

The Unity of Reason and the Highest Good

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Abstract. *Kant's Reason* (2023) is an excellent study that develops an original set of interpretive claims and shows their relevance for contemporary theories of rationality. At the core of Karl Schafer's project is the following thesis: that Kant's account of reason is unified as a power of comprehension in both its theoretical and practical activities. The aim of my paper is to examine this thesis against Kant's doctrine of the Highest Good. In §1, I question some claims Schafer makes about the Highest Good. Then, in §2 and §3, I consider how we might develop a more detailed reading of this doctrine along the lines of Schafer's project. §4 concludes.

Keywords. Kant, unity of reason, practical reason, theoretical reason, principle of sufficient reason, highest good, moral law, autonomy, kingdom of ends

For someone who has been able to convince himself of the propositions presented in the *Analytic* such comparisons will be gratifying; for they rightly occasion the expectation of perhaps being able some day to attain insight into the unity of the whole pure rational faculty (theoretical as well as practical) and to derive everything from one principle—the undeniable need of human reason, which finds complete satisfaction only in a complete systematic unity of its cognitions. (*KpV*, AA V 90–91)²

There is no doubt that Kant regards the faculty of reason as a unity, one whose theoretical and practical activities might derive from a single principle.³ But the question of the unity of reason and its elusive first principle have perplexed Kant's readers for over two centuries. Karl Schafer's book is an

¹ Please cite the published version.

² Using standard abbreviations of Kant's works, I cite the volume and page numbers of the *Akademie Ausgabe* (AA): Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed.: Vols 1–22 *Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Vol. 23 *Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, from Vol. 24 *Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen*. Berlin: Reimer then De Gruyter, 1900–.

³ See, for instance, *GMS*, AA IV 392; *KpV*, AA V 91, 5:121; as well as *KrV*, A xx.

outstanding attempt to reconstruct—using resources internal to Kant’s system—a new account of reason as a power of “comprehension” (*Begreifen*).⁴ The result, as one might expect, is an uncommonly *gratifying* interpretation that does justice to the architectonic aim of Kant’s philosophy. Still, such high ambitions invite scrutiny. My goal here is to suggest some ways we might strengthen Schafer’s project, focusing on the place of the “Highest Good” (*das höchste Gut*) in Kant’s system.

1.

While Schafer mentions the doctrine of the Highest Good briefly in the Introduction,⁵ we only get a sense of its importance in Chapter 5. Schafer writes that the Highest Good “provides us with our fullest grasp of the ideal object of theoretical and practical comprehension *together*.”⁶ More provocatively, he adds later in a footnote that the Highest Good enables us to cognize something that no exercise of theoretical reason can attain: “As we will see, there is a sense in which both theoretical and practical reason demand of us that we ‘assume’ something absolutely unconditioned in this sense, but only practical reason (in the guise of its conception of the highest good) allows us to begin to determine what this absolutely unconditioned condition is like.”⁷ A complete account of reason will direct us to its ideal object, the Highest Good, which is supposed to explain the harmony of theoretical and practical reason in a single end. Or so we are told.

This promise of an explanation is saved for Chapter 6, titled “Practical Reason’s Supreme Principle, the Moral Law, and the Highest Good.” But this is where things get puzzling. To see why, we must first consider the tripartite model that Schafer expands upon in his book. According to this model, any cognitive activity (theoretical or practical) admits of three characterizations:

1. A **formal characterization**, according to which we merely analyze a faculty’s internal structure and modes of operation, in isolation from the matter that constitutes its proper objects;

⁴ Karl Schafer, *Kant’s Reason: The Unity of Reason and the Limits of Comprehension in Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

⁵ Schafer, *Kant’s Reason*, p. 24.

⁶ Schafer, *Kant’s Reason*, p. 151.

⁷ Schafer, *Kant’s Reason*, p. 155, note 8. Schafer reiterates this point near the end of Chapter 5 when he states that it is “only by drawing on the resources of practical reason that we can make our conception of this ‘unconditioned Something’ determinate” (*Kant’s Reason*, p. 180).

2. A **material characterization**, according to which we analyze the proper objects that make up the matter of a cognitive faculty in its proper activity; and lastly,
3. A **complete characterization** that articulates a faculty's form *and* matter, thereby showing how a faculty's modes of operation and their proper objects are connected.

