

# WHAT'S SO GOOD ABOUT THE GOOD WILL? AN ONTOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF KANT'S AXIOMATIC MORAL CONSTRUCT

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**ABSTRACT:** Kant maintains that the only thing that is good in itself, and therefore good without limitation or qualification, is a good will. This is an objectionable claim in support of a controversial position. The problem is not just that the good will is not the only thing that is good in itself, which indeed it is not, but more importantly, that the good will is not so much a thing that is good in itself as it is the good kind of a thing that is otherwise neither good nor bad in itself. The goodness of a good will is no more intrinsic than the goodness of a good act, good outcome, good attitude, good character, or good person. Nor is it even any more so than something as commonplace as a good laugh or a good cup of coffee. A good will, whatever else it may be, is a will that is good, much like how a good act is an act that is good, a good outcome is an outcome that is good, and so on with the other examples, not one of which is good for any reason other than the goodness predicated of the corresponding subject. This paper thus challenges Kant's position on ontological grounds. It questions the validity of claiming intrinsic goodness for a complex construct whose goodness is, in fact, extrinsic to its substance. The objection is not that the good will might not turn out to be good after all, which is impossible by definition, designation, or stipulation, but that its goodness is axiomatic and derivative rather than intrinsic or fundamental.

**KEYWORDS:** Kant's good will; Kant's highest good; Kant's moral theory; Kant's moral ontology; The ontology of value

## INTRODUCTION

The central thesis of this paper is that Kant's conception of the good will is a qualified concept, or complex construct, masquerading as a pure and simple idea.

The corresponding aim is to explain what that means, to establish why it matters, and to demonstrate that it is true. Progress toward that end proceeds in three stages organized in three sections. Section 1 presents the charges, starting with Kant's contention that the good will is the only thing that is good without limitation or qualification and showing that this is itself a qualification, namely of the will, with the good. Section 2 elucidates the relationship between Kant's notion of the good will and his conception of the highest good in an effort to appraise and validate the significance of the good will in his moral theory. Section 3 examines the conceptual and methodological ramifications of the discrepancy between the ontological structure of the good will as a qualified concept, or complex construct, and its axiomatic identification by Kant as the only thing that is good without qualification. The way these parts fit together is that the first section describes the nature of the problem, which constitutes only a presentation and not a confirmation of the alleged difficulty, while the second section demonstrates why this difficulty is actually worthy of interest, and the third section illustrates why it is indeed a serious problem.

#### 1. THE GOOD WILL AS A QUALIFIED CONCEPT

Kant opens his *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (GMS) with a discussion of the good will, which he identifies as the only thing that could possibly be conceived as good in itself, that is to say, good without limitation or qualification.<sup>1</sup> The relevant documentation can reasonably be limited to two passages: (1) "It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will" (GMS 4:393). (2) "A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, because of its fitness to attain some proposed end, but only because of its volition, that is, it is

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<sup>1</sup> References to Kant's works use an abbreviated title followed by the pagination of the Akademie edition: GMS (4:385–463) = *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (1785). KrV (3:1–552) = *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781/1787). KpV (5:1–163) = *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (1788). KU (5:165–485) = *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790). MS (6:203–493) = *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* (1797). MM2 (29:597–642) = *Moral Mrongovius 2* (1784–1785 = second set of notes). R (6:1–202) = *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (1793). References to the first *Critique* additionally employ the standard A/B notation designating the first (1781) and second (1787) editions. Kant's works generally have more than one good translation in English, which therefore precludes a standard edition. The relevant options in each case are listed in the Works Cited section, together with a note indicating which translation, if any, was used for direct quotations. All quotations omit footnote reference markers and special typesetting conventions (such as boldface type for emphasis).

good in itself and, regarded for itself, is to be valued incomparably higher than all that could merely be brought about by it in favor of some inclination and indeed, if you will, of the sum of all inclinations” (GMS 4:394).

Here is how Christine M. Korsgaard interprets these passages in her introduction to Mary J. Gregor’s translation: “He means that the good will is the only thing which has a value which is completely independent of its relation to other things, which it therefore has in all circumstances, and which cannot be undercut by external conditions” (Korsgaard 1997 [= Kant 1785/1997], xi). Both the primary sources and the interpretation are consistent with Kant’s lectures on moral philosophy, as transcribed in class by his students, with the notes of Krzysztof Celestyn Mrongowiusz (Mrongovius) being particularly relevant here: “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” (MM2 29:599).

Kant’s insight into morality thus builds on an apparently foundational discovery anchored to a demonstrably derivative construct. And it is expressed in the form of an ostensibly simple claim concealing considerable complexity. It amounts to predicating intrinsic goodness of something that is not good in itself, and sometimes not even good at all, thereby first making a good will out of a will, and then identifying the modified product not just as good, not just as good in itself, but as the only thing that is good in itself.

The separate steps in the preceding description, mimicking the progressive stages of a comprehensive strategy as if Kant himself had first done one thing and then the other, represent a heuristic convenience to expose the underlying logic rather than a diagnostic device to trace the process of discovery or an interpretive model to illustrate the form of presentation. The point is that the good will is not a simple concept, one abstracted from experience and stripped of all contingency, but a complex construct dependent upon moral value. Kant, in effect, ascribes goodness to something that has none of its own, as opposed to working with something that is already good in itself, such as *eudaimonia* as proposed by Aristotle (*Eudemean Ethics*; *Nicomachean Ethics*) or happiness as promoted by Bentham (1776; 1789; 1829/1983; 1834/1983) and his associates, particularly James Mill (1821; 1823; 1829) and John Stuart Mill (1861).<sup>2</sup> Having thus picked out the good kind of

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that Kant neglects happiness as a possible alternative. The reference here to happiness merely illustrates the kind of thing that might qualify as a simple construct, one without illicit qualification,

something that normally comes in both good and bad varieties, to say nothing of its morally neutral manifestations, he nevertheless declares the axiomatically good version to be the only thing that is good in itself.

I am not yet objecting. I am merely describing what Kant is doing, or to be more accurate, bringing out the implications of what he is doing. Perhaps there is something about a will that makes it good in itself, whenever it turns out to be good as a matter of fact, even though it is not good as a matter of course. But how can goodness be intrinsic in something when it is not a natural part, property, or aspect of that thing? If the question is too broad, it can be rephrased with greater specificity: How can a will's goodness be intrinsic, or in any way compelling, if it is merely postulated, or stipulated, rather than properly demonstrated? And even if it just is, simply because it is, how is the result not arbitrary and the explanation not evasive? Where does the goodness of the good will come from?

Now I am objecting. By "compelling" I mean conceptually coherent, methodologically rigorous, and philosophically sound, preferably all at once. Axiomatic goodness is no more compelling as true goodness, intrinsic or otherwise, than axiomatic beauty is as true beauty. The axiomatic goodness of the good will is the methodological equivalent of the axiomatic beauty of a beautiful experience. We already know from Plato that what makes anything good is the goodness in it, what makes anything beautiful is the beauty in it, and so on. Kant borrows the causal explanation of value from Plato and makes it intrinsic to the thing associated with it, specifically to one such thing, thus giving us the will in instantiation of the good. He thereby transfers the unit of appreciation, or perhaps simply expands it, from the ultimate source of value (the good) to the thing allegedly most representative of that value (the will when it is good), which then somehow embodies that value without qualification (the will that is good).

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where the good will does not. Otherwise, Kant admittedly goes through various questions and examples jointly leaving no doubt as to whether he has seriously considered eudaimonism, along with other approaches, as a possible alternative to his deontological approach (GMS 4:395–396, 399, 401, 405, 415–419). His own interest in happiness shows that, like the hedonists of antiquity and the utilitarians of modernity, Kant associates the highest good with happiness, but that, unlike them, he does not consider happiness an unconditioned good. Strictly speaking, he takes, not happiness outright, but happiness proportionate to virtue, as the highest good (cf. KpV 5:107–148, especially 110–132). This is discussed in detail in the second section of the present paper.

This comparison between goodness and beauty may seem to conflate Kant's ethics and his aesthetics, but that is neither the intention nor the outcome. I am not saying that Kant's moral theory is conceptually, methodologically, or philosophically identical to his aesthetic theory. I am saying only that, regardless of Kant's approach in either area, qualifying an otherwise simple concept in the domain of morality is like qualifying an otherwise simple concept in the domain of aesthetics. The comparison practically suggests itself. As for whether the analogy is faithful to the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in Kant, the question is irrelevant because the point is not contingent upon the nature of that relationship, though I do believe that Kant's ethics and his aesthetics are connected in meaningful ways, the demonstration of which would constitute a digression in the present context.<sup>3</sup>

To return to the matter of axiomatic qualification, the problem of concealed complexity, or modified simplicity, seems to disappear when we substitute "goodwill" (one word) for "a good will" (three words). This apparent albeit superficial resolution is not unique to English. It can be duplicated at least in the German original. But a formative construct in one's ethical system should not rest upon word games. Goodwill is not the same thing as a good will. If we were supposed to focus exclusively on goodwill in our interpretation, Kant would have more simply recommended goodness instead, taking us back to Plato, because that is exactly what goodwill is.

