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## Reason and the Idea of the Highest Good

**ABSTRACT:** In this paper, we reconstruct Kant's notion of the practically conditioned, introduced in the Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason, by drawing on Kant's general account of the faculty of reason presented in the Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. We argue that practical reason's activity of seeking the practically unconditioned for a given condition generates two different conceptions of the practically unconditioned and identify these as virtue and (the ideal of) happiness. We then account for how and why reason proceeds to combine these two distinct ideas into the composite idea of the highest good. Last, we draw on our discussion to determine more precisely what Kant intends by the 'supremacy' of virtue within reason's idea of the highest good.

**KEYWORDS:** Kant; Practical Conditioning; Highest Good; Unconditioned; Happiness

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Among the many interpretative challenges posed by the Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason is the fact that it relies on an account of the faculty of reason that is largely presupposed rather than made explicit. This account, which Kant had introduced in the first *Critique* and which is vital for understanding Kant's aims in the Transcendental Dialectic, is invoked at the very outset of the second book of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, when he notes that "[p]ure reason always has its dialectic, whether it is considered in its speculative or in its practical use".<sup>1</sup> In the paragraphs that follow, we find a familiar cast of characters as Kant refers to practical reason's search for the "unconditioned",<sup>2</sup> with this resulting in a representation distinctive to reason, namely an idea, where this becomes a temptation to dialectical error that is exposed, much as it had been in the speculative context, through a "*conflict* of reason with itself".<sup>3</sup> Strangely, however, scholars largely have yet to follow up on these unmistakable allusions by drawing on Kant's original account of reason in order to fill in the missing details of practical reason's activity that leads to its dialectical misuse.<sup>4</sup>

1. *CPrR* 5: 107.

2. *CPrR* 5: 108.

3. *CPrR* 5: 107.

4. There are a couple of notable exceptions on this score, such as Watkins 2010 and Pasternack (unpublished manuscript).



The aim of this paper will be to redress just this deficiency. As we will argue, supplying the missing context serves to highlight a number of otherwise unnoticed argumentative steps in the first two chapters of the *Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason*, and reveals the rationale for aspects of Kant's discussion whose relevance might not be entirely obvious at first. To this end, we will first outline Kant's general account of the faculty of reason as presented in the first *Critique*, largely in accordance with some recent interpretations that recognize the centrality of Kant's account for the aims and arguments of the *Transcendental Dialectic*. Then, we will show how this account applies to the activity of practical reason, offering an account of how it proceeds from the 'practically conditioned' (a notion that Kant introduces but which, as far as we can tell, has been completely unaccounted for in the extant scholarship) to the conception of the practically unconditioned. We will then contend that practical reason can be understood to generate two distinct conceptions of the practically unconditioned, corresponding to the two ways in which reason can conceive of a 'totality of conditions', where these are identified as virtue (or morality or the good will) on the one hand and (the 'ideal' of) happiness on the other. Finally, we turn to accounting for why and how reason proceeds to combine these two distinct ideas into the composite idea of the highest good, and draw on the foregoing discussion to determine more precisely what Kant intends by the 'supremacy' of virtue within reason's idea of the highest good.

## 2. A PRIMER ON THE FACULTY OF REASON

Though it had been neglected for some time, Kant's account of the faculty of reason has recently received more detailed, and more sympathetic treatment at the hands of a number of commentators.<sup>5</sup> Following on these, we will draw attention to those aspects of Kant's account that are relevant for the discussion to follow. First, and most generally, reason is identified as a faculty of cognition by means of principles, understood (at least initially) in terms of propositions that are universal in scope. What this involves is perhaps best understood in contrast with the operation of the faculty of the understanding, which attains to cognition of particulars through the subsumption of a directly experienced object (or its intuition) under a concept. The cognition yielded by reason, however, is not gained by means of direct experience but through the relation of concepts asserted in the principle. We can, for instance, cognize that "Caius is mortal" directly, through the subsumption of Caius under the concept mortal insofar as he possesses features characteristic for that concept; alternatively, we can reach the same cognition by means of the principle "All humans are mortal" taken along with the cognition that "Caius is human".<sup>6</sup> This characteristic of reason is reflected, according to Kant, in (speculative) reason's logical use, which Kant takes as reason's most familiar employment. Kant claims that this way of gaining cognition finds its formal expression in the syllogism (*Vernunftschluß*), where the major premise expresses a rule,

5. Here, we have in mind particularly the treatments of the *Transcendental Dialectic* in Grier 2001: 109-139; Allison 2004: 307-332; and Willaschek 2018: esp. 71-102.

6. Cf. A 321-22/B 378.

or principle, the minor subsumes a cognition (the subject term) under the ‘condition of the rule’ (or the middle term), and the conclusion determines that cognition through the predicate of the rule (the predicate term).<sup>7</sup>

Kant’s own interest in reason’s logical use at this stage of the first *Critique* is to gain insight into its putative ‘pure’ or ‘transcendental’ use, in accordance with which it serves as the source of synthetic cognition known *a priori*. Yet, reason’s employment in this logical use provides little help in this regard as the cognition that results is always only analytic, inasmuch as a valid conclusion in a syllogism contains only what is expressed in the premises. Even so, Kant notes that this progressive application of reason (from premises to conclusion) does not exhaust its employments in its logical use as it also admits of a ‘regressive’ application:

If, as happens for the most part, the conclusion is a judgment given as the problem [*aufgegeben*], in order to see whether it flows from already given judgments [...], then I seek whether the assertion of this conclusion is not to be found in the understanding under certain conditions according to a universal rule.<sup>8</sup>

