What is a System of Moral Philosophy For?
Systematicity in Kant's Ethics[1]

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abstract. *The chapter examines the role of systematicity in Kant's practical philosophy, with a specific focus on his ethics. The aim is to make sense of Kant's emphasis on the systematic character of the Metaphysics of Morals at the very beginning of both parts of the work. I suggest that his view should be construed in contrast with the current assumptions on the role of a system in moral philosophy. First, while we nowadays tend to understand it as the systematisation of available moral beliefs, Kant follows instead what I call the Pufendorfian paradigm, according to which a system of morals is to be developed, but only after having established the principle that gives it a firm foundation. Second, in contrast not only to current assumptions, but also to the Pufendorfian paradigm, the system that Kant has in view is both complete and open-ended, as it primarily consists in the system of the obligatory ends from which all ethical demands unroll. Third, in contrast to both the current understanding and to the other eighteenth-century notions, Kant's conception of a system of ethics entails that its crucial task is to strengthen pure practical reason in individual agents, making them better suited to deal with difficult cases in light of the broadest possible account of the dynamic web of connections between the various ethical duties.*

1. The Necessity of a System of Morals

The idea of a system takes centre stage in the final moment of the development of Kant's practical philosophy from the very beginning. The Preface of Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* states at the outset that "[t]he critique of practical reason was to be followed by a system, the metaphysics of morals." [*Auf die KpV sollte das System, die MS, folgen*] (VI 205). Although it has hardly attracted specific attention in the scholarship, it is an extremely important statement.[2] At a first glance, the initial sentence of the *Metaphysics of Morals* follows up to the systematic project outlined in the Architectonic of Pure Reason. To a closer look, though, that statement raises many questions concerning Kant's project in moral philosophy that would

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[1] In loving memory of my father, an altogether unsystematic man.

[2] A rare exception to the general disregard of this passage is Thorndike 2018, 22. However, Thorndike focuses on it to draw a parallel with the project of a transition from metaphysics of nature to physics.

require closer scrutiny. Remarkably, the *Groundwork* is not mentioned at all, although that work was presented as the first installment of the project of a metaphysics of morals. The *Groundwork* could play a role parallel to the *Critique of Pure Reason* as a "propaedeutic to the system" (KrV B25) and had in fact anticipated the further development of the system with a few hints (see IV 391, IV 421n). Conversely, the second *Critique* only vaguely mentioned a future "system of the science" succeeding the "system of the critique" (V 8) and never referred to a metaphysics of morals. Yet, Kant connects the new work to the *Critique of Practical Reason*.[3] In terms reminiscent of the Architectonic of Pure Reason, that initial statement includes a significant innovation, since the systematic project in the Architectonic did not include a second *Critique*, which was not foreseen at that stage.[4]

The initial sentence of the Preface to the *Metaphysics of Morals* thus rapidly sounds less uncontroversial than it might appear. Conspicuously, Kant takes the same angle in the Preface to the "Doctrine of Virtue", which opens quite similarly:

> "If there is a philosophy (a system of rational cognition from concepts) of any subject, then for that philosophy also there *must* be a system of pure rational concepts independent of any conditions of intuition, that is, a metaphysic." (VI 375; my emphasis)[5]

This reprise of the general Preface gives the second of the two issues that I have pointed out further prominence.[6] The *Critique of Practical Reason* is here not mentioned anymore, but the emphasis on the systematic nature of the entire enterprise. Whereas at the beginning of the first volume of the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant stresses the connection between the preliminary investigation unfolded in a critique and the proper system (according to the outline prominent in the first *Critique*), in the "Doctrine of Virtue" the main focus is on the appropriate completion of a project that is systematic throughout. In spite of the differences, the close parallelism between the two statements emphasizes the significance of the angle that Kant takes in both cases. His first and arguably most important instruction to the readers of

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[3] See an analogous statement in the drafts for the *Metaphysics of Morals*, XXIII 247.

[4] I cannot consider here the further important claim that the system shall take the shape of a metaphysics of morals. What does it mean exactly in 1797 would deserve some clarification. I have argued that Kant's project of a metaphysics of morals undergoes significant changes through the decades. See Bacin 2006, 223 ff.

[5] I have revised the Cambridge Edition translation, which here reads: "A philosophy of any subject (a system of rational cognition from concepts) requires a system of pure rational concepts independent of any conditions of intuition, that is, a metaphysic". Kant's own phrasing stresses more strongly the necessity for a system of metaphysics and the connection of *two* systematic tiers: the general systematicity of philosophy as such and the systematicity of metaphysics in particular.

[6] Yet, this opening has not draw much attention either. See, e.g., the recent brief remarks on 'philosophy as a system' in Timmons 2021, 27-29, which merely connect the work to the general project sketched in the Architectonic. The main issue here, though, is not how practical philosophy is a part of the overall system of critical philosophy, but how practical philosophy as such is systematic.

the new work is that the main task of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, in both its parts, is to provide a *system*, which is thus presented as the most appropriate way to achieve the purpose of practical philosophy.

