

Rethinking the Priority of Practical Reason in Kant

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Abstract: Throughout the critical period Kant enigmatically insists that reason is a 'unity', thereby suggesting that both our theoretical and practical endeavors are grounded in one and the same rational capacity. How Kant's unity thesis ought to be interpreted and whether it can be substantiated remain sources of controversy in the literature. According to the strong reading of this claim, reason is a 'unity' because all our reasoning, including our theoretical reasoning, functions practically. Although several prominent commentators endorse this view, it is widely thought to lack exegetical support. This paper seeks to strengthen the case for this reading by showing how theoretical reason's positive function, as Kant presents it in the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic, may be construed as fundamentally practical. I argue that reason's supreme regulative principle ought to be understood as a categorical practical imperative. This interpretation, I suggest, resolves the apparent inconsistencies that blight Kant's account of the principle in the Appendix, while bringing greater overall coherence to his account of theoretical reason's regulative function.

Kant paints a picture of human reason that can seem divided to its core. While theoretical reason supposedly seeks to grasp what is given in experience, and hence to understand the world as it is, practical reason seeks to transform experience, and hence to make the world as it ought to be. It is widely assumed that these projects are fundamentally distinct and potentially in conflict with one another.¹ And yet throughout the critical period Kant enigmatically insists on the unity of reason. Both our theoretical and practical endeavours, he claims, are grounded in one and the same rational capacity.² If sense can be made of this claim, then its centrality to Kant's thought can hardly be overstated. And yet this thesis continues to be treated as a derivative element in Kant's philosophy, since it is widely, though I believe incorrectly, assumed that Kant lacked the conceptual resources for substantiating it.

In this paper, I offer a reading of reason's supreme theoretical principle that suggests that Kant's unity of reason claim can be substantiated. According to the interpretation I advance, reason is 'a unity' because all reasoning, even theoretical reasoning, functions practically.³ Several prominent commentators have argued that Kant's conception of reason is unified because wholly practical in character, however, in the absence of a comprehensive exegetical defense of this claim, it has garnered little support.⁴ This paper seeks to strengthen the case for a practical reading of Kant's controversial and widely neglected unity of reason

thesis, while drawing attention to the important consequences this reading has for our understanding of Kant's theoretical philosophy.

In Section 1, I briefly set out Kant's account of reason's theoretical function, including his account of its supreme theoretical principle: the regulative command to seek cognitive unity. In Section 2, I consider the conceptual difficulties raised by Kant's presentation of this principle and explain the standard responses to these difficulties in the literature. In Section 3, I introduce the practical interpretation of reason's principle I wish to defend, while in Section 4 I show how this interpretation resolves the aforementioned difficulties. In Section 5, I demonstrate other ways in which the practical interpretation of theoretical reason I offer brings greater coherence to Kant's account of reason's regulative function than is achieved on the standard reading. I conclude by reflecting on the far-reaching implications my reading has for our understanding of Kant's theoretical philosophy as a whole.

1. Theoretical Reason's Regulative Function

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant gives a spectacularly ambitious account of how human beings are able to gain knowledge of an orderly, objective world. As is well known, he organizes this account according to the distinct intellectual faculties he believes contribute to the process. In the Doctrine of Elements, Kant analyzes how the faculty of sensibility receives a manifold of intuition structured by space and time. He then goes on to demonstrate how the faculty of the understanding synthesizes this manifold through empirical concepts and categories in order to produce cognition. Despite the coherence of this initial story, in the Transcendental Dialectic Kant makes clear that the understanding and sensibility, for all they accomplish, do not succeed in getting us all the way to knowledge. For this we also need the unique contribution made by the faculty of reason, without which—it now appears—our cognition would remain a welter of relatively disordered information.⁵ Only by striving to achieve the ideal of completeness and systematicity that reason projects can we use the cognitive information generated by the understanding to produce knowledge. Thus, on Kant's final account, 'all our cognition starts from the senses, goes from there to the understanding, and ends with reason . . .'.⁶

That reason is meant to play a paramount role in this process is perfectly clear. The exact nature of its contribution is, however, much disputed. Part of the problem is that Kant devotes nearly two hundred pages to a critique of reason's preventable misuse, before turning, in the Appendix, to his remarkably compressed account of its proper role.⁷ Accordingly, Kant's readers are left with a much clearer sense of his critical message—what reason cannot do in aiding our quest for knowledge—than with a sense of what it can and should do.

Kant's critical message concerning the limits of reason is familiar. According to his central argument in the Transcendental Dialectic, classical metaphysics

treats reason's principles and ideas as though they referred to possible objects, and attempts to gain knowledge of these putative objects a priori. For instance, metaphysics attempts to discover truths about the soul, the world and God as though these ideas referred to real objects into which reason could gain insight. The critical aim of the Dialectic is to show that all such attempts lead necessarily to dialectical error and illusion. Reason's ideas (e.g. God, soul, etc.) cannot be employed in cognitive judgments, like the concepts of the understanding can be, since they refer beyond the bounds of possible experience. However, Kant maintains that reason's ideas nonetheless play a vital role in our quest for empirical knowledge. By guiding the activity of the understanding, reason helps unify not objects given in experience—since this is the understanding's job alone—but the empirical judgments the understanding itself generates. This means that although reason's ideas do not give us knowledge of objects beyond the bounds of sense, they nonetheless play an extremely useful, if not indispensable, role in enabling our acquisition of knowledge *within* those bounds.

How do they do this? Despite the ambiguity in Kant's account, it is possible to identify its basic features. It will be worth reviewing them, before turning to the central problems with which this paper is concerned. According to Kant's account in the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic, reason helps us gain knowledge of nature in two ways: first, by projecting the idea of systematic unity as the ideal goal toward which our cognition ought to strive, and second, by enjoining us to seek this unity in our attempts to understand nature. Below I look at each of these functions in turn.

In its logical use, reason is concerned with general conditions that may ground particular knowledge claims. By showing several distinct claims to be grounded in the same fundamental condition, reason can create limited unities in our knowledge. However, in its real or transcendental use reason not only seeks out conditions that would allow us to connect particular claims, it also seeks an ultimate condition or ground that would, hypothetically, allow us to connect *all* particular claims, thus creating a single, coherent whole of knowledge.⁸ This notion of an ultimate condition, containing within it the complete sum of all conditions, and capable of unifying all aspects of our knowledge, is reason's fundamental idea.⁹ It represents an ideal of explanatory closure in which nothing further remains to be explained.

This unity of . . . [knowledge] presupposes an idea, namely that of the form of a whole of cognition, which precedes the determinate cognition of the parts and contains [all] the conditions for determining a priori the place of each part and its relation to the others. Accordingly, this idea postulates complete unity of the understanding's cognitions, through which this cognition comes to be not merely a contingent aggregate but a system interconnected in accordance with necessary laws. (*CPR*, A645/B673)

However, all real empirical cognition is necessarily conditioned by further possible cognition, just as all empirical states are conditioned by prior states. This

means that no actual cognition is ever whole and complete but can always be furthered and amended. As Kant explains, 'For in sensibility, i.e. in space and time, every condition to which we can attain in the exposition of given appearances is in turn conditioned . . . [thus] appearances are not objects in themselves in which absolutely unconditioned [unity] might possibly occur'.¹⁰ Because we cannot find the idea of a perfect, systematic whole of conditions instantiated in nature, the goal of complete knowledge reason projects is one toward which our cognition may aspire but at which it is certain never to arrive.¹¹ As Kant puts it:

Ideas contain a certain completeness that no possible empirical cognition ever achieves, and with them reason has a systematic unity only in the sense that the empirically possible unity seeks to approach it without every completely reaching it. (*CPR*, A568/B596)