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<sup>3</sup> Kant's third *Critique* sheds some light on the relationship between his ethics and his aesthetics, with details of the connection confirming a late and gradual development. Section 59 of *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), explicating the notion of "beauty as a symbol of morality" (KU 5:351–354), is especially telling in that regard: "Now I say that the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good, and also that only in this respect (that of a relation that is natural to everyone, and that is also expected of everyone else as a duty) does it please with a claim to the assent of everyone else, in which the mind is at the same time aware of a certain ennoblement and elevation above the mere receptivity for a pleasure from sensible impressions, and also esteems the value of others in accordance with a similar maxim of their power of judgment" (KU 5:353). Relevant discussions include, but are not limited to, Paul Guyer (1990), Christoph Menke (2008), G. Felicitas Munzel (1995), James B. Wilbur (1970), and John H. Zammito (1992). Guyer, for one, identifies several links between Kant's ethics and his aesthetics: "Such a catalogue can be divided into three parts. First, there are direct connections between aesthetic judgment and the cultivation of moral feelings. Second, there are the ways in which both aesthetic objects, especially works of fine art, and aesthetic experience itself offer sensible representation of moral ideas and even the structure of morality. Third, both aesthetic and teleological judgment serve to represent the primacy of practical reason itself, the unconditional superiority of the rational use of reason over all other forms of value" (Guyer 1990, 140 [= 1993, 34, with minor emendations]).

Kant, of course, is not playing word games. It is, rather, the whole of his ethical system that is like a game, one based on rational introspection, conceptual generalization, and categorical universalization. The resulting moral theory has its own rules and conditions, together validating its own conclusions. Like any good game, it works with a distinctive universe of discourse simulating reality without necessarily emulating it. Within the parameters of his game, Kant is right that a good will is good, that a good will is good in itself, and perhaps even that a good will is the only thing that is good in itself. This is because: (1) a good will is good by definition, designation, or stipulation, since it is not just a will, but specifically a good will; (2) a good will is good in itself, since the axiomatic goodness of a good will, though not the actual goodness of any given will, is indeed unconditioned and unconditional; (3) a good will is the only thing that is good in itself, since the scope of consideration is restricted in advance to a deontological frame of reference instead of being subject to empirical verification and remaining open to rational deliberation. Broadly speaking, however, there is a logical and ontological gap in starting out with something that is good by declaration, rather than by demonstration, and ending up with something that is the only thing that is good in itself, still not demonstrated in the end.<sup>4</sup>

As a matter of fact, the good will is not even the end of the line in how far Kant goes with the conceptual transplantation of values after arriving at something that is good by declaration, grounded ultimately in a Platonic graft onto something that is not good in itself. Starting with the simplicity, or purity, of the concept of will, infused through and through with Platonic goodness, Kant gives us not just the derivative concept of a “good will,” which he tells us is the only thing that is good in itself, but also that of an “absolutely good will” (GMS 4:426, 437, 444, 447), and for good measure, that of a holy one of those, to wit, a “*holy*, absolutely good will” (GMS 4:439).<sup>5</sup> These are not random variations that

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<sup>4</sup> As the context may readily show, the caveat introduced at the beginning of this section is still in place here, continuing to make the corresponding analysis a heuristic convenience for comprehension and explication as opposed to a direct report of Kant’s methodology or presentation.

<sup>5</sup> An “absolutely good will” is a will “which cannot be evil, hence whose maxim, if made a universal law, can never conflict with itself” (GMS 4:437). Such a will “consists just in the principle of action being free from all influences of contingent grounds, which only experience can furnish” (GMS 4:426). Hence, an “absolutely good will is that whose maxim can always contain itself regarded as a universal law” (GMS

he shuffles around whimsically. They are all part of a formal system grounded in a simple concept, one that is originally pure, coherent, and cohesive in itself, at the foundation of the principle of volition making the categorical imperative a synthetic *a priori* proposition.

The simplicity at issue is not a partless simplicity but an ontological purity and mereological coherence, hence simplicity in the sense of freedom from complexity modifying or contaminating the essential concept. To illustrate, a triangle is not simple in the sense of being partless, since it has sides, vertices, and angles, if nothing else, as parts, but it is indeed simple in the sense of being free of modification and qualification, which cannot reasonably be attributed to, say, a red triangle, or a large triangle, or a rotating triangle. Neither redness nor largeness nor rotation is intrinsic to triangles. They are all accidental properties, much like goodness in relation to the will. Nor are these properties present in triangles without limitation or qualification, which is no different from the extent to which goodness can reasonably be predicated of a will in the formulation of a good will. Under the corresponding conception, definition, or interpretation of simplicity, a unitary whole, partless or otherwise, can have nothing added or taken away, nor be qualified or modified in any other way, without having either its basic identity and unitary integrity compromised or its ontological purity contaminated.

Even if we now drop the heuristic convenience of rendering the logical implications of what Kant is doing as methodological steps in what Kant is doing, the configuration invoked in that exploratory paradigm still accurately reflects how the system really works, independently of how Kant may have, in fact, pieced it together. Put differently, even if Kant himself never actually went through the conceptual construction process imagined here, a structural analysis of his system reveals just such a composition: complexity disguised as simplicity. The goodness of the good will, on the other hand, is strictly in the goodness, not in the will, which might easily have been bad, had it not been good.

Critics may object that Kant's good will is not simply a will that is good, as depicted here, but a technical concept designating the conformity of the will with

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4:447). A holy one of those, in turn, claims necessity as well: "A will whose maxims necessarily harmonize with the laws of autonomy is a *holy*, absolutely good will" (GMS 4:439).

reason, specifically with pure practical reason.<sup>6</sup> Given the requisite absence of sensible (*sinnlich*) conditions or considerations in the correlation envisaged, the goodness of the will, in anything like its intended meaning, amounts to the autonomy of the will. The objection to consider, then, to expand on the one under discussion, is that the good will is not a sterile combination of good and will, resulting in a qualified concept disguised as a pure one, or in a complex construct masquerading as a simple one, but rather the rational capacity to be moral in accordance with the dictates and principles of reason. This is to object, in other words, that a good will cannot be reduced to a good choice, or a right decision, or a proper volition, since it corresponds instead to the rational basis for morality itself.

This is all very reasonable. It captures, at least without prejudice if not without fault, the essence of Kant's interest in the good will. I grant the entire narrative yet continue to maintain that Kant puts together a qualified concept, or complex construct, as opposed to either adopting or inventing a pure and simple one, in proceeding with an axiomatically good will as the main methodological vehicle in his overall approach to moral theory. The explication he offers does not remove the qualification he makes. As certain as it may be that the guiding light in his approach is the autonomy of the will, and that the ultimate court of appeal there is pure practical reason, both considerations constitute an explication of the methodological function of the good will and not a demonstration of its ontological purity or simplicity as a moral construct.

The good will is still a will that is good, no matter what else the conceptual union of good and will may represent, and no matter what it may be that Kant thinks makes a will good. The inherent nature of the good-making characteristics invoked in the process does not change the fact that good-making characteristics have indeed been invoked in the process, or the fact that a qualification has thereby been made in the very act of introducing and adopting the corresponding

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<sup>6</sup> This consideration is not just in anticipation of potential opposition but in response to an actual objection to an earlier draft of the present paper, where I had assumed, without argument or reference, that the good will is still a will that is good even if it is also something else, in other words, that the term retains its ordinary meaning even if it also takes on a special meaning. The objection, in contrast, requires corroboration of the continuing validity and relevance of the ordinary meaning of the term, lest the thesis of the paper be interpreted as a pointless pursuit after a "straw man" as opposed to a real engagement with Kant himself. I believe this is a good point, which is why I go on to provide the requisite justification in the main text.



characteristics, whatever they may be. We are still talking about a will that is good. That has not changed. The only thing that has changed is that we have filled out the details of what that might look like.

I appreciate the symmetry of correlative developments in philosophy and terminology. I am not denying what the good will is, nor even what it appears to be. I am simply proposing that the notion of a good will is still that of a will that is good, even if what is meant by a will that is good is a will that is in conformity with reason. The ampliative association of will with reason, as the relevant explication of the notion of a good will, represents just as axiomatic a qualification of the will as does the direct designation of a will as good. Regardless of what its goodness is said to reside in, a good will is still a will that is good, which remains true even when such a will is the only thing that demonstrates or illustrates the presumably definitive interaction (or intersection) of morality with rationality.

To delineate the nature or content of a good will, as a will that is in conformity with reason, is not to absolve the corresponding conception of axiomatic qualification, but to reveal the intention behind that qualification. Thinking of the good will as a will that is consistent with reason is conceptually and methodologically on a par with to thinking of good company as a complementary network of friends in harmony with one's personal predilections, or of good management as administrative practices in compliance with generally accepted principles of corporate governance, or of good posture as spinal alignment in promotion of the sustainability of musculoskeletal health in the long run. Each interpretation clarifies what it is that makes the relevant thing good, but none of them changes the fact that the focus is on the good kind of the thing under consideration, which is not itself good without qualification, and therefore not a simple concept that happens to be good but a complex construct set up to represent the good variety of the underlying concept, which is otherwise neutral in itself.

To reiterate in the interest of avoiding any misunderstanding, I agree that Kant does not take the good will as nothing more than a will that is good, and I concede that he instead provides a rich explanation of what constitutes such a will. Yet I submit that he continues to consider the good will a will that is good even if he also happens to mean something more by it in the specific and technical sense he develops in articulation of his ethical theory. This may even be obvious

enough to require no further explanation or demonstration, given that the assignment of a special sense to ordinary terms does not erase or invalidate their common or conventional meaning. It would not seem altogether reasonable to object, for example, that Kant can no longer be thinking of the good will as a will that is good, once he has explicated that possibility in terms of the freedom of the will in conformity with pure practical reason. The technical sense he assigns to the notion of a good will does not preclude the possibility of his continuing conception of the good will as a will that is good.