One of Schafer's larger aims in Chapters 5 and 6 is to defend what we may call an Equivalence Thesis between the theoretical and practical principles of reason that fall under these three perspectives. On the theoretical side, he identifies a formal characterization of reason in terms of what Kant calls the "Logical Maxim":

Logical Maxim: *Find the unconditioned for every conditioned cognition of the understanding, with which reason's unity will be completed.*⁸

The practical analogue of this maxim, Schafer argues, is the Formula of Universal Law (FUL):

FUL: Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you at the same time can will that it become a universal law. (GMS, AA IV 421)

Schafer then asks what version of a real principle of theoretical reason follows from the Logical Maxim, and he identifies it as the "Supreme Principle," Kant's (critical) version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR):

Supreme Principle: When some X conditioned in respect R *exists* (or is posited), then either (i) the whole series of R-conditions involving X, which is itself unconditioned, *exists* (or is posited) or (ii) some other (non-R) conditions of X, which is itself sufficient to complete reason's unity, *exists* (or is posited).⁹

⁸ Schafer, *Kant's Reason*, p. 153. Here I am using the qualified version of the Logical Maxim that Schafer defends in Chapter 5, what he calls Logical Maxim-_{Find}, and the qualified version of the Supreme Principle, what he calls Supreme Principle-1.

⁹ Schafer, *Kant's Reason*, p. 172.

As for the practical analogue of this principle, Schafer claims it must be the Formula of Humanity (FH):

FH: So act that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means. (*GMS*, AA IV 4:429)

The reasoning Schafer gives for these parallels is this. The Logical Maxim and FUL correspond to a formal characterization because they merely seek the fundamental condition of a faculty's activity in isolation from any object. This yields a rule of finding the "unconditioned" for any conditioned object of cognition in the case of theoretical reason, and a rule of finding the "universal law" for any conditioned maxim of willing in the case of practical reason. Extending the tripartite model, Schafer thinks we can further equate the Supreme Principle and FH. Why? Because each are concerned with articulating a faculty's "matter" (object or end) to which its proper activity is directed. In the case of theoretical reason, this object is the "unconditioned" itself (of which we can know nothing further); in the case of practical reason, it is the end of practical reason in human beings, namely, their "humanity" or "rational nature." This is the sense in which FH is the practical analogue of the Supreme Principle, as it picks out a material characterization of the proper object of willing that enjoys an unconditional status.

But what can we say about the third perspective, the view that combines a formal characterization of practical reason (its modes of operation) and its material characterization (its object or end)? Schafer observes that there is no equivalent of this view on the side of theoretical reason, which he says is "no surprise,"¹⁰ since this is one place where practical reason enjoys "primacy" in Kant's system. From a theoretical point of view there will always be a gap between how the faculty of reason operates in seeking to find the unconditioned under the Logical Maxim, and how it assumes or posits the object of the unconditioned under the Supreme Principle. This limitation is removed once we turn to reason as a practical faculty, for then we can apprehend a power of willing that is simultaneously

¹⁰ Schafer, *Kant's Reason*, p. 206. One might still think this *is* surprising, given that Schafer states repeatedly that these three characterizations bear upon *any* cognitive faculty, theoretical or practical (see *Kant's Reason*, pp. 7, 59, 86, 135, 151, 165, and 204).

(i) unconditioned with respect to its form (qua universal law) and (ii) unconditioned with respect to its object (qua rational nature). This third perspective thereby yields the Formula of Autonomy (FA) and its variant, the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends (FKE), which unites the idea of willing only those maxims that can be made into universal law (FUL) with the idea of the rational nature of human beings as the proper end of such willing (FH).¹¹

Before voicing my reservations about the Equivalence Thesis, I want to add further evidence in support of the tripartite model. In the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant says that all maxims admit of three characterizations: (1) a “form,” (2) a “matter,” and (3) a “complete determination,” each of which corresponds to a different formula of the categorical imperative:

All maxims have

1) a **form**, which consists in universality, and then the formula of the moral imperative is expressed as follows: that maxims must be chosen as if they were to hold as universal laws of nature;

2) a **matter**, namely an end, and then the formula says: that a rational being, as an end according to its nature, and hence as an end in itself, must serve for every maxim as the limiting condition of all merely relative and arbitrary ends;

3) a **complete determination** [*vollständige Bestimmung*] of all maxims by that formula, namely: that all maxims from one’s own legislation ought to harmonize into a possible kingdom of ends [*Reich der Zwecke*] as a kingdom of nature. (GMS, AA IV 436)¹²

In other words, a formal characterization of maxims corresponds to the form of the will (and this yields FULN, the natural law variant of FUL); a material characterization of maxims corresponds to the matter of the will (and this

¹¹ One implication here is that Autonomy appears to be the highest principle of the entire faculty of pure reason, not the “critical” version of the PSR. I shall return to this in §3.

