

The Error in the Groundwork: Kant's Revision of the Imperatives and Prudence as Technical Ability

Stefano Bacin¹

Università degli Studi di Milano (Milão, Itália)

1. Introduction

Kant's *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* has been criticized innumerable times since its publication. More or less malicious critics have maintained that there is a gap in one central argument of the work, that central claims are unjustified, untenable, or even morally dangerous, and so on. One severe critic of the *Groundwork*, however, was, its author himself, who a few years later pointed out that that work contained an "error" that had to be corrected (*EEKU*, AA 20: 200).² The explicit retraction remained hidden for a long time in the unpublished version of the introduction to the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (which was first published in its entirety in 1838 in the Rosenkranz-Schubert edition), and was not included in as strong terms in the printed version. The substance of the claims leading to the remark was maintained in the published work as well (cf. *KU*, AA 5: 172), along with some further significant dissimilarities. The target of Kant's self-criticism is the account of the so-called hypothetical imperatives given in 1785. Thus, if the criticism is sound, it might be appropriate not to take some claims from the second section of the *Groundwork* as Kant's last word on the matter.³ What Kant calls an error belongs the ideas of the *Groundwork* that every exposition of the work, and most presentations of Kant's moral philosophy, touches upon. Now, according to Kant's own later assessment, that part would be superseded by the correction provided in the introductions to the third *Critique*.

In the following, I shall explore some of the main implications of this shift in Kant's view. Kant's change of mind on the matter has not been investigated

¹ E-mail: stefano.bacin@unimi.it

² All references to Kant's writings are given by volume and page number of the Academy Edition. The quotations are taken from the Cambridge Edition translations, where available.

³ See now the perceptive analysis in Papish (2018).

enough, in spite of the fact that the systematic, albeit brief treatment of the matter in the *Groundwork* has been replaced by a corresponding one in a similarly prominent systematic position both in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (cf. *KpV*, AA 5: 20) and in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (cf. *MS*, AA 6: 222). A possible cause of the neglect for the effects of the revision might well be the implicit, yet still widespread assumption that Kant's views on moral philosophy did not undergo significant changes after the *Groundwork* and, to some extent, the second *Critique*, if only because the *Metaphysics of Morals* is supposed not to be an innovative work in any respect. On the contrary, this issue provides one clear example of the dynamics of Kant's thought and the importance of taking its development into account, showing how Kant's revision of the theory of so-called hypothetical imperatives has an impact on his general conception of practical thinking and his consideration of prudence in particular.

My primary focus shall be on the impact of Kant's change of mind on his view of prudence, which has its *locus classicus* in Kant's corpus exactly in the pages that the introductions to the third *Critique* address.⁴ Remarkably, the brief overview of practical principles given in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (cf. *MS*, AA 6: 221f.) does not mention the precepts of prudence along with the imperatives of morality and the rules of skill, displaying a classification that seems hardly compatible with the account of the *Groundwork*. I shall suggest that the revision of the account of the so-called hypothetical imperatives leads to differentiate, and ultimately separate, two functions in prudence: the determination of individual ends through maxims and the pragmatic rules finding out means to reach those ends. Accordingly, as I shall argue, the revision changes the balance between skill and prudence as presented in the *Groundwork*, and a genuine structural distinction between the rules of prudence and skill goes missing. In Kant's revised account, the only difference lies in the domain in which prudence unfolds, that is, the field of human relations, and in the relevant cognitions.

2. Beyond Classification: Implications of the Revision

In the first section of the unpublished introduction originally planned for the third *Critique*, Kant explains that the traditional distinction between theoretical and practical propositions has some ambiguity that hides the most important difference between conflicting grounds of determination of a will's causal power. In order not to miss that distinction, the propositions of skill should be regarded not as practical

⁴ Schwaiger (1999) and Schwaiger (2002) provide a helpful reconstruction of the development of Kant's view of prudence, which, however, is by and large limited to the time up to 1785 and, except marginal references to later writings, does not take the later development directly into account. Part of the aim of the present paper aims is to point out the main lines along which Kant's conception of prudence progresses after, and beyond, the standard account of the *Groundwork*.

in the strict sense, but as 'technical'.⁵ This remark, Kant writes in a footnote, gives the opportunity to correct the "error" of the *Groundwork* concerning the non-moral imperatives:

For after I had said that imperatives of skill command only conditionally, under the condition of merely possible, i.e., problematic, ends, I called such practical precepts problematic imperatives, an expression in which a contradiction certainly lurks. I should have called them technical imperatives, i.e., imperatives of art. (*EEKU*, AA 20: 200)

Kant now suggests that the label of problematic imperatives that he had earlier given to the rules of skill is in fact afflicted by a contradiction.⁶ The remark, however, is not entirely plausible, if only because it does not explain where should lie the contradiction in the thought that a rule is prescriptive only with respect to the intent to reach a specific end, which thus represents a contingent condition.⁷ This is exactly the thought that most commentators of the *Groundwork* follow to explain the vocabulary that Kant introduces in those pages of its second section. At most, the conditional nature of those imperatives entail that they are not genuine commands, but Kant had already made this very point in the *Groundwork* (cf. *GMS*, AA 4: 416). Also, the imperativ force of the rules of skill had already been qualified in the second *Critique*, in which Kant had introduced for the propositions formerly known as hypothetical imperatives the term 'precepts' (*Vorschriften*) (cf. *KpV*, AA 5: 20), which remains in place in all later writings (cf. *MS*, AA 6: 221, also 6: 217, *TP*, AA 8: 288, *VAMS*, AA 23: 384). Moreover, in 1785 Kant had also dubbed 'technical' the imperatives of skill (cf. *GMS*, AA 4: 416). The alleged error would then appear to concern only a matter of terminology, at most a minor correction to an issue whose solution was in fact already given in 1785. This is probably why a reader of that passage is prepared to accept Kant's remark, without dwelling too much on it.

