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# The practical purposiveness in the determination of a free will. The paradoxical character of Kant's a priori

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**THE PRACTICAL PURPOSIVENESS IN  
THE DETERMINATION OF A FREE WILL.  
THE PARADOXICAL CHARACTER OF  
KANT'S *A PRIORI***

*Gualtiero Lorini*

**1. THE APPLICATIVE NATURE OF KANT'S METAPHYSICS**

In this essay we will try to address the Kantian concept of *practical purposiveness* in its moral meaning, as it is treated by Kant in the second *Introduction* to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, namely, in its application to the determination of a free will. Our aim is to show that this concept allows us to understand an aspect of Kant's articulated use of the *a priori* that at first sight could appear paradoxical.

In the *Introduction* to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant mentions the principle of *practical purposiveness* in its moral meaning twice, and in both cases he employs this principle as a term of comparison with the well-known principle of *formal purposiveness of nature*. In the first occurrence (at the end of paragraph 3), Kant maintains that the concept of *formal purposiveness of nature* "is also entirely distinct from that of practical purposiveness (of human art as well as of morals), although it is certainly conceived of in terms of an analogy with that." (KU, AA 05: 181; trans. 68). In the second occurrence (in paragraph 4), the moral-practical meaning of purposiveness is associated to the determination of a free will and is employed as an example of a *metaphysical principle* insofar as it is opposed to a *transcendental principle*. While the transcendental principle is a principle "through which the universal *a priori* condition under which alone things can become objects of our cognition at all is represented", the metaphysical principle represents "the *a priori* condition under which alone objects whose  
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concept must be given empirically can be further determined *a priori*.” (KU, AA 05: 181; trans. 68.)<sup>1</sup>

First of all, we need to observe that, since *practical purposiveness* is targeted to the determination of a free will, its subject is represented by the human being and not by nature, like in the case of *formal purposiveness*. Furthermore, Kant’s characterization of the moral-practical sphere seems to contrast here with what he had just stated at the end of paragraph 1 of this *Introduction*. There he talked about moral-practical precepts as “not merely precepts and rules for this or that purpose, but laws, without prior reference to ends and aims.” (KU, AA 05: 163; trans. 61). Thus, if the word “practical” intended as “moral-practical” indicates something “which the concept of freedom alone makes knowable” (KU, AA 05: 163; trans. 61), that is, something excluding any prior reference to ends and aims, one could ask how it is possible that the same word, if associated to the substantive “purposiveness”, indicates, instead, the preliminary *empirical* givenness of the will that must be determined. Maybe we can try to clarify this point by putting the following question: What does it mean, for Kant, that the principle of *practical purposiveness* that we need to think in the determination of a free will, is a *metaphysical* principle?

As it has been pointed out by some interpreters, one of the most relevant transformations operated by the critical turn on the concept of *metaphysics* concerns the way in which we should intend the prefix *meta*. Indeed, it does not merely refer to a dimension that is placed beyond the sensible one, but it rather suggests that metaphysics is also concerned with the way in which understanding comes to be aware of its a priori structures and with the application of these structures to sensibility (FICARA, 2006, p. 139). The proper objects of metaphysics, that is, both pure concepts and pure intuitions, are indeed meta-objects insofar as only their application to a representation coming from experience can reveal their nature and function. They are objects which need to be applied to other objects in order to be fully meaningful. It is a matter of a paradox, which is deeply rooted in the critique of reason, and that Kant clearly expresses in one of the first courses on metaphysics that he held after the publication of the *KrV*: the critic looks for “the right with which we use our concepts of reason” (V-Met/Volckmann, AA 28: 389) and finds out that “I can deal with all my concepts only by referring to objects of experience.” (V-Met/Volckmann, AA 28: 389). Nevertheless—adds Kant—we are not in condition

to understand how it concretely happens that principles, which do not come from experience, make sense only if they are applied to experience. (V-Met/Volckmann, AA 28: 395)

The *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* pushes this position to its extreme consequences, since here Kant states that the basis for the application of mathematics to the doctrine of bodies is provided by “a complete analysis of the concept of a matter in general [...], and this is a task for pure philosophy – which, for this purpose, makes use of no particular experiences, but only that which it finds in the isolated (although intrinsically empirical) concept itself.” (MAN, AA 04: 472; trans. 187).

Therefore, here we are dealing with a “genuine *metaphysics of corporeal nature*.” (MAN, AA 04: 472; trans. 187).