¹² Kant continues by saying that a “progression takes place as through the categories of the *unity* of the form of the will (its universality), the *plurality* of the matter (of objects, i.e. of ends), and the *allness* or totality of the system of these” (GMS, AA IV 436). In a footnote he adds: “*Teleology* considers nature as a kingdom of ends, *morals* considers a possible kingdom of ends as a kingdom of nature. In the former the kingdom of ends is a theoretical idea for explaining what exists. In the latter, it is a practical idea for the sake of bringing about, in conformity with this very idea, that which does not exist *but which can become real by means of our conduct*” (GMS, AA IV 436n; emphasis added).

yields FH); and the union of the two corresponds to the complete determination of maxims (and this yields FKE, the communal variant of FA). Indeed, what FKE articulates is not only the ideal *principle* of autonomy as the law by which all rational beings ought to exercise their willing of maxims. Stronger yet, it articulates the ideal *object* of a possible world in which the natural order of appearances would be systematically united with the freedom of rational beings. FKE then seems to yield the highest degree of “comprehension” we can attain, as it yields cognition through principles that unites both the unconditional form and matter of practical reason.

In view of what Schafer says in Chapter 5, it is natural to suppose that this ideal union of form and matter is another name for the “Highest Good.” Schafer even raises this expectation at the beginning of Chapter 6 when he states that “reason’s drive for complete comprehension (of *both* a theoretical and practical sort) is most fully satisfied” in Kant’s doctrine of the Highest Good.¹³ However, when we turn to Schafer’s explication of this doctrine in §6.e, titled “A Systematic Presentation of Reason’s Principle,” it is surprising to see where he locates this ideal within the tripartite model just reviewed. Instead of locating the Highest Good under the third heading of form/matter unity, as one might expect, he locates it under the second heading of matter alone. Schafer hints at this when he says that there is a relation of equivalence between the Formula of Humanity (FH) and the Highest Good (see *Kant’s Reason*, p. 205). Yet it is only when he draws up a “systematic presentation” of reason as a table of principles that we learn where Schafer thinks the Highest Good belongs:

SCHAFER’S TABLE¹⁴

	Principles of Theoretical Reason	Principles of Practical Reason
Subject-Focused (Formal)	Logical Maxim	Formula of Universal Law (FUL) / Formula of the Universal Law of Nature (FULN)

¹³ Schafer, *Kant’s Reason*, p. 184.

¹⁴ I have modified the table from Chapter 6 (*Kant’s Reason*, p. 206).

Object-Focused (Material)	Supreme Principle / Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR)	Formula of Humanity (FH) / <u>The Highest Good</u>
Complete System of Subjects and Objects (Union of Form and Matter)		Formula of Autonomy (FA) / Formula of the Kingdom of Ends (FKE)

What is confusing is that Schafer appears to weaken his commitment to this second-tier ordering only a few pages later. In §6.f, titled “The Ultimate Object of Human Comprehension and the Highest Good,” he writes that while Kant’s doctrine of the Highest Good “begins” with the concept of a good will and the unconditional value of human nature (as expressed in FH), “it does not end there.”¹⁵ This is because we only generate the ideal by including in a single system the unconditional value of human rationality with the “totality” of conditional goods that make up our happiness. So the Highest Good articulates a much broader “object” of practical reason than FH, and Schafer acknowledges this (see *Kant’s Reason*, p. 208). The object of FH is the rationality of human beings, as the objective end of their willing. Yet the object of the Highest Good is a possible kingdom of rational beings as a kingdom of nature, one in which their autonomous willing is united with their happiness. For this reason it is puzzling that Schafer does not locate the Highest Good in the third-tier of his table, as he agrees with Kant that only the Highest Good offers us insight into the “unconditioned totality [*die unbedingte Totalität*] of the object of pure practical reason” (*KpV*, AA V 108).