Kant's correction does not gain in clarity or plausibility, furthermore, because he does not apply it to the analogous case of prudence. In fact, with regard to it the first Introduction seems to confirm the version of the *Groundwork*. Like in

⁵ For an overview of Kant's notion of 'practical' and its different aspects, see Bacin 2015a.

⁶ Prior to the *Groundwork*, Kant had already called their necessity problematic in the essay on the *Evidence of the Principles* (cf. 2: 298) and the Remarks on the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*: cf. 20: 155. If only because of this, the correction in the first Introduction cannot be read as a return to his "precritical conception", as Konstantin Pollok has suggested (see Pollok 2007, p. 68). Note that, however, Kant is reported to have presented the rules of skill as "problematic" again after the third *Critique*, according to the Vigilantius notes: cf. 27: 491. (See also Papish 2018, p. 306n.)

⁷ The reading of Kant's correction suggested by Papish (2018, p. 302) might be too charitable, as it does not seem well grounded in the text. Papish holds that "the notion of a 'problematic imperative' emphasizes the relationship between a human being and an objective law, or the conditions under which an imperative applies to us", that of "a 'technical imperative'", by contrast, emphasizes that human action must in general be governed by technique, or the artifice exhibited by a craftsman". Even if this should be true, this would explain a different accentuation on Kant's part, but not why he intends to point out a contradiction in the notion of a problematic imperative.

1785, Kant highlights that the main distinctive feature of the prescriptions of prudence is that they, in contrast to those of skill, have to do not only with the prescription of the means to the intended end, but with the determination of the end in the first place:

Only the fact that the end which we ascribe to ourselves and to others, namely that of our own happiness, does not belong among the merely arbitrary ends justifies a special designation for these technical imperatives; for the problem does not merely, as in the case of technical imperatives, require the manner of the execution of an end, but also the determination of that which constitutes this end itself (happiness), which in the case of technical imperatives in general must be presupposed as known. (*EEKU*, AA 20: 200; cf. *GMS*, AA 4: 418)

At a first inspection, thus, the error that Kant is pointing out would not sound too serious, after all. One might even suspect that Kant's (apparent?) self-criticism might rather be meant to hide a renewed endorsement of the central claims of the *Groundwork*, after the responses to several allegations in the second *Critique*. If the idea of a problematic imperative is the only error to be corrected, then the rest of the work, that is, its substantial content, must be quite right⁸. A comparison with the published version of the introduction might strengthen this impression. There, the explicit reference to the *Groundwork* disappears, as does any talk of an error to be corrected. In discussing the traditional distinction between theoretical and practical field, Kant maintains only the crucial point, already made in the unpublished version, that the rules of skill and prudence belong together in the category of what he now calls "technically practical rules":

All technically practical rules (i.e., those of art and skill in general, as well as those of prudence, as a skill in influencing human beings and their will), so far as their principles rest on concepts, must be counted only as corollaries of theoretical philosophy. (*KU*, AA 5: 172)

⁸ Note, furthermore, that some internal terminological unclarity affects the footnote about the "error" in the *Groundwork*. After the critical remark on 'problematic', a reader would expect a similar annotation regarding the label of assertoric that the *Groundwork* gives to the imperatives of prudence (cf. *GMS*, AA 4: 415), exactly because the relevant end is, in that case, "actual and thus even subjectively necessary", as Kant writes in the first Introduction to the third *Critique* (*EEKU*, AA 20: 200). Oddly, 'assertoric' is not even brought up here. As Kant refers to the imperatives of prudence in that footnote, he calls them 'pragmatic' (cf. *EEKU*, AA 20: 200), using the term that already in the *Groundwork* he uses to differentiate the demands of prudence from those of skill, which in turn are already in 1785 called technical (cf. *GMS*, AA 4: 416f.; much the same, odd contrast between "problematisch-bedingt[e]" and "pragmatisch-bedingt[e]" imperatives occurs also in a draft for the *Theory and Practice* essay: cf. *VATP*, AA 23: 246. Cf. also the Vigilantius notes, *V-MS/Vigil*, AA 27: 491). Thus the true issue, in the first Introduction, seems to be not the rather marginal question of how to characterise the rules of skill, but rather that the logical vocabulary, so distinctive of the account of imperatives given in the *Groundwork*, has to be given up. (See also Aubenque 1975, p. 161, who however does not see the limits of Kant's self-criticism.) The only logical designation that sticks in later texts is, of course, that of categorical imperative. (On the role of logic as a background for Kant's conception at the time of the *Groundwork*, see Bacin 2006, p. 104-106, p. 136f.)