Thus, Kant's account of the regulative aim reason projects highlights a sharp distinction between the faculties of reason and the understanding. Reason's task of projecting systematic unity is not one that could possibly be accomplished by the understanding, since reason *alone* is capable of envisioning ideal possibilities that go beyond the bounds of sense. (All of the understanding's concepts, by contrast, find application in possible experience.) This means that the idea of unity that guides our pursuit of knowledge is not itself an item of possible knowledge, but instead fundamentally different in kind to that which we know.¹²

It follows from the fundamental difference between reason and the understanding that to assume, with transcendental metaphysics, that systematic unity *could be* known or instantiated in experience, as concepts of the understanding can be, is to lapse into dialectical error. This constraint makes reason's second regulative function look, at first glance, perplexing if not paradoxical. In addition to projecting an unattainable ideal as the goal of our cognitive effort, reason enjoins us to seek this goal. This command—to seek the systematic unity of our cognition—is the fundamental principle of theoretical reason, of which all others are but expressions or manifestations.¹³

Kant seeks to dispel the initial aura of paradox by insisting that reason's principle is 'regulative' rather than 'constitutive'. In contrast to the constitutive principles of the understanding, which provide concepts for cognizing real objects, regulative principles neither refer to nor determine any real object at all. This means that the command to seek systematic unity neither asserts nor implies that such unity exists in nature, a constitutive claim that, in reifying reason's idea of unity, would lead straight to dialectical error. Rather, reason's principle only tells us that if we are to understand nature, we must perpetually search for such unity. Since it can never be found, the injunction to seek unity specifies *only* practicable ways in which we may *approach* (but never arrive at) this ideal.

As mentioned, the command to seek unconditioned cognitive unity is only the most general version of reason's regulative principle. On Kant's account it can be specified in myriad ways, in a variety of cognitive contexts.¹⁴ For instance,

Kant states that the three logical principles of homogeneity, specification, and continuity, when given transcendental expression in the corresponding principles of genera, species, and affinity, can be used to bring maximal unity and systematicity into our empirical knowledge of nature.¹⁵ He presents these six principles, among other derivative principles, as so many formulations of reason's single core demand for unity.

Thus, according to Kant's account of reason's regulative function, reason performs a two-fold task. It projects the idea of systematic unity as the goal of our cognitive striving. This idea represents an unattainable ideal that we shall never achieve in our actual cognition, which is always conditioned, incomplete, and less than perfectly systematic. Nonetheless, reason fulfills its second function by enjoining us to seek this unity. We do this by striving to make our cognition ever more systematic and complete in accordance with the many subsidiary principles that derive from reason's supreme demand for unity.

2. Conceptual Difficulties

Kant's account of reason's regulative principle is beset by major difficulties, which lead many to despair of finding a coherent interpretation of it. In this section I explore the two most significant problems that afflict his account and survey the standard response to these problems in the literature.

Although it is widely agreed that the regulative command to seek cognitive unity does not tell us (constitutively) what nature is like but instead tells us how we ought to organize our cognition of nature, matters quickly become more complicated. For Kant holds that we ought to organize our cognition *as if* nature were in fact systematically unified. He writes:

For the regulative law of systematic unity would have us study nature *as if* systematic and purposive unity together with the greatest possible manifoldness were to be encountered everywhere to infinity. For although we may light on and reach only a little of this perfection in the world, yet it belongs to the legislation of our reason to seek for it and presume it everywhere (CPR, A700/B729)¹⁶

Thus, although the regulative principle is not constitutive and does not tell us that *there is* systematic unity in nature, it nonetheless tells us to conduct our cognitive practice *as if* there were.¹⁷ It thus seem to demand assent to a theoretically formulated proposition about the natural world (i.e. it is a systematic unity), even if we know this proposition cannot be confirmed as theoretically valid. This feature of the regulative principle gives rise to the first of the major difficulties I have mentioned. At issue is whether or not reason's demand for the systematic unity of our cognition brings with it the regulative assumption that nature itself is a systematic unity, and if it does, how this regulative assumption affects the status of the principle.

On this point Kant is accused of vacillating between two seemingly incompatible versions of the principle: one subjective, the other objective.¹⁸ According to the subjective version, the command to seek systematic unity is purely methodological. This means it is justified in telling subjects how to organize their cognitive activity but makes no valid claim *of any kind* about objects.¹⁹ As Kant explains, such a principle does no more than ‘prescribe the unity of [the understanding’s own] rules’, while remaining silent on whether or not this unity ‘contradicts [or agrees with] the arrangement of nature’.²⁰ Importantly, the validity of such a principle would be secured *independently* of the question of its applicability to objects.

According to the objective version of the principle, by contrast, reason’s demand for the systematic unity of cognition brings with it the necessary regulative assumption that nature *itself* is systematically unified, albeit in a manner that cannot be specified a priori by reason, but must instead be empirically determined through the understanding.²¹ By the lights of this interpretation, the command to seek cognitive unity has objective, though indeterminate, validity. Its indirect applicability to real objects would be secured through a transcendently necessary regulative assumption about those objects, and its validity would be grounded in this. It follows, on this view, that reason’s principle would not *only* be concerned with our way of understanding nature but also concerned, albeit indirectly, with *nature itself*.

Kant himself distinguishes the subjective from the objective version of the principle, before arguing that the first entails the second. His claim is that there can be no merely subjective command to seek systematic unity, since without the regulative assumption that nature itself is systematically unified, such a principle could not guide our cognitive activity. The problem, in essence, is that we cannot rationally pursue an end—in this case: cognitive unity—without assuming that nature will make possible its achievement.²² Hence Kant states, ‘In fact it cannot even be seen how there could be a . . . [subjective] principle of rational unity among rules unless an . . . [objective] principle is presupposed, through which such a systematic unity, as pertaining to the object itself, is assumed a priori as necessary’.²³ In sum, we must assume for regulative purposes that nature is unified, since without this assumption we could not coherently seek unity in our way of representing it. Thus, as the above passage illustrates, Kant believes there is no coherent choice between subjective and objective versions of reason’s principle. It must be both.²⁴

Despite Kant’s widely acknowledged clarity on this point, many commentators persist in regarding the sort of principle he seems to have in mind as conceptually incoherent. He is often accused of vacillating between incompatible subjective and objective versions, while failing to identify clearly the single principle he has in view.²⁵ In order to understand why Kant’s conceptualization of the regulative principle as *both* objective and subjective generates such difficulty, it is necessary to turn to the second major equivocation of which Kant stands accused.

Kant sometimes presents reason’s principle as transcendently necessary for any use of the understanding at all, while elsewhere casting it as a conditionally

necessary heuristic aid. If it is the former, then the principle would be necessary for cognition, and hence in some sense a transcendental condition on the possibility of experience. If it is the latter, the principle would merely provide methodologically necessary guidance, relevant only to those with specific cognitive aims. As is widely noted, Kant appears to affirm both views. Thus, for example, he appears to endorse the stronger view in writing that ‘... the law of reason to seek unity is necessary, since without it we would have no reason and without that, no coherent use of the understanding, and lacking that, no sufficient mark of empirical truth; thus in regard to the latter we simply have to presuppose the systematic unity of nature as objectively valid and necessary’.²⁶ By contrast, Kant appears to affirm the weaker view when he states that reason’s principle ‘is merely a subjective law of economy for the provision of our understanding’.²⁷ On the basis of apparent vacillations such as these, Kant is frequently accused of incoherently presenting the principle as *both* a conditionally necessary methodological tool for furthering our empirical cognition, *and at the same time* a transcendently necessary condition on any cognitive activity whatsoever.