2.

To make progress here, we must first address an ambiguity in the concept of *matter*. On closer inspection, this concept has at least two senses in a practical context:

*Matter*₁: The rationality of human beings is the only matter or object of a possible categorical imperative, because it is the only objective end that ought to be willed by all rational beings.

*Matter*₂: The matter or object of the will consists of the conditional or relative ends that make up the object of each person’s happiness.

¹⁵ Schafer, *Kant’s Reason*, p. 208.

Once we disambiguate these two senses of ‘matter,’ we can see that the Formula of Humanity relies upon the idea of human beings as ends in themselves (matter₁), whereas the Highest Good relies upon the additional idea that virtue combined with happiness makes up the complete object of pure practical reason (matter₂).¹⁶ As a friendly amendment to Schafer’s table, we might then relocate the Highest Good under the third tier, especially as it seems to belong to the “Complete System of Subjects and Objects” and the “Union of Form and Matter.” This would also square with what Schafer says about the Highest Good both *before* and *after* he introduces the table, especially his remark that the Highest Good satisfies “reason’s drive for complete comprehension.”¹⁷

But things are not so straightforward. This is because there is an even deeper ambiguity in the distinction between “form” and “matter” that lies behind Schafer’s Equivalence Thesis. To bring this into view, consider the first two headings that Schafer groups under the principles of practical reason: “form” refers to a “subject-directed” characterization of the will that abstracts from its end, and “matter” refers to an “object-directed” characterization of the will that includes this end. As we have seen, the concept of an end of willing can mean different things: it can mean (1) an objective “end” whose value stands independently of any relative matter of choice, or it can mean (2) those relative ends of choice that constitute the object of happiness itself (as one essential element of the Highest Good). When Kant calls attention to the three ways we can view maxims at *GMS*, AA IV 436—in terms of their form, matter, and complete determination—he is explicit in abstracting from the “matter” of willing in the sense of matter₂. And that is why, to be precise, FH concerns the objective end of maxims (in the sense of matter₁) that makes no reference to relative or contingent objects of desire that affect us as sensibly conditioned beings.¹⁸

This further explains why, for Kant, we can give a “formal characterization” of maxims: all we must do is abstract from any sensible need, inclination, or interest that would influence the will through feelings of

¹⁶ Cf. Kant’s threefold distinction of an “end” (*Zweck*), an “objective end” (*objectiver Zweck*), and a “final end” (*Endzweck*) (*RGV*, AA VI 6n).

¹⁷ Schafer, *Kant’s Reason*, p. 184.

¹⁸ While Schafer does mention the “flexible fashion in which Kant makes use of the form/matter contrast in different contexts” (p. 191, note 17), I worry that he ends up sliding between their different senses in his characterization of practical reason.

pleasure or displeasure. FH remains “formal” in this sense, not because it is “subject-directed” or focused exclusively on the principle of willing (as is the case with FUL/FULN), but because it contains the idea of an end that all rational beings ought to adopt. In fact, it should now be clear that all of Kant’s formulas of the categorical imperative belong to a “formal” characterization of the will in this sense of term, because they arise when we abstract from the matter₂ that constitutes our private ends. Even the “complete determination” of maxims that generates the ideal of a kingdom of ends arises only when we “abstract from the personal differences of rational beings as well as from all the content of their private ends” (GMS, IV 433). What FKE articulates is an ideal realm of rational beings whose autonomous willing unites with a natural system of appearances. Yet this makes no further claim about the connection between virtue and happiness (a point I shall return to shortly).

To carry out a more substantial revision of Schafer’s table, we might follow a clue he leaves the reader in a footnote: that the “complete object” of the Highest Good “involves completeness with respect to both the ascending and descending series of conditions.”¹⁹ A curious feature about the faculty of reason in its theoretical use is that it operates regressively from condition to conditioned, thereby “ascending” to ever higher (more universal) forms of cognition, yearning, as it were, to complete the regress of conditioning-relations with something Unconditioned. Schafer’s clue points to a striking asymmetry in the case of practical reason, which he observes also operates progressively.²⁰ This is the sense in which the faculty of practical reason “descends” to the totality of conditional goods in striving to determine a complete object to which its exercise is directed. For Kant, the object in question is the Highest Good as that which contains, in addition to the unconditional good of one’s autonomous will (the condition of virtue), the sum-total of relative ends that constitute one’s well-being (the condition of happiness).