One might suppose that, had the alleged error been so serious, it certainly should have been considered also in the final version of the introduction. Since this is not the case, there would be no reason to see in those pages a genuine change of mind concerning the non-moral imperatives. In fact, the term 'imperative' does not occur at all in the entire third *Critique*. Kant only focuses on the distinction between technically practical and morally practical. A notable difference between the two versions of the introduction, however, lies in that the published text does not devote any attention at the distinction between prescriptions of skill and prudence. A contrast between them, such as that pointed out in the unpublished introduction—that, unlike skill, prudence has to determine its end and not merely to identify the appropriate means—is no longer mentioned. In fact, brief remarks at the outset of the second *Critique* already suggested the same binary distinction, in which the specificity of the rules of prudence would vanish.⁹ There Kant wrote that imperatives are to be distinguished in two kinds:

The first would be hypothetical imperatives and *would contain mere precepts of skill*; the second, on the contrary, would be categorical and would alone be practical laws. (*KpV*, AA 5: 20; my italics)

In this respect, the Introductions to the third *Critique* unfold the view of practical principles briefly sketched in the second *Critique*. The account sketched in the two introductions to the third *Critique*, and somehow anticipated in the second, thus results in a twofold distinction of practical rules in the broadest sense, which appears to be made in increasingly sharper terms. This might be construed as a mere re-classification of the rules formerly known as imperatives, which are now differentiated according to a bipartite scheme instead of the tripartite distinction of the *Groundwork*.¹⁰

Still, the matter at issue cannot be solved that easily. As so often in Kant's thought, classifications and systematizations reflect a position on substantial issues. The apparently minor issue with the label to be used for imperatives of skill brings up more general questions, which affect the account of imperatives given in the *Groundwork*. Whereas the *Groundwork* and the first Introduction to the third *Critique* had differentiated between rules of skill and counsels of prudence, in the final Introduction the directives of skill and prudence are brought together under

⁹ Note that the discrepancies between the two versions of the Introduction and the closer similarity of the final version with the claims of the second *Critique* might suggest that the first, unpublished Introduction had been composed, at least in part, even before the second *Critique*. Here I cannot discuss the question, though. On the composition of the third *Critique* and the chronological position of the first Introduction in particular, see Tonelli 1954 and Zammito 1992, p. 4f. Both Tonelli and Zammito, however, suggest that the first Introduction should have been written between early 1788 and 1789, that is, well after the publication of the second *Critique*.

¹⁰ See e.g. Allison 2011, p. 158n., who notes in passing the transition from a tripartite to a bipartite classification after the *Groundwork*.

the common label of technically practical rules, to distinguish them from the morally practical norms.

The relationship between prudence and skill was always particularly close, not merely because they were both construed as operating through conditional imperatives. Prudence (“in the narrowest sense”) was presented already in the *Groundwork* as a specific kind of skill, namely “the skill in the choice of the means to one’s own greatest well-being” (*GMS*, AA 4:416). The different status of their respective ends marked the conceptual distinction. Now, the bipartite re-classification of practical principles introduced in the third *Critique* suggests some change that goes beyond that. One might still suspect that the distinction between skill and prudence is not brought up again in the published Introduction simply for reasons of space, and because it would not directly concern the (already broad) thematic scope of the third *Critique*, and it would thus not be necessary to dwell on that matter. But the same bipartite classification occurs again in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, where, in a context specifically devoted to the practical philosophy, Kant maintains that, besides the categorical imperative, “[a]ll other imperatives are technical and are, one and all, conditional” (*MS*, AA 6: 222; cf. 6: 221, and 6: 217 f.)¹¹.

One of the implications of the new bipartite classification of rules for action is that the space for a distinction between skill and prudence like that made in the *Groundwork* and, again, in the first Introduction, now fades. If all non-categorical imperatives are in fact technical rules, then, where are to be placed the imperatives of prudence? Furthermore, the one difference following from the particular status of the end of one’s happiness is never mentioned again after the unpublished first Introduction to the third *Critique*. In fact, in the published version of the introduction Kant goes as far as maintaining that “the general doctrine of happiness itself or even the mastery of inclinations and the control of affects for the sake of the latter” are not different from “domestic, agrarian and political economy, the art of social intercourse, the prescriptions of dietetics”, insofar as “*all of these contain only rules of skill, which are thus only technically practical*” (*KU*, AA 5: 173, my italics).

The bipartite distinction between technical and practical in the strict sense (technically practical vs morally practical) amounts to an implicit elimination of any ground for a structural distinction between prescriptions of skill and prudence. Even leaving aside the internal unclarity with the terminology that I have pointed out above (see footnote 7), this represents in fact a good reason for Kant not to bring up again the “error” of the *Groundwork* in the final version of the Introduction. If that error concerned only the label given to the rules of skill, it is

¹¹ The binary contrast categorical imperatives of morality vs. technical rules also occurs in several of Kant’s drafts for the *Metaphysics of Morals*: cf. *VAMS*, AA 23: 384, 392.

superseded, along with its correction, once a genuine distinction between those rules and other prescriptions disappears. The new name of technically practical rules displaces both the labels used in the *Groundwork* and the related issues.

In this respect, the revision of the notion of the 'practical' in the two Introductions to the third *Critique* has a significant impact on the conception of non-moral imperatives. More specifically, the relation between non-moral prescriptions is now seen from a slightly different standpoint, which accentuates some uncertainty in the status of prudence. In the following, I shall focus on two main aspects of this issue, namely how the task of prudence is conceived of, and how prudence relates to skill.

3. Prudence Divided

The revision of the account of non-moral imperatives that is made explicit in the first Introduction to the third *Critique* brings an important difference between prudence and skill to the fore. A distinctive duplicity of prudence emerges there, to become more and more apparent in Kant's later writings. As Kant remarks again in the footnote of the first Introduction from which I have begun my analysis, what characterizes prudence is that its task is not only to find out the best means to an end, but also the determination of the end itself (cf. *EEKU*, AA 20: 200). This crucial point marks not only a difference from skill, understood as merely focused on the right means to an end, but also a particular complexity in prudence in the first place. If it has both to determine an end and to discern how it is best attained, its task is, in fact, twofold.

