

## Rehberg's Moral Theory

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*Abstract:* Rehberg makes the astonishing claim that metaphysics caused the French Revolution. He makes this claim because of certain commitments he holds in moral philosophy, such as his skepticism of pure practical reason: for Rehberg, believing in abstract ideals that have no application in the real, empirical world can lead to dangerous results. While this connection between Rehberg's politics and his moral philosophy has not gone unnoticed, no serious examination of the moral theory Rehberg develops in his 1787 *On the Relation of Metaphysics to Religion* has yet been given. This is what I accomplish in this paper. After outlining the place of Rehberg's moral theory in the *Relation*, I offer an interpretation of Rehberg's conception of the principle of morality, his moral psychology, and conception of the good will. I also discuss the relationship between Rehberg's moral theory and philosophical optimism, namely the idea that we live in the best of all possible worlds, and his account of the human condition as one of conflict between sensibility and rationality in contrast to the nature of the perfect will. The result is a richer appreciation of the systematic nature of Rehberg's thought, as well as of the broader philosophical background of his political views.

*Keywords:* Rehberg, August Wilhelm; principle of contradiction; moral motivation; good will; optimism

### 1. Introduction

August Wilhelm Rehberg is best known as an influential critic of the French Revolution, but he was also a productive philosopher: he wrote on topics ranging from the nature and limitations of forces (1779) to the vocation of man (1780), the nature of pleasure (1785), and the pantheism controversy (1787).<sup>1</sup> And while at one time scholars thought that Rehberg's politics were

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<sup>1</sup> For an introduction to Rehberg's philosophy and major works, see Beiser (2020).

independent of his philosophical commitments, this view has since rightfully been corrected.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Rehberg himself makes the extraordinary claim that “metaphysics shattered the French monarchy and brought a revolution into being.” (1793, 5)<sup>3</sup> As a number of interpreters have recently argued, Rehberg makes this claim because of certain commitments he holds in moral philosophy, in particular his skepticism of pure practical reason: for Rehberg, believing in abstract ideals that have no application in the empirical world can lead to dangerous results.<sup>4</sup> Achieving a better understanding of Rehberg’s moral philosophy is therefore especially useful for gaining insight into the philosophical foundations of his politics, but also for understanding the systematic nature of his thought more generally. Although there has been an increase in attention paid to Rehberg’s moral philosophy in recent years, especially that found in his response to Kant’s ‘Theory and Practice’ essay and in his review of the second *Critique*,<sup>5</sup> to date there has been no serious examination of Rehberg’s central and most substantial explanation of his moral theory or “theory of morality” as he calls it (see 1787, 143 and 151), namely that contained in his earlier 1787 *Über das Verhältniß der Metaphysik zu der Religion* (On the Relation of Metaphysics to Religion). This is what I seek to accomplish in this paper.

I proceed as follows. After an introductory section in which I explain the purpose of the *Relation* and the place of Rehberg’s moral theory within it (Section 2), I discuss two core features of his moral theory. The first is the principle of morality (Section 3), which for Rehberg is grounded on the principle of contradiction: for Rehberg, the concept of an action or desire is morally good or evil based on whether it is rationally consistent or contradictory. The second is Rehberg’s moral psychology and conception of the good will (Section 4): Rehberg believes that all desire aims at pleasure, and even the pleasure he believes is associated with consistent concepts requires a relation to one’s present subjective pleasure in order to be motivating. I argue that this is a central piece of Rehberg’s moral philosophy because it implies that pure reason alone is not practical, and that the good will is one that merely acts *in conformity* with the moral principle. I then return (in Section 5) to the broader context of Rehberg’s moral theory and explain his conception of the morally perfect being, the human condition, and philosophical optimism: for Rehberg the most perfect being possesses only distinct cognition, and human beings are subject to moral error because of their

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<sup>2</sup> As Beiser notes (1992, 419n63), both Epstein (1966, 701) and Vogel (1972, 78) underestimate the importance of Rehberg’s early philosophy for his later politics.

<sup>3</sup> All translations of Rehberg in this paper are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g., Gregory (2022, 568ff.) and Kryluk (forthcoming, 4).

<sup>5</sup> Both of these have recently been translated into English: see Gregory (2021) and Walschots (2024, 229–245).

sensibility. He nonetheless believes that we are not justified in assuming that the highest being is in fact morally perfect. In fact, Rehberg argues that we do *not* live in the best of all possible worlds, and that it is better for human happiness if we deny philosophical optimism. I conclude (in Section 6) by illustrating how the moral theory Rehberg outlines in the *Relation* clarifies core views in his review of the second *Critique* and “Theory and Practice” essay. In the end, we have a richer appreciation of the systematic nature of Rehberg’s thought, as well as of the broader philosophical background of Rehberg’s political views.