The best response to any opposition or hesitation in that regard is probably through the words of Kant himself:

The true vocation of reason must be to produce a will that is good, not perhaps *as a means* to other purposes, but *good in itself*, for which reason was absolutely necessary. [Kant 1785, GMS 4:396]

This is unequivocal confirmation that the good will, as far as Kant is concerned, continues to be a will that is good regardless of what makes it good. The same confirmation is available in the very next paragraph, where he, once again, rehearses the logical structure and lexical construction of a good will as a will that is good:

We have, then, to explicate the concept of a will that is to be esteemed in itself and that is good apart from any further purpose, as it already dwells in natural sound understanding and needs not so much to be taught as only to be clarified — this concept that always takes first place in estimating the total worth of our actions and constitutes the condition of all the rest. [Kant 1785, GMS 4:397]

These are not isolated examples where Kant may have momentarily and inadvertently deviated from an otherwise systematic employment of “good will” in a strictly technical sense, thus making unintended anomalies out of telling instances in obvious conformity with the ordinary sense of a good will as a will that is good. Comparable instances can be found throughout the text, both in explicit statements and in implicit references. A case in point is the following association between a good will and the good, or rather, between a perfectly good will and the representation of the good:

A perfectly good will would, therefore, equally stand under objective laws (of the good), but it could not on this account be represented as *necessitated* to actions in conformity with law since of itself, by its subjective constitution, it can be determined only through the representation of the good. [Kant 1785, GMS 4:414]

Another example is the following reference to the good will as “a will which is good in some way,” the proper way subsequently being identified as its conformity with reason:

Since every practical law represents a possible action as good and thus as necessary for a subject practically determinable by reason, all imperatives are formulae for the determination of action that is necessary in accordance with the principle of a will which is good in some way. Now, if the action would be good merely as a means *to something else* the imperative is *hypothetical*; if the action is represented as *in itself* good, hence as necessary in a will in itself conforming to reason, as its principle, *then it is categorical*. [Kant 1785, GMS 4:414]

The preceding considerations show, both in conformity with common sense and in agreement with textual evidence, that the technical sense of “good will” in Kant’s moral theory exists alongside its ordinary meaning in his own vocabulary as well as matching the standard denotation in common parlance. This confirms that Kant can reasonably be read as holding the good will to be a will that is good. That, in turn, demonstrates that the construal of the good will as a qualified concept or complex construct, specifically as an axiomatic one that supervenes on the atomic concepts of good and will, is not undermined by the details of exactly how Kant sees that association or combination.

On the other hand, this does not yet establish the thesis of the present paper. It only makes a supporting contribution, validating the concerns expressed here as a possibility worth exploring, which is to point at best to a potential problem as opposed to establishing a definitive difficulty. Even if the good will is indeed a qualified concept, despite its presentation by Kant as a good without qualification, and, in fact, as the only thing that is good without qualification, what remains to be shown is why this should matter at all and how it might disrupt or undermine Kant’s general initiative, especially compared to other traditions in moral philosophy. The most promising approach toward that end is to elucidate the methodological role and function of the good will in Kant’s moral theory, particularly in connection with the highest good, and to illustrate why the axiomatic qualification of the will as a good one poses a problem not to be found in competing schools of thought in ethical theory.

These are the aims of the following two sections. The next section takes up the matter of Kant’s conception of the highest good in an attempt to demonstrate the relevance of the good will from that perspective. The one after that, with the

importance of the good will having been established, returns to the problem of the axiomatic qualification of the will as a good one. What makes the next section necessary, or at least useful, is that the matter under discussion, that is, the charges under consideration, must constitute not just a potential problem but also a relevant one in order to be worthy of attention.

While the notion of a good will is obviously relevant to Kant's moral theory, not everyone agrees on the nature and extent of that relevance, a demonstration of which is therefore in order. Scholarly reservations regarding the importance of the good will in Kant's practical philosophy include, among others, the outlook of Allen W. Wood (2003), who warns that the centrality of the notion of the good will in Kant's moral theory is easily exaggerated. Wood defers in particular to Onora O'Neill's assessment of the matter: "We must not be misled by the first part of the *Grundlegung* where it seems as though Kant takes the concept of a good will as the fundamental ethical concept. This is done only to show that the concept of a good will cannot be explicated except in terms of the moral law" (O'Neill 1975, 101 [= 2013, 204–205], as cited by Wood 2003, 478, n. 2).

It is indeed possible to overstate the importance of the good will in Kant's ethical theory, but it is no better to err in the opposite direction by underestimating its significance in the same context. Even if Kant's ethics does not rest entirely on what he makes of the good will, his conception of the good will is important enough to merit scrutiny of what he is doing with that construct in the *Grundlegung*, not just because he begins the discussion with it, but also because he invokes the will, through its main activity, willing, as an essential ingredient in the supreme principle of morality (GMS 4:437, 447). He does, after all, both assume and advocate, and if we must be charitable without limitation, perhaps also prove or demonstrate, the "validity of the will as a universal law" (GMS 4:437).

We must not, to be sure, mistake the good will for the highest good, especially since Kant himself distinguishes between the two, as discussed in the next section, but this does not mean that we may not press Kant on problems with the good will, as done in the final section. What makes the final section necessary, or perhaps merely useful, is that even a serious and relevant allegation requires corroboration, preferably through an illustration of its immediate consequences and implications, supplemented by a comparative analysis of the standard

approach to the principle of moral distinction in competing systems.

## 2. THE GOOD WILL AND THE HIGHEST GOOD

Kant's conception of the good will is indeed of central importance, not just in the specific context of his *Grundlegung*, but also in the general framework of his second *Critique*, the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, and in association with his *Lectures on Ethics*. Not only does Kant continue, at every stage of development in his thesis, argument, and position, to consider the good will a will that is good, he also, at one point in the *Grundlegung*, declares the good will the highest good:

This will [“a will that is good, not perhaps *as a means* to other purposes, but good in itself,” as set up in the sentence immediately preceding the present quotation in the original source] need not, because of this, be the sole [*einzigē*] and complete [*ganze*] good, but it must still be the highest good [*das höchste Gut*] and the condition of every other, even of all demands for happiness. [Kant 1785, GMS 4:396]

A proper understanding of this designation of the good will as “the highest good” (*das höchste Gut*, GMS 4:396, line 25) requires acquaintance with a later distinction, articulated most clearly and extensively in the second *Critique* (KpV 5:110), between “the supreme good” (*das oberste Gut*) and “the whole and complete good” (*das ganze und vollendete Gut*). The supreme good is the unconditioned good, which constitutes the condition of the goodness of other goods, which are not themselves unconditioned, while the whole and complete good is the supreme good plus any and all other goods whose goodness is conditioned by the supreme good. Here is how Kant puts the matter in his own words in translation:

The concept of the *highest* already contains an ambiguity that, if not attended to, can occasion needless disputes. The highest can mean either the supreme (*supremum*) or the complete (*consummatum*). The first is that condition which is itself unconditioned, that is, not subordinate to any other (*originarium*); the second is that whole which is not part of a still greater whole of the same kind (*perfectissimum*). That *virtue* (as worthiness to be happy) is the *supreme condition* of whatever can even seem to us desirable and hence of all our pursuit of happiness and that it is therefore the *supreme* good has been proved in the Analytic. But it is not yet, on that account, the whole and complete good as the object of the faculty of desire of rational finite beings; for this, *happiness* is also required, and that not merely in the partial eyes of a person who makes himself an end but even in the judgment of an impartial reason, which regards a person in the world generally as an end in itself. [Kant 1788, KpV 5:110]

The good will, in this context, corresponds to the supreme good, or to spell it out, the sole unconditioned good representing the condition of the goodness of everything else, which is not so much a loose plurality of goods as a unitary whole corresponding to the general notion of happiness (*Glückseligkeit*). As for happiness itself, there is little scholarly agreement on Kant's conception of it, though he evidently understands it as a broadly inclusive concept, corresponding roughly to a sense of general contentment with one's state of existence (GMS 4:393), which he often describes as the satisfaction of all inclinations (GMS 4:399, 405; KrV A806/B834; KpV 5:434n). Fully admitting and expressly acknowledging that happiness is an indeterminate concept (GMS 4:418), Kant nevertheless offers several definitions and provides various interpretations. While they cannot all be covered in passing, a few examples from the most relevant sources may be useful.

The *Grundlegung* construes happiness as “that complete well-being and satisfaction with one's condition” (GMS 4:393) and as “this idea that all inclinations unite in one sum” (GMS 4:399, cf. 405). The first *Critique* goes into greater detail with a somewhat fuller definition: “Happiness is the satisfaction of all of our inclinations (*extensive*, with regard to their manifoldness, as well as *intensive*, with regard to degree, and also *protensive*, with regard to duration)” (KrV A806/B834). The second *Critique* presents it as “the natural end of the sum of all inclinations” (KpV 5:434n). Although these random accounts of the concept do not all mean the same thing, at least not on face value, they also do not contradict one another.<sup>7</sup> They appear to point, both severally and collectively, to a highly generalized notion of happiness as an ideal that stands for all conditioned goods — “not an ideal of reason but of imagination” (GMS 4:418).