A distinction between determining ends and working out the appropriate means has already been recognized by Kant's predecessors. For instance, Baumgarten mentions the connection between the wisdom that is about ends and their connection (*sapientia*) and the prudence that is about the means to them (*prudentia*).¹² However, they are usually not understood as belonging to the very same ability. In contrast, Kant's standard account in the *Groundwork* stresses the unity of prudence through these two tasks. The view of the *Groundwork* goes beyond the previous way of drawing the distinction between the two tasks insofar as it counters the then current assumption that prudence as such has only to do with discerning the best means to an end. For instance, Wolff defined prudence exactly in these terms, as the ability to find out the best means, adding that the act of discerning them is a counsel (cf. Wolff 1720, §§ 326-327).¹³ When Kant observes that "*giving counsel* does indeed contain necessity, but it can hold only under a

¹² See Baumgarten 1763, §§ 103, p. 225. See Schwaiger 1999, p. 127; Schwaiger 2002, p. 152.

¹³ Analogously, Crusius defines prudence as "the skill to choose and to apply good means to one's own final ends" (Crusius 1744, § 161).

subjective contingent condition, if this or that human being counts this or that as belonging to his happiness” (*GMS*, AA 4: 415), he elaborates on that conception.¹⁴ Only, Kant points out that aiming at happiness makes all such prescriptions conditional, and therefore inadequate as expression of genuine moral demands. Once he separates the pursuit of happiness from morality, Kant has to include the necessary determination of that end in the domain of the same ability in charge of working out the means to attaining it. Since the pursuit of self-interest is not part of morality, the task of prudence cannot be only to work out how to best make one’s own interest, but has to include the individual determination of what belongs to one’s own best interest.¹⁵

The *Groundwork*, therefore, had insisted on the peculiar status of the distinctive end of prudence, observing that prescriptions of prudence have to include a supposed solution to the “the problem of determining reliably and universally which action would advance the happiness of a rational being”, although that problem “is completely insoluble” (*GMS*, AA, 4: 418). However, in the standard account given in 1785, Kant played this important characteristic down, in order to stress the unity of prudence, although this structural duplicity was already present in Kant’s writings, also before 1785. In the first *Critique*, Kant observes that the doctrine of prudence includes both “the unification of all ends that are given to us by our inclinations into the single end of happiness and the harmony [*Zusammenstimmung*] of the means for attaining that end” (*KrV* A 800/B 828). Also the ethics lecture notes report similar remarks; for instance: “For the rule of prudence there are two requirements: to determine the end itself, and then the use of means to this end” (27:246; cf. e.g. 27:124, 27:259).

One way to recognize that Kant attributes to prudence a twofold task is to suggest that his notion of prudence has two different meanings, that is, that prudence can be both “instrumental rationality in the service of self-interest” and “context-sensitive judgment that considers the proverbial right means at the right time in the right place”¹⁶. But this would neglect that the two tasks do not run

¹⁴ For this reason, I disagree with Hinske’s claim that the notion of ‘counsel’ should have been, for Kant, a terminological innovation of the *Groundwork* (see Hinske 1989, p. 140). Even bracketing the previous important history of the distinction between counsels and commands, reaching from medieval theology to Christian Thomasius, a passage like that from Wolff’s *German Ethics*, along with similar definitions in the Wolffians, shows a very different picture, suggesting that Kant could presuppose that the term was well-known to his readers.

¹⁵ Schwaiger remarks that “around the time of the *Groundwork*, the thought that the doctrine of prudence has to determine not only the means, but also the end of happiness” (Schwaiger 1999, p. 185). But the *Groundwork* itself insists that the peculiar status of the end of happiness directly affects the task of prudence, to which primarily belongs the necessary determination of that end (see *GMS*, AA 4: 418). Furthermore, the later writings certainly did not revoke that duplicity, as I shall show in the following. (See also Kain 2003, p. 259f.) On the contrary, the revision initiated by the first Introduction to the third *Critique* brings the duplicity of the task of prudence, of which Kant was already well aware, into the spotlight again. The result is that the two aspects of the task are considered more and more as separated.

¹⁶ Nelson 2004, p. 307. See also p. 318, where Nelson speaks of “two notions of prudence.”

parallel to each other, but are closely connected in a complicated dynamic, in which they are often conceived of as two aspects of the same comprehensive task. More importantly, it would make impossible to see how the development of Kant's thought changes the balance between the two functions of prudence, which allows to discern contexts in which one view of prudence is pre-eminent with regard to the other.