The process Kant outlines here involves setting out from some cognition – for instance, “Caius is mortal” – and searching for the rule or principle from which it would follow (this is what is intended when we take this cognition as “given as a problem”). This involves working backwards through the procedure sketched above, requiring that we find a middle term (here, human) that will serve to connect the subject and predicate by bringing the subject (Caius) under the ‘condition’ of the rule. Accordingly, Kant frequently refers to this as a search for a condition (here the middle term) for the cognition regarded by reason (for the sake of the search) as ‘conditioned’. The result of this procedure (when properly conducted) is the posit of a ‘new’ rule or principle, that would serve to introduce a unity into the already given cognitions (i.e., the conclusion and minor premise). Moreover, this principle, once discovered, can in turn be taken to be “given as a problem”, and a further condition sought for the connection of terms expressed in it. In fact, this is just what reason, as the faculty of principles, does until it finds a highest principle, or a condition that cannot be regarded as also conditioned, which is to say, until it finds something ‘unconditioned’. Kant thus identifies reason’s “logical maxim”, or the (prescriptive) principle that governs its activity as follows: “to find the unconditioned for conditioned cognitions of the understanding, with which its unity will be completed”.<sup>9</sup>

It is in this regressive application of reason in its logical use that Kant finds a clue for understanding the putative pure use of speculative reason. In this use, reason does not apply to judgments or propositions but rather to things or objects, and regressively seeks for their real conditions, such as their causes insofar as they are regarded as effects. In this use, reason’s activity is likewise governed by the same logical maxim in that it continues to seek for further conditions for a given conditioned thing until it

7. A 304/B 360-361.

8. A 304/B 361.

9. A 307/B 364.

comes to a condition that is itself unconditioned. However, in pursuing this maxim within the domain of objects, reason must further assume the actual givenness of the conditions up to and including the unconditioned, that namely they are not merely posited as the end of reason's labours but are actually there to be found.<sup>10</sup> This results in a further "principle of *pure reason*", proper only to reason's pure employment, in accordance with which "we assume that when the conditioned is given, then so is the whole series of conditions subordinated one to the other, which is itself unconditioned, also given".<sup>11</sup> This principle is itself synthetic, since according to Kant it asserts the relation of a conditioned thing to the unconditioned and not simply to some condition,<sup>12</sup> but more importantly it is the source of further (alleged) cognition insofar as the unconditioned condition that is thereby presumed as 'given' (which presumption Kant identifies with "transcendental illusion"<sup>13</sup>) is subsequently determined in light of the pure concepts of the understanding, and thus gives us "material for many synthetic propositions *a priori*".<sup>14</sup>

Accordingly, Kant proceeds to a derivation of the three ideas of reason, each of which amounts to a particular conception of the unconditioned, and which serve as the objects of this dialectical application of the categories. The ideas are distinguished (i) through the distinct conditioned objects (inner representations, appearances as such, or things in general) from which reason sets out,<sup>15</sup> and (ii) by the specific conditioning relational function (substance/accident, cause/effect, community) through which reason infers to the unconditioned in each case.<sup>16</sup> Reason's procedure in each case is broadly similar; in the case of the idea of the soul, for instance, reason attains to this representation by taking the condition of thinking in general, the "I think", apart from the conditioning manifold of inner appearances, and so as the "I itself" in its "unconditioned unity".<sup>17</sup> However, things change somewhat when it comes to the second idea, the idea of the world as the sum-total of all appearances. In connection with this idea, Kant notes that the conception of the unconditioned proper to reason can be taken in two, equally legitimate ways, namely, either as the unconditioned condition considered as the absolute first member of a series of conditions, or as the totality of conditions in the series, where no member of that series is without a further condition but where the series itself lacks any further condition. As Kant writes,

Now one can think of this unconditioned either as subsisting merely in the whole series, in which thus every member without exception is conditioned, and only their whole is absolutely unconditioned, or else the absolutely unconditioned is

10. On the need to presuppose the supreme principle as a condition of the application of reason's logical maxim, see Allison 2004: 312, 330.

11. A 307-308/B 364.

12. A 308/B 364.

13. See Grier 2001: 117-130.

14. A 308/B 365.

15. Cf. A 333-334/B 390-391.

16. Cf. A 323/B 379.

17. A 398. For more see Dyck 2014: 71-81.

only a part of the series, to which the remaining members of the series are subordinated but that itself stands under no other condition.<sup>18</sup>

According to the second way of conceiving the unconditioned, the regress in the series of conditions terminates at a first member, whereas in the first case, the regress is never complete, in the sense of arriving at an unconditioned member, but the series of conditions itself, taken as a totality, has no further condition and so is unconditioned.<sup>19</sup> In any case (and for reasons Kant does not fully explicate),<sup>20</sup> this twofold conception of the unconditioned only becomes significant in the application to the idea of the world where it generates two apparently contradictory conceptions of the unconditioned, such that, for instance, reason at once posits a beginning of the world, as a first member of a temporal series, but also denies that the world has a beginning inasmuch as every moment in the temporal series is bounded by an earlier one without end. This conflict constitutes the famous Antinomy of Pure Reason and, crucially, Kant emphasizes that it cannot be avoided by denying the legitimacy of the opposing conception of the unconditioned, since both are equally legitimate ways of conceiving the unconditioned and indeed both are equally natural to reason (at least as far as the cosmological idea is concerned).<sup>21</sup> This point will be important to keep in mind as we will return to it below.