These opening statements are so prominent and emphatic that they should be sufficient to show how central the thought of systematicity is not only in Kant's theoretical philosophy, but in his practical philosophy as well. As Paul Guyer has rightly stressed, "[t]he idea of systematicity is clearly central to Kant's moral philosophy".[7] Yet, the issue is hardly discussed with regard to that part of his general project.[8] Among other factors, this neglect might have to do with the fact that Kant's view of systematicity yields in practical philosophy a perspective that is significantly different from the angle from which the possibility of a system of morals is considered in current debates in ethics. That arguably makes these features more difficult to construe as philosophically relevant. A big part of the work that has been done on Kant's moral philosophy in the last decades has centred on its philosophical resources in dialogue with current perspectives. Now it might be suspected that Kant's emphasis on the systematic nature of his project cannot be reclaimed to a fruitful debate, since it would only be historically relevant, even the by-product of a time, between the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, in which systematicity was held to be an essential requirement for any theoretical enterprise. However, this worry should be overcome.[9] Systematicity proves to be an integral component of Kant's overall philosophical project, as recent scholarship has come to appreciate again, primarily with regard to his theoretical philosophy. As I shall show, quite the same holds true for his practical philosophy.

In the following I shall examine the strong necessity of a system that is expressed by the modal verbs in the opening of both parts of the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Why a system of practical philosophy *has to* follow, in Kant's view? What is the task of a genuinely *systematic* treatment in practical philosophy? More specifically, I shall focus on the role of systematicity in the ethics of his "Doctrine of Virtue", where Kant's distinctive view can helpfully be contrasted with the predominant understanding of systematicity in current debates in moral philosophy. An underlying claim of this chapter is that Kant's development of a system of ethics must be interpreted in light of his own conception of a system.[10] First, I shall consider how Kant's conception of systematicity in this domain is construed as to the relation of the

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[7] Guyer 2005, 243. See also Guyer 2019, 43 ff.

[8] An exception is Barbara Herman's emphasis on systematicity in her recent work; see Herman 2021.

[9] Herman 2021 should suggest such a change of direction.

[10] In contrast to Mark Timmons' otherwise excellent and thought-provoking interpretations collected in Timmons 2017, which, in spite of the general title of the volume, understand 'system' in a rather generic sense, without considering the connection with Kant's distinctive notion.

elements of the system with each other and the grounding of the system. Second, I shall clarify how Kant understands the outline and the scope of the system of ethics. Third, I shall explain how far that systematicity can have practical significance. This will prove to be of special importance in clarifying the task of Kant's system of moral philosophy.

2. Systematicity, not Systematisation: The Priority of a Principle

If in current moral philosophy there is talk of systematicity at all, what is mostly discussed is in fact a coherentist conception, according to which the coherence of certain moral beliefs with (most or all) others would provide justification for them. As the most widespread variant of this general approach has it, the method of reflective equilibrium, the main task is to systematize intuitions or basic moral beliefs into a tenable set.[11] The coherence of that set is meant to have justificatory force with regard to the items of the set. Seen in this light, a system is "a network of credibility transfers that can raise the level of the whole set of beliefs".[12] This is what is questioned by critics of that systematizing ambition in moral philosophy, which argue that mere coherence cannot be the sole source of justification, because it pushes a theoretical construction onto the substance of ethical life.[13] If endorsed or rejected, systematization of moral beliefs is considered as a possible source of validation of moral principles.

Kant operates with a decidedly different conception of systematicity in moral philosophy. As the opening statement of the general Preface to the *Metaphysics of Morals* shows, the system at issue is not self-standing, but follows a previous, crucial step of investigation, which Kant there calls a critique of practical reason and has the primary task of establishing a general principle of morality. The system of morals is not built by directly operating on ordinary, available beliefs, but only once a principle has been validated, which in turn shall provide the proper grounding for a system.[14] There is room for a system only once the investigation has led to an authoritative principle. In the Preface to the *Metaphysics of Morals*, only two pages after the initial statement of the work, Kant accordingly characterises the doctrine of virtue as a "system that connects all duties of virtue by one principle" (VI 207),

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[11] See e.g. the characterisation of this approach in Cath 2016, 214 f.

[12] Griffin 1996, 123; cf. 16. See also Griffin 2015, 84. As Crisp (2000) shows, Griffin's understanding of a system of morals is equivalent to Sidgwick's, despite their opposite views on the matter.

[13] See Griffin 1996, 124-128; Cueni & Queloz 2021.

[14] To show that Kant does not follow a coherentist approach in establishing the principle of morality (against e.g. Gillessen 2016), I should examine the strategy of the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*, which I shall do in a separate paper. Here, though, it is sufficient to my present purposes to emphasize that for Kant a system depends on a prior principle, instead of justifying it.

thereby spelling out the fundamental connection of the genuine system with a fundamental principle as its first defining feature.

More distinctively, this way to understand the systematic approach to what Kant calls the doctrinal part of practical philosophy also conforms to his own conception of systematicity. Kant thus applies to practical philosophy the general idea that a system as a body of scientific knowledge necessarily follows from a principle, namely that "the systematic of cognition [*das Systematische der Erkenntniß*]" lies in "its interconnection based on one principle [*Zusammenhang derselben aus einem Princip*]" (KrV A645/B673; cf. IV 467, V 151). This underlying thought is at odds with the current notion that a system is put together by securing the consistency of its elements, possibly even without any general principle, or in order to establish principles in the first place.