Commentators tend to link Kant’s apparent inability to decide between the principle’s methodological and transcendental necessity with his apparent equivocation on the issue of its subjective/objective character. Accordingly, it is often supposed that if reason’s demand for systematic unity is merely subjective, bringing with it no valid claim about nature, then it will not be transcendently necessary for cognition, but only a methodologically necessary device to be employed for specific cognitive ends. Conversely, it is frequently supposed that if the regulative principle is transcendently necessary, then it cannot be merely subjective but must be objective instead, bringing with it an a priori claim about nature, however regulative in character.

In keeping with this way of parsing the alternatives, interpreters often focus on deciding which of the two seemingly incompatible versions of the principle is the more coherent.²⁸ The dominant contemporary interpretation, most prominently advanced—in different iterations—by Guyer and Kitcher, takes a subjective-methodological rather than an objective-transcendental view of the principle. This reading has the advantage of doing justice to Kant’s insistence that there can be no constitutive, object-determining role for reason in cognition; however, it achieves this advantage at the price of systematically discounting those passages in which Kant’s claims objective and/or transcendental status for reason’s principle.²⁹

Many others, however, including Kleingeld, Walker, and Wartenberg, hold that reason’s regulative principle *is* transcendently necessary for our use of the understanding, and thus has objective validity (of some kind) insofar as it brings with it a transcendently necessary, regulative assumption about objects.³⁰ This view credits the many passages in which Kant claims transcendental-objective status for reason’s principle, though only at the price of systematically discounting those passages in which he states that reason’s principle is merely subjective and/or methodological. Statements such as these must be explained

away as an expression of Kant's alleged indecision on the matter, since it is all but universally assumed that a principle cannot be both objective-transcendental and subjective-methodological at the same time.

In contrast to both interpretive lines sketched above, I wish to argue that Kant does not—in his putative indecision—present two incompatible versions of reason's principle, but rather that once we understand the meaning of 'objective' and 'transcendentally necessary' in the right way, we shall see how the principle can have these attributes while also being subjective and methodologically necessary. On the interpretation I shall advance, we may credit Kant with presenting a single, coherent account of reason's principle, and need not systematically discount any part of his discussion in the Appendix.

Before turning to my proposal, however, it will help to diagnose more precisely the problem commentators encounter in trying to make sense of a principle that is supposed to be objective and transcendental *and at the same time* subjective and methodological. The contrast between transcendental and methodological necessity is clear enough. It is the related contrast between the principle's objective and subjective status that requires further clarification.

Let us begin by recognizing that there are at least two importantly different things Kant might mean in calling reason's principle 'objective', as he does throughout the Appendix.³¹ On the one hand, a principle may be 'objective' just in case it *directly* transcendentially conditions objects of possible experience.³² This is the primary sense in which the constitutive principles of the understanding count as 'objective'. For the sake of clarity, let us call principles that are objective in this way 'objectual'. On the other hand, there is a broader sense in which Kant calls principles 'objective'. Here, principles are 'objective' just in case they are valid a priori, that is, just in case their validity does not depend on contingent subjective variation.³³ For the sake of clarity, let us call principles that are objective in this second sense 'inter-subjectively valid'. Thus, Kant characterizes principles as 'objective' in both a wide and a narrow sense, since objectual principles comprise a sub-set of inter-subjectively valid principles.

As commentators are only too well aware, Kant also uses the term 'subjective' in a variety of distinct ways. Here, too, then, it will be useful to distinguish three things Kant might mean in calling reason's principle 'subjective', as he does throughout the Appendix.³⁴ First, there is a sense in which a principle is subjective just in case it comes from or is contributed by the subject.³⁵ For the sake of clarity, let us dub principles that are subjective in this sense 'subjectively grounded'. By the lights of Kant's Copernican insight, all transcendental principles are subjectively grounded, in virtue of being given by the subject. According to a distinct second sense of the term, however, principles are 'subjective' just in case they are *not* inter-subjectively valid, that is, just in case their validity does depend on contingent subjective variation.³⁶ Let us call principles that are subjective in this second sense 'idiosyncratic'. Kant also uses 'subjective' in a third sense, which contrasts not with inter-subjectivity but instead with objectuality. Here, a principle is 'subjective' just in case it does not

directly transcendently condition objects.³⁷ For the sake of clarity, let us call principles that are 'subjective' in this third sense 'non-objectual'.³⁸

Having clarified the relevant modifiers in play, we are now in a better position to see why Kant's claim that reason's principle is both objective and subjective appears problematic to many interpreters. First, let us observe that if 'objective' is taken to mean objectual, and 'subjective' is taken to mean subjectively grounded, then the transcendental principles of the understanding have dual objective/subjective character in exactly this sense. Indeed, the whole point of the Transcendental Deduction is to demonstrate how principles that come from the subject (and so are subjectively grounded) can also be objectual, that is, directly conditioning of objects.³⁹ What this shows is that the difficulty in interpreting reason's principle does not lie in the general claim that a principle can be both objective and subjective just as such, because the constitutive principles of the understanding exemplify at least one sense in which this is perfectly conceptually coherent. Rather, the problem interpreters encounter lies in the *unique way* in which reason's regulative principle is supposed to be both objective and subjective.

In calling reason's principle 'objective', Kant does not mean to signify that it is objectual (since, being regulative, the principle does not directly condition objects).⁴⁰ Equally, however, Kant is not content to claim that the principle is 'objective' merely in the minimal sense of being inter-subjectively valid, since he repeatedly states that the principle is transcendental.⁴¹ (Recall that not all inter-subjectively valid principles are transcendental, for example the principles of general logic.) Now, if it is *assumed* that all transcendental principles *are objectual*, then the very idea of a transcendental principle that is regulative and not constitutive is indeed incoherent.⁴² This widespread assumption, I submit, accounts for the difficulty many face in trying to make sense of reason's principle as both transcendental (and, on the above assumption, 'objective' in the sense of objectual) and 'subjective', where this is taken to mean non-objectual. Kant would indeed have to be as confused as many critics allege were he to claim throughout the Appendix that reason's principle both *does and does not* directly condition objects. Moreover, since all transcendental principles are minimally 'objective' in the sense of being inter-subjectively valid, interpreters also struggle to understand what Kant might mean in claiming that reason's principle is objective *in this minimal sense*, if he also is taken to claim that the principle is 'subjective' in the sense of being idiosyncratic. Again, Kant would have to be as confused as many allege were he committed to the claim that reason's principle both *is and is not* valid a priori for all subjects. Given the considerable ambiguity in Kant's use of these key modifiers, it is little surprise that his portrayal of reason's principle as both subjective and objective has generated widespread allegations of incoherence for both reasons set out above.

I submit that attending more closely to Kant's conception of a *transcendental principle*, however, begins to point the way out of this difficulty. To be sure, Kant often suggests in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that transcendental principles are necessarily objectual, directly conditioning *both* our a priori synthetic knowledge

and the objects of that knowledge.⁴³ This is undoubtedly the primary meaning of 'transcendental principle' at work in the Transcendental Deduction, and, more broadly, in the Transcendental Analytic as a whole. As Kant explains in the Doctrine of Method:

In transcendental cognition, as long as it has to do merely with concepts of the understanding, [the] ... guideline is possible experience. The proof does not show, that is, that the given concept (e.g. of that which happens) leads directly to another concept (that of a cause), for such a transition would be a leap for which nothing could be held responsible; rather it shows that experience itself, hence the object of experience, would be impossible without such a connection. (CPR, A783/B811)