Turning to the opening section of the Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason, it is clear that Kant carries over much of his previous account of the faculty of reason. So, he characterizes reason as seeking “the absolute totality of conditions for a given conditioned thing”<sup>22</sup> in an echo of the logical maxim identified above. He also claims that the unconditioned reason seeks is never met with in the regression through the series of conditions itself, but is posited or projected by reason itself, in an effort to introduce a systematic unity into appearances.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, where reason gets into trouble is precisely when it makes the additional presumption, in accordance with its pure use, that the unconditioned is not merely given as a problem but is actually given as an object in its own right. Thus, he identifies the source of reason’s antinomial conflict with itself “in the application to appearance of its basic principle of presupposing the unconditioned for everything conditioned”.<sup>24</sup> As in the speculative context, the antinomial conflict provoked by this “illusion” proves salutary as it makes necessary

18. A 417/B 445.

19. See A 417-418/B 445n: “The absolute whole of the series of conditions for a given conditioned is always unconditioned, because outside it there are no more conditions regarding which it could be conditioned”.

20. Cf. A 406/B 433.

21. For more on this, see Dyck 2021.

22. *CPrR* 5: 107.

23. See also *ibid.*, where Kant refers to the series of appearances “in whose series of the conditioned and [its] conditions the unconditioned can never be found [*in deren Reihe des Bedingten und der Bedingungen das Unbedingte niemals angetroffen werden kann*]”.

24. *CPrR* 5: 107.

a “complete critical examination of the whole pure faculty of reason”<sup>25</sup> and permits of resolution only through Kant’s own doctrine of transcendental idealism. In any case, the key point is that Kant indicates that his theory of reason elaborated in his previous discussion of pure speculative reason is still in place at the outset of his treatment of pure practical reason.

### 3. FROM THE PRACTICALLY CONDITIONED TO THE UNCONDITIONED

There is, in any case, an important difference that arises in the transition to the sphere of practical reason, albeit not in the general theory of reason but rather in the conception of the ‘conditioned’ from which practical reason sets out. Kant signals just this in the following passage:

As pure practical reason it likewise seeks the unconditioned for the *practically conditioned* [*zu dem praktisch Bedingten*] (that which [*was*] rests on inclinations and natural needs), not indeed as the determining ground of the will, but even when this is given (in the moral law), it seeks the unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason.<sup>26</sup>

This passage is notable as Kant points to a sense of the relation between the conditioned and its condition that applies specifically in the practical context. Explicating precisely what Kant intends here is difficult, as this is apparently the only time in his works that Kant refers to such a relation (in this context).<sup>27</sup> However, given how little Kant has to say about it here, it seems safe (or at least natural) to presume that he does not have in mind something wholly different from his account of speculative reason’s regress from the conditioned to the unconditioned. In any case, we can note that Kant, unsurprisingly, suggests a different starting point for this regress; as opposed to setting out from an object or appearance taken as conditioned, practical reason sets out from something that “rests on inclinations and natural needs”. Kant most frequently connects inclinations and needs with the faculty of desire,<sup>28</sup> and so that which “rests [*beruht*]” on inclinations and needs, is presumably some object or state of affairs that we seek or resolve to bring about on the basis of desire, broadly speaking.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *CPrR* 5: 108, emphasis added.

27. Kant does refer to a ‘morally conditioned’ consequence at *CPrR* 5: 119 “it is only the morally conditioned yet necessary result [*daß diese nur die moralisch bedingte, aber nothwendige Folge*]”, though it is not clear that this is to be understood as a form of practical conditioning. There is also an unrelated use of practical conditioning in the context of imputation in the lectures on moral philosophy, as at *AA* 27: 153 (PP-Powalski): “Die *Imputatio facti* beruht auf dem Verhältniß der Handlung zu einer practischen Bedingung, die Bedingung ist practisch so ferne sie eine Freyheit ist”.

28. We take it that the “needs” Kant is referring to here, as the starting points for reason’s regress are sensible needs (or needs “based on inclination”) rather than a need “of reason” (cf. *CPrR* 5: 144n). Of course, this regress itself can be, and is, characterized in terms of a result of a need of reason; see for instance *AA* 8: 280n and *Rel* 6: 7n. For discussion of this latter, see Kleingeld 1998: esp. 47-48.

Nonetheless, practical reason considers such inclinations and needs themselves as ‘conditioned’, and accordingly enacts a search (in accordance with the faculty’s logical maxim) for further conditions for these. It is possible, but unlikely, that Kant simply has in mind here the metaphysical or real conditioning relation<sup>29</sup> applied narrowly to inclinations and needs – that is, that in taking an inclination as conditioned reason is taking it as a predicate and seeking its subject, or taking it as an effect and searching for its cause. This is because the relation of an inclination (as a mental representation) to a subject or, considered as an effect (as an inner appearance), to another cause is presumably already taken up by speculative reason and included in its inference to the ideas of the soul and world, respectively. Nonetheless, there is a potentially instructive parallel to be found in the speculative context, where the conditions sought were, at least initially, homogenous with the given conditioned, that is, the conditions were other objects which, for instance, served as causes for the conditioned object regarded as an effect. By parity of reasoning, in the practical context these conditions would be other inclinations or needs by which our conditioned inclinations or needs are further conditioned.

One way in which an inclination or need might be taken to condition another would be insofar as it serves to restrict or determine that inclination, that is, insofar as the pursuit or satisfaction of one inclination or need might impact the pursuit or satisfaction of another. So, one’s inclination to drink heavily at a party might be restricted by another inclination to retain the esteem of one’s colleagues. Moreover, this should not be taken to rule out the possibility that inclinations and needs may mutually condition – mutually restrict or determine – one another, as when one’s inclination (or need) to maintain a state of physical fitness practically conditions and is conditioned by one’s inclination (or need) for intellectual stimulation. This conception of the relation of practical conditioning arguably finds an analogue in the metaphysical or real conditioning relation at the basis of the First Antinomy, where parts of space are taken to mutually condition (in the sense of restricting, or bounding) one another, and indeed not as subordinated to one another in a succession (as with causal conditioning), but as co-ordinated with one another.<sup>30</sup> Despite having this analogue, the practical conditioning relation remains distinct from any real conditioning relation inasmuch as it relates to the satisfaction or pursuit of inclinations or needs (as opposed to the conditions of their existence).