The “highest good” (*das höchste Gut*), then, in the light of these later refinements, is a reference that is typically and technically reserved for “the whole and complete good,” which is defined as happiness commensurate with virtue, hence with morality, which, in turn, is determined by the good will. This being so, even though the earlier reference in the *Grundlegung* (GMS 4:396), as quoted above, identifies the good will as the “highest good” (*das höchste Gut*), the sense

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<sup>7</sup> Working out a definitive formulation of Kant's conception of happiness is not necessary for the purposes of the present paper, but interested readers may benefit from the discussion in Thomas E. Hill (1999), Alison Hills (2006), Daniel O'Connor (1982), Herbert James Paton (1947, 85, 92, 106, 126), Gary Watson (1983), and Victoria S. Wike (1987; 1987–1988; 1994).

intended there is “the supreme good” (*das oberste Gut*), not “the whole and complete good” (*das ganze und vollendete Gut*), a distinction which can only be appreciated in retrospect, within the broader framework of the developing theory:

From this resolution of the antinomy of practical pure reason it follows that in practical principles a natural and necessary connection between the consciousness of morality and the expectation of a happiness proportionate to it as its result can at least be thought as possible (though certainly not, on this account, cognized and understood); that, on the other hand, principles of the pursuit of happiness cannot possibly produce morality; that, accordingly, the *supreme* good (as the first condition of the highest good) is morality, whereas happiness constitutes its second element but in such a way that it is only the morally conditioned yet necessary result of the former. Only with this subordination is the *highest good* the whole object of pure practical reason, which must necessarily represent it as possible since it commands us to contribute everything possible to its production. [Kant 1788, KpV 5:119]

All in all, notwithstanding the overlap in terminology and methodology, what Kant does with the good in connection with the good will is not to be confused or conflated with what he does with the good in arriving at *das höchste Gut*, or the *summum bonum*, the latter two designations representing terms he uses interchangeably. The good will is not Kant’s highest good in the proper sense.<sup>8</sup> It is not even *a good* in that sense, namely in an *objective* sense (since it cannot be its own object), though it is indeed good in itself, and the only thing that is good in itself, in a *subjective* sense. From an objective as opposed to subjective perspective, that is, from the standpoint of the object of the will, as opposed to that of the will itself, the highest good in Kant lies at the intersection of happiness (as the conditioned object of empirical practical reason) and virtue (as the unconditioned object of pure practical reason).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Student transcripts of Kant’s lectures on moral philosophy show that he tried to make the difference between the good will and the highest good as clear in his oral presentations as he did in his published writings: “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, but it is also not completely good. A thing can be unconditioned, and yet not complete. It does not yet comprise the whole of goodness. The highest good is unconditionally good, and also comprises the whole of goodness” (MM2 29:599).

<sup>9</sup> Distinguishing between conditioned and unconditioned goods in Kant, where their combination or interaction produces the complete good, while the unconditioned good alone constitutes the supreme good, Ralf M. Bader identifies the specific goods corresponding to these categories as follows: “While virtue is the

To be more specific, the highest good in Kant, elucidated largely in the second *Critique* (KpV 5:107–148, especially 110–132), though also discussed in other places (e.g., KrV A804–819/B832–847), is happiness proportionate to virtue, which is to say, happiness distributed in accordance with virtue. Kant’s pedagogical initiative to explicate this relationship in the classroom further attests to its importance:

But the possession of virtue is not yet the whole of goodness. Virtue is the greatest worth of the person, but our state must also be worth wishing for. The greatest worth of one’s state is happiness. So virtue combined with happiness is the highest good. Virtue is the condition under which I am worthy of happiness; but that is not yet the highest good. [Kant 1784–1785, MM2 29:599–600]

The merger between virtue and happiness in Kant’s approach to the highest good may seem to suggest that he shares the affinities of both Aristotle and the classical utilitarians (and perhaps of all philosophers of happiness from antiquity onward). The defining difference, however, is that Kant begins with duty and proceeds toward the good, whereas Aristotle and the classical utilitarians begin with the good and proceed toward duty.<sup>10</sup> Kant rejects the familiar process of deriving obligation from value, because he regards it as an attempt to infer an *ought* from an *is*, an illicit move with a gap in both evidence and reasoning. He holds instead that duty must be determined directly and exclusively through an *a*

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supreme and unconditioned good (moral good), happiness is the conditioned good (pathological good), making happiness in accordance with virtue the complete good” (2015, 183).

<sup>10</sup> John R. Silber (1960a) describes Kant’s reversal of the direction of moral inquiry as a “Copernican Revolution in Ethics,” an allusion to Kant’s own claim to a Copernican revolution in epistemology and metaphysics (KrV Bxvi–xviii): “Kant’s predecessors generally believed that ethical enquiry should begin with the definition of the good from which the moral law and the concept of obligation are to be derived. But from his revolutionary point of view, Kant saw that this was precisely the source of ‘all the confusions of philosophers concerning the supreme principle of morals. For they sought an object of the will in order to make it into the material and foundation of a law; ... instead they should have looked for a law which directly determined the will a priori and only then sought an object suitable to it’ [KpV 5:64, erroneously cited as KpV 5:71]” (Silber 1960a, 85; block quotation absorbed inline; original ellipsis points). He explicates the problem, together with the justification for the revolution, in terms of a discontinuity between formal and material principles: “The ‘analytic’ of the *Critique of Practical Reason* demonstrates that all attempts first to define the good as the object of the will and to derive from it the moral law and duty make the good into a material concept, and that all material principles are incapable of grounding the supreme principle of morality” (Silber 1960a, 85). In a later article, he elucidates Kant’s formalism through an analogy between ethics and science, whereby in ethics, as in science, the *raison d’être* of the field, as well as its central operations, is grounded in its methodology rather than in its goals (Silber 1974, 200), unless one wishes to argue that adhering to the methodology is the only or ultimate goal.



*priori* consideration of the will (KpV 5:62–67, 67–71, 71–89, cf. 89–106), effectively isolating the will itself, as it is in itself, and thus precluding the possibility of a duty imposed upon it from the outside, which then avoids the problem of inferring an *ought* from an *is*.

The nature of the highest good and its function in moral theory remains a controversial theme in Kant. The controversy does not have a unique point of inception in the scholarly literature, nor does it have a satisfactory solution by consensus, but it does have a distinct center of attention. The culmination of the debate can be traced, at least in one particular dimension, to a period of vigorous dialectical discussion and exploration in the second half of the twentieth century. A brief overview will help bring out the relevant details.<sup>11</sup>

John R. Silber, for example, considers Kant's understanding of good, or the good, and particularly his conception of the highest good, "the unifying theme of the second *Critique*": "Kant's doctrine of the good (of which the concept of the highest good is the central part) is that which binds together the various parts of the second *Critique*" (Silber 1963, 183).<sup>12</sup> Yet he warns that we cannot reasonably

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<sup>11</sup> The documentary aim of the literature review in this section is to tell a story with original material from a historical perspective, thus recounting the emergence and development of the relevant themes, as opposed to engaging with all the participants in the ongoing debate. A broader study of the principal contributions, including the ones discussed here but still falling short of comprehensive consideration, would have to consult at least the following works: Joachim Aufderheide and Ralf M. Bader (2015); Thomas Auxter (1979); Ralf M. Bader (2015); Gerald W. Barnes (1971); Lewis White Beck (1960, 242–245, 245–250); Curtis Bowman (2003); Étienne Brown (2020); Matthew Caswell (2006); Lara Denis (2005); Stephen Engstrom (1992; 2014; 2015; 2016); Eckart Förster (2000, 117–147); Roe Fremstedal (2011; 2014, especially 94–116); R. Zev Friedman (1984); Courtney Fugate (2014); Terry F. Godlove Jr. (1987); Paul Guyer (2003); Thomas Höwing (2016); Christopher Insole (2008); Cheng-Hao Lin (2019); Jacqueline Mariña (2000); Kate A. Moran (2011); Jeffrie G. Murphy (1965); Anh Tuan Nuyen (1994); Eoin O'Connell (2012); Lara Ostaric (2010); Mark Packer (1983); Lawrence Pasternack (2017); Herbert J. Paton (1947, 41–43); John Rawls (2000, 313–317, 317–319); Andrews Reath (1988); Philip J. Rossi (2005, 48–53, 73–75, 99–100); John R. Silber (1959a; 1959b; 1960a; 1963; 1974); Lance Simmons (1993); Steven G. Smith (1984); David Sussman (2015); Saniye Vatansever (2021); Alonso Villarán (2013; 2015; 2017); Victoria S. Wike and Ryan L. Showler (2010); Mary-Barbara Zeldin (1971). Among the individual contributions in Höwing's collection, *The Highest Good in Kant's Philosophy* (2016), those that may be consulted most profitably in the present context are the entries by Federica Basaglia (2016), Andrea Marlen Esser (2016), Pauline Kleingeld (2016), and Florian Marwede (2016), in addition to Stephen Engstrom (2016), already cited above.

