounts do but instead treats them as *coequal* manifestations of reason's fundamental form of activity" (Schafer, *Kant's Reason*, 20).

reason;⁶ (3) finally, ascribe the role of unifying both uses of reason to the reflecting power of judgment, as Kant presents such a power in the third *Critique*.⁷

Instead of trying to rehash these three possible approaches, my strategy is to focus on O'Neill's and Kitcher's version of the second approach, which empowers practical reason. I do not thoroughly analyze and present the particularities of O'Neill's interpretation or Kitcher's interpretation. Rather, I argue that the thesis according to which the principle of autonomy is the supreme principle of the unity of reason cannot unify reason, even in its practical use.

This negative part of my argument takes two steps. First, I hold that the meaning of the word 'autonomy' is equivocal when it refers to autonomy of the will and to autonomy of thought. To take its meaning as univocal is to commit a parallogism. A similar parallogism happens when we identify the meaning of the word 'autonomy' in moral self-legislation with its meaning in methodological self-discipline. The former is related to willing, the latter to thinking. Second, I hold that the thesis that considers the categorical imperative to be the supreme principle of the unity of reason is incompatible with rational agency as Kant expounds it in *Groundwork* II. I argue that actions grounded on hypothetical imperatives are rational and free, yet heteronomous. Actions grounded on hypothetical imperatives are effects of *arbitrium liberum*,

6. Similar to O'Neill and Kitcher, Sasha Mudd, "Rethinking the Priority of Practical Reason in Kant," *European Journal of Philosophy* 24, No: 1 (2013): 78-102, advocates for the priority of practical reason, arguing that the categorical imperative is the supreme regulative principle of reason.

7. Saniye Vatansever, "The Synthetic Unity of Reason and Nature in the Third Critique," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 2024, DOI: 10.1080/09672559.2023.2297214, argues for the unity of theoretical and practical reason in the third *Critique*, but claims that this unity occurs through the concept of *hope*. On her reading, Kant unifies nature and reason "by showing that the theoretical and practical ends of reason can be realized in nature" (Vatansever, "The Synthetic Unity of Reason and Nature in the Third Critique," 2). Henry Allison, "The Gulf between Nature and Freedom and Nature's Guarantee of Perpetual Peace," Repr. in H. Allison, *Essays on Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 217-228, addresses the problem in terms of the "gulf between freedom and nature" and argues that it can be fulfilled only in the third *Critique*, with the reflective power of judgment and its principle of the purposiveness of nature. Heiner Klemme, "Is the Categorical Imperative the Highest Principle of Both Pure Practical and Theoretical Reason?," *Kantian Review* 19, No: 1 (2014): 119-126, also argues that the 'common principle' is the reflective power of judgment and that Kant will not address this problem until the third *Critique*. In his concise essay, he also challenges O'Neill's and Kitcher's thesis. While I am sympathetic and entirely concur with his reading, my proposal differs (in a complementary way) from his on two main points: first, I show that the O'Neill/Kitcher thesis fails to demonstrate that the categorical imperative is the supreme principle of reason even in its practical use (in a broad sense, which includes hypothetical imperatives); second, I claim that every determination presupposes reflection and seek to unveil the reflecting aspect implicit in the determination of moral judgment. Accordingly, the reflecting power of judgment, with which Kant deals explicitly only in the third *Critique*, operates already in the *Groundwork*. I thank the anonymous referee for calling my attention to Klemme's essay.

the free power of choice, and are opposed to *arbitrium brutum*, the non-free power of choice, proper to beasts. Actions as effects of the free power of choice, however, differ from actions as effects of the autonomy of the will. Therefore, if the principle of autonomy does not unify reason even in its practical use, it cannot unify reason in its theoretical and practical uses.