Keeping these ascending/regressive and descending/progressive operations of reason in mind, we can now revise the practical side of Schafer’s table as follows:

¹⁹ Schafer, *Kant’s Reason*, p. 208, note 38.

²⁰ For further discussion, see the excellent paper by Eric Watkins, “The Antinomy of Practical Reason: Reason, the Unconditioned and the Highest good,” in *Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason: A Critical Guide*, eds. Andrews Reath and Jens Timmermann, 145–167 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

REVISED TABLE

	Ascending Operation of Reason: Abstracting from the “matter” making up happiness as the totality of conditional goods	Descending Operation of Reason: Including the “matter” making up happiness as the totality of conditional goods
I. Unity: Form of Maxims	Formula of Universal Law (FUL) / Formula of the Universal Law of Nature (FULN)	
II. Plurality: Objects of Maxims	Formula of Humanity (FH)	
III. Totality: Complete Determination of Maxims	Formula of Autonomy (FA) / Formula of the Kingdom of Ends (FKE)	<u>The Highest Good (unity of virtue and happiness)</u>

One advantage of this revision is that it supports what Schafer says about the Highest Good at the end of Chapter 6: that it “extends” the unconditional value of rational nature “to include all the forms of value that are conditional upon it.”²¹ The reason why we must separate the Highest Good from Kant’s formulas of the categorical imperative, including FKE, is that those formulas belong to a merely formal characterization of the will that abstracts from any particular (sensible) matter of choice. This is in keeping with a regressive operation of reason that seeks to find the unconditional form, matter, and complete determination of its maxims. But practical reason must also descend to the totality of relative ends that constitutes each person’s happiness, because practical reason must have an object for its activity. Thus the Highest Good is strictly speaking the only ideal that unites both a formal characterization of the will with a material characterization—a point we miss if we fail to distinguish the two senses of “form” and “matter” that lie in the background of Kant’s work as well as the “regressive” and “progressive” operations he assigns to the faculty of reason.²²

²¹ Schafer, *Kant’s Reason*, p. 208.

²² This also explains why Kant thinks we generate spurious conceptions of a highest good if we focus on one operation of reason at the expense of the other. If we only work regressively

3.

There are, however, further complications to address. Even if we accept this proposed revision of Schafer's table, what happens to his guiding thesis that the operations of reason are fundamentally the same across its theoretical and practical domains?

One worry is that the Equivalence Thesis begins to strain under a growing number of theoretical–practical asymmetries. Recall that Schafer wants to identify the Logical Maxim of seeking/finding the unconditioned for every conditioned cognition with either FUL or FULN, as the rule of seeking/finding the universal law for every conditioned maxim of choice. He also wants to identify the Supreme Principle of assuming/positing this unconditioned and FH, as the rule of assuming/positing the unconditional value of human beings. Yet having disambiguated two senses of “form” and “matter,” what are we to make of these parallels? At the very least, the second claim of equivalence begins to lose its appeal, since we have shown that the “object-directed” focus of FH is still one that abstracts from the matter of desire that constitutes one's happiness. Instead, a more plausible analogue²³ to the Supreme Principle might be the Highest Good, since the Highest Good assumes/posits the “complete object” of pure practical reason in the form of an ideal domain that unites the system of freedom with the system of nature. If anything deserves to be called the highest object of reason in Kant's system, it is this.

Schafer might be happy accept this proposal, but it comes at a cost. The problem is that once we equate the Supreme Principle with the Highest Good, we seem to lose the Equivalence Thesis, or we lose the version that Schafer wants to defend.²⁴ To see why, recall the empty space on Schafer's table: under the third perspective of a “Complete System of Subjects and Objects (Union

from conditional goods, we may think that virtue constitutes the whole good, and happiness a mere part (the mistake of Stoicism). On the other hand, if we only work progressively *to* conditional goods, we may think that happiness constitutes the whole good, and virtue a mere part (the mistake of Epicureanism) (see *KpV*, AA V 111–112).

²³ In one way, however, the analogy between the PSR and the Highest Good breaks down once we consider the “descent” to the totality of conditions unique to the operation of pure practical reason (at least on the supposition that the PSR operates only regressively).