<sup>12</sup> John R. Silber (1963) is reacting here in particular, and throughout his essay in general, to *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*, by Lewis White Beck (1960, especially 242–245, 245–250), who had then just recently questioned, among other things, the relevance of Kant's conception of the highest good to Kant's own moral theory.

hope to get a comprehensive view of Kant's ethics from the second *Critique* alone (Silber 1963, 179–180), largely in corroboration of his earlier assessment that the effort requires a combination of pure and practical reason: “The concept of the highest good cannot be understood even as an ethical concept of practical reason until it is also understood as a metaphysical concept of pure reason” (Silber 1959b, 233). A related insight is his distinction between the *immanent* and *transcendent* senses of the highest good in Kant, where the immanent sense is a constitutive principle determining our actual moral obligations, while the transcendent sense is a regulative ideal serving as a benchmark for the limits of our existential capacity for morality (Silber 1959a, 469–492).

Silber's (1959a) attempt to reconcile the immanent and transcendent senses, thereby recognizing both without favoring either, is only one of four possibilities, the exact opposite being the rejection of both senses, and the remaining two being the acceptance of either sense combined with a rejection of the other. Overlap is also a possibility as some of the alternatives blend into each other, typically when a commentator favoring the transcendent interpretation ends up either rejecting or minimizing the importance of the highest good in Kant, precisely because of the favored transcendence, often interpreted as making the good irrelevant when it is severed, both ontologically and epistemologically, from the will and from human conduct.

Among those who find Kant's practical reason divorced from any consideration for the highest good, Jeffrie G. Murphy (1965) and Thomas Auxter (1979) provide alternative interpretations of what they take to be the actual approach. Rejecting the highest good, that is, happiness proportionate to virtue, as an integral component in Kant's moral theory, especially in view of its failure as an ideal to be promoted in fulfillment of duty, Murphy (1965) considers Kant's conception of the highest good an extraneous development serving religion rather than morality.<sup>13</sup> In general agreement with Murphy (1965), Auxter (1979)

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<sup>13</sup> Jeffrie G. Murphy (1965) opposes Kant's conception of the highest good on strictly methodological grounds: “Kant's introduction of this notion was unnecessary and ill-advised, serving as it does extra-moral theological purposes by introducing confusions into the epistemology of his moral philosophy proper” (1965, 102). Murphy's objection is that neither virtue nor happiness originates in the categorical imperative, all formulations, applications, and implications of which are silent on any duties associated with either concept, which cannot then be universally valid or binding as a moral obligation, given that duty is determined only through the categorical imperative. He thus denies any room for the highest good as supplying the

argues that the promotion of the highest good cannot be an integral part of Kant's moral theory, because its transcendence makes it unknowable, whereby any obligation to pursue, promote, or attain it contradicts Kant's own dictum that obligation implies possibility, or that *ought* implies *can* (KrV A476–477/B504–505).<sup>14</sup>

As against those who attempt to minimize the importance of the highest good in Kant's moral theory, there are even more who try to emphasize it, particularly through efforts toward clarification. Steven G. Smith (1984), for example, denies that Kant really has two different conceptions of the highest good, attributing the ongoing scholarly debate to a lack of clarity: "Part of the trouble is that [Kant] explained it in different and perhaps irreconcilable ways on different occasions" (1984, 168). Smith's aim is to expose the "underlying idea that motivates Kant's formulation and defense of the concept, namely that a rational agent approves *a priori* of a strict proportion between virtue and happiness" (1984, 168–169). He attributes Kant's development of the notion of the highest good, together with his assignment of a definitive role to it in his moral theory, to his contention that "moral worth is necessarily interpreted by moral reason as 'worthiness to be happy'" (Smith 1984, 169).

Likewise attributing the polar division in interpretation to a lack of clarity engendering misunderstanding, Jacqueline Mariña (2000) observes that commentators tend to make too much of the case for their own position and too little of that for the opposition. She maintains that, as a result, neither the importance of Kant's conception of the highest good in his moral philosophy nor the relationship between its two senses as immanent and transcendent is understood as well as it could and should be. She notes that those denying the importance of the highest good in Kant tend to interpret it as transcendent, and therefore irrelevant, while those affirming its importance tend to interpret it as immanent, largely ignoring its transcendent aspects, which then results in an

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"necessary content for the form of moral volition": "The whole procedure of looking for a material content to fill out Kant's formalism is, for the most part, spurious — spurious because this content is already quite obviously given in the context of common moral experience" (Murphy 1965, 102).

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Auxter (1979) sets out to strengthen the case against the highest good as a moral standard through "Kant's own explanation of how a moral ideal is constructed and of how practical judgments are made," which he brings out through passages where "Kant most explicitly discusses the nature of the moral ideal that governs practice" (1979, 122).

impoverished grasp of the overall concept (Mariña 2000, 329–330). She proposes to remedy that deficiency by establishing “the highest good as transcendent systematically in terms of its being both an unconditioned condition and the perfect or consummate good, and as such the ultimate *telos* of the natural world” (Mariña 2000, 329).

A more recent initiative to promote the highest good as a pivotal concept in Kant comes from Lawrence Pasternack (2017), who rejects the longstanding interpretive division into two versions. He instead assigns a central role to the highest good in a single version relevant both to Kant’s moral theory and to his philosophy of religion. Focusing predominantly on *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft (Religion)*, which he identifies as Kant’s “most philosophically sophisticated account of the Highest Good,” Pasternack (2017, 435) sets out specifically to overturn the view that Kant migrates from a transcendent version of the highest good to a secular one. He not only rejects the purported migration but also maintains that there is nowhere to migrate to in the first place: “There is no secular alternative anywhere advanced in the corpus” (Pasternack 2017, 465). His thesis and his approach, though, are as positive as they are negative. He construes Kant as doing just the opposite of migrating away from a theological conception, continuing instead to develop it, especially in *Religion*, as the one and only conception of the highest good.

Whatever one may think of the plausibility of the arguments on either side of the debate, the difference between the two conceptions of the highest good in Kant is contextual rather than terminological. Kant himself never explicitly draws such a distinction. Nor does he consistently employ different terms corresponding uniquely to different interpretations. His *summum bonum*, for instance, even when it is alternated with *das höchste Gut*, reveals no signs of a preference between the immanent and transcendent senses of the highest good. Even so, the source of inspiration for the persistent lack of agreement in the scholarly community is indeed Kant himself. His discussion of the highest good does waver between immanence and transcendence, in either case with the good in question amounting to the union of virtue with proportionate happiness.

What is adequately clear, however, regardless of what one makes of the ongoing debate, is that Kant’s focus on the highest good, whether in the second *Critique* or elsewhere, is the methodological counterpart of his focus on duty

through the good will, particularly in the *Grundlegung*. While it may be tempting to think of Kant's search for the highest good as his attempt to provide content for the categorical imperative, as maintained by Silber (1963), among others, the categorical imperative can hardly be taken seriously as a vacuous exercise in formalism whose content must be supplied externally, a prospect rejected by Murphy (1965, 102) and Reath (1988, 600, n. 10), for example, in opposition to Silber (1963).<sup>15</sup>

We must, therefore, if we take the categorical imperative seriously, take a step back with Christine M. Korsgaard (1986) and remember the primacy that Kant assigns to the good will: "The good will is the source of value, and without it, nothing would have any real worth" (Korsgaard 1986, 499, in reference to GMS 4:393).<sup>16</sup> That is what makes it important to sort out what Kant is doing with the good will. And that is what gives us the right, as critics, to scrutinize every step he takes from the beginning.

### 3. THE PROBLEM WITH AXIOMATIC QUALIFICATION

Korsgaard's reminder brings us back full circle to the problem motivating the present paper: the axiomatic goodness of the good will. Despite a genuine and arguably successful effort on the part of Kant to locate the highest good elsewhere, any difficulty concerning the derivative goodness of the good will remains a separate problem. Kant's identification, from the objective perspective, of a highest good at the intersection of the ones identified by Aristotle and the classical utilitarians, as well as other hedonists from antiquity onward, is indicative of his general orientation toward the good and of his overall approach to morality. Yet it neither resolves nor removes the concerns of this paper with

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<sup>15</sup> Andrews Reath (1988) considers the matter of the highest good in Kant an open question between a theological conception and a secular conception (the latter of which he also calls a political conception), roughly coinciding with Silber's (1959a) distinction between immanent and transcendent senses. Reath himself favors the secular interpretation, where the highest good, as "an end to be achieved through human agency," effectively "combines virtue and happiness, though not by a relation of proportionality" (1988, 594).

<sup>16</sup> Christine M. Korsgaard (1986) is especially careful to emphasize the connection between reason and value in Kant: "In a similar fashion, Kant will argue that the good will is unconditionally good because it is the only thing able to be a source of value. In order to follow this argument, it is necessary to keep in mind that on Kant's view a good will is a perfectly rational will. The argument is essentially that only human reason is in a position to confer value on the objects of human choice" (1986, 499).

the validity and plausibility of attributing the source of all value to something that is good by designation and declaration rather than by design or nature. The good will remains a complex construct representing the modified version of an otherwise simple concept — the will.

Some translations have Kant speaking of the good will as the only thing that is “good without qualification” (GMS 4:393 as translated by Abbott, Beck, and Paton), a variant of “good without limitation” (GMS 4:393 as translated by Gregor). Be it without qualification or without limitation, the attribute conferred in either case is goodness itself, as it is in itself, hence intrinsic goodness. The question, then, is this: How can anyone reasonably qualify the will under consideration, indeed any will at all, as a good one, and yet declare the will thus qualified to be good without qualification? Would that not be like qualifying an object or an experience as a beautiful one, while declaring the object or the experience thus qualified to be beautiful without qualification? The thing that is good without qualification is, of course, the good will, not the will, nor willing in general. But is that not like saying that the thing that is beautiful without qualification is, of course, a beautiful experience, not just any experience, nor experience in general? Are we not making a qualification when we designate the will as good, just as we do when we designate the object or the experience as beautiful? Either both are illicit moves or both are trivial truths.