Assuming this is a plausible interpretation of what Kant intends by the ‘practical’ conditioning relation, a picture begins to emerge of how Kant might conceive of reason’s regress in the practical sphere. Much as pure reason sets out from empirical objects (appearances) in the speculative context (at least with respect to the cosmological idea), so in the practical context pure reason begins with the empirical, in this case the inclinations and natural needs, and the ends grounded upon them, of the sensibly-

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29. For a detailed discussion of real conditions, see Watkins 2018. Watkins (rightly) notes that “Kant also clearly uses the notion of a condition in his practical philosophy” (p. 1135), but does not seem to have the above passage specifically in mind.

30. Cf. A 412/B 439–A 413/B 440.

affected human will. Taking these as conditioned, practical reason enacts a search for a condition, which is to say, another inclination, need, or end that such a being has to which that conditioned inclination or need is subordinate (or with respect to which it is subject to restriction). Yet, this conditioning inclination or need, can itself be regarded as ‘conditioned’, and a further condition sought for it, and so on, and because practical reason abides by the faculty’s logical maxim, it will continue this search until it arrives at a condition that is not itself conditioned. Furthermore, and again as was the case in the speculative context, practical reason also projects the end of this iterative application in its presupposition of an unconditioned object at the end of the series, that is, of the “unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason”.<sup>31</sup>

Kant proceeds immediately to identify this object as the highest good, which has a fairly determinate content and which we will consider in more detail below. However, for now we might consider this object, as Kant sometimes does, more generically in terms of the “final end” (or purpose) (*Endzweck*), that is, that end which conditions all other ends but which is not itself subordinate to any higher end. The representation of the final end can be understood to result from a similar application of reason to practically conditioned inclinations and needs inasmuch as Kant claims that an “end is always the object of an *inclination*”,<sup>32</sup> such that something that conditions an inclination will at the same time constitute a condition of the end that is the object of that inclination. Focusing on ends specifically, one end can condition another when the pursuit or achievement of that end is restricted by some other end, especially if the latter end “contains” the former in the sense of the former being subordinate to it. So, one’s end in making a profit might be subordinate to one’s end (for prudential reasons) of serving one’s customers honestly.<sup>33</sup> Significantly, just as in the speculative context, the result of this activity on the part of practical reason is the introduction of a kind of systematic unity into our inclinations and needs. Insofar as one end is conditioned by another, those higher ends can be said to “contain”, “order”, or “unite” lower ends within it. In this way, and again closely following Kant’s previous characterization of reason’s activity, the higher ends serve reason as a sort of ‘rule’ under which disparate inclinations, needs, and ends can be brought.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Kant himself characterizes the final end in just this way, for instance, in the third *Critique*, where he identifies a final end as “an end that requires no other end as the condition of its possibility”,<sup>35</sup> and the *Religion*, where he claims that the “end that contains the inescapable, and at the same time sufficient, condition of all other ends is the *final*

31. *CPrR* 5: 108.

32. *Rel* 6: 6n.

33. This is of course the example Kant considers at *G* 4: 397.

34. For Kant’s mention of ‘rule’ in this context, see for instance *R* 6621, 19: 114; *R* 7029, 19: 230; *R* 7063, 19: 240; *AA* 27: 116 (PP-Powalski); *MP-Co* 27: 245; *AA* 27: 1399 (Moral Mrongovius).

35. *CJ* §84, 5: 434.

*end*".<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, on this point, Kant's otherwise idiosyncratic conception of the faculty of reason and its employment in the practical sphere links up helpfully with classical accounts. So, in Cicero's *De finibus*, in which the respective merits of the Epicurean and Stoic conceptions of the highest good are debated (and as such constitutes an essential frame for the initial sections of the Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason), where Cicero identifies "the end, [...] the final and ultimate goal" as that for which "everything else is a means to it, while it is not itself a means to anything".<sup>37</sup>

#### 4. VIRTUE AND HAPPINESS AS TWO CONCEPTIONS OF THE PRACTICALLY UNCONDITIONED

While this suffices for a generic notion of the practically unconditioned, there are nonetheless two more distinct ways of conceiving it. As might be expected, this is in line with the two conceptions of the unconditioned in the speculative context, namely, as the unconditioned considered as the first member of the series, and the series itself, taken as a totality that lacks any further condition. Kant identifies, or so we contend, the former as virtue (or sometimes simply as "morality"), whereas the latter is connected with happiness itself taken as an idea of reason. Beginning with virtue, as it turns out Kant offers some insight into the basis for its identification as one conception of the practically unconditioned in a discussion that is not, at first glance, obviously relevant, namely, the famous account of the good will at the outset of the *Groundwork*. As is well known, Kant there offers an argument to the effect that there is nothing in the world, or beyond it, "that could be considered good without limitation [*ohne Einschränkung*] except a *good will*".<sup>38</sup> Kant proceeds to contend that talents of mind (understanding, wit, and judgment) and talents of temperament (courage, resolution, and perseverance), while both "good and desirable for many purposes" are nonetheless only good when accompanied by a good will. The same goes for the so-called gifts of fortune (power, riches, honour, and health), which "produce boldness and thereby often arrogance as well unless a good will is present".<sup>39</sup> As a result, neither internal goods (talents of mind and of temperament) nor external goods (gifts of fortune) can be good in the absence of the good will. Conversely, the good will is good "without limitation", inasmuch as the addition of any of these goods adds nothing to its value and their removal does not detract from its goodness: "Usefulness or fruitlessness can neither add anything to this worth, nor take anything away from it".<sup>40</sup>

As it relates to the present context, Kant phrases the results of these considerations in a way that suggests a connection; thus, he characterizes the good will as having

36. *Rel* 6: 6n. See also *Met-Mr* 29: 847: "that to which all ends are subordinated is called the final end".

