

THE FREEDOM TO DESIGN NATURE: KANT'S STRONG OUGHT→CAN INFERENCE IN 21ST CENTURY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: Kant's attempts to formulate a conception of the harmony of nature and freedom have two logical presuppositions. The first presupposition is the separation of ought and is, which provides a logical formulation of the separation of freedom and nature. Kant might well have settled on the view that the separation between nature and freedom cannot be bridged. Why did Kant attempt to overcome said separation? The second presupposition of Kant's project to bridge nature and freedom involves an ought→can inference, stating that moral obligation implies the possibility of its fulfillment. There are at least two ways this inference can be understood. There is a weak sense of the inference, stating that no one is obliged to do the impossible. There is also a very strong sense of the inference, stating that if a moral obligation is found to obtain, it must then be possible to fulfill it. Kant interprets the ought→can inference in this strong as well as in the weak sense. Nature, the law-governed totality of what exists, must be understood as able to provide a suitable field for moral realization. The isomorphism between the lawfulness of nature and that of moral freedom animates Kant's account of moral judgment, and will provide the main focus of the current investigation. Kant conceives of nature and freedom as twin kingdoms, thus providing a theoretical model validating this ought→can inference. The weaker sense of this ought→can inference does justice to moral judgment without requiring the awesome task of bridging nature and freedom. Why, then, should we maintain the strong ought→can inference in our post-Kantian situation? I suggest that Kant's insistence on the strong ought→can inference may yield an ethical approach to the ever more powerful ways in which human beings technologically transform nature, including human nature itself.

KEYWORDS: Practical Philosophy; Kant; Nature; Freedom; Ought→Can Inference

Kant's attempts to formulate a conception of the harmony of nature and freedom have two logical presuppositions.¹ The first presupposition is the ought/is distinction.

1. Kant's most sustained attempt at this can be found in his *Critique of Judgment*, where both aesthetic and teleological judgment indicate a 'supersensible ground' of nature and freedom. Here, I will focus on the development of this harmony in Kant's moral philosophy. I choose this focus in light of the importance of the ought/is distinction and ought→can inference at issue in harmonizing nature and freedom.

The separation of ought and is provides a logical formulation of the separation of freedom and nature. This is a presupposition of the search for harmony between freedom and nature if only because there is no need to seek harmony where there is no separation in the first place. Kant might well have settled on the view that the separation between nature and freedom cannot be bridged. Why did Kant attempt to overcome said separation? After all, the logical validity of the ought/is distinction should have inspired caution about such a project. The second presupposition of Kant's project to bridge nature and freedom involves the ought→can inference, stating that moral obligation implies the possibility of its fulfillment. There are at least two ways this inference can be understood. There is a weak sense of the inference, stating that no one is obliged to do the impossible. There is also a very strong sense of the inference, stating that if a moral obligation is found to obtain, it must then be possible to fulfill it. In this sense of the inference, a possibility of fulfillment is automatically implied by the very fact of obligation and not just ingredient to the finding that an obligation obtains. This strong ought→can inference implies its weaker version in which the clear impossibility of fulfillment, for example, relieves us of any moral obligation to change the past. An undisputed impossibility always relieves us of moral obligation. Barring this relief, the strong inference means that moral obligations postulate the possibility of being realized. Kant interprets the ought→can inference in this strong sense in which the sense of obligation precedes and demands the conditions of its fulfillment. Nature, the law-governed totality of what exists, must then be understood as able to provide a suitable field for moral realization. Kant's account of this possibility ultimately makes recourse to the postulate of a God capable of bringing about the highest good, combining happiness (*natural goal*) and moral virtue (freedom). As far as moral judgment goes, however, Kant also insists on the isomorphism bridging the lawfulness of moral freedom and the lawfulness of nature. This isomorphism will provide the main focus of the current investigation. Kant's account of the Typic of Pure Practical Judgment in the *Critique of Practical Reason*² conceives of nature and freedom as twin kingdoms, thus providing a theoretical model validating the ought→can inference.