The peculiar status of the end of one's own happiness requires that it be determined with regard to the individual subject's own desires and inclinations. But this requires a different act than that of working out the best way to reach the goal that has thus been set. Determining the content of one's own happiness seems significantly different from prescribing the best means to realize (part of) that content, and has an epistemically different basis. The former act consists in *intending* something, on the basis of one's own desires, while the latter follows from the *belief* that a certain act, through a certain causal connection, would produce the best effect to attain the intended end.¹⁷

The duplicity of the task makes it implausible to attribute both tasks to mere rules like the imperatives described in the second section of the *Groundwork*. In some cases, where he points out the twofold task of prudence, Kant would attribute its two aspects to different kinds of propositions:

the doctrine of prudence provides laws as to what one should set happiness in; then rules to attain it [*Die Klugheitslehre [gibt] einige Gesetze, worin man nemlich die Glückseligkeit zu setzen habe; hernach regeln, sie zu erlangen*] (Ref. 7030, AA 19: 231)

Kant would soon deny that prudence can provide genuine laws, but the point that the two tasks need principles of different status holds its validity. In fact, the very claim that non-moral imperatives are conditional insofar as they depend on a previously set condition implied that two different acts were required: first, the act of setting the condition, and second, the prescription following from that condition. Rules of prudence are not hypothetical because of the indeterminacy of the end of happiness, which makes them lack necessity.¹⁸ It is because they depend on a previous *contingent* act of willing, which is not identical with the subsequent act of prescribing the means to attain the intended goal. To be valid for an individual subject, thus, precepts of prudence call for a determination of the will.¹⁹

The distinction between the two aspects of prudence is made easier by how the second *Critique* presents maxims. As Kant explains there, maxims, being practical principles, “contain a general determination of the will, having under it

¹⁷ See Schroeder 2015, p. 98.

¹⁸ See e.g. Allison 2011, p. 157, arguably drawing on *GMS*, AA 4: 418, where, however, the indeterminacy of happiness explains why the imperatives of prudence are counsels, and not genuine commands.

¹⁹ See Bojanowski 2006; Bacin 2006, p. 172-174.

several practical rules”. Specifically, unlike laws, maxims thereby set “a condition is regarded by the subject as holding only for his will” (*KpV*, AA 5: 19). The practical rules that are said to fall under higher-order principles like maxims (or laws) “prescribe [...] action as a means to an effect”, and are imperatives. If they are conditional, they are better called precepts (*KpV*, AA 5: 20) and are in fact more precisely “mere precepts of skill” (*KpV*, AA 5: 20). Like in the final Introduction to the third *Critique*, thus, the supposedly specific imperatives of prudence vanish, as any distinction from those of skill dissolves²⁰. In fact, the picture so rapidly sketched lacks any explicit reference to prudence. Yet, this reworking of the account of practical principles is best construed as providing (among other things) a solution to the issue of the duplicity of prudence. The task of discerning and prescribing means to an end on the basis of the subject’s beliefs and cognitions is carried out by precepts of skill. They come in once a condition is set, which can only happen if the subject’s desires are shaped into a general determination of the will, which Kant calls a maxim.

Accordingly, when in the second *Critique* Kant comes to discuss the peculiar status of happiness as an end and the necessity of an individual determination (in the second remark to §3), precepts and prudence are not even mentioned. The main point is, instead, that an individual subject’s concept of happiness yields “merely subjective practical principles”, in which “it is expressly made a condition that they must have as their basis not objective but subjective conditions of choice, and hence that they must always be represented as mere maxims” (*KpV*, AA 5: 26). Adopting maxims is thus the act through which the primary task of prudence, that is, to determine the individual subject’s concepts of happiness, can be accomplished (cf. e.g. *KpV*, AA 5: 61)²¹. Notably, this way to frame the problem of determining the end — not through objective rules, but through subjective principles — leads Kant also to see that the problem is, in these terms, not “completely insoluble” (4:418), as he held in the *Groundwork*. It is ordinarily solved by every individual subject through his, or her, own maxims, although in a way that cannot possibly enjoy universal validity (cf. *KpV*, AA 5:25f.).

The revision of the non-moral imperatives in the introductions to the third *Critique* and in the second *Critique* thus calls attention to a structural difference in prudence that the *Groundwork* aimed at presenting as non-essential. If the

²⁰ Furthermore, in the very same pages Kant maintains that “practical cognition” has to do “only with determining grounds of the will” (*KpV*, AA 5: 21), which entails that what is usually called ‘practical’ but in fact follows from a previous determination of the will, falls rather in the field of theoretical cognitions, as a technical proposition (see also *KpV*, AA 5: 26f). Also with regard to this, the crucial distinction drawn in both Introductions to the third *Critique* develops the thought already in place at the beginning of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

²¹ Similarly, also Graband (2015, p.54f.) remarks that the role previously attributed to prudence is, in the second *Critique*, ascribed to maxims. Graband, however, equates them with counsels of prudence altogether, thereby overlooking the important duplicity of prudence, and the separation between their two original tasks that the introduction of ‘maxims of prudence’ entails.

Groundwork had left space for attributing to so-called hypothetical imperatives the task of organize the individual subject's desires and determine his, or her, notion of happiness, the account sketched in the third *Critique* along the lines of the *Critique of Practical Reason* rules that out. The remarkable statements of the published Introduction follow from these considerations. The revision triggered by the self-critical remarks in the first Introduction reverts that part of the view presented in the *Groundwork*, as it brings the duplicity of the task of prudence into focus again. On the one hand, the difficulty posed by the twofold task attributed to prudence in the *Groundwork* is solved by separating its two moments. On the other hand, the precepts of prudence can be associated with, and be regarded as identical to, rules of skill, as Kant does in his new bipartite classification of practical principles, because the preliminary task of determining the subject's own concept of happiness can be now attributed to the subject's maxims. Prudence is thereby divided in two distinct moments, which are tied by the closest connection, but are not regarded as expression of the same ability. After this revision, when the two tasks are mentioned together, they are remarkably *not* attributed to prudence anymore, as for instance in this passage from the *Religion*:

This love [sc., self-love] is however rational to the extent that with respect to the end only what is consistent with the greatest and most abiding well-being is chosen, and that also the most apt means for each of these components of happiness are chosen. (RGV, AA 6: 45f)

While some commentator has suggested that prudence risks of having no citizenship in the realms of nature and freedom²², prudence is rather to be regarded as enjoying a double citizenship of sorts, though at the price of separating its two traditional functions and ultimately giving up genuine unity. As to its precepts, prudence is to be regarded as a technical ability, once the unity of its two tasks is given up. If the task of determining the individual subject's notion of happiness through setting ends is attributed to maxims, the precepts of prudence would be rules requiring the appropriate means, not unlike rules of skill. The bipartite classification that brings them together grounds on this assumption. This leads Kant, after the third *Critique*, to maintain a separation between the two tasks or prudence, thus considering it either regarding the determination of the end of happiness or with regard to discerning the best means to self-interest.