As with the first occurrence of this analogy from aesthetics, closer to the beginning of the paper, an explicit clarification here may help avoid misunderstanding later. I am not proposing that Kant himself claims that, just as the only thing that is good without qualification is a good will, so too is the only thing that is beautiful without qualification a beautiful experience. I am suggesting merely that nominating the good will as the only thing that is good without qualification invites questions pertaining to other examples where one concept may be qualified by another, whether or not the additional examples originate in Kant’s own thought or output. There may conceivably be good reasons to object to the analogy, but “Kant never said that” is not one of them, partly because I am not saying that he did, but largely because it does not matter whether he did.

Kant’s axiomatic qualification of the will as good is strategically appropriate for his aims. Denying the act of qualification, however, is neither reasonable in itself nor consistent with what he is doing. Let us explore the present analogy

further: Identifying a good will as the only thing that is good without qualification is more like identifying a beautiful experience as the only thing that is beautiful without qualification than either one of those is like identifying a red rose as the only thing that is red without qualification. The first two at least sound plausible, while the third sounds like nonsense, but the apparent veracity does not remove all the difficulties. While a beautiful experience may seem *prima facie* acceptable as the only thing that is beautiful without qualification, one could just as well recommend something else in its place, say, a beautiful attitude, contending that the right attitude, which would naturally also be a beautiful attitude, is a prerequisite for the appreciation of a beautiful experience. This is not the only alternative. Another possibility is a beautiful phenomenon, which is an even more nebulous qualification. Further examples can be found as well. All of them would be, as the foregoing ones are, axiomatic instantiations of a property by something that does not necessarily come with that property, neither by nature nor by convention.

The problem is not the exclusive identification of the good will as the only thing that is good without qualification. Nor is it the exclusive identification of a beautiful experience as the only thing that is beautiful without qualification. The qualification alone, either in creating a good will out of a will or in manufacturing a beautiful experience out of an experience, is sufficiently problematic without introducing exclusivity. Consider what happens when we reformulate the extended analogy in the preceding paragraph, between the will, the experience, and the rose, this time without a claim to exclusivity, thus taking the good will as good without qualification, while remaining silent on whether it is the only thing that is good without qualification, and doing the same with the beautiful experience and the red rose. What happens is that, even though identifying the good will as the only thing that is good without qualification is more like identifying a beautiful experience as the only thing that is beautiful without qualification than either one of those is like identifying a red rose as the only thing that is red without qualification (as already admitted in the preceding paragraph), once we remove the condition of exclusivity imposed by making each construct the only thing answering to the corresponding definition, identifying the good will as good without qualification and identifying a beautiful experience as beautiful without qualification are both very much like identifying a red rose as

red without qualification, for a red rose must always be red, though a rose need not ever be so. The three proposed analogues then become equally reasonable or unreasonable, intuitive or counterintuitive, appropriate or inappropriate.

None of this is like claiming that ice cream is delicious without qualification, which it certainly is, nor like insisting that ice cream is the only thing that is delicious without qualification, which it obviously is not. The problem is not with ice cream but with the other three examples. The will is qualified as good, the experience as beautiful, and the rose as red, each combined with the denial of any qualification whatsoever in regard to the qualified product. Ice cream, in contrast, is just ice cream. There is no qualification. There is no denial. It is delicious simply because it is, that is, of course, if it really is, not because its being delicious is stipulated as an axiomatic condition of aesthetic sensibility or culinary delight. The claim is not that delicious ice cream is delicious without qualification, or that ice cream that tastes good is delicious without qualification, either of which would be a trivial truth, but that ice cream is delicious without qualification, which stands to be a meaningful truth.

Ice cream is the analogue of the will, not of the good will, the latter of which is comparable to “delicious ice cream,” or “ice cream that tastes good,” as a stipulation. The claim that Kant makes, in contrast, is that the good will is good without qualification, which is indeed either a travesty or a trivial truth. To render the ice cream example problematic in the same way as the good will, not to mention the other two examples (the beautiful experience and the red rose), we would have to introduce an illegitimate qualification, while denying all the same that there is any qualification, just as Kant does with the will qualified as the good will.

An amendment to that effect may perhaps introduce specificity: “Vanilla ice cream is delicious without qualification.” This is a restriction of the scope of consideration from “ice cream (without qualification)” to “vanilla ice cream.” While this is indeed a modification of the original claim, the qualification here is not analogous to the restriction of the range of relevance in Kant from “will” to “good will.” Specifying the flavor does not beg the question of taste, so long as the judgment is restricted to the specified flavor.

The difference between the two types of qualification may become even more perspicuous through further examples along the same lines. Reconsider the case



of ice cream in terms of a series of qualifications with increasing specificity: (1) “Ice cream is delicious without qualification.” (2) “Vanilla ice cream is delicious without qualification.” (3) “Sal & Mookie’s vanilla ice cream is delicious without qualification.” (4) “Sal & Mookie’s vanilla ice cream with hot fudge, chocolate syrup, caramel topping, roasted pecans, toasted almonds, peanut sprinkles, melted marshmallows, whipped cream, and a cherry on top is delicious without qualification.” (5) “Sal & Mookie’s vanilla ice cream with hot fudge, chocolate syrup, caramel topping, roasted pecans, toasted almonds, peanut sprinkles, melted marshmallows, whipped cream, and a cherry on top is delicious without qualification, provided that it is prepared personally by Jeff Good when he is in a particularly good mood.”

All of these claims are problematic in the sense of making a qualification while denying that a qualification is being made, but none of them comes right out and makes the very same qualification as the one being denied. That is what Kant does. The logical and methodological counterpart of his presentation of “the good will” as “good without qualification” is the presentation of “delicious ice cream” (or “ice cream that tastes good”) as “delicious without qualification.” The fact that he formally explicates “the good will” as “a will that is in conformity with pure practical reason” may seem to remove the axiomatic nature of the goodness predicated of the will, but the logic of the explication there is the same as the one in equating “delicious ice cream” specifically with “Sal & Mookie’s vanilla ice cream with hot fudge, chocolate syrup, caramel topping, roasted pecans, toasted almonds, peanut sprinkles, melted marshmallows, whipped cream, and a cherry on top, prepared personally by Jeff Good when he is in a particularly good mood,” where it is no longer clear whether it is the ice cream that is delicious, or the stuff that is added, or the magic touch of Jeff Good.

The taste of ice cream is obviously a personal perspective based on a subjective impression. Yet even when we set aside subjective evaluations of gastronomical experiences, the logical point is the same: Qualification is a bad starting point for the denial of qualification. Anyone inclined to object that I may be exaggerating the delectability of ice cream may rest assured that I am not doing anything Kant is not doing with the goodness of the will that he identifies as the good will. As for those who gravitate toward pecan pie or peach cobbler in their own predilections, they are not doing anything they would not be doing

in embracing Aristotelian virtue or utilitarian happiness as an alternative to Kant's correlative conceptions of good will and duty. To give credit where it is due, Kant remains the reigning champion of exaggeration, since he is ascribing goodness to something that is not good in itself, precisely because it is not good in itself, whereas I am praising the taste of ice cream itself, which is absolutely delicious even without any toppings.

To be perfectly clear, I am not charging Kant with a conceptual confusion whereby he cannot distinguish between a will in general and a good one in particular. He understands that distinction better than anyone. His ethical system depends on it. I am merely proposing that the analytic architecture he presents as the groundwork, foundations, or fundamental principles of morals rests on a qualified concept somehow masquerading as an unqualified one, whereas competing ethical systems throughout the history of philosophy favor a base that is unqualified from the beginning, as in *eudaimonia* through *aretē* in Aristotle, or happiness as pleasure net of pain in Bentham and the Benthamites (at least James Mill and John Stuart Mill).

I trust that my tendency to associate Aristotle both with *eudaimonia* (human flourishing, commonly equated with happiness) and with *aretē* (human excellence, typically construed as virtue) requires no further justification than that Aristotle himself grounds happiness in virtue. The highest good (*to ariston*) for Aristotle is *eudaimonia*, which requires the actualization of our potential as human beings, thus the realization of our *aretē*, which consequently makes us virtuous, or more specifically, happy through virtue (or fulfilled through excellence). While this is straight from Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a15–22, 1097b16–22), a warning about consulting Aristotle in translation may be more informative than actual citations in translation, especially since the preceding overview is the standard view:

Readers of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in translation find themselves in territory whose apparent familiarity is often deceptive and inimical to proper understanding: *politikē* isn't quite politics, *epistēmē* isn't quite science, *praxis* isn't quite action, *theōria* isn't quite theory, *eudaimonia* isn't quite happiness, *ergon* isn't quite function, *aretē* isn't quite virtue. Even what the *Ethics* is about isn't quite ethics. [Reeve 2014, xiii, in Aristotle 2014]

It would be easy enough to object here, just to be disagreeable without being unreasonable, that the function of the will in Kant, regardless of whether it is a

good one, an intrinsically good one, an absolutely good one, or a holy one that is absolutely good, is not analogous to the function of *eudaimonia* or *aretē* in Aristotle, or to that of happiness in classical utilitarianism. Indeed, it is not. I am not after a functional analogy where the conceptual correlates serve the same purpose in the same way. I am merely pointing out that the good will is a regular will qualified with axiomatic goodness, whereas neither *eudaimonia* nor happiness is qualified in any way to make it work as a moral construct.