To this extent, however, Kant does not merely elaborate on his own account of systematicity, but he also follows a widespread paradigm in early modern moral philosophy. That the fundamental principle of natural law yields a system of obligations is a prevalent assumption in eighteenth-century natural law.[15] Although often overlooked, this represents a significant part in the history of the conceptions of a system in early modern philosophy, which unfolds parallel to the usages in metaphysics and natural philosophy. The general project of providing such a system as a guide to the conduct of rational subjects was first articulated by Pufendorf. Centring his revision of natural law on the connection between the fundamental principle and the resulting system, Pufendorf had observed:

> "When I decided to bring natural law to the rightful form of a discipline, whose parts should be mutually consistent and derive from one another in an evident way, *my first concern was to establish a solid foundation, that is a fundamental proposition*, which should comprehend and summarize in itself all its precepts, *from which all further rules could be derived with an easy and evident demonstration*, and in which they all could then be easily resolved" (Pufendorf 2002, 142; my emphasis).

If the word 'system' is not used here, the thought is in fact at the centre of Pufendorf's conception. The comprehensive set of rules that are to be derived from the principle is precisely what would have soon be called a system. Also, bringing about a system is the way to develop natural law as a proper science. Accordingly, following Pufendorf's paradigm, most expositions of natural law since the early eighteenth century aimed at providing a complete collection of norms that instantiate the general principle with regard to the different matters and circumstances and can thereby offer the needed guidelines to the human beings.

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[15] See especially Scattola 2017, 132-139. See also Scattola 2008, 240 f., and 2011, 264 f.

What we can call the Pufendorfian paradigm is thus significantly different from a coherentist strategy. While the latter sets off from a set of beliefs, the traditional approach of eighteenth-century natural law develops a system of obligations from a fundamental proposition that is not itself under scrutiny, since it has previously been established as valid and true, that is, as a principle. The justification, thus, is not attained by virtue of the coherence among elements of the system, but by virtue of the relation of derivation from the principle. The principle can be said to "comprehend and summarize in itself all its precepts" precisely because it provides the foundations for their normative significance.

The convergence with the Pufendorfian paradigm represents an important aspect of Kant's connection with early modern natural law theory that goes beyond the aspects that have been appreciated so far.[16] Like eighteenth-century natural law, also Kant's general strategy in practical philosophy proceeds in two main steps, whose connection is of the utmost importance: (1) Establishing a principle, drawing on which alone it is possible (2) to develop a system of obligations. Their connection validates both steps: the principle makes a system of duties possible, and conversely developing such a system confirms the validity of the principle.

When Kant maintains that the critique of practical reason was to be followed by a system of practical philosophy (see VI 205, VI 375), thus, he does not envisage a system of obligations constructed by a series of logical relations of consistency among its elements, but a system of duties deriving from a fundamental moral principle. Systematicity here is not about systematisation, unlike what is mostly assumed in the recent debates. The opening passages of the both volumes of the *Metaphysics of Morals* state that a system of moral philosophy is needed because it accounts for the entire scope of moral demands on the basis of the principle of morality, from which it follows. In this general strategy, there is no direct continuity between ordinary moral thinking and moral science. The continuity is only indirectly secured by the principle itself, from which the system can unfold. Unlike in current views, systematicity in Kant's practical philosophy does not have to do with making elements of ordinary moral thinking consistent with one another.

3. A System of Ethical Demands via a System of Ends

If Kant follows the Pufendorfian paradigm of a doctrine of duties in the crucial aim to cover the entire scope of morality, his way to unfold a proper system differs significantly. On the traditional model, the system is based on a principle that is general enough to apply to as

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[16] See e.g. the traditional account of the impact of natural law on Kant's moral philosophy in Schneewind 1993.

many cases as possible. Accordingly, the comprehensiveness that the system aims at is reached by classifying the demands that can be derived from the principle. In this perspective, 'system' denotes the largest possible collection of items (cases and duties) that can be accounted for. Notably, this approach is the target of further criticisms by the opponents of systematization efforts in ethics, who lament precisely that "[t]heory looks characteristically for considerations that are very general and have as little distinctive content as possible, because it is trying to systematize and because it wants to represent as many reasons as possible".[17] In this respect, Kant parts company with the traditional way to develop that Pufendorfian paradigm.

At a first glance, Kant would seem to follow that traditional paradigm also in structuring its system through a taxonomy of duties. When he comes to discuss the outline of the "Doctrine of Virtue", he presents the reader not with one, but with two divisions. First, he draws one concerning "the subjective relation between a being that is under obligation and the being that puts him under obligation". This would tentatively yield a fourfold division in duties to the self, duties to others, duties to "subhuman beings" and duties to "superhuman beings" (VI 413). Then, Kant adds an 'objective' division that mirrors the general outline of a critical investigation into one of the uses of reason, that is, the division, familiar to the readers of the *Critiques*, between a Doctrine of Elements and a Doctrine of Method, which he here specifies further, adapting it to the field at issue.[18] As it becomes clear, the two divisions are to be "taken […] together [*zusammen verbunden*]". The latter, 'objective' division roughly corresponds to the main outline of the published text, in which the former division concerning the subjects that put the agent under obligation has merely the task to give a tentative overview of the further specifications of duties that are dealt with in the Doctrine of Elements. Moreover, the fourfold division of subjects, which per se would be rather uncontroversial is eventually not carried out by Kant in the terms in which he initially presents it, since God and non-human living beings are left out from the morally relevant relations (see VI 488). While one division is basically confirmed by the development of the treatise, the other one is stated only to be significantly revised.