## 2. The Relationship Between Metaphysics, Religion, and Morality

*On the Relation Between Metaphysics and Religion* begins with the claim that abstract speculation, such as that carried out in metaphysics, is valuable in itself and not only in virtue of its utility, that is, not only in virtue of whatever increase in human happiness it may bring about (1787, 1). Indeed, Rehberg argues in the book’s opening pages that not only the exercise of our faculty of abstraction, but “the free use of the powers of the soul” (1787, 2) in general, the faculty of abstraction being only one such power, has value in and of itself, and all forms of civil constitution and institutions such as private property are means to this end rather than vice versa (1787, 2). Rehberg then goes on to argue that abstract speculation has “unrightfully” (1787, 3) been given another value in virtue of the fact that people have attempted to prove “the universally recognized truths of natural religion by means of metaphysical speculation.” (1787, 4) Rehberg argues that “this method of supporting natural religion on metaphysical grounds is extremely disadvantageous” for the following reason: “there have always been very many who have been worried by metaphysical doubt, and even more by the fear that the belief that contributes so much to their happiness rests on uncertain ground and could possibly be made doubtful by metaphysical investigations unknown to them.” (1787, 4) Rehberg therefore believes that basing our belief in God in particular on metaphysical arguments is disadvantageous for the happiness and contentment of human beings, that this method should be avoided, and that a new relationship between the two disciplines needs to be conceived.

The *Relation* is not only about the relationship between metaphysics and religion, however, but also about the relationship between these two disciplines and moral philosophy. On the one hand, Rehberg believes that “theology is closely related to morality [*Sittlichkeit*], and thereby to the foundation of human happiness.” (1787, 5) On the other hand, he holds that “regardless of how one might otherwise treat it [i.e. theology], one connects metaphysical investigations to it.” (1787, 5)

Accordingly, properly conceiving of the relationship between metaphysics and religion is important because this has consequences for moral philosophy and, thereby, human happiness. Rehberg believes that there are only two ways of eliminating the doubt mentioned above, and which he feels is disadvantageous to human happiness. First, by separating moral philosophy from religion is such a way that we “find the foundations of moral conduct in its internal and independent worth alone, and to this end leave it open what anyone thinks about all the objects of the investigation that might belong to religion.” (1787, 5) Rehberg believes that some ancient schools of philosophy followed this path, and among his contemporaries he names Kant and Christian Garve as adopting this method (1787, 5). Rehberg objects to this option on the grounds that if philosophers want to make the “doctrine of morals independent of their theology”, theology should not be given priority (1787, 6). In other words, Rehberg believes that making moral philosophy independent of theology commits one to making it independent of all the other sub-disciplines of philosophy as well. Rehberg writes: “if one system is more beautiful, and raises the spirit and heart more than another, all of them are harmless.” (1787, 7) Thus, to claim that morality is independent of theology is to adopt what Rehberg calls “philosophical tolerance” (1787, 7) and thereby hold that it ultimately does not matter if one is committed to materialism, atheism, or whatever other metaphysical or religious view one might have.

Rehberg argues that this kind of “general indifferentism could never possibly take place” (1787, 9), however. He admits that perhaps some Greeks and Romans who knew nothing of revealed truths might find some satisfaction in it, but for us moderns, “for whom established religious concepts are too closely bound to moral ones” (1787, 9), only the second option remains:

It would be more appropriate for us if we could prove that the subtle and varied investigations of metaphysics, the concepts of the divinity and its influence on the world, do indeed modify, but nevertheless leave the most important doctrines of religion preserved, regardless of the ideas one might think of by means of subtle speculation. (1787, 9)

This is what Rehberg seeks to establish in the remainder of the *Relation*. Indeed, he takes himself to be doing a service to humanity by showing that “even in relation to the strangest speculations about these concepts [i.e. metaphysical concepts], that on which the peace of so many is grounded remains.” (1787, 12) To summarize, he claims that if he can show that there are certain core pieces of religious doctrine that are compatible with every metaphysical doctrine, then “the doctrine of morals might remain so closely bound to theology” (1787, 9–10) as we think it is, and yet we can

avoid suffering the doubt that “every thinking mind” necessarily encounters when wading into metaphysics (1787, 10).

In the rest of the *Relation's* opening pages Rehberg indicates that there are two foundational concepts of religion that are compatible with all metaphysics systems (1787, 16), the first being the following:

The world, the whole, which consists of the connection of such diverse beings and the reciprocal influence of such diverse powers, is not a wild heap of individual, efficacious beings existing on their own without any relation to each other, rather it is in their changes and effects order and coherence with the concepts of a higher understanding. (1787, 12)

Rehberg holds that this is accepted by both those who claim that material and immaterial powers are created out of nothing by the divinity, as well as those who claim that the relations of things are grounded in powers independent of the divinity. He is clear that this concept is minimal, and that it amounts to nothing more than the claim that “in the changes of the world there appears a relation to a higher understanding.” (1787, 13) The incomprehensibility of this higher understanding, something Rehberg claims is accepted by all religions, means that we cannot say anything more specific about it (1787, 13).