In keeping with the dominant conception of transcendental principles offered in the Analytic, Kant here suggests that that which is transcendently necessary for our knowledge of experience must also be true of the objects of experience. In short, he suggests that transcendental principles are objectual. However, as the above passage makes explicit, Kant restricts this claim 'merely' to the transcendental concepts (and principles, presumably) of the understanding, the implication being that although *these* transcendental concepts and principles are necessarily objectual, others may not be. This restriction is exactly what we should expect in light of Kant's discussion of reason in the Appendix. According to that discussion, reason's principle is emphatically non-objectual (because regulative rather than constitutive), and at the same time *transcendental*. While it remains true that if one focuses exclusively on the first *Critique* and gives interpretive priority to the Analytic over the Dialectic, a case can be made for dismissing the alleged transcendental status of reason's principle on the grounds that all transcendental principles are objectual, such a case fails to account for Kant's critical thought as a whole. For, in the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant continues to display the same commitment to the possibility of non-objectual transcendental principles that underwrites his discussion of reason in the Appendix. According to his third *Critique* account, the principles of judgment are non-objectual because regulative *and*, at the same time, transcendental.⁴⁴ Setting aside the vexed question of how the faculties of reason and judgment relate to one another, Kant is clearly committed to the view that regulative principles (whatever faculty they belong to) fail to *directly* condition objects, while yet retaining their 'transcendental' status (however this latter designation is ultimately understood). Thus, in light of the third *Critique*, and in the absence of *other* compelling reasons to dismiss the transcendental status Kant claims for reason's principle in the Appendix, the onus falls on the interpreter to make sense of this claim.

If, however, when Kant calls reason's principle transcendental he does *not* mean to say that it directly conditions objects, then what does he mean to say? Here it will be helpful to recall that Kant uses 'transcendental' in a broad sense to designate a specific kind of philosophical reflection concerned with investigating a priori conditions of possibility *tout court*.⁴⁵ According to this usage, any a priori

principle that conditions the possibility of X may be considered transcendental, whether or not X refers directly to objects of possible experience. This is one important respect in which mental faculties (including reason), logic, and, indeed, Kant's philosophy as a whole count as transcendental.

If reason's principle is transcendental in *this broad sense*, then there is no conceptual incoherence at all in the idea that it conditions the possibility of our knowledge of objects without directly conditioning objects themselves. At the very beginning of the first *Critique* Kant draws attention to just this possibility. He claims to call 'transcendental all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode of our knowledge of objects in so far as this mode of knowledge is to be possible a priori'.⁴⁶ Although Kant may here seem to overstate the point (inadvertently suggesting that no transcendental principles are objectual), he clearly wishes to distinguish the transcendental conditions on *what* we know, the object of our cognition, from the transcendental conditions on *how* we know, the activity of cognizing.⁴⁷ Moreover, by claiming that reason's regulative principle is transcendental while denying that it is objectual, he suggests—quite coherently—that, unlike the principles of the understanding, it conditions our cognitive activity *without* directly conditioning the objects we grasp through that activity. That is to say, Kant suggests that reason's principle conditions our 'mode' of cognizing objects without directly conditioning objects themselves. The principle therefore straightforwardly counts as 'transcendental' in the broad sense established above. Reading its transcendental status in this way, however, allows us to appreciate a new sense in which it may be considered 'objective'. Insofar as reason's principle conditions fully rational cognitive activity, and insofar as that activity *in other respects* constitutes objects, the principle would remain linked to objects, however *indirectly*. This is a third (comparatively weaker, or—as Kant puts it—'indeterminate') sense in which reason's non-objectual transcendental principle might still be said to have objective status.⁴⁸

By considering reason's principle transcendental in the sense spelled out above, I submit, we open-up the needed conceptual space for making sense of the principle's unique objective/subjective character. On this construal, the principle would be 'objective' *not in the sense of being objectual* but in the dual sense of being (1) intersubjectively valid, and (2) a transcendental condition on our *cognitive activity* (hence indirectly linked to objects). At the same time, it would be 'subjective' *not in the sense of being idiosyncratic*, but in the dual sense of being (1) 'subjectively grounded' and (2) non-objectual (hence *not directly* constitutive of objects).

This reading allows us to account for the unique way in which reason's transcendental principle is both objective and subjective, while yet preserving a strong distinction between it and the transcendental principles of the understanding, all of which are objectual. Thus, even if Kant's seemingly contradictory characterization of reason's principle as both transcendental and methodologically necessary remains a puzzle, the possibility of an objective, transcendental principle that is nonetheless subjective has gained initial plausibility.⁴⁹

3. Seeking Unity as a Practical Imperative

In the previous section I diagnosed the two chief difficulties interpreters encounter in making sense of reason's principle, and sketched the conceptual contours of the sort of objective-subjective principle I believe Kant has in mind. What would such a principle be like? How can we make sense of its transcendental-methodological necessity? Although in the Appendix Kant openly gropes for an adequate vocabulary with which to explain reason's principle, I submit that his well-developed conception of a categorical imperative provides an apt model. For, as I shall argue, reading reason's regulative principle as a categorical imperative allows us not only to make sense of its objective-subjective character, but also its peculiar methodological-transcendental necessity. Moreover, this reading before looking at how this works, however, it will be useful to clarify Kant's conception of a practical principle and to show how this conception captures the normative features of the command to seek cognitive unity.

While Kant's account of practical principles is a vast topic, for present purposes what is essential is that such principles express normative claims about types of action that *ought* to be done. By imposing practical principles on themselves, agents freely choose to make their activity conform to the normative standards they prescribe.⁵⁰ Importantly, practical principles never automatically guide the action of agents, since agents can always choose to flout or ignore them. Agents can also fail to instantiate those principles they do adopt and intend to live up to. Thus, agents can be guided by practical principles precisely because they can *fail* to be guided by them, too.⁵¹

If the command to seek cognitive unity is a practical principle, this would mean that seeking systematic unity is not something we automatically do whenever we use our understanding in an attempt to cognize nature; rather seeking systematic unity would be something *we ought to do* under such circumstances, but may fail to do. That is to say, the claim that the command to seek cognitive unity is practical would imply *no more* than that the principle establishes normative standards for guiding our cognitive activity, rather than automatically determining the nature of that activity. Unlike the principles of the understanding, therefore, which agents cannot help but use in representing objects, reason's principle, practically construed, would neither determine anything given in the world nor anything given in the way we understand the world. Rather, it would normatively specify how we *ought* to understand the world, namely, as a systematic whole.

Although, to be sure, Kant does not explicitly call reason's regulative principle 'practical', he attributes to it the same prescriptive power—'expressed by an ought'—that is the defining hallmark of such principles.⁵² Thus Kant states in a variety of ways that we are *required* or *prescribed* by reason to seek the systematic unity of our cognition. For example, he claims that the idea of systematic unity 'shows not how an object is constituted but how, under the guidance of [this idea], *we ought to seek* after the constitution and connection of objects of experience in general'.⁵³ He further explains that 'the [regulative] principle of

reason is only **a rule**. . . . which, as a rule, postulates *what should be effected by us* in [seeking to understand nature] . . .'.⁵⁴ Additionally, Kant points out that 'if one looks not to what happens but to what properly *should* happen' then there can be no possible confusion about the regulative role played by the command to seek cognitive unity.⁵⁵

Further, if reason's regulative principle is indeed a practical imperative for us, then it should establish normative standards for our cognitive activity. That is to say, rather than determining anything given in the nature of objects or anything given in our way of thinking about them, the principle and its associated ideas should project criteria we *ought to meet* in our way of thinking about them.⁵⁶ This is precisely how Kant characterizes their function. He explains that 'even though one may never concede . . . [reason's ideas] objective reality (existence), [they] are nevertheless not to be regarded as mere figments of the brain; rather *they provide an indispensable standard for reason*, which needs the concept of that which is entirely complete in its kind, in order to assess and measure the degree and the defects of what is incomplete [in our cognition]'.⁵⁷ In the same vein Kant elaborates that '[s]uch concepts of reason [i.e. ideas] are not created by nature, rather we question nature according to these ideas, and we take our cognition (not nature) to be defective as long as it is not adequate to them.'⁵⁸ It follows that in falling short of the idea of complete and systematic cognitive unity (as we inevitably do), it is we who are enjoined to do better, to seek further and more complete explanations of nature. This failure cannot possibly reflect on nature itself—since the idea of systematic unity is neither derived from nature nor discursively applied to it. It refers only to 'what should be effected by us'—that is, to our own cognitive activity or conduct.