The leading thread for the formal unity of Kant's treatment of ethics is thus given by the general division of doctrine of elements and doctrine of method, combined with (part of) the distinction between different moral relations. However, the genuine organizing principle of the system presented in the "Doctrine of Virtue" is in fact provided by a different source, that

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[17] Williams 1985, 116 f.

[18] Note, incidentally, that this is the only case in his published writings in which Kant employs the Doctrine of Elements/Doctrine of Method division not in a critique, but in a part of the system. (Traces of that division are to be found in the anthropology lectures: see e.g. VII 421.5-8, XXV 1529.)

is, the two "ends that are at the same time duties", one's own perfection and the happiness of others, which Kant presents in the Introduction to the "Doctrine of Virtue" even before explaining the criteria according to which the work is outlined (cf. VI 385 f.).[19] In fact, most of the first half of the Introduction to the "Doctrine of Virtue" (§§ II-V) centres on the thought of an obligatory end and its implications. Kant confirms the systematic primacy of those ends when he writes that "[e]thics can […] be defined as the *system of the ends* of pure practical reason" (VI 381; my emphasis).[20] I suggest that Kant's treatment of ethics can be systematic precisely because it unfolds from the consideration of *all* possible obligatory ends.[21] Their systematic role is thus crucial to understand Kant's final solution to the issue of a system of ethical demands.

Kant had arguably first attempted to assure genuine systematicity for his normative theory drawing on the classification of the possible relations between rational agents. For instance, in a note from the drafts for the later *Metaphysics of Morals*, he considered that the "completeness of the division of laws" could be connected with "exhaustiveness in specifying the cases that are under the laws that result a priori from the possible relationships among human beings [*Ausführlichkeit in Specificirung der Fälle unter den Gesetzen die sich a priori aus den möglichen Verhältnissen der Menschen ergeben*]" (XXIII 406). This kind of attempt could not suffice, since it imposes no further constraints on the fact that rational agents act in relation to one another. In those terms, the contents of ethical demands could hardly be determined. That attempt, however, displays Kant's awareness that the mere taxonomy of duties cannot suffice to outline a system of ethical demands.[22]

In contrast, the organization via the system of ends yields a proper system of duties, in Kant's view. The two obligatory ends build the "system of ends of pure practical reason", because they comprehend all the ways to determine a general content for possible maxims that can embody the fundamental principle of ethics. Thus, those two ends can provide the outline of the whole that makes of the doctrine of ethical demands a properly systematic theory. Strictly speaking, Kant's system of ethical duties cannot immediately follow either from specification or derivation from the one or the other variant of the categorical imperative, in contrast to what is often assumed. Were the system of duties derived in

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[19] Here I cannot discuss the specific content of the two ends.

[20] The same primacy is already articulated in the drafts for the *Metaphysics of Morals*. See e.g. XXIII 374: "doctrine of virtue as doctrine of wisdom [shall] consider ends that it is presented as a duty to set oneself [*Tugendlehre als Lehre der Weisheit [hat] von Zwecken zu reden die sich zu setzen es als Pflicht vorgestellt wird*]".

[21] Gregor misses this crucial point when she suggests that "our obligatory ends are, in a sense, abstractions from" the system of the ends of pure practical reason (1963, 93).

[22] See also XXIII 417.14-20.

successive, single steps, from the categorical imperative, this would yield rather an aggregate of normative directions with regard to diverse circumstances.[23] The categorical imperative is accordingly first specified in the principle of ethics, as a principle that puts constraints on ends ("The supreme principle of the doctrine of virtue is: Act in accordance with a maxim of ends that it can be a universal law for everyone to have", VI 395). Then, the systematic development of that principle is made possible through the two obligatory ends, which are not mere general characterizations of the different kinds of duties, but the only two possible overarching ends that meet the constraint imposed by the general principle.[24] From Kant's perspective, only they can warrant the systematicity of the normative theory, as they can both account for the classification of duties and for the generation of the content of ethical demands.[25] I shall briefly consider the two aspects in turn.

First, the two obligatory ends vindicate the distinction between self- and other-regarding duties as well as the ethical irrelevance of the relations to God and non-human beings. Since the only two ends that are commanded by the principle of ethics are to be realized in relations to oneself and others, the other possible relations are, morally speaking, not directly significant, on Kant's view. They can be acknowledged to be indirectly significant, insofar as they can be connected with the two obligatory ends (as Kant does with regard to the conduct towards animals: see VI 442-444, 491). Kant can thus cover the entire territory of ethics attaining a system of duties via a system of ends. Here it is important to differentiate (1) ways to adopt and realize those ends, and (2) ways to guarantee the ability to have and realize them. In these terms, Kant's system can account for every duty of virtue and, at the same time, differentiate between perfect and imperfect duties as to their respective obligation. Whereas the former have to do with the strict necessity to safeguard the crucial ability to pursue morally not-discretionary ends at all, the latter require to actually pursue those ends in some of the many possible ways to do it.