The second concept is related to the first and is “the concept of a being that contains the absolute condition of everything else” (1787, 14–15) or “the concept of absolute independence.” (1787, 15) Rehberg is careful to explain that this concept is not sufficient for religion, because by accepting yet another minimal concept such as this, one is not, for example, presupposing that this being is absolutely perfect (1787, 15). Rehberg argues that the perfection of such a being is always based on an analogy to our own spirit, thus, to assert with certainty that such a being possesses absolutely perfection is “a very obvious and often criticized fallacy.” (1787, 15) This point makes Rehberg's empiricist commitments clear, which he summarizes as follows:

All metaphysical systems are only explanations of the appearances that experience makes known to us. The explanation will turn out as it may, but it can never give a reason for denying those appearances, or for reintroducing doubt about that which is grounded on undeniable experience and has been correctly derived from it. (1787, 15)

Rehberg thus concludes the introductory section of the *Relation* by claiming that the above constitute the two “most essential” (1787, 12) religious claims that do not go beyond what experience teaches us, and which therefore must be compatible with every metaphysical system. This is what Rehberg goes on to argue in the remainder of the *Relation*. But as we will soon see, equally important is

Rehberg's discussion of well-known metaphysical claims that cannot be so grounded in experience and his assurance that morality and human happiness nonetheless remain unharmed.

### 3. The Principle of Morality

Rehberg is led to outline the core of his moral theory when discussing the idea of philosophical optimism, namely the idea that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds. Rehberg argues that this idea presupposes "incorrect concepts of the moral properties of the highest being" (1787, 120), in particular that this being is absolutely perfect which, as we have just seen, Rehberg holds to be a fallacy. This leads Rehberg to undertake a more serious examination of "the concept of moral perfection in general." (1787, 120) The first topic that falls under this general umbrella is that of the principle of morality or the conditions under which an object of moral evaluation is good or evil. Rehberg therefore begins the outline of his moral theory by asking: "wherein lies the foundation [Grund] of moral good and evil?" (1787, 121)

In order to understand Rehberg's answer to this question, we will have to consider a few aspects of his moral psychology, which will be discussed in more detail in the next section. First, Rehberg notes that his focus is on voluntary actions, for "nobody calls an involuntary action moral or immoral." (1787, 120) Additionally, he claims that, strictly speaking, it is not actions that are the proper objects of moral evaluation, but the will, and that we morally evaluate both our own will and those of others.<sup>6</sup> Most generally speaking, Rehberg is a psychological hedonist in the sense that he believes that "[w]ithout the sensation of pleasure and pain, the human being wills nothing." (1787, 121, see also 165) Important here is that Rehberg distinguishes between "mere desire or aversion" (1787, 121) and "the will" (1787, 122), where 'mere' desire or aversion consists in the "simple connection of pleasure or pain with a perception of the senses." (1787, 121) Rehberg claims that entirely sensible beings, such as animals, are "ruled" (1787, 121) by such "simple" desires, and to this extent they can be called "machines." (121n)<sup>7</sup> Rehberg argues that because such beings are incapable of making comparisons it is not correct to attribute a will to them. Human beings, on the other hand, who have understanding (*Verstand*) and reason (understanding being the faculty responsible

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted however that Rehberg often speaks of both actions and wills as being morally good or evil, and I will do so as well in the following.

<sup>7</sup> Rehberg is careful to note here that although animals are entirely sensible, they should not be regarded as "entirely sensationless" (1787, 121n), for this is "a hypothesis that is without foundation and dangerous in the practical doctrine of morals." (1787, 121n)

for making connections between representations, see 1787, 121), are capable of “combining many sense perceptions into higher concepts”, and when it is not just sense perceptions but also sensations of pleasure and pain that are so combined, “this is how the representations arise that set activity in motion, the will.” (1787, 121)<sup>8</sup>

Now, Rehberg argues that all simple desires are good in themselves because “the object of every desire is always something pleasurable, or good.” (1787, 122) However, since simple desires are distinct from the will, although simple desires might always be ‘good’, only the will can be *morally* good. Rehberg argues that we evaluate wills to be morally good or evil on the following basis: “if many desires are bound into a concept, then the concepts and the desires connected to them are morally good which are conceivable, in accordance with reason.” (1787, 122) Similarly, the “connection of contradictory desires in one concept generates moral evil.” (1787, 122) As I will discuss again later, this is a view noticeably influenced by the one Kant offers in the *Groundwork*. In the meantime, to help explain what Rehberg means he offers two examples, the first of which is an immoral action towards oneself:

A simple desire that has sensible enjoyment, and thus something that is good in itself as object, is not immoral so long as I suspect no bad consequences from it, even if after the fact bad consequences should appear. On the other hand, if I know that its satisfaction in its consequences damages the health of my body or the powers of my spirit to such an extent that thereby more badness would arise for me, or I would have to forgo something good, more than the good that I desire is worth in my opinion, then if I were to give in to that desire I would prefer the lesser good to the great, which is a contradiction. (1787, 124)

There are a few things to unpack about this passage, the first being the way in which Rehberg believes the consideration of consequences figures into moral evaluation. Just before this example, Rehberg describes it as a “deception [*Täuschung*]” (1787, 124) to “explain morality on the basis of consequences” (1787, 124), at least on the basis of consequences alone. His view, rather, is that it is not the consequences themselves but “the consideration of them in the moment of desire or action, by means of which they become good or evil.” (1787, 124) Rehberg’s point here seems to be the following: if, as in the above example, I will an action that I nonetheless believe will bring about more harm than good to myself, then I would act in a contradictory way. This is the case because human beings “must cognize more good as better” (1787, 126); this is simply how the human

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<sup>8</sup> Rehberg later defines the will in his review of the second *Critique* as: “the power to make possibility into actuality.” (Rehberg 1788, 352; see Walschots 2024, 236)

understanding works. Thus, while Rehberg holds that “no desire or action is morally good or bad without considering the consequences” (1787, 123–4), what he means is that it would be contradictory for us to intentionally perform an action that brings about more bad than good consequences for our body and mind. In other words, it is not the consequences that make the action bad, it is rather the contradiction generated by preferring the worse to the better.

