

The Ambitious Idea of Kant's Corollary

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Misrepresentations can be innocuous or even useful, but Kant's corollary¹ to the formula of universal law appears to involve a pernicious one: "act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature".² Humans obviously cannot make their maxims into laws of nature, and it seems preposterous to claim that we are morally required to pretend that we can. Given that Kant was careful to eradicate pernicious misrepresentations from theoretical metaphysics, the imperative to act as if I have this supernatural power has typically been treated as an embarrassment meriting apology. The wording of the corollary may be vindicated, however, by recognizing that "as if" (als ob) is a technical term both in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and here. It signals a modal shift from the assertoric to the problematic mode of cognition, one that is necessitated by the attempt to incorporate the natural effects of a free will into a philosophically practical universal moral imperative. In this paper I sketch how the modal shift makes sense of the corollary as a subjectively necessary, philosophically practical idealization of the extension of human freedom into nature, one that *accurately* represents a necessary parameter of moral conduct: moral ambition.

To briefly set up the problem, Kant's *Transcendental Dialectic* expounds a logic of illusion consisting of a "critique of the understanding and reason in regard to their hyperphysical use, in order to uncover the false illusion of their groundless pretensions [... and] guard against sophistical tricks".³ Kant argues here that traditional metaphysics is merely a deceptive pretense (trüglicher Schein) that arises from the abuse (Mißbrauch) of ideas of pure reason.⁴ Though he concludes that the traditional canon of theoretical metaphysics is sheer speculation beyond the boundaries of experience, he claims to usefully clear the way to establish that "there is an absolutely necessary practical use of pure reason

¹ The corollary is often called the formula of nature, but Kant does not identify it as distinct formula. "Corollary" is thus a more accurate term.

² GMS, AA 04: 421. All GMS translations are by Mary Gregor.

³ KrV A63f/B88. KrV translations are by Guyer and Wood unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ KrV B697.

(the moral use), in which reason unavoidably extends itself beyond the boundaries of sensibility”.⁵ Kant later identifies and establishes the supreme principle of morality as the canon of this new metaphysics in the *Groundwork*, where he formulates the moral law as a universal imperative and then immediately infers the corollary, which is perhaps even more pretentious than the speculative canon it replaces.

From Paton through the CI procedure casuistry that was prominent in the late 20th century, Kant scholars have typically ignored the wording of the corollary, deflated action to deliberation, or focused narrowly on universalization, the enumeration of duties or the equivalence of the formulas.^{6,7,8,9,10} These strategies have their merits, but also significant faults. In particular, they do violence to the sense in which a principle of practical philosophy like the corollary is alleged to be practical. *Technically practical* propositions of natural philosophy merely present the possibility of things and their determinations, as well as how we can generate things through our voluntary action as natural causes. In contrast, the morally practical propositions of practical philosophy differ in content: They concern freedom under laws that connect free grounds with natural consequences.¹¹ The corollary is offered as a *philosophically practical* principle in this latter sense, i.e. an objective ground of volition or a determining ground of the will, where volition and will are putatively free causes of natural effects.¹² The practical is thus sacrificed in this interpretive tradition: We don’t actually have to *do* what the corollary says, so we need not concern ourselves with how natural effects of freedom ought to shape our maxims.

One might expect that Vaihinger would have provided a philosophically adequate account of the corollary in his book on the philosophical use of representations als ob, but his

⁵ KrV Bxxv; see also A797/B828.

⁶ Paton, H. J.: *The Categorical Imperative: A Study in Kant’s Moral Philosophy*. London 1947, “Chapter XV: The Formula of the Law of Nature”, 146-164.

⁷ Korsgaard, Christine: *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. Cambridge 1996, “Chapter 3: Kant’s Formula of Universal Law”, 77-105.

⁸ Allison, Henry: *Kant’s Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals: A Commentary*. Oxford 2011, “Chapter 7: The Universal Law (FUL) and the Law of Nature (FLN)”, 176-203.

⁹ Stratton-Lake, Philip: *Formulating Categorical Imperatives*. In: *Kant-Studien* 84 (1993), 316-40.