More importantly, the system of ends as organizing thread matches the structure of the determination of the will, that is, fits the architectonic purpose of the system at issue. If the purpose is the full determination of the will from principles of pure reason, the obligatory

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[23] See e.g. XXIX 5: "When the parts come before than the whole, one has an aggregate".

[24] Here I find myself in agreement with Baum 1999.

[25] Since the distinction of the two obligatory ends is never mentioned in the main text of the "Doctrine of Virtue", but only in the Introduction, Bernd Ludwig has suggested that it could be a later addition to the actual development of the system of ethical duties (see Ludwig 2013, 80, 83). Passages of connected texts prior to the *Metaphysics of Morals* that contain virtually explicit statements of the thought of the two obligatory ends (see e.g. XXIII 374 and XXVII 543.30 ff.) invalidate the suggestion, though. Even as a possible *ex post* arrangement, however, the distinction makes sense of the whole as a system in Kant's distinctive sense, as it is apt to confer completeness and organicity in a way that would not be available to other criteria.

ends as morally required contents of maxims are perfectly adequate. With this aim in view, the systematic is achieved through a system of non-discretionary contents of possible maxims, that is, obligatory ends, is appropriate. The system of duties is aptly unfolded not as a list of mere constraints on choice, but as a development of basic objects of the will which are to be considered from a first-person standpoint as the content of possible maxims.

Second, according to Kant's view of systematicity, the systematic role of the twofold system of ends does not merely lie in accounting for an overarching order of the doctrine of duties, but in allowing for further development within the system, in order to deal with future issues. If the categorical imperative provides us with a compass, as Kant writes in the *Groundwork* (see IV 404), it is impossible to determine in advance all the places it can lead us to, but it is possible to clarify in which directions it will guide us. The two obligatory ends specify those directions. The system of ends provides a unifying idea of the whole of ethical demands, since it reduces them to their essential contents, but it does not give a complete, final description of all those demands. The systematic nature of their treatment is not limited by any factual completeness of the doctrine of duties presented in the "Doctrine of Virtue". The generative role of the two obligatory ends allows for, even suggests, the possibility of further duties beyond those examined in Kant's work. If understood in Kant's terms, the systematicity of moral science allows for substantive moral progress, that is, for the acknowledgment of further demands beyond those that were previously acknowledged.

Along these lines, Kant's approach yields a system that meets the desiderata of the Pufendorfian paradigm while it also satisfies the demanding requirements of Kant's own notion of a system. The doctrine of ethical demands can be comprehensive because its principle is not a ground for the successive derivation of single duties through an isolated application of the principle to particular circumstances. On Kant's view, a doctrine can be properly comprehensive if, and only if, its principle (a) determines *a priori* "the domain of the manifold as well as the position of the parts with respect to each other" (KrV A832/B860) and (b) institutes a whole that "can […] grow internally (*per intus susceptionem*) but not externally (*per appositionem*)" (KrV A833/B861). Both conditions are met by the system of ends produced by Kant's principle of ethics: the two obligatory ends exhaust the entire scope of ethical demands, leaving it nevertheless open to different ways to pursue them, as no traditional taxonomy could have. As Kant is reported to have observed in his lectures, "morals is an inexhaustible field" (Kaehler, 358); now the same holds true in the "Doctrine of Virtue". This character would appear to resist a systematic treatment only if we follow a traditional notion of system. Kant's own view of systematicity, instead, centres on the thought that a whole with that property is to be at the same unified and open to further development, for a

system is necessary and complete, although not concluded.[26] It holds true also in the "Doctrine of Virtue" that its "systematic unity […] is only a projected unity" (KrV A647/B675). Hinging on the two obligatory ends, Kant's system of ethics thus satisfies the Pufendorfian demand of comprehensiveness by providing a system that is both complete in its scope and open-ended in its contents.[27] In Kant's terms, it is a "whole" that is "[…] "articulated […] and not heaped together" (KrV A833/B861). Here the two obligatory ends provide the internal articulation according to which the whole of ethical demands can be established and further develop. They provide a general outline of a system, giving it at the same time a crucial plasticity.

4. Enhancing Ordinary Moral Thought: Systematicity and Orientation

Because of its comprehensiveness and structure, a system of cognitions marks a difference from ordinary, i.e. non-scientific cognition (see KrV A832/B861; IV 467). As to a system of morals, its relation to ordinary thinking can be of different sorts, though. Different ways to understand a system diverge in this respect. A system can give order to pre-scientific cognition, thereby justifying its elements, in coherentist accounts. In a traditional deductive account, as in the Pufendorfian paradigm, the system traces back the contents of ordinary moral thought to the principle that grounds them. Kant's approach diverges here. The sort of systematicity that is distinctive of his ethics differentiates his approach from that of the traditional versions of the Pufendorfian paradigm, which provide deductive derivations from the principle via logical relations and a taxonomical overview of the demands of morality. Furthermore, Kant's view can be helpfully contrasted also with a different understanding of a system of morals, which does not conform to the deductive outline of the Pufendorfian paradigm. In a remarkable passage of his *Essay on the Active Powers of Man*, Thomas Reid, who subscribes to the project of a comprehensive doctrine of duties, writes:

> "A system of morals is not like a system of geometry, where the subsequent parts derive their evidence from the preceding, and one chain of reasoning is carried on from the beginning, so that, if the arrangement is changed, the chain is broken, and the evidence is lost. It resembles more a system of botany, or mineralogy, where the subsequent parts depend *not* for their evidence upon the preceding, and *the*

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[26] Thorndike (2019, 132 f.) insists that the "Doctrine of Virtue" lacks systematicity and *cannot* provide more than "an aggregate of fragmentary precepts". But that would reduce the "Doctrine of Virtue" to a casuistry, in contrast to Kant's remarks to this regard (see VI 411), on which I shall comment in the next section. Also, Thorndike does not consider that, in Kant's view, a system does not have to be concluded, although it must be complete.

[27] Herman (2021, especially chap. 9) similarly emphasizes that Kant's is a "dynamic system".

> *arrangement is made to facilitate apprehension and memory, and not to give evidence."*[28]

On Reid's view, the materials of a system of ethics do not require any justification, but have to be laid out in a comprehensive order, without being traced back to a unifying principle. The criteria that govern moral judgment are self-evident and do not need to be backed up by an underlying standard.[29] They are merely fixed points of moral reasoning that must be kept in plain sight, in order to avoid confusion in thinking about moral issues.[30] Unlike Reid, Kant has in view a system of morals that does not aim at mapping already available convictions and beliefs into a more perspicuous arrangement. Rather, as we have seen in the previous sections, Kant's own conception of a system leads him to devise a system of ethics that draws on the foundations provided by a principle and that unfolds by projecting a whole that shall grow out of the two obligatory ends commanded by the principle. The relation of such a system to ordinary moral thinking is accordingly different: while in Reid's account the system is mainly a memorizing tool for ordinary moral thinking, a system that is complete, yet not concluded, is primarily about recognizing a systematic order in morality within which any further demand will find their place. Building on the standard given by reason, the system articulates the shape that ordinary moral thinking should take, if it would fully embody the principle of reason. Ordinary moral thinking will thus be enhanced by a firmer awareness of the fundamental standards that shall guide deliberation even beyond already recognized demands.

Along these lines, the conception of ethics as a system of duties that unfolds from a system of ends strengthens ordinary moral thinking through simplicity and principled completeness. Recently, the "Doctrine of Virtue" has been characterized as "an explanatory grounding project", which aims "to derive (and thus justify) a set of duties but also to explain and thus provide insight into the deontic status of a range of actions".[31] The *Doctrine of Virtue* has thus the task to clarify not only "that certain types of action are required of us", but also "why they are".[32] That explanatory task of the system of ethical duties entails that the contents of the system go beyond "intuitive moral judgement". Here again, crucially, systematicity is not about systematisation of already available beliefs of ordinary moral thinking. Characterizing

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[28] Reid 2010, 281 (my emphasis). The passage is so remarkable that J.G.H. Feder quotes it at length in his review of Reid's work (see *Philosophische Bibliothek* 2, 1789, 115 f.). It might have been known to Kant thanks to that mediation.

[29] See Reid 2010, 31 and 271.

[30] See also Cuneo 2011, 112 f.

[31] Timmons 2017, 176. (See Smit & Timmons 2013)

[32] Timmons 2017, 178.

the system of ethics as an explanatory project overall is appropriate, provided that that explanation is understood as the enlightenment of the rational agent about his, or her, capacity to grasp the complex variety of ethical demands. Systematizing those demands as an dynamic whole is rather about strengthening the awareness of the proper determination of rational deliberation and, thereby, cultivating reason in its ordinary use. As any systematic enterprise in Kant's philosophy, the systematic account of obligatory ends and the corresponding duties amounts to a specific mode of self-knowledge of reason.[33] With respect to our starting point, a further clarification of the necessity stated in the opening passage from the preface of the *Metaphysics of Morals* is now available, namely that such a system *has to* follow in order to unfold the normative import of the principle of morality, thereby strengthening its availability to reason.

If a system of ethics aims at strengthening reason in ordinary moral thinking, however, it would seem that Kant eventually comes closer to the current understanding of the role of systematicity in ethics, after all. A crucial task of such a system of moral philosophy would be to provide by a lexical order of moral demands the means to address and solve difficult cases, that is, first and foremost instances of supposed conflict between different demands. As Paul Guyer has put it, "[i]f Kant's classification of duties is a genuine system, then it ought to provide a basis for the resolution of these sorts of conflicts too". Guyer has suggested that " Kant does not explicitly explain how it can, but he does offer hints and materials that can be developed for this purpose".[34] I shall suggest that the systematicity of Kant's ethics is indeed crucially connected to that need, although it addresses it in a different way than the current understanding of a system of morals assumes. I will consider not so much whether Kant's moral theory has the resources to deal with purported conflicts of demands, but the more specific, and somehow more neutral, issue whether the systematicity of that theory plays a role in that regard and whether to deal with those conflicts should be regarded as a task for the system of ethics.