To gain a clearer picture of what Rehberg has in mind, let us also consider his second example, which is of an immoral action towards others, namely theft. Rehberg argues that the concept of property contains “the representation of enjoyment and the thereby connected pleasure,” thus “every human being approves this concept,” even “without consideration of his own present condition” (1787, 125), that is, even for others when no advantage thereby arises for oneself. The concept of theft, however, is contradictory:

The concept of theft, on the other hand, as an action that harms property, would connect with each other these two concepts, of satisfaction in taking and satisfaction in keeping, and that of satisfaction with property and with no property, in a contradictory way and is therefore not conceivable. (1787, 125)

One way of putting Rehberg’s point is that the concept of theft inconsistently combines the idea of pleasure in having property and pleasure in (another person) not having property. Another way is as follows: theft “inflicts a kind of evil upon others that we ourselves disapprove of, or deprives them of a good that we ourselves desire that they enjoy.” (1787, 126) Put this latter way, theft involves desiring two contradictory things, namely that others get to enjoy property, and that they do not get to enjoy property. Thus, similar to the previous example, Rehberg regards “the inner content of the concept” of theft as “impossible” (1787, 126), i.e., as inconceivable or contradictory.

With these two examples in hand, we are now in a position to summarize Rehberg’s conception of the foundation of moral evaluation. As a reminder, Rehberg holds that the will or complex desires, which combine many desires together in contrast to simple desires, are morally good or evil based on whether their concept is conceivable or in accordance with reason (if morally good) or inconceivable or contradictory (if morally evil). The above two examples are of immoral actions because, in the first case, we necessarily prefer (*vorziehen*) the greater to the lesser good (see 1787, 124), so the concept of an action that brings about more bad consequences than good to ourselves would be contradictory and thus impermissible. Similarly, because property gives everyone pleasure and is good in itself (see 1787, 126), the concept of an action, such as that of theft, which connects to the idea of property pleasure in denying another property would also be contradictory

and thus morally evil. The flipside of this picture, of course, is that concepts or desires that are conceivable or rationally consistent are morally permissible. How this principle indicates what is morally required or obligatory is a more complicated question and will be discussed at the end of this section. But most generally speaking, a complex concept or desire is morally good or evil on Rehberg's view depending on whether it is in accordance with reason.

As mentioned, such a conception of moral evaluation is clearly influenced by the view Kant presents in the *Groundwork*; more specifically the 'universal law' formulation of the categorical imperative, according to which maxims are judged to be morally permissible or impermissible depending on whether they can be universalized without generating contradiction. Kant's clearest explanation of this view is in the following passage:

One must be able to will that a maxim of our action become a universal law: this is as such the canon of judging it morally. Some actions are such that their maxim cannot even be thought without contradiction as a universal law of nature; let alone that one could will that it should become such. In the case of others that inner impossibility is indeed not to be found, but it is still impossible to will that their maxim be elevated to the universality of a law of nature, because such a will would contradict itself. (4:424)<sup>9</sup>

How we should best understand Kant's view in this passage is a notoriously difficult interpretive question to answer that cannot be addressed here.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it is likely that one could interpret Rehberg in just as many ways as scholars have read Kant. But based on the above I believe Rehberg should be read as offering a version of what has been called the 'logical contradiction' interpretation of Kant's formula of universal law, according to which moral permissibility and impermissibility is determined by either the presence or the lack of a logical or conceptual contradiction: in Rehberg's case the concept capturing a complex desire can be either conceptually consistent or conceptually contradictory, and this determines moral good or evil respectively. Evidence for reading Rehberg along these lines is that he explicitly focuses on evaluating actions "in the mere cognition of the understanding, in calm reflection" (1787, 126), and he stresses repeatedly that "the highest principle of morality can be established a priori." (1787, 148, see also 129)

Additional evidence for reading Rehberg along these lines consists in the fact that he explicitly states that his "principle of morality is based on the principle of contradiction." (1787,

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<sup>9</sup> References to Kant's works cite the volume and page number of his *Gesammelte Schriften* (see Kant 1900–) and I follow the translations of Kant's texts available in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.

<sup>10</sup> For a helpful overview of the interpretive options, see Galvin (2009).