The above considerations lend initial plausibility to the claim that the command to seek systematic unity may be understood on the model of a practical principle, or, to say the same thing, a practical imperative. This interpretation gains further plausibility, however, when we consider how reading the principle as a *categorical* imperative accounts for Kant's apparently contradictory characterization of it as *both* objective and subjective, as well as both transcendently and methodologically necessary. As I shall show, this interpretation resolves the conceptual difficulties that seem to threaten the very coherence of reason's principle as Kant presents it.

4. Seeking Unity as a Categorical Imperative

According to Kant's account in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, categorical imperatives express unconditional normative requirements all agents ought to meet.⁵⁹ In contrast to hypothetical imperatives, which set conditional requirements that bind only in some cases, categorical imperatives bind all agents necessarily whenever they act. There is a further, less commonly appreciated feature of categorical imperatives, however, that is especially salient for present purposes. In *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant

argues that only activity that meets the normative standard set by the CI counts as *fully or purely rational*. On the basis of this claim, Kant goes on to argue that *if* there were no valid categorical imperative, or, more minimally, if it were impossible for agents to act on such an imperative, then pure rational activity itself (or, in his favored terminology, pure practical reason itself) would be impossible.⁶⁰ For example, Kant writes '[t]his Analytic shows that pure reason can be practical—that is, can of itself, independently of anything empirical, determine the will—and it does this by a fact in which pure reason in us proves itself actually practical, namely autonomy in the principle of morality by which the will is determined to deeds'.⁶¹ In these sorts of passages, Kant seeks to argue that the Categorical Imperative *conditions the very possibility of pure or fully rational activity*, since without this principle (and the ability of agents to act on it) pure rational activity would itself be impossible. Because this rationality-constitutive feature of the Categorical Imperative belongs to it merely in virtue of its form, however, it is shared by all categorical imperatives. Thus, as many have noted, categorical imperatives, in contrast to their hypothetical counterparts, set requirements on the very possibility of pure rational activity.⁶² In this way they help define or constitute what pure rational activity is. It follows that while such principles are in no way constitutive of objects, they may be considered, in a rather different sense, constitutive of pure rational activities or practices.

This rationality-constitutive feature of categorical imperatives is important since it illustrates the broad sense in which such principles count as transcendental. According to the definition identified earlier, *any* a priori principle that conditions the possibility of X counts as transcendental, whether or not X refers directly to objects of possible experience. Thus, insofar as categorical imperatives normatively condition the possibility of fully rational activity they may be considered transcendental in this sense. Although, to be sure, Kant himself does not explicitly call categorical imperatives 'transcendental', this way of characterizing them is both internally consistent for the reasons laid-out above, and has the virtue of explaining why Kant's practical philosophy is naturally considered one aspect of his transcendental philosophy as a whole. For present purposes this is important since it allows us to see how conceptualizing reason's principle as a categorical imperative, so construed, resolves the conceptual difficulties laid out earlier.

In order to see how this is so, let us return to the issue of the principle's objective-subjective character. On the proposed reading, reason's principle would count as 'objective' not merely in the sense of being inter-subjectively valid (binding all agents regardless of the contingent differences between individuals, as all a priori practical principles do), but also in virtue of transcendentally conditioning the possibility of fully rational cognitive activity. The principle would thus retain an indirect link to objects in virtue of conditioning the cognitive activity through which objects are, in a different respect, constituted. Thus, reading the command to seek cognitive unity as a categorical imperative makes sense of its special 'objective' character.

At the same time the proposed reading makes sense of the principle's alleged subjective status. To wit: the principle counts as 'subjective' not only in virtue of being (1) subjectively grounded, as all transcendental principles are, but also in virtue of (2) normatively guiding the activity of *subjects*, rather than determining anything given in the nature of objects. In this second respect the principle's 'subjectivity' would designate what I shall call its 'normatively non-objectual' character.⁶³

On the proposed reading, therefore, there is no contradiction in claiming that reason's principle is both subjective and objective at once. To describe it this way merely signifies that it is, on the one hand, a *practical* principle—concerned with normatively guiding subjects rather than determining anything given in the nature of objects (or in our way of representing them)—while at the same time being a *transcendentally necessary* practical principle. That is to say, a principle that conditions the very possibility of fully rational cognitive activity—and so retains a link to objects, however indirect. Reading reason's principle as a categorical imperative thus captures the objective-subjective character of reason's principle identified earlier, while also drawing attention to its normative status as a guide to our cognitive practice.

But does this interpretation fully solve the issue concerning the character of the principle's validity as a guide for cognitive practice? I think it does. Recall that in seeking cognitive unity Kant claims that we must suppose, for regulative purposes, that nature itself is a unity, even though we can have no knowledge that this is the case. How, many wonder, can Kant claim that reason's principle is merely subjective while at the same time making a necessary, albeit regulative, claim about nature's own objective unity? If reason's principle is a categorical imperative, we have a ready answer to this question. Recall that Kant thinks we cannot coherently adopt a practical principle unless we presuppose that we are able to pursue the end it requires us to seek.⁶⁴ Thus, just as Kant argues that we must assume nature to be morally purposive if we are to adopt the Categorical Imperative of seeking a moral world, so he argues that we must assume nature to be unified if we are to adopt the imperative of seeking cognitive unity.⁶⁵ In both cases Kant presents the regulative assumption about nature as grounded in the necessity of adopting the practical principle, *and not vice versa*. Accordingly, he asks '[f]or if we cannot presuppose . . . [this unity] in nature a priori, i.e. as belonging to the essence of nature, then how can one be assigned to seek it out . . .?'⁶⁶ As would be the case if the regulative principle were indeed a categorical *practical* imperative, Kant presents the regulative assumption about nature as grounded in the unconditional necessity of seeking cognitive unity. Thus, far from contradicting the principle's subjective character, the regulative assumption it entails about nature in fact further corroborates that status, if 'subjective' is taken in the suggested sense to mean: (1) subjectively grounded and (2) normatively non-objectual. Against those who hold that that reason's principle cannot be subjective and at the same time make a transcendently necessary—albeit regulative—claim about objective nature, the practical interpretation on offer makes sense of Kant's claim that it can be and do both.

Reading reason's principle as a categorical imperative, however, not only dispels the apparent conflict between its objectivity and subjectivity, but also that between its methodological and transcendental necessity. In order to grasp this further point, it will again be helpful to consider the distinctive character of categorical imperatives.

In setting transcendental requirements on agency, categorical imperatives may be viewed as helping to constitute what rational activity is. Thus while they are not constitutive of objects, they are—in a rather different sense—constitutive of rational activities or practices. In virtue of this, such principles have descriptive properties in addition to their practical or prescriptive ones.⁶⁷ They are prescriptive since they lay out normative requirements that free agents may or may not actually meet. Such principles also have *descriptive properties*, however, since they can be used to describe the activities agents perform when they succeed in living up to them. If the command to seek systematic unity is a categorical imperative, it will be a necessary requirement on our cognitive practice. This means that 'seeking unity' will accurately describe what we do when we *successfully* cognize nature, and will *also* specify what we *ought* to do when we aim to cognize it.⁶⁸ The principle will thus display both prescriptive and descriptive properties. Accordingly, we shall be able to say that all cognition *ought* to seek systematic unity, while also claiming that all *successful* cognition *does* seek it. This is exactly the sort of double nature, both prescriptive and descriptive, that all categorical imperatives have with respect to the activities they structure and make possible.