¹⁰ Guyer, Paul: *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness*. Cambridge 2000, “Chapter 5: The Possibility of the Categorical Imperative”, 172-206.

¹¹ KU, AA 20: 196.

¹² KpV, AA 05: 20.

account substantively mischaracterizes acting as the corollary mandates.¹³ In his enthusiasm to defend fictive representations from Pragmatism, Vaihinger exaggerated the commonality of representations he classed as fictive. Thus according to Vaihinger the corollary is “*untrue or incorrect*” like all other fictives.¹⁴ The logical form of any als ob representation, he contends, is a conditional with an *impossible* antecedent, thus the procedure in which we engage is a “construction of human *imagination*” and “the real principle of Kantian ethics [... is that] true morality must always rest upon a *fictional* basis”.¹⁵ Truth, reason, and objective validity are sacrificed.

We can do better. In the *Final Aim* of the first *Critique*, Kant perspicuously appeals to proceeding als ob as a remedy for false pretensions like those involved in the *I think* of the first paralogism. As I will briefly explain in section 1, als ob rescues the use of ideas in the theoretical context via a shift to the problematic mode of judgment, a distinctive mode of cognition for which regulative assumptions set parameters. Section 2 I sketch how by parity with the *I think* of rational psychology, the practical *I will* requires a similar rescue because the causal extension of my will into nature is a morally necessitated problem. Humans cannot fully determine the limits of our power to affect nature theoretically: We can only *find* the limits of our natural effects through our deeds. Putting these together we should find that in positing a philosophically practical regulative assumption, what the corollary literally requires is that we *act as if we can make nature as it ought to be* (eventually, with help, through the progress of history). The corollary is thus a principle of moral ambition¹⁶ that expresses the necessity of *acting*, without assurance that nature will cooperate.

1. Cognizing as if, faultlessly

In the *Transcendental Dialectic* of the first *Critique* Kant undertakes a deduction of the psychological, cosmological, and theological transcendental ideas because their respective sciences not only promise cognition that reaches beyond objects of possible experience, their transcendent principles incite us to tear down the boundary posts marking the territory in which the pure understanding is allowed its play and pretend to lay claim to a

¹³ Vaihinger, Hans: *The Philosophy of 'As if': A System of the Theoretical, Practical, and Religious Fictions of Mankind*. London 1952, 292.

¹⁴ Vaihinger 1952, viii.

¹⁵ Vaihinger 1952, 259, 49 (italics added).

¹⁶ Korsgaard's account of the “ambitious ideal of agency” subrepts Kant's argument in that inserting oneself into the causal order makes one hostage to nature, which leads too directly to religious faith. Korsgaard, Christine: *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, Integrity*. New York 2009, 89.

wholly new supernatural territory.¹⁷ Transcendental ideas have been misused this way, he contends, because they persistently appear to be a different kind of representation than they really are. They are not ordinary concepts. Transcendental ideas are empty, yet not arbitrarily invented or useless. As I explain in this section, a transcendental idea is given only as a problem (als Problem), referring to the problematic mode of judgment in which one assumes (annehmen) rather than asserting or denying.¹⁸ The regulative assumption of a transcendental idea sets a parameter for employing the problematic mode of judgment, e.g. I assume X for proceedings P during which I proceed as if X. In conditional proofs and other contexts this can faultlessly extend cognition, thereby indirectly conferring objective validity on the idea. “Als ob” thus designates its object (X) to be a regulative assumption that sets a parameter for a problematic mode of cognitive activity through which cognition can be extended.

Ordinarily, concepts determine objects that are given through intuition as direct objects. The object is what the concept represents, or what it contains, and a representation is objectively valid when it contains an object that is or could be given through intuition. Extraordinarily, the concept is an idea of reason, a representation for which no object can be given through intuition. Ideas of reason are empty concepts. It should follow, then, that ideas cannot be objectively valid. Since objective validity is Kant’s litmus test for cognitive significance, he should claim that ideas can have no use or sense. Instead he claims that transcendental ideas are cognitively necessary and defends this thesis by explicating a second way in which an object can be given, i.e. “in the idea”.¹⁹ Though an idea represents objects only indirectly, the schema for indirectly representing objects can nevertheless make the idea objectively valid in a distinctively functional way. Rather than containing its own objects as ordinary concepts do, an idea suggests the existence of an ideal object (e.g. a focus imaginarius, a biological function, freedom, etc.) to regulate the systematic extension of cognition to other objects which thereby become cognizable.²⁰ The objective reality of these other objects then indirectly confers objective validity back to the idea.