The refusal of O'Neill's and Kitcher's version of the second approach leads me to analyze moral judgment. Following Béatrice Longuenesse (1993; 2000; 2005) and Rubens Rodrigues Torres Filho (1993), I explore the hypothesis that every determining judgment, whether theoretical or practical, presupposes reflection and attempt to disclose an unknown reflecting aspect in moral judgment in addition to its well-known determining aspect. In the positive part of my argument, through an analysis of moral judgment in the *Groundwork*, I claim that the power of judgment plays a determining as well as a reflecting role in the categorical imperative, "I ought." It plays a determining role when an imperfect rational being derives an action from the moral law represented as a categorical imperative. It plays a reflecting role when an imperfect rational being self-legislates the moral law as a perfect rational being, a law through which she determines herself as an imperfect rational being. This means that a reflecting function is already implicit in the determination implemented in moral judgment. My reading of the *Groundwork* opens a path to search for the principle of the unity of reason in the third *Critique*, but here I can only indicate the direction of such an investigation, which must be developed elsewhere.

1

AUTONOMY AS THE SUPREME PRINCIPLE OF REASON

Kant alludes to the unity of reason in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, in the chapter on the "Critical Elucidation":

For someone who has been able to convince himself of the propositions presented in the Analytic such comparisons will be gratifying; for they rightly occasion the expectation of perhaps being able some day to attain insight into the unity of the whole pure rational capacity [*Vernunftvermögen*] (theoretical as well as practical) and to derive everything from one principle [*Prinzip*] – the

undeniable need of human reason, which finds complete [völlige] satisfaction only in a complete systematic unity [vollständig systematische Einheit] of its cognitions. (5: 90-91; trans. mod.)

Given that Kant does not search for or establish in the second *Critique* the principle that unifies theory and practice, it is appropriate to consider what such a principle cannot be. It cannot be a “foundational proposition [Grundsatz].” The system of the critique of reason cannot be deduced from any principle considered as an axiom. The conception of system presented in the first *Critique*, in the chapter on the “Architectonic of Pure Reason,” does not require a clear and distinct intuition that would ground an order of reasons. The model of Kant’s conception of system is not mathematical, but rather biological. His model is the organism:

I understand by a system [...] the unity of the manifold cognitions under one idea. This is the rational concept of the form of a whole, insofar as through this the domain of the manifold as well as the position of the parts with respect to each other is determined *a priori*. (A 832/B 860)

System is the unity of a manifold of parts under the idea of a whole. Here the whole makes possible its parts, not vice-versa. If parts were to make possible their whole, such a whole would be an aggregate, not a system. To be complete, rational cognitions must be systematic and, to be systematic, they depend upon a principle that provides the idea under which all rational cognitions might be unified.

In *Constructions of Reason* (1989), instead of searching for the principle that guarantees “complete systematic unity” (5: 91) to rational cognitions in theory and practice, O’Neill “proposes a reading of *Groundwork* III that presents the Categorical Imperative as the supreme principle of all reason”:⁸

The *categorical imperative* is the supreme principle of reasoning not because it is an algorithm either for thought or for action, but because it is an indispensable strategy for *disciplining thinking or action* in ways that are not contingent on specific and variable circumstances. The categorical imperative is a fundamental strategy [...] not just of morality but of all activity that counts as

8. Onora O’Neill, “Reason and Autonomy in *Grundlegung* III,” in *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant’s Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 [1989]), 52.

reasoned. The supreme principle of reason is merely the principle of thinking and acting on principles that can (not “do”!) hold for all.⁹

She concludes:

Both in thinking and in acting the self-discipline of reason is a matter of asking whether the ground of the assumption can be a universal principle. The supreme principle of reason both emerges from and disciplines human thought, action and communication. There is no gap between reason and autonomy because the authority of reason is grounded in autonomy.¹⁰

In using “autonomy,” O’Neill seems to refer the categorical imperative to the formula of universal law. Her aim might be to emphasize the universal and necessary validity of any law of reason, namely the abstract form of any law reason gives to itself, whether in its theoretical or practical use. If this is so, in addition to conflating moral self-legislation and methodological self-discipline through the concept of autonomy, two further problems arise. First, universality and necessity are characteristics of any law, including laws of nature. So why should we give the status of the supreme principle of all reason to the “only one moral law,” as Kitcher refers to it, and not to a law of nature? Second, the categorical imperative cannot be reduced to the formula of universal law since it is a system of formulas united in the formula of autonomy and its subsidiary formula of the realm of ends.