132n) He says that this explains why perfect duties to others, for instance, “can originally only be negative” (1787, 130), namely because the presence of contradiction determines what we ought to refrain from doing in all circumstances and without exception. Rehberg also aligns himself with the Wolffian tradition by claiming that “the principle of perfection is useable as the highest principle of morals” (1787, 137) to the extent that “rational conforming and conceivability” (1787, 148) is a perfection. To be noted, however, is that Rehberg also spends some time explicitly distancing himself from the Wolffian tradition by arguing that moral evil is not a mere privation, as he takes Spinoza, Leibniz, Wolff, Baumgarten, and Mendelssohn to have done (see 1787, 131). Instead of a mere lack of perfection, Rehberg takes moral evil to involve something positive, namely the feeling of displeasure that he takes to be necessarily associated with the representation of contradiction (1787, 131), which will be discussed in more detail in the next section. He also makes a point of saying that his view aligns with the stoic principle that ‘all vices are equal,’ in the sense that just as all contradictory concepts are equally untruths, so do all cases of moral evil equally involve contradiction (see 1787, 131).

Strictly speaking, Rehberg holds that moral evaluation is carried out in the way described above only under ideal circumstances. He mentions, for instance, that it is *impossible* for human beings to judge theft to be morally permissible, but only “if the inner content of concepts determined satisfaction.” (1787, 126, see also 129) As based on the principle of contradiction, under ideal circumstances at least the moral evaluation of actions or wills is thus a purely cognitive act. But under nonideal circumstances, that is, for human beings in the real world, “diversity in representations of good and evil necessarily arises from the limitedness and diversity of their experience” (1787, 141), which results in each individual alone being able to know “what kind of representations and sensations he combines in any concept.” (1787, 129) Thus, while we might all judge similarly if we were to judge on the basis of reason alone, Rehberg argues that it is “the limitedness or diversity and the conflict in the field of sensibility” which is to blame for the diversity in our representations of moral good and evil (1787, 141). Not only this, but Rehberg believes that reference to experience is required in order for the principle of morality to determine positive duties: in the *Relation* he claims that “it is impossible to find the application of the principle a priori and in such a way prove a moral science according to the geometrical method” (1787, 149), and even more clearly in his later ‘Theory and Practice’ essay that “from this rule of assessment, no objective determination of human actions, on which a system of individually determines duties could be built, can be derived.” (1794, 119 and see Gregory 2021, 1168) In the next section we will see that it is our

nature as both rational and sensible beings that results in the a priori principle requiring additional help from the field of sensibility in order to be ‘applied’ in a different sense, namely in order to motivate us to act accordingly.

#### 4. Moral Psychology and the Good Will

We have already seen that Rehberg is a psychological hedonist in the sense that he believes all desires to aim at pleasure (1787, 121 and 165). But he is not a psychological egoist, because the pleasure that we desire is not necessarily our own: “the object of our desires [*Wünsche*], of our actions, even the most virtuous, is always pleasure: one’s own or that of another.” (1787, 166) Indeed, likely as a result of his reading of British authors such as Hume, Rehberg believes that we either desire pleasure “immediately,” namely our own pleasure, or ‘mediately’, namely “through the sympathy of sensations that we imagine are connected to the object of moral sensations and thoughts.” (1787, 128)

Rehberg also makes an important distinction between two different kinds of pleasure. The first is what we might call ‘simple’ pleasure or pain because it is the kind that is involved in simple desire or aversion. Rehberg describes this kind of pleasure as being connected to a perception of the senses and as a “pleasure of the body.” (1787, 134n, see also 150) To this Rehberg contrasts a “satisfaction [*Wohlgefallen*] in the act of the understanding”, namely the pleasure “connected with the work of the understanding, with the cognition of relations, independently of their object which, considered on its own, might be pleasurable or displeasurable.” (1787, 127) As connected to the cognition of relations, we might therefore call this kind of pleasure ‘complex’ or a pleasure of the understanding. The primary case that Rehberg has in mind, of course, is the pleasure that accompanies “the cognition of perfection” (1787, 128), namely the pleasure connected to concepts that are rationally consistent and conceivable, and the displeasure connected to contradictory and inconceivable concepts.<sup>11</sup> Rehberg describes this kind of pleasure as not only “unique [*eigne*]” (1787, 144), but also as of a “stronger degree” than the pleasures that take place “in mere sensibility.” (1787, 157, see also 145) The displeasure that accompanies contradiction and “immoral thoughts and actions” in particular is “far more painful because the internal contradiction that lies in an

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<sup>11</sup> Rehberg describes this “pleasure that we experience in relation to the efficacy of the understanding” (1787, 133) as a “Leibnizian theory”, i.e., one that supposes “pleasure is connected to (distinct or obscure) cognition of perfection,” but he notes that he adds his own “qualification [*Bestimmung*]” to it (1787, 134n).

immoral sensation or action cannot be overcome” (1787, 127), which explains why some are led to end their lives when they have an evil conscience (1787, 128).