37. Cicero 2001: 6, 13.

38. *G* 4: 393.

39. *Ibid.*

40. *G* 4: 394.

“*unconditional* worth”<sup>41</sup> while being “the *condition* of every other” good.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, in a parallel presentation recorded in the *Moral Mrongovius*, the same argument is cast explicitly in terms of conditions (and an investigation into the highest good):

What is the highest good? Among all that we call good, the major portion is good in a conditional sense, and nothing is good without restriction, save the good will. Understanding, bodily strength, and prudence are good, but united with a bad will are exceedingly harmful. Health, enjoyment [*Vergnügen*], and well-being and constant cheerfulness of heart are good only provided that the agent has a good will [...]. Thus a good will is simply good without restriction, for itself alone, in every respect and under all circumstances. It is the only thing that is good without other conditions.<sup>43</sup>

Framed in this way, we might take these considerations concerning the unconditioned goodness of the good will to bear on reason’s search for the practically unconditioned. Setting out from an inclination or need, practical reason takes this as conditioned, that is, as good or desirable only on account of some further inclination or need, and initiates a search for this, coming to rest only when it reaches the unconditioned. Reason scans the various sorts of external goods and ends (such as the development of our innate talents) that we take to be good, and discovers in each case that the various goods are themselves further conditioned, in each case, on the possession of the good will. Given that the goodness of the good will is not itself further conditioned on or restricted by anything else, practical reason takes it as the ‘unconditioned’, in this case, the first member of the series “to which the remaining members of the series are subordinated but that itself stands under no other condition”.<sup>44</sup>

In fact, that Kant identifies virtue as the unconditioned in just this sense is made clear early in the Dialectic of the second *Critique* itself. In the context of disambiguating what is intended by the concept of the ‘highest’, Kant notes that one sense – the supreme – refers to “that condition which is itself unconditioned, that is, not subordinate to any other”, and proceeds to identify virtue as “the *supreme condition* of whatever can even seem to us desirable”.<sup>45</sup> It might, however, be thought problematic to consider virtue (or morality, or the good will) in terms of the unconditioned, and so as a kind of ‘idea’ of reason, and indeed as something potentially misleading, in the same way as the ideas of speculative reason present us with potentially misleading illusions. However, these concerns are unfounded as Kant is quite clear not only that virtue is an idea of reason but also that whatever potential it has to mislead us is grounded in the denial of its ideal status. So, in his account of ideas in the first book of the *Transcendental Dialectic* (“On the Ideas in General”), Kant writes

41. *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

42. *G* 4: 396, emphasis added.

43. AA 29: 599. Cf. as well *R* 6890, 19:194-195.

44. A 417/B 445.

45. *CPrR* 5: 110. Cf. *G* 4: 396: “This [good] will need not, because of this, be the sole and complete good, but it must still be the highest [sc. *supreme*] good, and the condition of every other”.

we are all aware that when someone is represented as a model of virtue, in regard to which all possible objects of experience do service as examples (proofs of the feasibility of, to a certain degree, of what the concept of reason requires), but never as archetypes. That no human being will ever act adequately to what the pure idea of virtue contains does not prove in the least that there is something chimerical in this thought.<sup>46</sup>

That virtue is an idea of reason, then, does not at all detract from its capacity to serve as an effective basis for our appraisal of the actions of others, and a determining ground for our own; indeed, inasmuch as the substitution of any conditioned good in its place would result in heteronomy of the will, it follows that this ideal character is essential.<sup>47</sup> And while virtue, like any idea, has the potential to mislead – as Kant notes, as far as admitting a dialectical misuse, “reason in its practical use is no better off” than in the speculative<sup>48</sup> – this potential lies precisely in the presumption that virtue (as a component of the highest good) can be attained in this world. This is an illusion which, for instance, Kant charges the ancients of falling prey to, and which assumption motivates the Antinomy of practical reason (in the same way in which the illusory givenness of the world of appearances lies at the basis of the Antinomy of pure speculative reason), though we do not have space to pursue this in detail here.

As we have seen above, however, the identification of virtue as the practically unconditioned in this sense (i.e., as the first member in the series) still leaves room for another conception of the unconditioned on the part of practical reason. This conception involves, namely, taking the series of conditions in its totality, and so as itself unconditioned by any further conditions, in spite of lacking a first member. Interestingly, Kant frequently (if not unfailingly) describes happiness as the practically unconditioned, and so as an idea of reason, in just this way. This much is suggested, for instance, when he refers to the notion of happiness as including the (satisfaction of the) “sum-total” or the “whole” of inclinations, as when Kant writes in the *Groundwork* that the human being “sums up under the name of happiness” “the entire satisfaction [*die ganze Befriedigung*]” of its “needs and inclinations”.<sup>49</sup> Likewise in the *Groundwork*, Kant claims that it is in the “idea” of happiness “that all inclinations unite in one sum [*zu einer Summe vereinigen*]”<sup>50</sup> and that “for the idea of happiness an absolute whole [*ein absolutes Ganze*] is required”.<sup>51</sup> It is, then, through reason’s activity that our inclinations are brought

46. A 315/B 371-372. On virtue as an idea, see also *MP-Co* 27: 463 and *Rel* 6: 23-24n.

47. See *CPrR* 5: 109: “if one assumes any object under the name of a good as a determining ground of the will prior to the moral law and then derives from it the supreme practical principle, this would always produce heteronomy and supplant the moral principle”. Cf. A 314/B 371.