In the *Groundwork*, Kant claims that a “progression happens” among the formulas of the categorical imperative “as through the categories of the *unity* of the form of the will (its universality), the *plurality* of the matter (the objects, i.e. the ends), and the *allness* or totality of the system of them” (4: 436). The formula of universal law and its subsidiary formula of the law of nature express merely the form of the moral law. In contrast, the formula of humanity expresses merely the matter of the moral law. It is only the formula of autonomy and its subsidiary formula of the realm of ends that express the complete determination of form and matter by combining both of them. It is doubtful, therefore, to regard the formula of universal law alone as the categorical imperative and its formal lawfulness as the supreme principle of all reason.¹¹

9. O’Neill, “Reason and Autonomy in *Grundlegung* III,” 59.

10. O’Neill, “Reason and Autonomy in *Grundlegung* III,” 59.

11. On the relationship among the formulas of the categorical imperative and the role the guiding thread (*Leit-*

One can reconstruct O'Neill's argument as follows:

(1) She steps back to the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A = 1781; B = 1787) to claim that reason involves self-discipline in its pure use. Kant defines discipline as “the compulsion by which the constant tendency to disobey certain rules is restrained and finally extirpated” (A 709/B 737). Now, reason can escape from dogmatism through critique only by discipline. This is not externally imposed, but is self-discipline.

(2) After stating that reason involves self-discipline, which is not externally imposed, O'Neill identifies self-discipline with autonomy: “Autonomy does not presuppose but rather constitutes the principles of reason and their authority.”¹² Since reason has no transcendent authority, critique consists in the practice of autonomy. Accordingly, “the subordination of thinking or practice to other supposed authorities is not reason, but abrogation of reason.”¹³

(3) After stating that reason involves self-discipline and after identifying self-discipline with autonomy, O'Neill appeals to the principle of autonomy as Kant expounds it in the *Groundwork*. She states, “for guiding thought and action, reasoners – or potential reasoners – adopt the principle that we know in other contexts as the categorical imperative.”¹⁴

(4) According to O'Neill, if there is no authority external to reason in its attempt to escape from dogmatism through critique, if reason involves discipline as self-discipline, and if self-discipline involves autonomy, then the categorical imperative is the supreme principle of reason in its theoretical and practical uses.

If this reconstruction of O'Neill's argument is accurate, what seems to be problematic in it? Above all, the identification of self-discipline with self-legislation through the notion of autonomy. Whoever supports O'Neill's thesis has to prove that there is no paralogism in her use of the word ‘autonomy’ when she comments on the *Grund-*

faden) of the logical forms plays in Kant's moral philosophy, see Marília Espirito Santo, “Autonomia e determinação completa na *Fundamentação da metafísica dos costumes*,” *Analytica. Revista de Filosofia* 22 No. 1 (2018): 105-119. In a similar vein, see also Allen Wood, *Formulas of the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2017. I thank Allen Wood for pressing me on this issue.