Both of these kinds of pleasure function as distinct “incentives [*Treibfeder*]” (1787, 132), and Rehberg is clear that it is not the conceivability of a concept on its own that functions as an incentive, rather it is the pleasure that accompanies it: “the incentive of moral actions is not contained in the conceivability of their concepts, but rather in the pleasure which is connected to the cognition of it.” (1787, 132) Thus, when it comes to the question of how Rehberg thinks action takes place, the first thing to note is that he does not offer what we might call an ‘intellectualist’ theory of choice, according to which we necessarily choose in line with our cognition of the best.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly enough, neither does Rehberg believe that we act on the basis of what promises the most pleasure. This means that even though the pleasures of the understanding are stronger in degree than the pleasures of the body, we do not always act in accordance with these higher pleasures. Rehberg’s view, rather, is that “the activity of human beings is ruled” by what is called the “liveliness [*Lebhaftigkeit*]” (1787, 129) of one’s representations.<sup>13</sup> For Rehberg, liveliness is determined neither by the quality of the pleasure we experience (i.e., whether of the body or the understanding), nor by its quantity, but rather certain subjective conditions: “more lively cognition [...] is connected to the consciousness of the transition to the cognition or feeling of greater perfection than what I knew before.” (1787, 133–4) Whether a particular bodily pleasure is more lively, for instance, and thus capable of moving me to action, depends upon my previous experience: the prospect of going to the beach, for example, is a more ‘lively’ representation for the person currently experiencing winter than it is for someone who lives in a warm climate and can visit the beach year round. Rehberg appears to think similarly about the pleasures of the understanding: becoming aware of a perfection we previously failed to notice is more likely to move us to act than if we had been confronted with it on a daily basis (see 1787, 134n). In this way, Rehberg believes that “the incentives of our actions are very much subjected to the subjective conditions of our own state.” (1787, 134)

The above is one of the most significant positions of Rehberg’s moral theory because it has a number of important implications. The most noteworthy implication is that the “law of morality (of reason) is in part inefficacious on its own” (1787, 140), in the sense that the mere a priori judgment

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<sup>12</sup> This is the view traditionally attributed to Leibniz, Wolff, and their followers. See Walschots (forthcoming) for an overview.

<sup>13</sup> The nature of ‘lively’ representations or ‘living cognition’ was discussed by many figures prior to Rehberg. See Grote 2017, Ch. 3) for a discussion of Baumgarten’s development of Wolff’s conception of living cognition.

that the concept of an action is conceivable is never sufficient to move us to action. This is true in two senses: first, and as mentioned, judgment or cognition is simply not an incentive without the pleasure that accompanies it, and second because even though the pleasure of the understanding is stronger in degree, it is not necessarily more ‘lively.’ Rehberg makes his general point here by claiming that his position is similar to Kant’s: while the principle of morality “is analytic and comprehensible from reason alone” (1787, 132), the application of this principle “to actions or the principle **do that which you wish to be valid as universal law**, is synthetic and not comprehensible from reason alone, as Kant very rightly claims: for experience must first teach us that our actions spring from our representations.” (1787, 132n) Rehberg misinterprets Kant on this issue, however. Although Kant does indeed claim in the *Groundwork* that the categorical imperative “is an a priori synthetic practical proposition” (4:420), this has nothing to do with ‘application’ in the sense that Rehberg has in mind: for Kant the categorical imperative is not analytic on its own but synthetic when applied, it is synthetic because we cannot analytically derive what we are to do from a presupposed end (whether possible or actual), as is the case for the imperatives of skill and prudence (see 4:417 and 4:419). Indeed, Kant stresses throughout the *Groundwork* that the categorical imperative does *not* rely on experience, so Rehberg appears to misunderstand the sense in which the categorical imperative is synthetic. In any event, the important point for understanding Rehberg’s view is that he believes that the principle of morality is synthetic in the sense that it requires reference to experience, in particular empirical knowledge of human psychology, in order to be applied: “the most perfect speculative moral philosophy, in order to become universally practical, cannot entirely do without the empirical doctrine of the soul.” (1787, 138) In particular, pure moral judgment needs to be related to a human being’s subjective pleasure in order to motivate us: “the thought of an action that we cognize as containing the greatest sum of pure pleasure is nonetheless not sufficient to bring it about *if one’s own present pleasure does not accompany this thought*.” (127, my emphasis) Indeed, based on the moral psychology described above, this is the only way in which the cognition of perfection can become the most lively option and we therefore act accordingly.

This last point brings me to Rehberg’s conception of the good will. Since the a priori principle requires knowledge of the empirical human being in order to be applied in the sense that acting morally involves certain subjective conditions and a relation to our present pleasure, Rehberg has a particular conception of what a good will looks like:

If it is impossible that a human being could ever perfectly correspond to the ideal of morality, he will nonetheless always fulfill its requirements to the extent that his sensations

and action harmonize with it, even if they do not express the ideal itself: he will be morally good as long as his cognition of perfection either determines his actions and sensations, or the latter are at least in accordance with the former cognition of the law. (1787, 136)

Rehberg repeatedly uses the language of harmony (*harmonieren*) to express what he has in mind: to put it in Kantian terms, Rehberg believes that it is sufficient if our actions are *in conformity* with what the principle of morality requires and thus we do not always need to act *from* duty (see 4:398). This fits with the picture offered above: although it is in principle possible for the pleasure connected to a conceivable concept to be strong enough to motivate us, because human action results from the liveliness of our representations, it would be unrealistic to require the good will to always and only act *from* duty.