If, therefore, the principle of seeking systematic unity is a categorical imperative, constitutive of our cognitive practice, then it is easy to see why Kant can *coherently* characterize it as both transcendently necessary for cognition, and methodologically necessary for its extension and improvement. Insofar as perfect compliance with this principle defines the (ideal) practice of cognition, Kant represents the principle as a transcendently necessary condition on that practice. In this vein he writes '[f]or the law of reason to seek unity is necessary, since without it we would have no reason, and without that, no coherent use of the understanding . . .'.⁶⁹ On this construal, uses of the understanding that fail to seek cognitive unity do not count as real or coherent uses of the understanding at all. Equally, however, Kant can also affirm that agents who *aim or intend* to cognize nature must use the regulative principle to guide their own (would-be) cognitive practice. It is therefore also perfectly fair for him to write that through this principle our 'cognition, within its proper bounds, is cultivated and corrected more than could happen' without it.⁷⁰ How the regulative principle gets presented, whether as transcendently or methodologically necessary, will depend on whether cognition is cast in terms of the ideal search for unity it prescribes, or in terms of our *attempts* to search for this unity, however well or poorly executed. Possessing the characteristic double nature of transcendental practical principles, the regulative command to seek unity can be both methodologically necessary for improving our cognition, while at the same time being constitutive of what (ideal) cognition is. The second major perceived equivocation in Kant's account is in this manner removed.

5. Further Advantages

Not only does a practical reading of reason's regulative principle resolve the two chief conflicts that trouble Kant's account, it also has further advantages. Those who affirm the transcendental nature of reason's principle, while yet denying or ignoring its practical character, run into two major problems that the practical account successfully avoids. I conclude by looking at what I take to be the two greatest difficulties generated by this view.

According to one dominant approach, the principle of seeking systematic unity is held to be transcendental in the sense that our use of it is presupposed by any use of the understanding at all. According to this interpretation, seeking systematic unity is just what we automatically and inevitably do whenever we use our understanding in an attempt to comprehend nature. Thus, for example, Michelle Grier writes that our use of reason's principle is 'unavoidable for us as rational, discursive knowers', while Pauline Kleingeld agrees that seeking cognitive unity is 'transcendental in the sense of being a necessary a priori principle that is always already employed by the cognizing subject'.⁷¹ This view implies a denial of the practical thesis, since a principle that *inevitably* determines our action cannot guide us. Being guided by a practical principle implies the possibility of failing to be guided by it, as well.

The most obvious difficulty faced by those who regard our search for systematic unity as inevitable is how to account for the prescriptive way in which Kant often formulates the principle of seeking unity. Absent a sufficient explanation of this, one is left with the awkward impression that we are *required* to seek a goal we supposedly inevitably seek anyway. Thus, adherents of this view are challenged to explain why Kant often characterizes reason as *commanding* or enjoining us to seek cognitive unity if seeking it is, as they maintain, something we always already do. On a practical reading, one entirely avoids this problem, since seeking systematic unity is *not* what we always inevitably do whenever we use our understanding, but is rather what we always *ought* to do under such circumstances. The practical reading thus accounts for the transcendental necessity of the principle (any exercise of the understanding that is to count as rational ought to conform to it), without affirming that every exercise *does* conform to it.

Avoiding this latter claim is particularly important since Kant clearly wants to leave conceptual room for the possibility of agents who intend to cognize nature while yet failing to seek systematic unity in the proper way. In the Doctrine of Method, as well as in a host of shorter writings—including 'What is Orientation in Thinking?' and 'What is Enlightenment?'—Kant diagnoses failed, erroneous and poor attempts at cognition in exactly this way, as uses of the understanding that fail to be guided correctly by reason's principle. For example, Kant maintains that reifying reason's idea of cognitive unity by imagining that we or others have fully achieved it amounts to abandoning the regulative principle and adopting a 'principle of lazy reason' instead.⁷² He writes:

The first mistake that arises from using the ideas...not merely regulatively (but contrary to the nature of an idea) constitutively, is that of lazy reason (*ignava ratio*). One can use this term for any principle that makes one regard his investigation into nature, whatever it may be, as absolutely complete, so that reason can take a rest, as though it had fully accomplished its business. (CPR, A690/B718)

Kant describes the errors of classical metaphysics as well as a host of other epistemic shortcomings along similar lines. It is crucial to his account of reason, therefore, that these failures are not inevitable but can be corrected. By allowing that the command to seek systematic unity is practical, we have a ready way of accounting for Kant's diagnosis of cognitive failure, including the failures of classical metaphysics that are his primary target in the Transcendental Dialectic. By contrast, those who see our search for cognitive unity as inevitable are as challenged to explain failed cognition, as they are to explain why reason seems to require us to do something we supposedly always do anyway.

However, those who interpret the principle of seeking unity as transcendently necessary while yet denying its practical character of course deny that the principle tells us how *we ought to* conduct our cognitive practice, claiming instead that it describes how reason itself inevitably functions, even when incompletely exercised. The additional problem with this interpretation is that it contradicts a central tenet of Kant's conception of agency. It is fundamental to Kant's practical philosophy that ends are never pursued automatically but are always freely chosen.⁷³ Indeed, in order for something to be an end it must be adoptable by an agent. In the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant explains, '[a]n end is an object of the choice (of a rational being) . . . Only I myself can make something my end'.⁷⁴ Accordingly, 'to have an end that I have not myself made an end is self-contradictory, an act of freedom that is not yet free'.⁷⁵ As these passages illustrate, we never find ourselves helplessly and inevitably pursuing ends we ourselves do not freely choose. It follows that reason does not automatically govern our action by imposing ends; rather it prescribes ends that become action-guiding only insofar as we freely adopt them. However, in affirming that reason automatically pursues the end of systematic unity, the standard transcendental approach affirms that, insofar as we are rational, we cannot help but pursue this end whenever we attempt to cognize nature. I think this is a picture of agency Kant gives us good reason to reject. Despite the strong current of teleological language running through Kant's account of reason, *we* are obliged to seek unity when we try to understand nature, although we do not unavoidably do so. Reason does not automatically undertake this task for us.

In light of these considerations, I suggest that it is more plausible to embrace a practical reading of reason's regulative principle. On this view, we do not, insofar as we are rational, automatically seek systematic cognitive unity, but rather are required to adopt this end as the goal of our cognitive striving. Such an interpretation is fully consistent with Kant's conception of agency, explains

Kant's ubiquitous use of prescriptive language, and brings coherence to Kant's overall account of the principle.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the regulative command to seek systematic cognitive unity ought to be read as a categorical, practical imperative. Moreover, I have argued that interpreting the principle in this way solves the apparent conceptual difficulties that seem to threaten the very coherence of reason's principle. More specifically, I have argued that reading the principle as a categorical practical imperative shows the sense in which it can be simultaneously objective and subjective, as well as both methodologically and transcendently necessary. According to this account, we need not suppose that Kant's exposition of reason's principle is inherently confused and contradictory. We need not decide which of the supposedly incompatible versions of the principle best captures Kant's mature view. Rather, I have proposed a way in which Kant's exposition of reason's theoretical principle may be taken at face value. By distinguishing the transcendental conditions on *what* we know from the transcendental conditions on our cognitive practice, we appreciate how Kant's account of categorical imperatives—understood as transcendental *practical* principles—uniquely illuminates reason's theoretical function.