48. *CPrR* 5: 108.

49. *G* 4: 405. See also *G* 4: 393, where Kant indicates that ‘happiness’ designates “the entire well-being and contentment [*das ganze Wohlbefinden und Zufriedenheit*] with one’s condition”.

50. *G* 4: 399.

51. *G* 4: 418. For other passages along these lines, see *CJ* §83, 5: 430: “The concept of happiness is not one that one abstracts (say) from his instincts [...]; rather, it is a mere *idea*”; and

together into a single whole, with the result being not merely the complete collection of our inclinations (and their satisfaction) but the thought of them together as a whole or totality. Thus Kant draws attention to the intellectual component of the idea of happiness in a lengthy *Reflexion* from the 1780s, writing that “[t]he material of happiness is sensible, the form of the same however is intellectual”,<sup>52</sup> and further that “[h]appiness is not something sensed [*empfundenes*] but rather thought”.<sup>53</sup> As such, and just as was the case in the speculative context, practical reason introduces its distinctive unity into the material of one’s inclinations, thinking them together as an ideal whole even if none of these inclinations themselves constitutes a first, unconditioned condition.

Even so, Kant indicates that he takes the idea of happiness to amount to more than the mere thought of the complete collection of all one’s inclinations. This is because, as we have already seen, one inclination can condition, or restrict, another (with the same presumably being the case for our natural, and artificial, needs). Given this, the thought of the complete collection of one’s inclinations will not (necessarily) be internally consistent as some inclinations and needs will have to be restricted or even eliminated for the sake of the satisfaction of others. The idea of happiness is, therefore, not the thought of the satisfaction of all of one’s inclinations, but rather of the satisfaction of a maximum of inclinations, that is, the satisfaction of the greatest number of (mutually consistent) inclinations.<sup>54</sup> Thus, Kant refers to happiness as the idea of “one’s own greatest well-being”,<sup>55</sup> and as a “maximum of well-being”.<sup>56</sup> In order, then, to think of these inclinations as a unity, the activity of reason is required in order to determine the extent, and degree, to which one inclination may be compossible with another. In this case, reason is used “only to take care of the interest of inclinations [...] in their greatest compatibility with one another”.<sup>57</sup> This results in the refinement of the thought of all of one’s inclinations into a narrow set of compossible inclinations, which is to say, it results in a more determinate representation of what specific combination of inclinations (and in what degrees) constitutes the content of the idea of happiness for an individual.

This internal refinement of an idea into a more determinate representation, however, is just what Kant understands as an ‘ideal’ of reason, as he explains in connection with the “transcendental ideal”. In that case, the (indeterminate) idea of the sum-total of all possible predicates of things in general is refined into a determinate representation of a maximum of compossible predicates:

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*Mor-Mr* 29: 899: “Happiness has two meanings [the first being] the sum of all agreeable sensations [...]”.

52. *R* 7202, 19: 276.

53. *AA* 19: 278. See also *R* 6610, 19: 107: “*Neigungen vereinigt durch die Vernunft, stimmen zur Glückseligkeit.*” Cf. Wood 1970: 53: “happiness is an *idea*, and thus requires reason for its formulation”. Cf. also Wood 1970: 81.

54. Again, cf. Wood 1970: 53.

55. *G* 4: 416.

56. *G* 4: 418.

57. *G* 4: 406.

Now although this idea of the *sum total of all possibility*, insofar as it grounds every thing as the condition of its thoroughgoing determination in regard to the predicates which may constitute the thing, is itself still indeterminate, and through it we think nothing beyond a sum total of all possible predicates in general, we nevertheless find on closer investigation that this idea, as an original concept, excludes a multiplicity of predicates [...]; and that it refines itself into a concept of an individual object that is thoroughly determined merely through the idea, and then must be called an *ideal* of pure reason.<sup>58</sup>

The eventual result of the refinement of this idea in the speculative context is the ideal of the most real being or *ens realissimum*, that is, God, inasmuch as it is the idea of the maximum of possible predicates of things in general. In the practical context, the idea of happiness likewise refines itself into an ideal, that is a determinate representation of the maximum of inclinations that constitute happiness in an individual case. So, while Kant explicitly designates the idea of happiness as an ideal, he also notes that it differs from the transcendental ideal inasmuch as it sets out not from (intellectual) predicates of things in general, but from (sensible) inclinations: “happiness is not an ideal of reason, but of the imagination, which rests merely on empirical grounds”.<sup>59</sup> Kant also makes clear that, in spite of the involvement of “understanding and reason”<sup>60</sup> in its generation, a fact that has misled otherwise “intelligent men”,<sup>61</sup> the ideal of happiness is unsuitable as a basis for practical law – not only does it rest on empirical grounds (inclinations), but there is no *a priori* guarantee that the set of inclinations from which reason sets out in generating the ideal will not differ between individuals. So, while “the concept of happiness *everywhere* underlies the practical relation of *objects* to the faculty of desire”, “where each has to put his happiness comes down to the particular feeling of pleasure and displeasure in each”,<sup>62</sup> and indeed what constitutes happiness for the same individual might even change over time on account of changes in our inclinations.<sup>63</sup> But, while the content of the idea might vary among (and within) individuals, the inference of the idea of happiness, and its refinement into a determinate ideal, remain wholly natural to practical reason.

58. A 573/B 601.

59. G 4: 418.

60. CPrR 5: 24.

61. CPrR 5: 28.

62. CPrR 5: 25.

63. CJ §83, 5: 430: “Man himself formulates this idea [of happiness], and since his understanding is tied to imagination and the senses, he formulates the idea so diversely and even changes the concept so often that nature, even if it were subjected completely to man’s choice, still could not possibly adopt a definite and fixed universal law that would keep it in harmony with that wavering concept”.