4. "All others are technical imperatives": (Worldly) Prudence and Skill

The revision of the so-called hypothetical imperatives thus leads to notable changes in Kant's conception of prudence. The most significant of them consisted in bringing its inner duplicity to the foreground. This affects, in turn, how the

²² See e.g. Brandt 2005, p. 127.

relation of prudence to skill is to be construed. Since what attracts most of the attention, both in Kant and his readers, is the crucial distinction between morality and prudence, the relation between prudence and skill is not always very clear, and has scarcely been examined.²³ Also in this respect, Kant's correction in the Introductions to the third *Critique* can help to shed some light on the issue. Again, Kant's account is not developed as it would have been if his main aim were to give a full-blown theory of instrumental rationality, and its brevity makes some aspects less clear. Still, the unclarity about the relation between prudence and skill deserves further examination, as it affects the understanding of the role of prudence in Kant's moral philosophy and pragmatic anthropology.

The account that Kant rapidly sketched in 1785 aimed at harmonizing the complexity of the different forms of rational agency in a tripartite distinction in which skill, prudence, and morality appear co-ordinated like three species of the same genus. Their reduction to respective imperatival norms responds to the goal of highlighting an analogous fundamental structure of practical rationality that finally develops without limiting conditions only in morality. Accordingly, the account given in the second section of the *Groundwork* hides the diverse structural complexity that distinguishes prudence and skill. There, Kant only stresses the different character of the end involved in each case: contingent and merely potential for skill in general, actual and natural, if undetermined, for prudence. This, however, obscures that the contrast in the relation to the respective end goes beyond the mere modal status of the end itself and involves a higher complexity of the task in the case of prudence. The distinction of the two tasks of prudence, which I have pointed out in the previous sections, enables to separate the two functions responsible for them. The ability of finding out appropriate means to attain a given end can be clearly distinguished from the ability of setting ends.

According to this division of labor, the search for appropriate means might even be considered in isolation from the specification of the general end of happiness through the determination of particular ends. For the ability of finding out effective means is not necessarily governed by self-interest, as it should be in the standard conception of prudence. It might simply be the ability of finding out effective means for given ends, period. But then is any distinction between prudence and skill ultimately withdrawn? If we bracket the necessity of determining the end of one's own well-being, as it belongs to a faculty responsible for harmonizing the individual subject's desires, then prudence in the strict sense, as it is in charge of working out the best means to the end that has been determined, can be regarded as belonging to skill altogether.

This is exactly what the bipartite classification of practical rules introduced in the third *Critique* entails, after all. In fact, attributing prudence along with skill

²³ For the state of the discussion, see Graband 2015, chapter 1.

in the strict sense to the domain of the 'technical', as Kant does starting from the published Introduction to the third *Critique*, amounts to describe prudence as a kind of skill, too. The standard definition of prudence given in the *Groundwork* was formulated already in terms of skill, of course ("the skill in the choice of the means to one's own greatest well-being": GMS, AA 4: 416). However, once the differentiation of the two tasks weakens the unity of prudence and the distinctive feature that makes it something else than skill in general, the prudence that prescribes means for an end set by reason as belonging to the subject's happiness has to be regarded as a kind of skill. Notably, in the *Groundwork* Kant had already taken this possibility into consideration:

"The imperatives of prudence would totally and entirely coincide with those of skill [...], if only it were so easy to provide a determinate concept of happiness." (GMS, AA 4: 417)

A neat separation between skill and prudence as two distinct abilities would require a clear difference in the relation to the ends that respectively direct the abilities at issue. In Kant's writings after 1790 this is not the case anymore. In a passage from the first Introduction that I have quoted above, Kant similarly observed:

Only the fact that the end which we ascribe to ourselves and to others, namely that of our own happiness, does not belong among the merely arbitrary ends justifies a special designation for these technical imperatives. (*EEKU*, AA 20: 200; my italics)

Once the status of the end of happiness and the necessity for each individual subject to determine its concept are considered separately, that simple distinction between skill and prudence is not viable anymore. That is, once the determination of the ends making up the individual subject's concept of happiness is not attributed to the same ability that issues precepts regarding the best means, then the rules of prudence and those of skill appear not to be genuinely distinct.²⁴ Accordingly, "a special designation" for the precepts of prudence is not further needed, as they are to be understood as technical rules like those of skill. This is exactly what happens in the published Introduction to the third *Critique*. The binary classification that is maintained in all later writings, up to the *Metaphysics of Morals* (cf. *MS*, AA 6: 222) is to be interpreted against the backdrop of this re-assessment.