Another way in which Rehberg describes the good will is in terms of the “good heart” (1787, 147).<sup>14</sup> When addressing some imagined objections to the moral psychology he has presented, one of them is that he has assigned too much importance to “the cognition of the understanding” (1787, 145) and that experience teaches us that “broad insight” and the good will often come apart (1787, 145). Rehberg responds by distinguishing between two types of person: the first is the “sensible knave [*den schlaunen Schurken*]” (1787, 146)<sup>15</sup> who is very smart and clever when finding the means to their own end but has no problem mistreating others when doing so (1787, 145–6). The second is the person of limited insight but who never even considers mistreating others by clever means (1787, 146). The difference is that the latter has a “correct, that is, good understanding” (1787, 146) and “correct judgment” (1787, 147) which is “inseparable from a good heart” (1787, 148), as opposed to a merely large quantity of knowledge, which can be used for all sorts of immoral purposes.

Before concluding this section there are a few more implications that follow from the moral psychology described above that deserve brief mention. First, Rehberg’s conception of the liveliness of representations allows him to explain the possibility of moral evil and weakness of will cases: human beings might be able to cognize perfection and which complex desires are conceptually consistent, but if a more lively personal pleasure arises this “outweighs [*überwiegt*]” (1787, 129) the former judgment. Rehberg explicitly states that this is how theft might take place, for instance (1787, 129). Second, Rehberg is explicit that the inclinations that do not spring from the moral law are not

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<sup>14</sup> See di Giovanni (2005, 135) for a brief discussion of Rehberg contra Kant on ‘purity of heart’.

<sup>15</sup> Although Rehberg seems to have the kind of character Hume describes in the second *Enquiry* in mind, it should be noted that this is not the same expression that can be found in the first German translation of that text, namely “*verständiger Schelm*” (see 1756, 214)

necessarily bad; indeed, he warns against “the dangerous error of the moralists who allow themselves to be misled into condemning all inclinations that do not spring from the law of morality, even if they do not work against it.” (1787, 135) Third, Rehberg stresses that the nature of the pleasure of the understanding is an additional reason why he is not an egoist: cognizing perfection or consistent concepts gives me pleasure even if this perfection has nothing to do with me personally (1787, 143–4). Fourth and finally, Rehberg’s moral psychology illustrates that he wishes to find a moral theory that is not an “enthusiasm [*Enthusiasmus*]” and “mere abstraction that can only exist as an idea” (1787, 135). Rehberg holds such an approach to moral philosophy to “do morality indescribable harm by means of this distance from the objects of the real world.” (1787, 136) This is of course an important point when it comes to the relationship between Rehberg’s moral theory and his politics. Rehberg’s aim, rather, is to outline a moral theory grounded in and applicable to real human beings, who possess both reason and the understanding, on the one hand, and a body and sensibility, on the other.

## 5. The Morally Perfect Being, the Human Condition, and Optimism

Toward the end of outlining his moral theory, Rehberg returns to the question he started with, namely the moral qualities of the highest being or what he regards as the false hypothesis that the concept of an absolute independence is also absolutely perfect. Rehberg calls this “the ideal of morality, a being that could absolutely never be capable of an immoral will.” (1787, 149) Rehberg reminds us here that he has found “the ground of immorality in sensibility” (1787, 149) in that it is the ‘liveliness’ of present sensible pleasure that leads us to act against what we judge to be morally good on the basis of reason alone. Accordingly, he argues here that a morally perfect being is one that is “independent of everything external to it” (1787, 150) in the sense that its cognition is not determined by its relation to other things but by “the constitution of things themselves” (1787, 151); it “grasps everything with its understanding and cognizes all relations equally distinctly.” (1787, 152) Such a morally perfect being is therefore independent of sensibility and “the insight of its understanding is perfect.” (1787, 150)

In contrast to such a being, Rehberg describes the human condition as one of “conflict” between “sensibility and the principles of reason.” (1787, 151–2) In fact, Rehberg describes this conflict as “undoubtedly the most interesting problem of philosophy” (1787, 152) and outlines four distinct ways in which the relation between reason and sensibility in human beings could be

understood. The first is materialism where reason is an illusion and everything can be reduced to sensible appearance (1787, 152). The second is idealism, according to which reason is “the only thing real and sensibility is mere illusion.” (1787, 153) The third option is Kant’s transcendental idealism, according to which sensibility is not reduced to reason, but the ground of sensibility is found in the laws of reason and the laws of both (sensibility and reason) are thought to be compatible with one another (1787, 153–5). Rehberg’s preferred view, however, is the fourth option, namely “a Platonic dualism, if you will” where “both reason and sensibility are taken as they are, and neither is explained by means of the other [...] and to regard sensibility as a given object of every understanding.” (1787, 159)

Rehberg does not expand on the nature of his dualism, but an important implication of him giving priority to neither reason nor sensibility is that it becomes difficult to explain why we *should* prioritize reason over sensibility; put differently, why we ought to be moral. Rehberg is aware of this problem, and his view is that we cannot prove a priori “that reason deserves priority over sensibility” (1787, 138), and thus that the moral skeptic “can never satisfactorily be answered.” (1787, 138) He nonetheless believes that reason *should* be given priority over sensibility, and that a feeling of this priority “is found in all rational beings to a stronger or weaker degree,” thus the only thing remaining to do is to pay attention to this feeling and strengthen it (1787, 138). Indeed, a point Rehberg makes numerous times is that we cannot “constrain [*zwingen*]” another to act morally, and that it is dangerous to “instill [*einzuschärfen*]” (1787, 140) the law of morality upon human beings by means of civil reward and punishment. The most we can ever do is “compel [*nötigen*]” (1787, 130) others to follow their own insight and not be led astray by sensibility, just as a sick person who cannot control their limbs might be guided by a helper to go where they wish (1787, 130–1).