Addressing the need for orientation with regard of cases of purported conflict between different obligations would be a matter for what the previous tradition calls casuistry. Kant's view reverses the traditional perspective, though. When he remarks that "ethics falls into a *casuistry*" "because of the latitude it allows in its imperfect duties", he adds that casuistry so understood cannot properly belong to the system that is to be developed: "casuistry is […] *neither a science nor a part of a science*; […] it is woven into ethics in a fragmentary way, *not systematically* […], and is added to ethics only by way of *scholia to the system*." (VI 411; my

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[33] See Baum 2019.

[34] Guyer 2005, 269.

emphasis; cf. XXIII 389). It would then appear that systematicity encounters at this point its boundaries. Yet, Kant's distinctive notion of a system of ethics reveals here its peculiar practical significance. On Kant's view, casuistry has to play a role in orienting judgment within the space of options that an imperfect duty leaves open.[35] It thus focuses on how to comply with one ethical demand (say, the duty of beneficence) in the given circumstances or, as Kant puts it, "to decide how a maxim is to be applied in particular cases" (VI 411). This, however, is not the same as dealing with a supposed conflict of duties, where contrasting grounds of obligation are confronted (see VI 224).

If casuistry is limited in its scope, in Kant's view the *system* does provide orientation in problematic cases. It is not simply because the scientific treatment of ethics argues that "a collision of duties and obligations is not even conceivable" (VI 224), thereby maintaining that difficult cases are in fact only apparently dilemmatic. Ethics can provide orientation in that regard because a systematic account opens up a broader perspective that goes beyond a mere classification of duties. If casuistry can only sharpen *the power of judgment* in applying specific demands, the system thereby strengthens pure practical *reason* and expands its outlook (see VI 411). "Falling into casuistry", that is, going beyond the limits of systematicity, is not an unfortunate weakness of ethics, but a danger or a defeat for moral theory, as it makes unable to see the connections between different duties. To the contrary, properly systematic ethics should aim at taking on the task that traditionally was attributed to casuistry, namely preparing the subject to deal with difficult cases. Instead of practicing the power of judgement, which cannot assure any significant results, and might in fact jeopardize the clarity achieved in the "dogmatics" of duties, moral theory should aim at strengthening reason in the individual agent, making it capable to grasp the complex connection of demands.

Kant's systematic view of ethics does respond to the need of dealing with difficult cases and apparent conflicts, after all. It does "provide a basis for the resolution of these sorts of conflicts", as Guyer puts it, but not through its classification of duties. Ends as systematic standards make a comparative consideration of grounds of obligation easier, as different purported obligations are warranted by the reference to the morally necessary ends. The entire system of duties contributes to facilitate the consideration of perplexing cases, as it clarifies the specific character of each demand. In fact, it is precisely the systematic nature of the treatment of ends and duties that allows rational agents to better explore moral options in problematic circumstances. A mere taxonomic systematization, like that endorsed by Reid, would provide no clue at all to address perplexing cases — just a catalogue of separated options from which the agent should intuitively pick the most appropriate. In contrast, a genuine system that

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[35] On Kant's view on the role of casuistry, see Schuessler 2012, 2021.

unfolds the complex web of normative presents the rational agents with an orientation that is closer to the terms of deliberation.

The systematic connection of demands grounding on the system of obligatory ends provides the rational agent with the better perspective. Systematicity makes the particular understandable in light of its being part of a whole. Alleged moral conflicts never present themselves in isolated cases, but always in already normatively loaded situations, in which previous choices have been made and other demands have been considered.[36] Instead of artificially separating normative claims, Kant's perspective underscores the necessity of focus on their interplay. In fact, cases of this sort present themselves in conditions in which "one obligatory maxim" could be legitimately limited "by another (e.g. general love of one's neighbour by the love of one's parents)". When this happens, as Kant remarks, "the field for the practice of virtue *is indeed widened.*" (VI 390; my emphasis). Connections, convergence, or conflict between different grounds of obligation are indeed only one aspect of the more general web of moral demands. The normative relations between grounds of obligation are better construed not by narrowing the focus of moral reasoning, but rather by widening it. Remarkably, one of the clearest way to find the solution to a conflict is to recognize that one option is supported not only by one ground of obligation, but by several grounds of obligation.[37]

The present issue, however, is not Kant's view on how to deal with conflicts of moral demands, but the extent of the role that systematicity can play in this regard. Because this complexity becomes relevant at the level of the individual agent's maxims, then a systematic doctrine of moral demands ultimately does play a role also with regard to perplexing cases. It is not the role of solving conflicts in advance, but that of shaping reason so that it can be prepared and flexible enough to face perplexing cases. The wide obligation of ethical duties also requires that, unlike the doctrine of right, ethics encompasses a part concerning the individual learning and assimilation of the system of duties, which he calls a doctrine of method. Notably, Kant is explicit in regarding the doctrine of method as a part of the system (see VI 412), although it does not present any specific principle or demand. This shows, again, that systematicity is not about systematisation of given elements, but about the ongoing implementation of principles of reason according to its fundamental normative purpose. In contrast to the episodic focus on the power of judgment that is characteristic of casuistry, which can easily lead to micrology, a thorough articulation of the system of ends and duties is ultimately, for Kant, what makes a rational agent well armoured to confront perplexing cases

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[36] Here I find myself in agreement with Herman 2021, 78 f.