The harmony of nature and freedom is a concern for practical judgment. Kant takes the ought→can inference in a special strong sense, driving him to try to search for its validity through a harmony of freedom and nature.³ This strong sense of the ought→can inference adds a direction of *causal* implication lacking in the weaker sense. The weaker sense of the ought→can inference does justice to moral judgment without requiring the awesome task of bridging nature and freedom. Why, then, maintain the strong ought→can inference? I suggest that Kant's insistence on the strong ought→

2. AK V. 67ff.

3. Following Hintikka, one might reformulate Kant's sense of the ought→can inference: 'it *ought* to be that *ought* implies *can*.' This reformulation does not imply any claims about a harmony of nature and freedom. For a discussion of Kant regarding obligation and possibility, see: Jaako Hintikka, 'Deontic Logic and its Philosophical Moral,' in *Models for Modalities* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969) and discussion of this in Patrice Bailhache, *Essai de logique déontique* (Paris: Vrin, 1991).

can inference may yield an ethical approach to the ever more powerful ways in which human beings technologically transform nature, including human nature itself.

The role of possibility in Kant's account of practical reason will prove crucial to my inquiry, for the ought→can inference requires bridging natural possibility and moral necessity, so that nature is taken to be a matrix of possibility not only for ontological but also for deontological actualization. Accordingly, I shall begin by briefly clarifying the moral relevance of the modal category of possibility. This will require introducing Kant's insistence on the heterogeneity of sensibility and reason as highlighted in his claim concerning the immanence of the modal categories. In light of this, I will offer a reading of the Typic of Pure Practical Judgment, supplemented by a review of Kant's conception of moral purposiveness in its relation to natural purposiveness found in the Dialectic of the first *Critique* and argued further in the *Critique of Teleological Judgment*. From this discussion of moral and natural purposiveness, I will draw some conclusions concerning the contemporary relevance of the strong ought→can inference for an ethics of technology based upon humanity's perspectival situation, which bridges nature and freedom by grounding both theoretical and moral reflection.

THE MORAL RELEVANCE OF THE CATEGORY OF POSSIBILITY

Rather than possibility, isn't it always necessity that characterizes moral obligation for Kant? I offer the following clarifying response to this question. The *necessity* of moral obligation is connected with Kant's conception of the *a priori*. Wherever one finds necessity in a connection one has discovered an *a priori* element in so far as necessity cannot be derived from experience. On Kant's view, cognition, moral obligation and aesthetic (reflective) judgment all claim necessity, and each of these three kinds of necessity has distinguishing features. The necessity of laws of nature is such that physical events can never happen otherwise than under these laws. The necessity of aesthetic reflective judgment is called exemplary necessity, the claim to a necessary connection between a judged representation and pleasure, such that I put forward my judgment as an example of how everyone *ought* to judge. In morality, too, necessity is rendered in terms of the word "ought." The objective necessity of an action is its morally obligatory status, a status that cannot be derived from experience. Objectively necessary actions are, of course, subjectively contingent, which means that my will is *under necessitation* to act from duty. The possibility implied by moral obligation does not contradict the necessity of moral obligation, i.e., its *a priori* status. Taking moral actions as either logically or ontologically necessary makes no sense *unless* one qualifies obligatory acts as necessary, *given the objective moral law*, or as necessary *for a good person*. These phrases neatly shift the deontic sense from the modal concept of necessity unto the axiological ingredients "objective moral" or "good," leaving *necessity* to function as a non-deontic modal term. Leibniz formulated theorems combining modal alethic and deontic logic in this way. In these theorems Leibniz clearly states the sense in which obligatory acts are necessary—under

the qualification “for the good man.”⁴ He also clearly formulates an implication consistent with the necessity of obligatory acts: “Whatever is obligatory is possible.”⁵ Kant certainly came to the same conclusion when he argues that “ought” implies “can,” even if for Kant the freedom signified by this implication cannot be *theoretically known*.⁶

THE IMMANENCE OF THE MODAL CATEGORIES⁷

With this in mind one sees how Kant can explicitly connect the moral *ought* with *possibility* within the context of a discussion of the difference between understanding and sensibility in §77 of the *Critique of Judgment*. Aware of the difference between the necessity and the possibility pertaining to moral obligation, Kant also uses the term “necessity” to refer to the *ought* of moral obligation:

It is clear, therefore, that only because of the subjective character of our practical ability do we have to present moral laws as commands (and the actions conforming to them as duties) and does reason express this necessity not by *is* (i.e., happens) but by *ought to be*. This would not be the case if we considered reason, regarding its causality, as being without sensibility (the subjective condition for applying reason to objects of nature), and hence as being a cause in an intelligible world that harmonized throughout with the moral law. For in such a world there would be no difference between obligation and action, between a practical law that says what is possible through our doing, and the theoretical law that says what is actual through our doing. It is true that an intelligible world in which everything would be actual just because it is (both good and) possible...is for us a transcendent concept.⁸

The faculty of understanding provides a matrix of possibility for experience and cognition. Pure reason provides principles of the possibility of experience, but not for its speculative employment in cognition. Rather, as stated in the first *Critique*, pure reason’s provision of possibility concerns moral obligation:

Pure reason, then contains, not indeed in its speculative employment, but in that practical employment which is also moral, principles of the *possibility of experience*, namely, of such actions as, in accordance with moral precepts, *might* be met with in the *history* of mankind. For since reason commands that such actions should take place, it must be possible for them to take place. Consequently, a special kind of systematic unity, namely the moral, must likewise be possible.⁹

4. G. W. Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe* (Darmstadt - Berlin 1962 ff), VI, 4, 2758.

5. *Ibid.*, 2759.

6. See note 2.

7. In the ‘Amphiboly’ of the first *Critique*, one finds the *locus classicus* of Kant’s argument for the immanence of the modal categories. Given my concern for their relevance to practical judgment, I have chosen to argue from certain passages in the third *Critique* instead, because they clearly show Kant’s view on that issue.

8. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), AK V.403-4 (§76 Comment).

9. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1929), B835 (Canon of Pure Reason). Future references will give the page numbers of the original B edition.

Viewing practical reason as provider of the principles of the possibility of experience, Kant invokes the idea of a moral world (a kingdom of ends) that *can* be brought about just because it *ought* to be.¹⁰ The moral possibility of a kingdom of ends is an implication of moral obligation established through the fact of the moral imperative. This is precisely the ought \rightarrow can inference in its strong sense. But how can practical reason provide the “principles of the *possibility of experience*,” as Kant not just states, but emphasizes? Is not that the role of understanding (*Verstand*), while reason (*Vernunft*) always exceeds the limits of experience? This question furnishes the central problem of the Typic of Pure Practical Judgment.

THE TYPIC OF PURE PRACTICAL JUDGMENT

In cognition, understanding provides a matrix of possibility, sensible intuition gives the actual through its reception of the given, and transcendental imagination mediates between the two faculties by means of schemata. In the “Typic of Pure Practical Judgment” the moral law demands practical fulfillment, while the lawfulness of nature delimits what *can* be experienced and known as actual, i.e., it provides experiential and cognitive possibility. This marks the chasm between *ought* and *is*, viz., between freedom and nature. The question for practical judgment concerns how to render as possible for experience (in the natural terms of experience) what is demanded as possible by moral obligation. Kant attempts to grasp the bridge from freedom to nature as a species of *hypotyposis* that he calls the *typus*, thus paralleling the function of schematism in the first *Critique*. The term *typus* comes from the Greek *τυπος*, meaning “to render or sketch.” In rhetorical terminology it refers to a vivid pictorial rendering. Kant uses this term to indicate that the lawfulness of nature provides a rendering of moral lawfulness. The situation with pure morally practical judgment is different than that in cognitive judgment in that there is no schematizing function of imagination, no third faculty to make the rendering. Rather, the lawfulness of nature itself provides the *typus* through which the moral law will be rendered.

Through the *typus* the legislative power of understanding over experience provides a rendering of the lawfulness of pure practical reason. In this relation between reason and understanding Kant takes care to highlight the point that imagination plays no role.¹¹ The faculty of understanding (*Verstand*) is reason (*Vernunft*) itself in its cognitive employment. Even in the cognitive work of understanding, however, reason surpasses its application to sensible experience in order to regulate and guide that very application which gives rise to knowledge. In this way, as stated in the first *Critique*, reason operates on understanding, rather than on appearances.¹² Yet more pertinent to the problem of the “Typic,” ideas (*Ideen*) of reason make possible the transition from concepts of nature

10. For an interpretation of the kingdom of ends in terms of deontic logic, see the texts cited in note 2.

11. AK V, 69.

12. B383

to practical concepts.¹³ The *typus* permits the transition from the moral concept of freedom to concepts of nature projecting empirical possibility. The conception of *lawfulness* provides this bridge between freedom and nature. In order to appreciate the purposiveness implicit in this lawfulness, the account of the *Typic* must be taken together with the suggestion from the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* that a kingdom of ends can be conceived according to the analogy of a kingdom of nature, where a kingdom is defined as the systematic interconnection of ends.