Kant’s appeal to the *use* of a representation here introduces a distinctive kind of cognitive fault, a functional use-fault. An otherwise faultless idea is misused, Kant says, when its object is assumed “in itself” (an sich) as a real, determinate existence.²¹ In attempting to identify the use-fault here, Kant distinguishes two senses of assumption. An

¹⁷ KrV A296/B352.

¹⁸ KrV, A327/B383, A70/B95, A74/B100.

¹⁹ KrV A670/B698.

²⁰ KrV A670f/B699-700.

²¹ KrV A673f/B701.

assumption in itself is a groundless affirmation of the reality of the object represented. So long as there is no contradiction in it, there is no fault.²² A groundless assumption of this sort is at best the assertion of an opinion. There is, of course, no fault in having or asserting an opinion per se. The trouble is that determinate judgments always appear to be objectively well-grounded assertions, even when they are not. This illusion of well-groundedness is deceptive whenever the “subjective condition”, i.e. the mere assumption, is mistaken for knowledge of the object.²³ For example, I may assume the substantiality of the soul in itself without being deceived so long as I recognize that I have no grounds for asserting it. I introduce a fault into my cognition when I pretend to know that the soul is a substance, and I compound the error when I misuse this pretense as a constitutive ground for the extension of my cognition, e.g. in paralogistically reasoning from it.

Whereas assumptions in themselves are misused when treated as knowledge, *regulative assumptions* are instead misused when taken out of context. A regulative assumption is from the outset constrained to a particular use in the proceedings for which it sets a parameter or within which it is assumed to be true or objectively valid (e.g. indirect proof, counterfactual reasoning, rehearsals, simulations, etc.). In this sense of assumption, I assume that X for P, then proceed as if X. So long as I have no illusions that the assumption grounds an assertion of X outside the context of P, there is no fault in my use of the representation, whether it be an idea of reason or an ordinary empirical representation. I may validly reason from a regulative assumption (only) within its proper scope.

Now in emphasizing that one “mistakes the significance” of an idea when one takes it to be the assertion or even only the presupposition of an actual thing, Kant says that a mere idea can be taken as a ground only *problematically*.²⁴ Thus the distinction between assertion and assumption is a modal one between the assertoric and problematic modes of judgment, as distinguished in Kant’s table of the logical functions of understanding in judgment.²⁵ As Kant explains there, a modal shift changes the value of the copula (thought) in relation to thinking in general; it does not change the content of the judgment.²⁶ The modal shift thus leaves the idea still empty, but solves the paradox by accurately representing the idea as a parameter for cognitive extension to other objects. So far, so good.

²² KrV A673/B701.

²³ KrV A396.

²⁴ KrV A681/B709.

²⁵ KrV A70/B95.

²⁶ KrV A74/B99f.

2. From the theoretical illusion of *I think* to the practical assumption *I can*

At this point the parity between theory and practice yields a use distinction for practical ideas, e.g. between asserting freedom and assuming freedom only problematically. Since the corollary includes an *als ob* phrase, we may infer that we are to assume rather than assert, and that the cognitive activity in which we engage when acting as the corollary mandates is problematic. Kant's *Paralogisms* provide a clue to how this helps make sense of the corollary.