[37] See Timmermann 2013, 52 f.

from a broader perspective. It is not the power of judgment, but reason in Kant's specific sense that makes an agent able to deal with difficult cases, because the fundamental standard of morality that it provides also issues a complete, yet growing network of demands that are connected through a system of obligatory ends. The systematicity of the overall examination of the entire web of ethical demands thus trumps the isolated attempts at handling particular difficulties concerning specific duties.

Here, again, the significance of the systematicity of ethics displays a further notable difference from the role that systematization would now be taken to have. A systematic account of ethical demands that arranges them in a coherent disposition would handle perplexing cases and possibile conflicts by putting forward a lexical order according to which some demands have to be prioritized above others. Differently, Kant suggests that a proper system does not provide a mere order of prioritization, but a reconstruction, as thorough as possible, of the complex web of ethical demands and their connections that makes its systematic structure apparent. In this perspective, the absence of any genuine conflict has a different meaning than in traditional rationalist accounts of morality: a conflict of obligations is not merely ruled out because it counters the overall consistency of ethical demands, but because it would trouble the relations connecting them. The aim of a system in Kant's distinctive sense is not only an exposition of morality free from any contradiction, but the possibility of a thorough determination of the maxims of the individual agents. With respect to the opening passage from the preface of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, here emerges a further reason why a system *must* be unfolded, namely because it provides rational agents with all the orientation reason can offer to deal with the intricacies of morality.

In the first *Critique* Kant had observed that "[t]he greatest systematic unity, consequently also purposive unity, is the school and even the ground of the possibility of the greatest use of human reason" (KrV A694f./B722f.). I suggest that the same holds true for the system of ethics, in which the articulation of ethical demands as forming an open-ended unity amounts to a genuine "school […] of human reason". The broader the perspective on ethical demands we can reach, the closer we come to their complete systematic unity, the closer we reach to satisfying the need of reason for totality also in its practical aspect, that is, as the fullest determination of maxims instantiating the principle of morality.

5. The Distinctive Systematicity of Kant's Ethics

Kant's emphasis on the systematic nature of the *Metaphysics of Morals* proves to be not merely historically, but also philosophical significant. That both parts of the work begin stressing that

the project is systematic in nature is thus not accidental. Specifically, ethics needs to be developed as system because the mere identification and corroboration of a principle is hardly enough with regard to the needs of moral life and the weaknesses of ordinary moral thinking in dealing with it. In this respect, a system of morals *has* to follow the preliminary investigation on the principle of morality.

The distinctive character of Kant's systematic development of ethics revolves around a threefold difference between his conception of systematicity as it is applied in his ethics and a current standard conception, which mostly informs the reference to systematicity, or systematization, in moral philosophy. Each of the features that I have pointed out also contributes to make the relationship between ethics in its systematic development and ordinary moral thinking more precise.

First, in Kant's view, the system of ethics is not about the systematisation of moral beliefs, but about the *articulation of moral demands in their connection with the fundamental principle of morality*. Unlike in the current understanding, a systematic treatment of ethics is not instrumental to a coherentist project that aims at justifying moral convictions and beliefs embedded in ordinary moral thinking by constructing them into a coherent set. Here, on the contrary, Kant's project follows the Pufendorfian paradigm of a comprehensive account of the demands of morality that draws primarily on a fundamental principle, which provides the proper ground for the system. A system of ethics is needed to unfold the obligations that are justified by the fundamental principle.

Second, drawing on the fundamental principle of morality, Kant's systematic treatment of ethics is developed as a *system of ends* that yields *an open-ended system of duty types*. While Kant's approach shares the first feature with the traditional approach, here it markedly diverges, as the novelty of Kant's distinctive notion of a system becomes relevant. According to that conception, a system finds its unity in an underlying principle of reason, which generates a set of determinations that is complete in its scope and yet can grow further. The system of ethics that Kant puts forward is thus neither a logically consistent arrangement of demands, nor a concluded collection of ethical duties. The central system-building feature here is the role of the obligatory ends, from which the corresponding system of duties originates, in an ongoing development. In this respect, a system of ethics entails advancement from ordinary moral thinking insofar as the system presents a dynamic reconstruction, maybe even a revision, of the ordinary moral convictions that is able to show how it could expand.

Third, because of its dynamic character and its relation to ordinary moral thinking, the system of ethics that Kant has in view by virtue of his distinctive notion of systematicity has a different, more substantial purpose that a system of moral demands should have according to

other conceptions. Instead of providing merely a more coherent or orderly arrangement of moral beliefs, Kant's system of ethics aims at strengthening reason in its practical use. This becomes apparent, for instance, with regard to intricacies such as supposed conflicts of obligations. In Kant's view, the systematicity of ethics as a comprehensive and dynamic body of demands is supposed to *provide orientation and a broader perspective from which perplexing cases should be considered.* Here the scientific treatment of morality provides crucial support to ordinary moral thinking by emphasizing the holistic character of ethical demands and clarifying their connections.

These three features define Kant's view on the significance of systematicity for moral philosophy and ethics specifically, which constitutes an original rationalist conception that takes its clue from the system that reason unfolds from its own principles. Having his characteristic notion of a system in view, systematicity proves to be an integral component of Kant's distinctive approach to ethics.[38]

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