This result matters. The suggestion that reason is 'a unity' because all of reason, including theoretical reason, is practical is still widely ignored or dismissed. However, if this claim is correct it has far reaching implications for how Kant's theoretical philosophy should be understood. To begin with, it suggests that the usual practice of interpreting Kant's practical and theoretical philosophy independently of each other must be reconsidered.⁷⁶

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NOTES

¹ Indeed this occasionally appears to be Kant's own assumption, as for instance in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, where he discusses how the potential conflict between practical and theoretical reason may be resolved, in a section entitled 'On the primacy of pure practical reason in its connection with speculative reason' (*CPrR*, 5:119–21).

² *CPR*, Axx;G, 4:392; *CPrR*, 5:91, 5:121.

³ This strong reading of Kant's unity thesis contrasts with a number of weaker readings, which dominate the literature on this topic. According to these weaker views, theoretical and practical reason are 'united' by the shared teleological view of nature they presuppose, despite their functioning in fundamentally different ways. See, e.g., Guyer (2000), and Kleingeld (1998: 311–39).

⁴ See O'Neill (1989: 3–127) and Korsgaard (2008: 27–68, 100–126).

⁵ My use of the term reason (*Vernunft*) in this paper refers to the distinct theoretical faculty, introduced at *CPR*, A299, which Kant contrasts with the faculties of sensibility and the understanding. Kant notoriously uses the term in a variety of ways, however. In the *Transcendental Analytic*, for instance, he uses '*Vernunft*' in several broader senses, which include the faculty of the understanding. My own usage of the term refers to the distinct theoretical faculty of reason alone, except where otherwise noted.

⁶ *CPR*, A299.

⁷ Susan Neiman makes a similar point in Neiman (1994: 63).

⁸ See, for instance, *CPR*, A 307–8. For more on how reason's real use and logical use are connected see Allison (2004: 311–12).

⁹ *CPR*, B378–86.

¹⁰ *CPR*, A327.

¹¹ As Kant also puts the point, 'systematic unity (as a mere idea) is only a projected unity, which one must regard not as given in itself, but only as a problem . . .' (*CPR*, A648/B676).

¹² *CPR*, A307.

¹³ *CPR*, A324/B380.

¹⁴ See, for example, *CPR*, A509–10/B537–8. From here forward I shall speak of the single regulative principle—the command to seek systematic cognitive unity—as shorthand for the regulative principles of reason in general, all of which further specify this demand. Moreover, in keeping with norms of stylistic variation, I refer to this principle interchangeably as the command to seek 'unity', 'systematic unity', and 'systematic cognitive unity'.

¹⁵ *CPR*, A657. In the *Critique of Judgement* this list changes, most notably with Kant adding the principle of teleology.

¹⁶ I have substituted italicized for bold font in passages quoted from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.

¹⁷ *CPR*, A672/B700, A673/B713, A685/B713.

¹⁸ An array of commentators charge Kant with this, including Norman Kemp Smith, and Thomas Wartenberg, among others (Kemp Smith 2003: 547; Wartenberg 1992: 231).

¹⁹ For example, Kant writes: 'In fact . . . the unity of . . . [knowledge] is a demand of reason, in order to bring the understanding into thoroughgoing connection with itself . . . such a principle does not prescribe any law to objects, and does not contain the ground of the possibility of cognizing and determining them as such in general, but rather is merely a subjective law of economy for the provision of our understanding' (*CPR*, A306).

²⁰ *CPR*, A651/B679.

²¹ See *CPR*, A409/B436, also A307/B364, and A308/B365.

²² Without the regulative supposition that nature itself is systematically unified, 'reason would proceed directly contrary to its vocation, since it would set as its goal an idea that entirely contradicts the arrangement of nature' (*CPR*, A651/B679).

²³ *CPR*, A651/B679.

²⁴ As Guyer puts it, 'the principle of systematicity must be both a logical [subjective] and a transcendental [objective] principle—because it makes no sense to look for systematicity in our concepts of nature if we do not think that nature itself is systematic . . .' (Guyer 1997: 293). For a fuller treatment of Guyer's influential interpretation of this matter see 'Reason and Reflective Judgment: Kant on the Significance of Systematicity' (Guyer 1990: 17–43). Michelle Grier advances a reading that agrees with Guyer's in affirming that the two versions of the principle need not be exclusive of each other (Grier 2001: 282).

²⁵ Norman Kemp Smith characterizes Kant's account as 'extremely self-contradictory', and marshals the notorious patchwork theory of interpretation in order to account for it (Kemp Smith 2003: 547). See also, e.g., Gardner (1999: 224). Many who do not find his Kant's view outright incoherent nonetheless hold that the idea of a regulative principle that is both subjective and objective, both transcendentially and methodologically necessary is in some sense 'very unKantian' (R.P. Horstmann 1989: 250).

²⁶ CPR, A651/B679.

²⁷ CPR, A306.

²⁸ As Michelle Grier observes, 'Given these apparent shifts in Kant's position, it is not surprising that . . . the problem seems to be reduced to that of determining *which* of the principles of systematic unity [logical or transcendental] is supposed to be "the" . . . principle' (Grier 2001: 273). Patricia Kitcher makes a similar point in noting that, 'the interpretative difficulty is surely Kant's apparent wish to have things both ways: to dismiss the pretensions of reason and simultaneously to attribute to the search for unity some kind of objective validity' (Kitcher 1986: 207).

²⁹ Guyer, for example, concludes that 'nothing in the appendix in the first *Critique* seems to offer an answer' to the question of why reason's principle should be viewed as having the objective, 'indispensibly necessary' status Kant says it has (Guyer 2006: 170). In a similar vein, Kitcher sees Kant's insistence on the transcendental status of reason's principle as an expression of his presumably incoherent 'wish to have things both ways' (Kitcher 1986: 207).

³⁰ For instance, Kleingeld writes that although the assumption about nature is merely regulative, '[i]t is transcendental in the sense of being a necessary a priori principle that is always already employed by the cognizing subject' (Kleingeld 1998: 326). In sympathy with this view, Wartenberg writes: 'the results of the attempt to unify [the cognitive products of the understanding] are taken to be true of nature . . . this shows that the demand of reason for such unity is not merely subjectively valid' (Wartenberg 1992: 237).

³¹ CPR, A651/B679, A654/B682, A663/B691, A664/B692, A665/B693.

³² E.g., CPR, A90/B122, A94/B127.

³³ Principles of logic, for example, are 'objective' in virtue of being valid a priori, even though they do not directly determine objects of possible experience, and so are not 'objectual'. See Kant's distinction between general and transcendental logic (CPR, A709/B737- A724/B752).

³⁴ CPR, A666/B694, A680/B708, A698/B726.

³⁵ E.g., CPR, A 90/ B122.

³⁶ E.g., CPR, A336/B393, A666/B694, A680/B708.

³⁷ E.g., CPR, A666/B694, A680/B708.

³⁸ The possibility must be left open that non-objectual principles *indirectly* condition objects. Kant argues that reason directly conditions our use of the understanding, but does not directly condition objects (while our use of the understanding does directly condition objects). It follows that by conditioning the understanding reason stands in an *indirect* (or second order) conditioning relation to objects, since the conditioning relation would have to be, at least in some measure, transitive. See, e.g., CPR, A644/B672.

³⁹ CPR, A89-90/B122-23.

⁴⁰ CPR, A666/B694.

⁴¹ E.g., CPR, A671/699.

⁴² This assumption is fairly widespread and tends to be grounded in a selective reading of passages, many found in the Transcendental Deduction, where Kant suggests that all transcendental principles directly condition objects of possible experience (e.g.,

CPR, B137-9, B150, B160, A133-36/B172-75). However, Kant consistently rejects this view in his discussion of regulative principles of reason in the Appendix, and of judgment in the third *Critique*, e.g. *CJ*, 5.184.

⁴³ E.g., CPR, A133-36/B172-75.