## 5. THE IDEA OF THE HIGHEST GOOD

Of course, that there are two conceptions of the practically unconditioned puts practical reason in a similar situation to that faced in the speculative domain. In the speculative context, this resulted immediately in a set of antinomies as reason was constrained to think the unconditioned for a given conditioned thing in incompatible ways (at least insofar as it conceived the conditioned as a thing in itself). In the practical context, the conflict between these two conceptions is all the more acute given the apparent incompatibility between the two sets of conditions upon a given inclination. While the threat of an antinomy of practical reason obviously looms, Kant indicates that there is a more immediate dialectical potential that needs to be addressed, namely, that reason would not be satisfied with two conceptions of the practically unconditioned but would continue its systematizing activity by reducing one of these ideas to the other. One tempting resolution might be to contend for the identity of these two ideas – that the ideas of virtue and happiness, properly understood, amount to the same thing. Indeed, there is more than just the potential for such a dialectical misstep as Kant accuses ancient moral philosophers of just this sort of mistake, as he notes that the ancients sought to reduce virtue and happiness to a single idea. He observes already in an early *Reflexion*, that the “[a]ncients did not co-ordinate happiness and morality but subordinated them”,<sup>64</sup> and much later, in the *Vigilantius* lectures he explicitly traces this error to a misuse of a maxim of reason:

But instead of unifying the two principles, so as thereby to define the highest good, the [ancient] sects in fact separated them from one another, in that they proceeded by reason’s maxim, to the effect, that a thing may only be derived from a single principle (*entia, i.e., principia praeter necessitatem non sunt multiplicanda*), and subordinated one to the other.<sup>65</sup>

Kant has in mind the efforts of the Epicureans on the one hand and the Stoics on the other to assert the identity between these two conceptions of the practically unconditioned (by either taking virtue as nothing more than prudence in the choice of the means to happiness, or by taking happiness as just the consciousness of attaining virtue).<sup>66</sup> As Kant will point out, however, this amounts to a mis- (or over-)use of reason in seeking a unity between “extremely heterogeneous concepts”,<sup>67</sup> or a “unification of heterogeneous grounds”,<sup>68</sup> even if it is one that is “in keeping with the dialectical spirit of their times”.<sup>69</sup> Otherwise put, happiness and virtue as conceptions of the practically unconditioned cannot be brought together in a conceptual unity, but must be taken to constitute heterogeneous ideas of reason.

64. *R* 6607, 19: 106.

65. *AA* 27: 483.

66. *CPrR* 5: 111-112.

67. *CPrR* 5: 111. Cf. also *CPrR* 5: 112-113.

68. *CPrR* 5: 112.

69. *CPrR* 5: 111.

That reason cannot bring the ideas of virtue and happiness into a larger unity by means of conceptually reducing one to the other does not mean that it abandons its efforts altogether. Rather, as Kant has already suggested, reason attempts to think these two ideas together by co-ordinating rather than subordinating them (or reducing one to the other). This is to say that reason takes the ideas of virtue and happiness to together compose a whole and because taken together virtue and happiness exhaust all possible human desires, the resulting composite representation amounts to the representation of the highest good in the sense of the complete good. Thus Kant distinguishes a sense of 'highest' as designating "that whole which is not part of a still greater whole of the same kind (*perfectissimum*)",<sup>70</sup> and proceeds to identify virtue and happiness together as "the whole and complete good".<sup>71</sup> That happiness cannot be removed without making the resulting representation incomplete is something Kant frequently emphasizes, as when he denies that virtue is the "sole and complete good",<sup>72</sup> emphasizes that for the whole and complete good "*happiness* is also required",<sup>73</sup> and claims more expansively in the first *Critique* that "[h]appiness alone is far from the complete good for our reason" but that "morality alone (...) is also far from being the complete good".<sup>74</sup> It is, then, only insofar as the ideas of virtue and happiness are co-ordinated in this way that they can together constitute the representation of "the totality of human ends",<sup>75</sup> which is to say an 'idea' (if of a composite sort), namely, the representation of "the unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason, under the name of the highest good".<sup>76</sup>

Even so, virtue and happiness are not just completely heterogenous concepts, but also frequently inconsistent with one another. Accordingly, in order to think them as constituting a single whole, reason must assign one priority over another. As Kant writes, virtue and happiness are otherwise "so far from coinciding that they greatly restrict and infringe upon each other in the same subject",<sup>77</sup> but provided that the supremacy of virtue is recognized, then these two parts of the highest good "not only do not contradict each other but can also be united".<sup>78</sup> Kant is explicit that while virtue and happiness jointly compose the highest good, virtue enjoys special status as solely constituting the 'supreme' good:

That *virtue* (as worthiness to be happy) is the *supreme condition* of whatever can even seem to us desirable and hence of all of our pursuit of happiness and that it is therefore the *supreme* good has been proven in the *Analytic*.<sup>79</sup>

70. *CPrR* 5: 110.

71. *Ibid.*

72. *G* 4: 396.

73. *CPrR* 5: 110.

74. A 813/B 841.

75. *Met-V* 27: 482.

76. *CPrR* 5: 108.

77. *CPrR* 5: 112.

78. *Mor-Mr* 29: 602.

79. *CPrR* 5: 110.