²⁴ We may end up with the *teleological* unity of reason, whereby the Highest Good functions as the harmonizing end/object of the entire faculty of pure reason. But this would differ from the kind of *constitutive* unity that Schafer wants to defend in terms of reason's single power (comprehension) and single principle (the PSR).

of Form and Matter)” we have FA/FKE on the side of practical reason but nothing on the side of theoretical reason. As mentioned earlier, Schafer calls attention to this: “Here we notably do not find any principle in the theoretical domain that fits neatly into this category. *But this is no surprise* since Kant’s view is that it is strictly speaking impossible for us to achieve the sort of relationship to the objects of theoretical cognition that ideal theoretical comprehension requires.”²⁵ One might object that this empty space on Schafer’s table highlights not only the poverty of theoretical reason, but also the poverty of its highest law, the Supreme Principle. How, then, can we say that the Supreme Principle, which Schafer equates with the Principle of Sufficient Reason, is the same law even for practical reason and its activity?²⁶

The point of this objection, as I am framing it, is that if only pure practical reason can do the work of uniting its highest principle, Autonomy, with the complete object of its actualization in the world (the Highest Good), then the operations of reason are not exactly equivalent after all.²⁷ They are not equivalent in their most fundamental principles, nor are they equivalent in the determination of their highest objects. A worry might then surface that instead of defending the unity of reason, Schafer has defended the primacy of theoretical reason, to the extent that he has attempted to derive the highest principle and object of practical reason from the PSR. Whatever our views of the PSR might be, it seems that any reconstruction of Kant’s philosophy along these lines runs afoul his repeated insistence on the “primacy of practical reason” (a phrase, I admit, that is easier stated than explained). One sense we can safely ascribe to this phrase is that the interest of theoretical reason for systematic comprehension or “cognition through principles” must be subordinated to the interest of practical reason. The latter, Kant says, “consists

²⁵ Schafer, *Kant’s Reason*, p. 206; emphasis added.

²⁶ Schafer after all thinks that when we view reason as a power of comprehension “we can see why the activities of *both* theoretical and practical reason are governed by a version of the *Principle of Sufficient Reason*, and that Kant’s various formulations of the moral law are best understood as attempts to express this principle as it appears in the context of practical reason” (*Kant’s Reason*, p. 2).

²⁷ We might wish to restrict the concept of the unconditioned to the regressive operation of reason and say that only the good will (or the rationality of human beings) counts as the practically unconditioned. But we might also take a more liberal definition here and speak of two senses of the ‘unconditioned’ attaching to the operations of reason. This would yield (i) the unconditioned condition of a regressive series, and (ii) the unconditioned totality of conditions of a progressive series. Yet we only get a proper account of the Highest Good, Kant thinks, when we combine (i) and (ii) together.

in the determination of the *will* with respect to the final and complete end” (*KpV*, AA V 120).

A different picture begins to emerge here that makes the subordination of theoretical to practical reason necessary for the unity of reason itself. On two occasions Schafer cites Kant as saying that “in the union [*Verbindung*] of pure speculative with pure practical reason in one cognition, the latter has primacy” (*KpV*, AA V 121) (see *Kant’s Reason*, pp. 8 and 146). The remainder of the passage is worth quoting in full:

Without this subordination a conflict of reason with itself would arise, since if they were merely juxtaposed (coordinate), the first would of itself close its boundaries strictly and admit nothing from the latter into its domain, while the latter would extend its boundaries over everything and, when its need required, would try to include the former within them. But one cannot expect pure practical reason to be subordinate to speculative reason and thus to reverse the order, because all interest [*Interesse*] is ultimately practical, *and even that of speculative reason is only conditional and only complete in practical use.* (*KpV*, AA V 121; emphasis added)

This idea becomes clearer in the way that the Highest Good can satisfy our search for the Unconditioned, as it represents the ideal of reason as both fully determined with respect its principle (under laws of freedom) and fully determined with respect to its object (under laws of nature). I struggle to see how anything resembling the Supreme Principle or the PSR could suffice to explain this sort of reciprocal interaction between the form and matter of reason. Schafer might reply by saying that the Highest Good still relies upon a practical version of the PSR in the guise of the Moral Law, understood now as the principle of Autonomy. I see some truth in this. But then I wonder if we have the arrow of explanation pointing in the wrong direction. Should we explain the highest operations of practical reason with a theoretical principle like the PSR? Or should we instead explain the highest operations of theoretical reason with a practical principle like Autonomy? The latter option looks compelling in light of Kant’s remark that the interest of speculative

reason is “only conditional and is complete in practical use” (*KpV*, AA V 121).²⁸

Where, then, do we go from here?