12. O'Neill, “Reason and Autonomy in *Grundlegung* III,” 57.

13. O'Neill, “Reason and Autonomy in *Grundlegung* III,” 57.

14. O'Neill, “Reason and Autonomy in *Grundlegung* III,” 58.

work and on the chapter of the first *Critique* on The Discipline of Pure Reason. One has to prove that there is no confusion between the meaning of a methodological rule against dogmatism and the meaning of the moral law for human beings. In the first *Critique*, Kant's notion of discipline stresses the independence of the method of philosophy and the method of mathematics. Specific to philosophy is the discursive use of pure reason, its use through concepts. Specific to mathematics is the intuitive use of pure reason, its use through construction of concepts. Contrary to what occurs with the categorical imperative in *Groundwork* III, there is no relationship between thinking and willing when we regard the restriction of philosophy to its discursive use of pure reason.¹⁵ Such a constraint of reason has nothing to do with the constraint of the will in the moral judgment, "I ought." Even if we acknowledge the existence of self-legislation in both cases of coercion, what human reason legislates in self-discipline is not the moral law.

In *Kant's Thinker* (2011), Kitcher offers additional evidence for the thesis according to which the categorical imperative is the supreme principle of human beings' entire use of reason. When asking whether "Kant's thinker is (as such) a free and responsible agent,"¹⁶ she refers to a passage from the *Jäsche Logic* on the notion of error, where Kant declares that,

universal rules and conditions for avoiding error in general are: 1) to think for oneself, 2) to think oneself in the position of someone else, and 3) always to think in agreement with oneself. The maxim of thinking for oneself can be called the *enlightened mode of thought*; the maxim of putting oneself in the viewpoint of others in thought [can be called] the *extended mode of thought*; and the maxim of always thinking in agreement with oneself [can be called] the *consequent or coherent mode of thought*. (9: 57)

Kitcher interprets the enlightened maxim of thinking for oneself in accordance with O'Neill's strategy of subordinating theoretical and practical uses of reason to its moral use. If O'Neill seems to commit a paralogism by considering methodological self-discipline and moral self-legislation as synonyms,¹⁷ Kitcher seems to commit a paralogism by

15. On the difference between representing and willing see A 92/B 125 and 5: 89-90.

16. Kitcher, *Kant's Thinker*, 238.

17. We could spell out the paralogism as follows:

MP: "Discipline of our thinking is self-discipline or autonomy in thinking" (56) ("Autonomy [...] constitutes the

considering autonomy of thought and autonomy of the will as synonyms. If one has to think for oneself, then this principle of thinking is self-imposed. However, this does not mean that the moral law, a categorical imperative for human beings, and the “maxim of thinking for oneself” (9: 57) express the same command. Self-imposed principles in thinking are not self-imposed principles in willing. Relating representations and relating representations to determine the will do not consist in the same act of judgment.

Thus, the attempt to defend the principle of autonomy as the supreme principle not only of morality but also of the entire use of reason fails because autonomy in thought differs from autonomy in will. Also, while there may be coercion involved in disciplining thought, this coercion differs from the constraints imposed by the categorical imperative on a finite will. The categorical imperative demands action according to pure reason rather than mere inclinations to effect the object of the will.

Actually, the principle of autonomy cannot be the supreme principle of the entire use of reason because it is not even the supreme principle of the practical use of reason. According to the *Groundwork*, not every self-imposed principle in actions is an autonomous principle. The claim that autonomy is the principle that unifies the theoretical and practical uses of reason seems to contradict Kant’s conception of agency according to the representation of laws. For human beings, to act rationally is not only to act according to the categorical imperative, but also to act according to hypothetical imperatives.

2

RATIONAL AGENCY

In *Groundwork* II, Kant presents the will as practical reason, namely as the capacity to act rationally:

Every thing in nature works in accordance with laws. Only a rational being has the capacity [*Vermögen*] to act *in accordance with the representation* of laws, i.e. in

principles of reason and their authority” (57) “for thinking or for acting” (58)).

mP: To be autonomous (“to adopt the strategy of not acting on principles that accept alien authorities”, i.e. “to adopt this negative strategy for guiding thought and action”) is to “adopt the principle that we know in other contexts as the Categorical Imperative” (58).

C: Therefore, self-disciplining our thinking is to adopt the Categorical Imperative.

I thank Béatrice Longuenesse for pushing me to spell out the parallogism in O’Neill’s argument.