Consider the pinnacle of qualification in Kant, as an indication of how qualification in general, once it is made, can get out of hand, as if it were never made at all, and as if all the variations to follow were already established as matters of fact. What, for example, would be the analogue of a “holy absolutely good will” in Kant in terms of *eudaimonia* or *aretē* in Aristotle? It is hard to tell. Something like “divine perfectly actualized excellence” or “perfectly actualized supreme excellence” comes to mind, but nothing of the sort is to be found in the Aristotelian corpus. To stick with a more realistic scenario, note that either Bentham or one of the Mills could have switched from happiness simpliciter to the right kind of happiness, the good happiness, as it were, like its deontological cousin, the good will. This forced amelioration would then have constituted a qualification or modification of the standard notion of happiness.

The example is not entirely hypothetical. Recall that the younger Mill is commonly described as espousing the right kind of happiness in proposing a distinction between “higher” and “lower” pleasures (Mill 1861, 395–398 [= 1969, 210–214]). Mill’s distinction, however, is not so much a restriction of the natural domain of happiness as it is a clarification of the meaning of the term in reference to rational beings as moral agents. What he is trying to do is not to fabricate the right kind of happiness for moral discourse but to show that happiness already is the right kind of consideration for moral discourse, subsequently proceeding to demonstrate that it is, in fact, the only proper consideration in that regard. The point of his distinction is simply to explain why defining happiness in terms of pleasure and pain does not demean the concept.

Mill’s distinction was a defensive initiative motivated by a damaging misconception of utilitarianism, and more often by a deliberate misconstrual of it, as a degenerate system of vulgar values and perverse ideals. This was an ancient line of attack, originally conceived against hedonism, but later revived

and perpetuated by the critics of utilitarianism. It was this critical tendency that worried Mill:

To suppose that life has (as they express it) no higher end than pleasure — no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit — they [critics] designate as utterly mean and grovelling; as a doctrine worthy only of swine, to whom the followers of Epicurus were, at a very early period, contemptuously likened; and modern holders of the doctrine are occasionally made the subject of equally polite comparisons by its German, French, and English assailants. [Mill 1861, 395 (= 1969, 210)]

Mill seems to have been thinking here of Thomas Carlyle's (1850) colorful critique of Jesuitism in an essay called "Jesuitism," which includes particularly harsh rhetoric in a section named "Pig Philosophy" (pp. 268–270), apparently a translation by Carlyle of a manuscript titled "Schwein'sche Weltansicht" by a certain Professor Gottfried Sauerteig, in reality, Carlyle's sardonic mouthpiece for cultural criticism. Regardless of how seriously Mill took the polemical tenor of Carlyle's critique of Jesuitism, he introduced his own distinction between higher and lower pleasures specifically in response to the general impression of utilitarianism as "pig philosophy":

It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact, that some *kinds* of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others. It would be absurd that while, in estimating all other things, quality is considered as well as quantity, the estimation of pleasures should be supposed to depend on quantity alone. [Mill 1861, 395 (= 1969, 211)]

To drive the point home, while meeting the opposition on its own terms, particularly with respect to the metaphor then in vogue, Mill made sure to invoke the image of a pig as he elaborated on the philosophical distinction with a rhetorical comparison representing one of the most memorable analogies in the history of ethics:

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides. [Mill 1861, 396 (= 1969, 212)]

Yet Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures quickly became widely censured as a specious appeal to quality in direct contradiction of the quantitative integrity of the felicific calculus in classical utilitarianism. Critics still tend to take his emphasis on quality to be irreconcilable with the role of pleasure

in the estimation of happiness.<sup>17</sup> If quality makes a difference, they object, then pleasure is not all that matters. They consider any qualitative dimensions to be extrinsic to the nature of pleasure. This is because more pleasure or less pleasure is still pleasure, given that the nature of pleasure does not vary with the amount of it, whereas a distinction between higher pleasures and lower pleasures, essentially a distinction between better pleasures and worse pleasures, so the objection goes, is not so much about pleasure itself as it is about the property that makes pleasure better or worse. This ontological complication, in turn, makes mathematical calculation impossible, simply because there is no meaningful or reliable way of accommodating qualitative differences in quantitative balances, or from the opposite perspective, because there is no conversion rate for adjusting quantitative balances in accordance with qualitative differences.

As it happens, this ontological complication, so to speak, does not really require a mathematical solution reconciling quantity with quality, given that Mill's distinction allows no amount of a lower pleasure to trump any amount of a higher pleasure:

If one of the two is, by those who are competently acquainted with both, placed so far above the other that they prefer it, even though knowing it to be attended with a greater amount of discontent, and would not resign it for any quantity of the other pleasure which their nature is capable of, we are justified in ascribing to the preferred enjoyment a superiority in quality, so far outweighing quantity as to render it, in comparison, of small account. [Mill 1861, 395 (= 1969, 211)]

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<sup>17</sup> The secondary literature on John Stuart Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures is enormous, both because scholarly reviews go as far back as the nineteenth century and because the subject matter continues to attract critical attention. The classical commentaries, just to name a few, include the following: (1) Francis Herbert Bradley: *Ethical Studies* (two editions: 1876/1927, cf. 1876, 78–117, especially 105–111; 1927, 85–129, especially 116–122). (2) Thomas Hill Green: *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883, 168–174). (3) George Edward Moore: *Principia Ethica* (1903, §§ 3:47–48, pp. 129–132). (4) Henry Sidgwick: *The Methods of Ethics* (seven editions: 1874–1907, cf. 1874, 76–79, 104, 109, 114–117; 1907, 93–95, 121, 125–130). (5) William Ritchie Sorley (two editions: 1885/1904, cf. 1885, 58–60; 1904, 61–63). Moore's assessment is a typical example of the prevailing opposition: "Now we see from this that Mill acknowledges 'quality of pleasure' to be another or different ground for estimating pleasures, than Bentham's quantity; and moreover, by that question-begging 'higher,' which he afterwards translates into 'superior,' he seems to betray an uncomfortable feeling, that, after all, if you take quantity of pleasure for your only standard, something may be wrong and you may deserve to be called a pig. And it may presently appear that you very likely would deserve that name. But, meanwhile, I only wish to shew that Mill's admissions as to quality of pleasure are either inconsistent with his Hedonism, or else afford no other ground for it than would be given by mere quantity of pleasure" (Moore 1903, § 3:47, pp. 129–130).

However that may be, preconceptions as “pig philosophy” hardly disappeared after Mill’s distinction, as documented, for example, in the reaction of Francis Herbert Bradley (1876), whose first thoughts in opposition still ran to pigs (1876, 95–96, reprinted in 1927, 104), with the human race allegedly reduced at the hands of Mill to a drove of pigs fed at the same trough (1876, 103, reprinted in 1927, 113). As Mill’s reminders regarding the qualitative content of happiness continued to meet with an unfavorable reception, especially in contrast to the free rein that Kant always enjoyed in sponsoring the right kind of will, conceptual clarification and axiomatic qualification were not only confused from the outset but also interpreted on a double standard, invariably working against Mill, though not in the least against Kant.

To be sure, Kant never says that the will is the only thing that is good in itself, or good without limitation, or good without qualification. He says that the good will is. Yet he never proves that claim either, nor even explicates the concept of a good will, except through that of duty (GMS 4:397). My objection, however, is that this thing, which Kant takes to be the only thing that is good in itself, or good without limitation, or good without qualification, namely a good will, is actually the qualified version of a prior and more basic thing that is not even good without stipulation.

Apart from this objection, albeit as a corollary of it, one wonders why, other than for the sake of observing methodological restrictions peculiar to Kant’s aim, approach, and system, we must look for the good in the *willing as willed* (or as motivated) and not in the *outcome as willed* (or as intended). We know very well that the former is relevant to the estimation of the moral worth of the person involved (the moral agent) and the latter to that of the corresponding action (the intended or actual consequences). Even if a good will is the only thing that makes a motive good, while thereby also serving as the corresponding explanation of what makes the consequent action right, why might not a good outcome, that is, the good state of affairs intended or realized through an action, serve as a competing explanation, or even as a complementary one, of what makes that action right?<sup>18</sup>

That is basically the approach of John Stuart Mill, who saw fit to amend his

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<sup>18</sup> The *Grundlegung* (GMS 4:399–401) assigns a singular importance to the motive as the determining factor in the morality and immorality of actions.

*Utilitarianism*, three years after its publication, to introduce a footnote addressing where the will and the willing fit in with the distinction between motives and intentions, the clarification of which was evidently a priority for the proponents of utilitarianism in his day:<sup>19</sup>

There is no point which utilitarian thinkers (and Bentham pre-eminently) have taken more pains to illustrate than this. The morality of the action depends entirely upon the intention — that is, upon what the agent *wills to do*. But the motive, that is, the feeling which makes him will so to do, if [“when” in later editions] it makes no difference in the act, makes none in the morality: though it makes a great difference in our moral estimation of the agent, especially if it indicates a good or a bad habitual *disposition* — a bent of character from which useful, or from which hurtful actions are likely to arise. [Mill 1864, 27 n (= 1969, 220 n)]

This passage confirms the role Mill assigns to the will in moral theory. He maintains that the feeling responsible for what is willed helps establish the moral worth of the performing agent, while what is actually willed determines the moral status of the action, especially in connection with the intended consequences, as proposed above, prior to the last block quotation.