Though it is unclear how many sources of illusion Kant takes himself to reveal in the *Paralogisms* and precisely what they are, we need only one here. In psychology, understood as the rational doctrine of the soul, the idea of the mind or soul as a simple substance arises through the quasi-Cartesian proposition *I think*. This *I think* involves an illusion that cannot be dispelled but can be solved²⁷ by a transcendental deduction involving a modal shift, as sketched above, combined with discipline.²⁸

The philosophically practical use of a moral idea is a cognitive activity, *willing*, and this kind of cognition, i.e. practical cognition, relates to its object by causally making its object actual.²⁹ Willing is the moral copula, so the obvious practical analog of the theoretical *I think* is *I will*. Just as *I think* in this context is not an ordinary proposition but instead the “vehicle [...] that serves only to introduce all thinking as belonging to consciousness”,³⁰ *I will* should be the vehicle that serves to introduce all volition (or maxims as subjective principles of volition) as belonging to rational agency. Its modes include *I do will*, *I can will*, and *I must will*. A modal shift from the assertoric to the problematic is then a shift from *I will* to *I can*. (The problematic notably often precedes the assertoric in deliberation because many human ends are indeterminate or multiply realizable.)

A modal shift from the assertoric to the problematic is *necessary* in a philosophically practical sense whenever the end or the means it entails involves a natural effect, because practically cognizing it (making it actual) requires cooperation from nature. From within the empirical standpoint, whether I can realize an end is always a problem (cf. “stepmotherly nature”³¹). I cannot know in advance what the extent of my potential influence on other people, of my creative reach, or of my influence in the world shall be. Focus on limitations is self-defeating for humans – worrying about what *I can't* do undermines my ability to try. In

²⁷ KrV A709f/B737f.

²⁸ KrV A341/B399.

²⁹ KrV Bixf.

³⁰ KrV A341/B399f.

³¹ GMS, AA 4:394.

trying to realize a morally necessary end, therefore, I must assume for the sake of the good that I am *free to make it so*. I must assume the end is a *possible* consequence of my will, even when I have little notion how to accomplish it and good reason to doubt its likelihood as an actual consequence of my best efforts. By refraining from asserting that I can't, and instead assuming that I can (somehow) do what I ought, I accurately represent my autonomy in the face of endemic empirical ignorance and limitation. No illusions of empirical efficacy are needed here. So long as my maxim conforms to universal law, and “no true contradiction can be found between freedom and natural necessity of just the same human actions”,³² there is no bar to assuming I can do what I ought and proceeding in an appropriately disciplined manner.³³

Stepping back from the empirical standpoint, the central *idea* of a moral science is the idea of a subject of conduct, of a subject of autonomy, or of a free being. This is the practical analog of the theoretical soul. The theoretical idea of self is the synthesis of the conditions of a thought.³⁴ If moral subjectivity is also a synthesis of conditions, it should be a synthesis of conditions of an action, i.e. a synthesis of the conditions of the possibility of making any object real through the causality of the will. Since the will is at a causal crossroads between freedom and nature, this practical synthesis of causality could be ordered two ways. To act as if nature determines my maxims is to act as if *I can't*. To act as if I can, I must act as if I determine nature, i.e. as if I am free to make of nature what I will. The corollary thus mandates that we proceed in our transformation of nature from what merely *is* to what *ought* to be, as if nature can be *systematically made or reconstituted* through our volition into an intelligible ideal (cf. universal law). Unlike the transcendent principle of psychology, morality *appropriately* incites us to tear down the boundary posts marking the territory of actual nature and lay claim to a wholly new supernatural territory of the possible, thereby realizing what ought to be – freedom under laws extended into nature.

To make a final point, since practical representations are very easily mistaken for theoretical ones, this mistake is a source of deception that also demands solution. In the theoretical context Kant posits indemonstrable ideas of theoretical reason, which are concepts to which no intuition could be adequate, and inexponible ideas of imagination, which are

³² GMS, AA 4:456.

³³ As Herman notes, there is no evidence of an “insatiable” demand to “do more” in Kantian ethics (Herman, Barbara: *The Practice of Moral Judgment*. Cambridge 1993, 147). Discipline presumably manages satiability, shared responsibility, longterm planning, and other relevant parameters of conduct.

³⁴ KrV A397.

intuitions to which no concept could be adequate.³⁵ The moral idea is a *volitional* idea of practical reason, which by parity would be both inexponible and indemonstrable: Neither intuition nor concept could be adequate to the idea of freedom. The moral requirement is consequently not to think or intuit *I can*, but to enact it. The corollary makes imperative that we *find* the empirical limits of our freedom *through our deeds*, as opposed to fantasizing our omnipotence.

³⁵ KpV, AA 05: 314f, 342.