As a final thought, I take it that Schafer wants to view the PSR as the single principle of both theoretical and practical reason, which would make it different from the dogmatic versions of the PSR upheld by the likes of Spinoza or Leibniz (see *Kant’s Reason*, p. 171).²⁹ Yet it seems that once we explicate the structure of the Highest Good, we find an operation of practical reason that employs Autonomy both to determine its form and matter in a way that outstrips even a critical version of the PSR. Moreover, if theoretical reason must be subordinated to the practical, then it is no longer obvious that “comprehension” is the power that constitutes the unity of reason, as Schafer maintains. After all, what drives the interest of practical reason is the “determination of the *will* with respect to the final and complete end” (*KpV*, AA V 120). Instead of reaching its pinnacle in “cognition through principles,” it seems that practical reason approaches the Unconditioned through a power entirely unique to its use, what we might call “creation through principles.”³⁰ And if we follow this idea further, it appears that we are on the path to an alternative view of the unity of reason in Kant,³¹ one that characterizes the highest power of reason as absolute self-activity or self-determination—in short, as *freedom*.

I suppose Schafer could concede this point but add that what I have identified as freedom is just another name for “comprehension,” what he calls “practical comprehension” or “practical wisdom.” If that is the case, then there may be a way of reconciling the emphasis I am placing on Autonomy and the power to realize the Highest Good with Schafer’s emphasis on the Supreme

²⁸ For different readings of the primacy of the practical, see Onora O’Neill, *Constructions of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), esp. Chap. 1, and Sacha Mudd, “Rethinking the Priority of Practical Reason in Kant,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 24 (4): 2016: 78–102.

²⁹ Chapter 7 offers further support for the Equivalence Thesis, which I must set aside due to limitations of space. The reservations I have voiced here extend to Chapter 7 as well, though.

³⁰ To put the contrast differently: Schafer’s account of Kant’s reason makes it akin to the divine intellect of the *Aristotelians*, whose self-contemplation lacks causality, whereas my suggestion is that Kant’s reason is more akin to the divine intellect of the *Platonists*, whose self-contemplation exerts both efficient and final power. See also *KrV*, A568/B596, where Kant takes reason’s “practical power” (*praktische Kraft*) to supersede the “creative power” (*schöpferische Kraft*) of Platonic ideas.

³¹ Schafer wants to resist this implication (see the long footnote on the “keystone” of freedom in *Kant’s Reason*, p. 17, note 36).

Principle and the power to comprehend the Highest Good. These may be complementary perspectives of the unity of reason, one that expresses what Kant calls the “love of science” (perfection of insight) and the “love of wisdom” (perfection of will) (*KpV*, AA V 108, 130–131). But then I wonder if the concept of “comprehension” is not being stretched too thin and made to do too much work. I find it difficult to see how a contemplative activity like cognition through principles is equal to the kind of creative activity Kant believes is distinctive of practical reason. This is not to say the two are unrelated, but that the power of freedom cannot be reduced to the power of comprehension, at least not within the premises of Kant’s system.

4.

My first task in this paper was to put pressure on Schafer’s table of principles, as I found it puzzling that he locates the Highest Good alongside the Supreme Principle and Formula of Humanity. I took this placement to be symptomatic of an ambiguity in the concept of “matter” that underpins Schafer’s distinction between formal and material characterizations of reason. While the Formula of Humanity does concern the objective end of practical reason, and so pertains to the “matter” of a possible categorical imperative, it abstracts from the conditional ends that constitute the “matter” of the faculty of desire. In proposing this distinction, I suggested further that Schafer’s table demands a new division in order to capture the regressive and progressive operations of reason. My own view, left here as a proposal, was that taking this division seriously might lead us to a different picture of the unity of reason, one that assigns more weight to the power of freedom and its law, autonomy. In the end this may harmonize with Schafer’s commitment to the power of comprehension, just as the love of science, as Kant tells us, is meant to harmonize with the love of wisdom.³²

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