This is not to suggest that Mill’s approach is the utilitarian version of what Kant does with the good will, nor even that Mill’s thought constitutes a refinement of Kant’s thought on the matter. The point is merely that there may be viable alternatives to what Kant is doing with the good will.<sup>20</sup> Mill’s distinction between what makes the agent will something, on the one hand, and what the agent actually wills, on the other, is a departure from Kant’s conception of a will, which is neither a feeling, as Mill describes the first option, nor the thing that the agent wills, as he describes the second. This becomes clear where Mill calls the first a “motive” (the feeling determining the will) and the second an “intention” (what the agent wills to do). Kant’s conception of a will seems to be somewhere in the middle, apparently ignored by Mill, an active intermediary serving as a

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<sup>19</sup> The footnote in question, quoted in part in the main body of the present paper, was introduced by John Stuart Mill in the second edition of *Utilitarianism* in book form (1864), which came out three years after its original appearance in *Fraser’s Magazine* (1861) and one year after its first appearance as a book (1863).

<sup>20</sup> As for John Stuart Mill’s distinction between motives and intentions, Michael Ridge (2002) provides ample insight into precisely that issue, though not into how either the problem or its solution compares with what Kant is doing, which is beyond the scope of his study.

principle of volition connecting the motive with the intention.<sup>21</sup>

Yet none of these things (wills, motives, intentions, consequences) are good without qualification. Adding the good in is, in fact, qualification. Adding the good in, and then calling the result good without qualification, is qualification plus misdirection. Saying on top of that, that the trumped-up good is the only thing that is good without qualification, is a magic show in a three-ring circus. It is difficult to understand how Mill can attract widespread and everlasting criticism for attempting to demonstrate that happiness is the only thing that is good in itself (desirable as an end in itself), while Kant escapes a fate of that sort despite declaring, with the same force and to the same effect, that a good will is the only thing that is good without qualification.<sup>22</sup> Mill is persistently persecuted for promoting a plausible perspective with proper justification, primarily on empirical grounds that remain open to discussion and interpretation, while Kant is applauded for steering us in the opposite direction on axiomatic insight without

<sup>21</sup> A more thorough comparison would require cognizance of Kant's later distinction, ventilated in *Religion* (R 6:4–5, 21–28, 31, 35) and *Metaphysics of Morals* (MS 6:213–214, 226–227, 375, 380–381), between “will” (*Wille*) and “choice” (*Willkür*). The former represents the legislative function of the will, drawing on practical reason (often, but not always, pure practical reason), while the latter corresponds to its executive function, manifested as the power of choice (the capacity for choosing) and carried out in terms of specific choices. The distinction is complicated by the tendency of Kant to use *Wille* both in this narrow sense and in a broad sense corresponding to the entire faculty of will. Julian Wuerth (2014, 236–254), for one, argues not only that the distinction is clear and effective but also that it is present and operative as early as the *Groundwork* (1785), and even before then, thus denying that it is a later development, one emerging either with *Religion* (1793) or with *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). Other contributions to the literature include: Henry Edward Allison (1990); Lewis White Beck (1960, 176–208); Heidi Chamberlin Giannini (2013); Triantafyllos Gkouvas (2011); Hud Hudson (1991); Ralf Meerbote (1982); John R. Silber (1960b).

<sup>22</sup> Even a representative list restricted to John Stuart Mill's early critics can be telling in regard to the range, intensity, and longevity of reactions to his attempt to establish the principle of utility as the first principle of morality, that is, as the principle of distinction between right and wrong. The seminal reactions perpetuating a tradition of critical opposition to Mill's “proof” of the principle of utility (Mill 1861, 530–534 [= 1969, 234–239]) include the following: (1) Francis Herbert Bradley: *Ethical Studies* (two editions: 1876/1927, cf. 1876, 101–105; 1927, 111–116). (2) John Dewey: *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* (1891, 53–59, 59–67). (3) John Dewey and James Tufts: *Ethics* (two editions: 1908/1932, cf. 1908, 286–305, especially 290–293; 1932, 205–215). (4) John Grote: *An Examination of the Utilitarian Philosophy* (1870, 58–78, especially 63–72). (5) John Stuart Mackenzie: *A Manual of Ethics* (six editions: 1893–1929; see especially 1893, 98–99, 112–113, 263; reprinted either with no alterations or with minor emendations in the editions of 1894, 98–99, 112–113, 263; 1897, 213–214, 229–230, 394; 1900/1901, 213–214, 229–230, 261; 1915, 215–216, 231–232, 287; 1929, 169, 182, 248–249). (6) George Edward Moore: *Principia Ethica* (1903, §§ 3:39–44, pp. 116–126, § 3:62, pp. 155–156). (7) Henry Sidgwick: *The Methods of Ethics* (seven editions: 1874–1907, cf. 1874, 364–366; 1907, 386–389) and “The Establishment of Ethical First Principles” (1879). (8) William Ritchie Sorley: *The Ethics of Naturalism* (two editions: 1885/1904, cf. 1885, 57–75; reprinted with minor emendations in 1904, 59–78).



elaboration or substantiation.<sup>23</sup>

In all fairness to Kant, Mill's conception of happiness has a demonstrable tendency to appear just as axiomatic, at least in some respects, as Kant's conception of the good will. This is because any conceivable alternative to happiness, particularly as the only thing that is desirable as an end in itself, turns out, whenever Mill is granted an audience, to be either a part of happiness or a means to happiness.<sup>24</sup> The highly flexible and infinitely extensible inclusivity of his conception of happiness constitutes the methodological impetus behind Mill's notorious "proof" of the principle of utility:

We have now, then, an answer to the question, of what sort of proof the principle of utility is susceptible. If the opinion which I have now stated is psychologically true — if human nature is so constituted as to desire nothing which is not either a part of happiness or a means of happiness, we can have no other proof, and we require no other, that these are the only things desirable. If so, happiness is the sole end of human action, and the promotion of it the test by which to judge of all human conduct; from whence it necessarily follows that it must be the criterion of morality, since a part is included in the whole. [Mill 1861, 533 (= 1969, 237)]

The reason why nothing other than happiness is desirable as an end in itself is that all competing candidates somehow always fall under the rubric of happiness.<sup>25</sup> The conceptual fluidity claimed for happiness thus rules out any

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<sup>23</sup> To cite just one example from the more recent literature, Henry Robison West has written basically the same article five times (1972; 1982; 2004; 2006; 2017) over a span of five decades in the process of defending John Stuart Mill's reasoning in his proof of the principle of utility. The repetition in question is not in the Borgesian sense of a Pierre Menard duplicating the *Quixote* (Borges 1939), but in the manner of a competent judge, or in this case, a competent advocate, vindicating an innocent suspect. As a result, the duplication, both in effort and in method, is a welcome contribution in each instance.

<sup>24</sup> In the first chapter of *Utilitarianism*, for example, John Stuart Mill expresses the principle of utility in terms of "a comprehensive formula, including all things which are in themselves good," where "whatever else is good, is not so as an end, but as a means" (Mill 1861, 393 [= 1969, 208]). This is in the context of a preliminary discussion of the conceptual and methodological possibility of proving the principle of utility. When he finally undertakes that proof in the fourth chapter, Mill asserts that "the ingredients of happiness are very various, and each of them is desirable in itself, and not merely when considered as swelling an aggregate," quickly and emphatically reiterating that these ingredients "are desired and desirable in and for themselves; besides being means, they are a part of the end" (Mill 1861, 531 [= 1969, 235]).

<sup>25</sup> The integrative value and structure of Mill's conception of happiness (1861, 393, 531–533 [= 1969, 208, 235–237]) is not unlike the unitary pluralism of Kant's notion of happiness (GMS 4:393, 399, 405; KrV A806/B834; KpV 5:434n), though at least one decisive difference is that the latter is explicitly commensurate with virtue, thereby being distributed in accordance with desert and merit, in order to constitute the highest good, whereas the former has no formal requirement of that sort.

alternatives for the ultimate source of value. But such convenient solutions inevitably invite suspicion. Carl Wellman (1959), for one, expresses his misgivings as follows: “As the denotation of the word is broadened, hedonism becomes at once more plausible and less significant. Mill has come close to making hedonism entirely plausible” (Wellman 1959, 275).

This is, no doubt, a valid observation in support of a reasonable objection. Nevertheless, Mill could always respond, rightly so in my opinion, that happiness is, in fact, exactly that sort of thing, broadly inclusive and uniquely desirable, features merely being explicated rather than fabricated. Although that would be to reaffirm what was said, as opposed to adducing additional considerations to address emerging objections, that is perfectly acceptable if what was said was both true and relevant to begin with, which I am convinced that it was and that it still is.

Even if Mill’s truth is something of a tautology, especially in consideration of the comprehensive ontological domain reserved for happiness, which then appears almost by definition to be the only thing that is good in itself, the closest that Kant ever comes to the truth of the matter is in begging the question of the goodness of the will, or from another perspective, in starting directly with the good will rather than with the good, or even with the will, the latter of which would have required restarting with the good, given that the will must be good in order to serve as the foundation of morality.

What’s so good about the good will? The same thing that is denied of it: the qualification. In the final analysis, a good will may indeed be good without qualification, that is, without further qualification, but the will in question is good only because of the original qualification.

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