To better understand the function of purposiveness in the *Typic*, let us digress briefly and explore the purposive feature of moral lawfulness with the help of the *Critique of Teleological Judgment* which complements the account in the *Dialectic of the Critique of Pure Reason*. The lawfulness of nature and moral lawfulness both exhibit purposiveness, and *the ground of the purposiveness of the former is that of the latter*. Reflective judgment is the mental power the principle of which is purposiveness. This invites us to consider whether moral judgment, in so far as it employs the lawfulness of nature as a *typus* for moral lawfulness, might either be a species of reflective judgment or, at least, involve reflective judgment. However, at first sight this line of thought seems blocked by Kant's adamant insistence that moral judgments, like cognitive judgments, are determinative rather than reflective.

Determinative judgment subsumes a given particular under an already given universal. Reflective judgment seeks a universal under which to subsume a given particular. Reflection means comparison, and here it means the comparison of particulars in the search for a universal. Reflective teleological judgment does not directly involve the power of imagination, but rather puts reason into relation with understanding. This distinguishes it from aesthetic reflective judgment, which involves imagination in free play with understanding. There is one path that saves Kant's contention that moral judgments are determinative, while also acknowledging reflective teleological judgment as an operation preliminary to moral judgment; this path involves recalling the role that reflective judgment plays with regard to determinative cognitive judgment. Even though scientific inquiry and empirical concept formation are guided by reflective judgment, both empirical and transcendental cognitive judgments that correlate concepts and objects still remain determinative judgments. Reflective judgment orients empirical concept formation, but it does not give rise to knowledge directly. Can we view reflective teleological judgment as guiding concept formation preparatory to morally determining judgments? Concept formation in moral judgment occurs in the formulation of maxims and in the derivation of actions from maxims. Since moral judgment subsumes maxims rather than actions under the categorical imperative, reflective judgment must guide the formation of maxims by reference to reason's idea of purposive lawfulness, just as reason regulates the understanding in the process of homogenizing and specifying the laws of nature. This would explain the function of the type in rendering the lawfulness governing moral freedom in terms of the lawfulness delimiting experiential

13. B386

natural possibility.

Kant's argument that the lawfulness of nature can furnish a *typus* for moral lawfulness ultimately rests upon his conception of the primacy of moral praxis. The purposiveness of morally practical reason lies at the root of the idea of the purposiveness of nature that speculative reason employs in guiding scientific inquiry. This system of ends "has its source in the moral order, as a unity grounded in freedom's own essential nature..."¹⁴ Kant insists on a connection between the ends of nature and the ends of morality: "What *use* can we make of our understanding, even in respect of experience, if we do not propose ends to ourselves? But the highest ends are those of morality, and these we can know only as they are given us by pure reason."¹⁵ Kant also ties the transcendent extension of reason to the idea of moral purposiveness.

But the former purposive unity¹⁶ is necessary and founded on the will's own essential nature and this latter unity [of design in nature] which contains the condition of its application *in concreto* must be so likewise. And thus the transcendental enlargement of our knowledge, as secured through reason, is not to be regarded as the cause, but merely as the effect of the practical purposiveness which pure reason imposes upon us.¹⁷

In the account of teleological judgment of the third *Critique*, moral purposiveness is again seen as the basis of our judgments concerning the purposiveness of nature. Reason, in its *a priori* provision of lawfulness that is moral purposiveness gives lawfulness to nature under the understanding. Understanding would have no ability to legislate were it not for reason, for the two are the same power of reason, under the name of *reason* applying in a way that will always surpass experience, while under the name of *understanding*, this conceptualizing power remains connected to appearances. We can grasp why Kant characterizes the operation of judgment in the Typic of Pure Practical Judgment as "pure," when we recall the *a priori* rendering of moral purposiveness through the medium of the natural purposiveness that orients the understanding.