Kant never explicitly takes back a terminological distinction between prudence and skill, which after 1790 become the two forms of technical agency. Still, their distinction blurs to a significant extent, especially in contexts where the

²⁴ Therefore I disagree here with Aubenque, who holds that, with the first Introduction, "la prudence est rejetée tout entière du côté de l'habileté," so that its rules "ne se distinguent des autres règles techniques que par la circonstance plutôt aggravante de l'indétermination de leur fin" (Aubenque 1975, p. 163). Moreover, I shall soon point out a possible distinction between the two kinds of rules, still viable to Kant after 1790 (§ 4).

vocabulary is less adherent to the common linguistic usage, and needs thus not to keep track of what traditionally prudence is understood to be²⁵. For instance, it is difficult to see how the “skill in acquiring some happiness” (*TP*, AA 8: 278) should be different from what Kant usually called prudence. Furthermore, in the later writings Kant remarkably often refers to the ability that a human being can make use of in pursuing his, or her, own well-being through an hendiadys: “skill *and* prudence”, which seems often to imply that it not possible, or not important, to distinguish the one from the other. This happens, for instance, when Kant explains that, like moral contentment, even a human being’s contentment with his, or her, own well-being, that is, is in fact “unattainable”. The proper object of contentment “from the pragmatic point of view” is one’s own well-being, that is, what one “intends to secure *through skill and prudence*” (*Anth*, AA 7: 234 f.; my italics). Analogously, in the essay on *Theodicy*, Kant argues that “we must judge all well-being and ill merely as the consequence of the use of the human faculties according to the laws of nature, in proposition to the *skill and prudence* of their application [*proportionirt ihrer angewandten Geschicklichkeit und Klugheit*]” (*MpVT*, AA 8: 262; my italics). The hendiadys would have been unthinkable before the revision of classification of the practical rules and the transition to the bipartite distinction. If Kant writes of “skill and prudence”, not merely in contrast to morality, but as converging in striving towards happiness, it is because he assumes a deep continuity between them.

Skill, however, is a less specific term, which can be used in the plural too, to design specific skills. ‘Prudence’, instead, has no plural. Whereas in 1785 skill and prudence appeared as cognate kinds of a genus, Kant’s later writings suggest that prudence is rather to be described as a species belonging to the genus of skill, which is a general reason-guided ability to use the force and capacities that a being has or has developed as means to ends. Prudence is a *species* of that genus. Now, what is its specific difference? If there is any, the only definite distinction between skill and prudence concerns the respective domain of application and the corresponding relevant cognitions. Whereas skill in the strict sense can be understood as concerning the efficacious use of the force and abilities of the subject in general, prudence applies to the human world and interpersonal relations. This way to construe their relation emerges, for instance, when prudence is described as “the faculty of using one’s skillfulness [*Geschicklichkeit*] effectively *on human beings*” (*Päd*, AA 9: 455; my italics; cf. 15: 800, 15: 820, 25: 854, 25:

²⁵ Incidentally, note that after 1785 Kant is increasingly willing to distance his vocabulary from that of his contemporaries. The specification of ‘practical’ through the distinction between ‘technical’ and ‘moral’, in order to correct a “great misunderstanding” (*EKKU*, AA 20: 195), is a case in point. Remarkably, Kant’s contemporaries both appreciated and rejected it for the same reason, namely that it corrected common language. See Niethammer 1795, p. 350f. (in favour of Kant’s new distinction) and Platner 1800, p. 4f. (against it).

1037, 25: 1296, 25: 1481)²⁶, as happens in *On Pedagogy*, immediately after the remark that “by means of formation towards prudence he is formed into a citizen, thus receiving public value” (*Päd*, AA 9: 455; see analogous remarks e.g. in 25: 855, 25: 1296, 28: 333). Kant calls the instructions of prudence pragmatic, both before and after the third *Critique*, to stress this feature of prudence as concerning agency within human society.²⁷

Thus, where a distinction between skill and prudence has to be drawn, Kant implicitly goes back to what in the *Groundwork* he had called “worldly prudence” (*Weltklugheit*), in contrast to “private prudence [*Privatklugheit*]”. In a footnote in the *Groundwork*, Kant remarked that there is a difference between “the skill of a human being to influence others so as to use them for his purposes” and “the insight to unite all these purposes to his own enduring advantage”, and that “the latter is actually the one to which even the worth of the former is traced back” (*GMS*, AA 4: 416f). Now, after the growing separation between the two tasks of prudence, the skill to pursue one's own ends in interaction with others becomes more and more prominent in Kant's writings after 1790, when the matter is prudence²⁸. This reversal is mostly implicit, but becomes tangible, for instance, in a draft for the *Metaphysics of Morals*, where the distinction made in the *Groundwork* simply disappears, and what there was worldly prudence, is now defined as prudence without further qualification: “prudence is the skill to use human beings (free beings) as means to one's own purposes” (23:346; compare with *GMS*, AA 4: 416f). Analogously, in a passage from the *Anthropology*, where Kant points out that human beings normally flourish in skill at twenty years of age and in prudence at forty, he defines prudence as the ability of “using other human beings for one's purposes”, whereas skill in general is “the capacity to achieve any purpose one chooses [*Kunstvermögen zu beliebiger Absicht*]” (*Anth*, AA 7: 201). Here again the description of prudence echoes how *worldly* prudence is presented in the *Groundwork*. This represents a further change with regard to the account given in 1785, which reflects some development in Kant's view of agency.