While Rehberg might have defined the concept of the highest being as one with a most perfect intelligence, it should be made clear that he never makes the additional claim that we are justified in attributing absolute perfection and a will incapable of moral evil to the concept of a highest being. As a reminder, Rehberg holds the concept of a highest being to be a minimal concept that he feels we *are* justified in assuming and that is compatible with all metaphysical systems. Indeed, he states explicitly that “no reason can be found for the hypothesis that the sensible world contains the greatest possible, that is, conceivable amount of happiness” (1787, 159), i.e., that we live in the best of all possible worlds. Rehberg concludes the discussion of his moral theory with the claim that we do not necessarily lose more than we gain by denying philosophical optimism. On his view, it is “impossible that something could be other than it is” (1787, 162), and that this establishes

a more certain and lasting contentment than optimism ever can. This is the case for several reasons. First, he claims that we cannot prove optimism as a philosophical claim: the mere consolation that things always work out for the best lacks authentication (1787, 164). Second, it is disadvantageous because it gives rise to confusion: since we never know what is truly best in advance of acting, but after we have acted we know that what took place was the best that could have ever happened, virtue hereby loses its “most powerful drive”, namely, “the drive to do good.” (1787, 166)<sup>16</sup> Rehberg’s alternative, according to which we do not live in the best of all possible worlds, but the world cannot be otherwise than it is and the highest being is only responsible for what does *not* stem from human beings, preserves this drive and the idea that we are in control of our own happiness and that of other creatures. Although Rehberg does not say so explicitly, with this he clearly thinks he has accomplished what he set out to do at the beginning of the book, namely remove the threat to human happiness that comes with doubting belief in God and his absolute perfection.

## 6. Conclusion: Pure Practical Reason and Theory and Practice

Rehberg takes up a number of the above themes in later writings that discuss moral philosophy. First, in this review of Kant’s second *Critique*, published in August of 1788, just seven months after the book first appeared, one of Rehberg’s main arguments is that “there is no distinct pure practical reason; rather that this only consists in the application of pure reason to the empirically given faculty of desire.” (1788, 357; Walschots 2024 240) Indeed, Rehberg repeats in the review that “the principle of contradiction is the supreme *principium cognoscendi* of pure morality” (1788, 257; Walschots 2024, 240), but its application requires that it be related to feelings of pleasure. Rehberg goes so far as to accuse Kant of fanaticism (*Schwärmerei*) for thinking that the incentive of morality, namely respect for the moral law, is not a sensible feeling of pleasure: “The idea that the law itself but not pleasure in the law has to be the incentive of morality is itself fanaticism.” (1788, 355; Walschots 2024, 238) Rehberg argues that this sort of fanaticism is dangerous because it leads to “the deadening of the senses.” (1788, 355; Walschots 2024, 238) With the above discussion of Rehberg’s more extensive moral psychology as laid out in the *Relation* in hand, we are in a much better position to understand his claims to this effect in the review: since he believes that no action

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<sup>16</sup> Rehberg’s reference to the Stoics in this context (see 1787, 166) indicates that he has the ‘lazy argument’ in mind, namely the idea that the doctrine of fatalism makes it futile to act.

takes place without a relation to pleasure, indeed the liveliness of one's own subjective pleasure, it is impossible for the moral law alone to be applied to human beings and motivate them to act morally.

In his response to Kant's 'Theory and Practice' essay as well Rehberg argues that the "highest moral law is independent of all experience" (1793, 117; Gregory 2021, 1167), but in order to be applied "something empirically recognized must always be added to the highest (formal) law" (1793, 120; Gregory 2021, 1168), namely a relation to our sensible feelings of pleasure and displeasure (see 1793, 124n; Gregory 2021, 1170n). The important point, with which I would like to conclude, is that this view is the foundation of the political philosophy Rehberg goes on to develop in the remainder of his own 'Theory and Practice' essay and his writings on the French Revolution: in order to make a priori principles relevant and obligatory in the real world for human beings, we must take into consideration their sensible nature, which "is an empirically recognized fact." (1793, 123; Gregory 2021, 1169) Indeed, Rehberg believes it is dangerous to try and apply abstract ideals in the real world without taking the empirical nature of human beings into account, and this is true in the context of both moral philosophy and politics. The moral theory Rehberg develops in the *Relation* provides the background to such claims, thus we are now in a position to better understand the broader philosophical foundations of his politics as well as the systematic nature of his thought more generally.

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