In our consideration of possibility in Kant's moral philosophy, we have seen that in addition to moral necessity Kant formulated a conception of the possibility demanded by moral praxis in line with the ought→can inference. Doing so gives us insight into the nature of moral judgment as examined in the Typic of Pure Practical Judgment. In our examination of the Typic we saw that natural and moral lawfulness share a purposive character and that the power of imagination plays no role in moral judgment. Natural purposiveness is a principle of judgment, but not a feature of the actual world of appearances. Despite the mediation of the *typus*, moral judgment can never determine when an appearing action fulfils moral duty. The actualization of moral freedom exceeds the imaginable, yet the Typic of Pure Practical Judgment requires that moral freedom harmonize with natural possibility. Without any contribution from the power

14. B844

15. Ibid.

16. sc., the ends of morality

17. B845

of imagination, the type renders moral freedom through the understanding's legislative provision of natural possibility, the conditions of the possibility of experience. For Kant, were we not morally purposive beings, we could not be cognitive beings nor could we be aesthetically judging beings.

CONCLUSION

Kant's Copernican revolution in thinking, which considers reason to wield legislative authority over nature, is not complete until reason means *practical reason*. If practical reason ultimately roots our understanding of nature, it becomes plausible to model practical lawfulness on natural lawfulness as Kant outlines in the "Typic." The introduction of a teleological dimension immanent in our theoretical attitude towards nature, but not present in nature itself, attests to this rootedness in the rational form of our freedom as ends in ourselves. Several major questions arise from a post-kantian standpoint, however. Within the purview of evolutionary biology there is no longer *any* need for a teleological dimension immanent in our theoretical attitude towards nature. In fact, even a teleology submitted to the Copernican turn proves theoretically unhelpful. Kant was clearly wrong when he remarked that there will never be a "Newton of the grass blade." So, what becomes of nature as an experiential field for the fulfillment of our moral demands? I suggest that there still remains something, not any teleology immanent in our pure theoretical attitude towards natural lawfulness, but rather a system of purposes expressly imposed upon nature through technological interventions in otherwise natural processes. This is nothing new, of course, although these interventions have become ever more radical transformations of nature. Human beings adapt themselves and other organisms to ends they choose by design, carrying further the process of adaptation, which in nature remains a thoroughly mechanical process. From a Kantian moral standpoint, the natural mechanical process of adaptation would have to be judged as cruelly inhumane. Even so, the possibility of humanizing nature through the imposition of human design upon adaptive processes itself poses manifold dangers. At least two fields of awareness suggest themselves here. First, the power to impose human design upon nature rests ultimately on the fact that humanity is part of nature, thus making any intervention into natural processes a point of vulnerability for humans both as individuals and as a species. Secondly, this vulnerability points out the crucial role of prudence, the intellectual excellence of deliberation concerning the means of attaining flourishing, which is traditionally the natural purpose of human existence. Taking Kant's project of bridging freedom and nature in light of the imposition of design upon nature, the strong ought \rightarrow can inference implied in this project turns out to be redeemable through technology. Technology may design nature (I intentionally do not say "redesign," as nature is not designed in the first place) to be amenable to human moral demands, yet not without posing risks calling for prudence.

At first sight, it seems unlikely that nature cooperates with human moral intentions just because human beings try to engage with nature by using the same power of

reason they use in moral reflection. I would argue that something like this must be the case, though. Conceptual determination in scientific inquiry is *perspectival*—depending on what we want to know and do with our knowledge, we will take one approach or another. Whatever approach we choose, it will always involve human beings engaging with a reality of which they form a part. Conceptual determination in moral reflection is also *perspectival*—what are maxims if not perspectives through which we conceptually determine actions? For Kant, moral reflection forms the heart of the human perspective in its self-reflective capacity. The human perspective in its self-reflective mode takes account of narrower individual and collective purposes within a broader moral kingdom of ends. The human perspective knows itself as a perspective upon a reality it engages and of which it forms a part, and this knowledge encompasses both theoretical and morally-practical reflection.

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