The new priority of worldly prudence follows from the focus on the means and the specific cognitions that are required to an agent whose ends are to be gained within the peculiar environment of human society. Accordingly, the only

²⁶ Here the Cambridge Edition translation misses an important detail, which I have restored in the quote. The German original reads: “Klugheit ist das Vermögen, seine Geschicklichkeit gut *an den Mann* zu bringen” (italics added). The original phrasing stresses both that prudence has to be efficacious and that its efficacy concerns the human sphere. See also the remarks in Schwaiger 2002, p. 155f.

²⁷ On the complex meaning of the notion of ‘pragmatic’ in Kant, see Bacin 2015b. On this aspect in particular, see also Frierson 2003, p. 53f.

²⁸ On the emergence of the notion of worldly prudence in Kant up to the *Groundwork*, see Schwaiger 1999, p. 124f. and Schwaiger 2002, p. 155. As I have mentioned before, Schwaiger's reconstruction only includes marginal references to the post-1785 writings. The regained importance of worldly prudence after 1790 thus remains out of his picture.

relevant difference between skill and prudence as abilities to work out means lies in the sort of knowledge that is respectively required in the two cases: whereas skill requires knowledge of nature in a broad sense, prudence requires not merely knowledge of *human* nature, but specifically of human nature in society, with regard to responses within interpersonal relations²⁹. A distinction between skill and prudence, thus, cannot regard the different status of their respective end, as Kant still holds in the first Introduction to the third *Critique*, but rather their field of application and the kind of competence required to work out the appropriate means. That the difference between skill and prudence is construed in these terms, can be shown also regarding the failure of the two abilities at issue. In a (presumably earlier) private note, Kant observed that “one is annoyed by his ineptitude [*Ungeschicklichkeit*], one is ashamed by his imprudence [*Unklugheit*]” (Ref. 6824, AA 19: 173). This remark does not entail any structural difference contrast the two kinds of ability, and can be construed perfectly well as reflecting a difference between domains of application. If, unlike skill, imprudence is shameful, it might be simply because it is an ineptitude that affects one’s position within the human community, wherein one’s accomplishments or failures always suggest a comparison with others’. A failure before the fellow humans naturally provokes shame. Thus prudence is now construed as the kind of skill that implements cognitions about the human environment and the relations that occur within it. The project of a pragmatic anthropology as it was finally brought to realization is to be understood in this perspective³⁰.

5. Concluding Remarks

The “error” in the second section of the *Groundwork* that Kant pointed out in the first introduction to the third *Critique* was not immediately so serious as the tone of that remark might suggest, but it proved to be rather significant for the revision that it contributed to initiate. While it did not affect Kant’s justification of the principle of morality, it did affect his view on non-moral agency and the best

²⁹ See the perceptive remarks in Sturm 2009, p. 496f. However, Sturm stresses the epistemic difference between precepts of skill and prudence, denying that the latter essentially are about causal connections, which separates them from skill and the empirical sciences. While I agree with Sturm on his general analysis, I disagree on this specific issue. Nothing in Kant seems to corroborate this reading. On the contrary, it goes against Kant’s binary classification, which from 1790 on brings those kinds of rules together. That implies that their epistemic status is the same. In fact, the rules of prudence are about causal connections *in a different domain* than that of physical nature, which makes them more complex, but do not change that they are about causal connections.

³⁰ See for instance one of Kant’s handwritten notes: “Pragmatic anthropology. Prudence refers to the community in which we are with [other] human beings [*Pragmatische Anthropologie. Klugheit geht auf die Gemeinschaft, darin wir mit Menschen stehen*]”. In this respect, I do not find persuasive Norbert Hinske’s claim that pragmatic anthropology considers the human being “not anymore — or not primarily anymore — in relation to other human beings, but in relation to himself” (Hinske 1966, p. 425). The matter cannot be adequately discussed here, though. For a different perspective, see e.g. Frierson 2003.

way to construe it. If the matter addressed in the first Introduction to the third *Critique* appeared limited in scope and significance, it nevertheless allowed larger complications to emerge. The systematization of the practical domain that lies in the background of the *Groundwork* thus proved to be precarious.

Although Kant never addresses it explicitly, especially his conception of prudence is affected by this development. The revision of the formerly so-called hypothetical imperatives yields a more complicated account, in which the traditional view of prudence as the ability to pursue self-interest is thus superseded by a more differentiated consideration, in which a new take on the twofold task of prudence eventually leads to separate its two functions. This reworking explains the otherwise extraordinary claims in the published Introduction to the third *Critique*, followed by corresponding claims in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, in which the account of the *Groundwork* appears much changed, without that immediately clear reasons for that are provided. A closer examination of the twofold task of prudence and of the relation between prudence and skill, finally, shows that the "error" pointed out in the first Introduction was not the only weak spot in the *Groundwork* that needed to be rectified, to Kant's own lights. The account of non-moral agency given in 1785 is thus significantly superseded by a different view in the later writings. A consideration of Kant's view of prudence cannot be non-specific, but should take this complex development into account.

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Abstract: The paper examines Kant's self-criticism to the account of hypothetical imperatives given in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Following his corrections in the introductions to the third *Critique*, the paper traces the consequences of that change in his later writings, specifically with regard to the status of prudence. I argue that the revision of the account of hypothetical imperatives leads to differentiate, and ultimately separate, two functions in prudence: the setting of ends through maxims, and the pragmatic rules establishing means to reach those ends. Accordingly, I furthermore argue, there is ultimately no genuine structural distinction between the rules of prudence and skill. The only difference lies in the domain in which prudence unfolds, that is, the field of human relations, and in the relevant cognitions.

Keywords: Kant; Prudence; skill; hypothetical imperatives

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