Rather than having a specific section or argument in mind, Kant is likely referring to the principal conclusions of the *Analytic*, namely, that only morality (as involving a formal principle as the determining ground of the will), and not (the principle of) happiness, is consistent with the character of a practical law in issuing a command that holds universally and necessarily.<sup>80</sup> Whatever the case, the foregoing suggests a way in which we can determine more precisely what is intended by the supremacy of virtue. Clearly, what virtue's supremacy cannot mean is that the idea of happiness is itself subordinated to virtue in the sense of being practically conditioned by it, as Kant sometimes wrongly suggests.<sup>81</sup> This would violate the 'unconditioned' character of the idea of happiness, and so would amount to a version of the dialectical mistake of the ancients. Rather than expressing a direct (subordinating) relation between the two components of the highest good, the supremacy of virtue should instead be understood in terms of the priority of virtue in conditioning our inclinations and natural needs. That is, our inclinations and natural needs are first considered insofar as they may be restricted by virtue as the practically unconditioned. Subsequent to this initial screening, those (suitable restricted) inclinations and needs are then taken up by reason and refined into a coherent totality. Kant seems to indicate just this understanding of virtue's supremacy when, in the above quote, he identifies virtue as the "*supreme condition* of whatever can even seem to us desirable",<sup>82</sup> as well as in the corresponding discussion in the *Groundwork*, where he claims that virtue's supremacy is a condition "even of all demands for happiness".<sup>83</sup> Significantly, the result of reason's activity here continues to be an 'ideal' of happiness, albeit one in which all of the inclinations and needs whose satisfaction is identified with happiness have already been deemed to be morally permissible. This is, properly speaking, the "*ideal of the highest good*".<sup>84</sup> It is, in any case, only when virtue is given priority in this way that the two components of the highest good can be taken together to form a coherent whole.

In the foregoing, we have offered an account of the origin of reason's idea of the highest good. This account traced the idea back to practical reason's activity in seeking the (practically) unconditioned for a given conditioned inclination or need, and demonstrated how the practically unconditioned is conceived by reason in two distinct ways. Practical reason (in contrast with the speculative context) was nonetheless able to find a way to co-ordinate these two heterogeneous conceptions of the unconditioned – virtue and happiness – into a single composite idea, albeit only through recognizing the supremacy of virtue. In the end, this account amounts to what Kant would call a "metaphysical deduction" of the idea of the highest good, or an account of the origin of

80. For representative passages in the *Analytic*, see for instance *CPrR* 5: 35; 5: 61-62; 5: 92-93; Cf. also *G* 4: 396.

81. In *CPrR* 5: 119, Kant refers to the 'subordination' of happiness to morality.

82. *CPrR* 5: 110.

83. *G* 4: 396.

84. A 810/B 838. Properly speaking, in terms of the division introduced in the first *Critique*, this is the ideal of the highest 'derived' good; see A 810/B 839-A 811/B 840 as well as *CPrR* 5: 125.

the idea (and of our possession of it) that is *a priori* or does not rely on the acquisition of the concept through experience (and our reflection upon it).<sup>85</sup> What remains undetermined, however, is whether what is thought through this idea, namely, the rationally determined agreement between virtue and happiness, represents something that is *possible*, that is, whether one can “*produce the highest good through the freedom of the will*”.<sup>86</sup> Since, as we have seen, the combination of elements into the idea of the highest good is not in virtue of their identity but is rather a synthetic connection between heterogeneous concepts, this is a question that requires a transcendental deduction to answer, in the course of which the threat of a novel Antinomy will have to be dispelled. With all this in hand, then, we are brought to the threshold of this transcendental deduction though, regrettably, no further.

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#### ABBREVIATIONS

All citations from Kant refer to the volume and page numbers from the Akademie-Ausgabe (AA): *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, 29 vol., ed. Berlin-Brandenburgische (originally Königlich Preussische, and then Deutsche) Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, Reimer, 1900-19, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1920-.

Where it is relevant, the AA-abbreviation is replaced by the abbreviation for the particular text within the AA. References included in the abbreviation list below are to the English versions of the texts, which were consulted in conjunction with the German texts.

A/B = Kant, I. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. and ed. by P. Guyer and A. W. Wood (“The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant”), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

CJ = Kant, I. 2000. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, tr. by P. Guyer and E. Matthews, ed. by P. Guyer (“The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant”), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

CPrR = Kant, I. 1997. *Critique of Practical Reason*, tr. A. Reath, ed. M. J. Gregor (“The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant”), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

G = Kant, I. 2012. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, tr. by M. J. Gregor, ed. by J. Timmermann (“The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant”), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

R = Kant I. 2005. *Notes and Fragments*, tr. by C. Bowman, P. Guyer, and F. Rauscher, ed. by P. Guyer (“The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant”), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Rel = Kant, I. 2018. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, tr. and ed. by A. Wood and G. di Giovanni (“The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant”), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

85. Cf. B 159, and Kant’s metaphysical deduction of the ideas of (speculative) reason at A 333/B 390-A 336/B 393.

86. CPrR 5: 113.

- Met-Mr* = Kant, I. 1997. "Metaphysik Mrongovius", in *Lectures on Metaphysics*, tr. and ed. by K. Ameriks and S. Naragon ("The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant"), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 109-288.
- Met-V* = Kant, I. 1997. "Metaphysik Vigilantius", in *Lectures on Metaphysics*, tr. and ed. by K. Ameriks and S. Naragon ("The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant"), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 417-506.
- MP-Co* = Kant, I. 1997. "Part 2 – Moral Philosophy: Collins's Lecture Notes", in *Lectures on Ethics*, tr. P. Heath, ed. by P. Heath and J. B. Schneewind ("The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant"), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 37-222.
- Mor-Mr* = Kant, I. 1997. "Part 3 – Morality according to Prof. Kant: Mrongovius's Second Set of Lecture Notes (Selections)", in *Lectures on Ethics*, tr. P. Heath, ed. by P. Heath and J. B. Schneewind ("The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant"), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 223-248.

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