⁴⁴ 'Now this transcendental concept of a purposiveness of nature is neither a concept of nature nor of freedom, since it attributes nothing at all to the object (of nature), but rather only represents the unique way in which we must proceed in reflection on the objects of nature . . . consequently it is a subjective principle (maxim) for the power of judgment' (*CJ*, 5.184).

⁴⁵ As with many of Kant's most fundamental concepts, the meaning of the term 'transcendental' shifts throughout the critical period, and, indeed, throughout the *Critique of Pure Reason* itself. Famously, Kant qualifies a diverse variety of things as 'transcendental', including: logic, aesthetic, faculties, unity of apperception, principles, etc. Here 'transcendental' is often used to signify nothing more than that the noun in question is being analysed in terms of *its conditions of possibility*.

⁴⁶ CPR, A12 /B25.

⁴⁷ This troublesome passage may be understood in several different ways. In claiming that transcendental knowledge does not concern itself with objects, Kant may mean to say no more than that transcendental knowledge does not concern itself with objects considered noumenally, but only considered phenomenally. On this interpretation, Kant would not be denying the possibility that transcendental principles can be objectual.

⁴⁸ Kant describes the weaker, indirect character of the principle's objectivity as 'indeterminate' in a variety of places, e.g. CPR, A663/B691, A665/B693.

⁴⁹ Recall that 'non-objectual' was one important meaning of the term 'subjective' as applied to reason's principle.

⁵⁰ I interchangeably use 'agents' and 'subjects' to mean finite human beings who possess practical reason, and so are able to conform their conduct to normative requirements. Moreover, I use 'practical principles' and 'imperatives' interchangeably, since the only practical principles at issue in this paper are those directed at finite rational agents.

⁵¹ It is important to Kant's view of agency that the capacity to act on practical principles remains even when agents fail to exercise it.

⁵² *G*, 4:413.

⁵³ CPR, A671/B699, italics mine.

⁵⁴ CPR, A509/B537, italics mine.

⁵⁵ CPR, A750/B778, italics mine.

⁵⁶ Kant neatly expresses this point by saying that 'the ought that reason pronounces sets a measure and a goal . . .' (CPR, A548/B576).

⁵⁷ CPR, A570/B598, italics mine.

⁵⁸ CPR, A646/B674.

⁵⁹ Although Kant famously argues that there is only one valid categorical imperative and that this is the Moral Law, these contentious arguments and their striking conclusions fall outside the scope of present concerns. Rather, what is at issue is the generic concept of a categorical imperative, from which Kant attempts to derive the above theses. I follow common usage in distinguishing the allegedly unique, fully determined concept of a categorical imperative with capital letters: the Categorical Imperative.

⁶⁰ This point is vividly illustrated by Kant's claim that the Categorical Imperative determines nothing but the 'form of volition as such' where volition refers to the capacity for pure rational activity (*G*, 4:444). See also, *G*, 4:427, 4:442, 4:445. Kant also makes this point in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, e.g., *CPrR* 5:20–21, 5:26, 5:29–5:30, 5:42.

⁶¹ *CPrR*, 5:42.

⁶² This reading of Categorical Imperatives is well established in the secondary literature. Korsgaard, for instance, gives an influential account of how the Categorical Imperative in particular plays a constitutive role in conditioning the rational activity its guidance makes possible (Korsgaard 2008: 12). Andrews Reath also offers a notable account of how formal practical principles, including categorical imperatives, transcendently condition and thus help constitute the rational activity they structure (Reath 2010: 42–3). For another excellent treatment of this issue, see O'Neill (1989: 89–96). Of course, it may be argued that although this reading of categorical imperatives captures Kant's view in *Groundwork* and the third *Critique*, by the Religion book Kant had come to a different understanding of the status of such principles. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer at the *European Journal of Philosophy* for drawing my attention to this point. For present purposes, however, I do not take a stand on the exegetical question of whether Kant did indeed change his mind about this, but rather seek to develop the philosophical point that unconditional normative requirements may be read as conditioning the possibility of fully rational activity by uniquely specifying what is to count as such activity.

⁶³ If a non-objectual principle is one that does not directly condition objects, a normatively non-objectual principle is one that, in lieu of directly conditioning objects, instead directly conditions rational practices.

⁶⁴ Kant treats this as one of the fundamental constraints on rational willing. See Guyer's thorough treatment of this issue in Guyer (2000: 345–7).

⁶⁵ For the moral argument, see, for example, *CPR*, A811/B839. For the cognitive argument, see *CPR*, A651/B679, where Kant writes that since 'the law of reason to seek unity is necessary . . . we simply have to presuppose the systematic unity of nature as objectively valid and necessary'.

⁶⁶ *CPR*, A693/B721. Here Kant refers in particular to our need to assume the systematic unity of nature by postulating that it is purposively designed by God.

⁶⁷ This point is made by Korsgaard in Korsgaard (2008: 8–9).

⁶⁸ Stating it this way may seem to suggest that reason's principle does not possess categorical necessity, since its normative authority would depend upon particular agents' intending to cognize nature. Although this is an issue I cannot fully explore here, I suggest that this is the same sort of dependency that characterizes categorical imperatives broadly construed, since the authority of all such imperatives depends upon particular agents' intending to act, whether cognitively or in some other respect.

⁶⁹ *CPR*, A652/B680.

⁷⁰ *CPR*, A671/B699.

⁷¹ Grier 2001:286; Kleingeld (1998: 326).

⁷² *CPR*, A690/B718.

⁷³ Despite Kant's clarity on this point in the context of the practical philosophy, at times he may nonetheless seem to suggest that we are teleologically compelled or influenced by ends we have not freely chosen but that are either internally implanted or in some other way externally imposed. There are two cases in particular that may seem to suggest this: happiness, which Kant claims is an end given to us by nature, and the 'ultimate end of nature', understood as the telos of human history. Happiness appears to raise the problem of how an end, as a function of freedom, can be imposed upon us from without. Kant dispels this difficulty by insisting that happiness is merely an empty placeholder with no determinable meaning. Whatever the case may be with happiness however, Kant clearly opposes it to the ends prescribed to us by reason. So even if

happiness *were* an end given by nature (whatever that might mean), this does not suggest that ends of reason could be similarly given. However, in the 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim', Kant discusses reason as a capacity of the species as a whole, and here reason is described as undergoing a process of teleological, historical development toward an end that may seem to influence human action irrespective of individual free agency (e.g. IUA 8:18). Thus, even if happiness does not present grounds for worry, Kant's theory of human history may seem to suggest that reason can influence our action through ends it projects without our freely adopting them. Despite Kant's occasional suggestions to this effect, however, he is consistently clear that we project the essentially practical concept of an end onto nature for regulative purposes in order to regard it as a teleological system. That is to say, there is no real end of nature we could possibly know. Moreover, Kant claims that we are entitled to view nature as being teleologically organized for the sake of being able to pursue our own practical purposes, including the obligatory practical purposes reason unconditionally prescribes to us. These are of course purposes that can only guide our action through our own free decision to adopt them. Thus, although certain aspects of Kant's teleological account of history—and indeed of nature more generally—may suggest otherwise, Kant regards all real ends as practical, which is to say adoptable by free agents. Henry Allison provides an argument in support of this claim in Allison 2009: 24–45.

⁷⁴ *MM*, 6:831.

⁷⁵ *MM*, 6:382.

⁷⁶ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Universities of Cambridge and Southampton, and I would like to thank both audiences for very helpful questions and suggestions. I would also like to thank Angela Breitenbach, John Callanan, Marina Frasca-Spada, Nick Jardine, Pauline Kleingeld, and Onora O'Neill for their invaluable feedback on earlier drafts. Finally, I am grateful to the anonymous referee for this journal whose constructive criticism significantly helped improve the paper.

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