This characterization of metaphysics clarifies how a principle can remain a priori even when an empirical component is supposed to be among its presuppositions. As a consequence, even when Kant places the adjective *practical* next to the concept of *purposiveness* in order to provide an example of a *metaphysical principle*, he is not contradicting the a priori nature of the moral dimension that he has stated a few lines before. However, even after this explanation, another urgent question remains at stake: why, as an example of a metaphysical principle, does Kant choose a principle belonging to the moral-practical domain, instead of choosing other more evident examples from the theoretical-speculative domain? This question seems to require an analysis divided into two moments. Primarily we should analyze the process of determination of a free will, in order to discover *whether* and *how* any empirical elements are involved in it. Then, we shall try to understand if the concept of *practical purposiveness* plays a particular role in this process, so as to be legitimately chosen as an example of the special meaning of the *a priori* in Kant’s metaphysics.

## 2. THE DETERMINATION OF A FREE WILL

For the first of these two moments we need to consider the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Here, once he has stated that good will can be determined only by the moral law, Kant explains the advantage of the practical part of reason compared to the theoretical. Unlike the latter, the former—the practical part of reason—does not depend upon any experience for

the determination of its judgments: “in practical matters, it is just when common understanding excludes all sensible incentives from practical laws that its faculty of appraising first begins to show itself to advantage.”(GMS, AA 04: 404; trans. 59).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, in the following clarification Kant somewhat mitigates such a distinction, since he implicitly asserts the unity of reason, like he does in many other passages of his moral writings. In this case the claim about the unity of reason is carried out by the acknowledgment of a weakness, which is common to both the theoretical and the practical parts of reason. Indeed, even the practical part of reason can come to conflict with itself, so as to originate a *practical dialectic*. Both the theoretical and the practical dialectics are caused by an illegitimate relationship between the empirical and the a priori dimensions. The theoretical dialectic arises from the lack of empirical contents within the ideas of reason, whereas in the practical dialectic the empirical component is illegitimately present in a determination which should be absolutely pure. This empirical tendency can be recognized in

a propensity to rationalize against those strict laws of duty and to cast doubt upon their validity, or at least upon their purity and strictness, and, where possible, to make them better suited to our wishes and inclinations, that is, to corrupt them at their basis and to destroy all their dignity. (GMS, AA 04: 405; trans. 59-60).<sup>3</sup>

In order to contrast this propensity we must follow the same method we pursued in the theoretical reason, namely, to carry out a “complete critique of our reason.”(GMS, AA 04: 405; trans. 60).

However, as it is well known, in the *Groundwork* Kant does not completely succeed in fulfilling this task, while three years later, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he acknowledges the moral law as a *fact of reason*. This definition of the moral law as a *fact of reason*, and freedom as *ratio essendi* of this law, is a good example of what Kant means as a transcendental principle in the *Introduction to the Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Through the *fact of reason* Kant indeed provides only “the universal a priori condition” for an action to be free, and it is not by chance that at the beginning of the *Preface to the Critique of Practical Reason* Kant refers to the “transcendental freedom” (KpV, AA 05: 3; trans. 139), that he considers as absolute. Nevertheless, it is necessary that this freedom could be attributed to the human will, whose faculty to desire is rooted in the empirical dimension. Therefore, there is a need for a *further* determination

*a priori* of objects “whose concept must be given empirically”. As we have seen, indeed, this determination in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* marks the difference between transcendental and metaphysical principles. In the second *Critique* the *further* determination concerns freedom and it is provided by Kant through the “practical use of reason” that he describes at the beginning of the *Introduction of the Critique of Practical Reason*. In this practical use “reason is concerned with the determining grounds of the will, which is a faculty either of producing objects corresponding to representations or of determining itself to effect such objects (whether the physical power is sufficient or not), that is, of determining its causality.” (KpV, AA 05: 15; trans. 148).

Although this kind of causality has been *justified* in the *KrV*—Kant argues—here it cannot be represented empirically and coincides with the concept of freedom. Thus, exactly like in the *Groundwork*, Kant defines freedom as a *particular kind* of causality (GMS, AA 04: 446). And just because such a particular causality belongs to the human will, Kant is able to demonstrate that only the pure reason, insofar as it is not empirically conditioned, can be practical. In other words, by expressing a transcendental concept like freedom through another transcendental concept like the category of causality—whose reference to experience is clearer and more direct—Kant provides a rational explanation of how we can think the actuality of freedom. But this does not affect in any way the possibility of considering freedom as a concept *a priori*, it rather grounds it.

This characterization of freedom as a particular kind of causality repeatedly emerges in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and is always referred to the determination of will. For instance, in the third chapter of the first book, *On the incentives [Triebfedern] of pure practical reason*, Kant already reveals in the title a negative reference to the empirical dimension. Indeed, he attributes to pure practical reason some *incentives*, by which he usually designates the sensible inclinations motivating human actions. Here we are dealing again with a *particular kind of incentives*, as it becomes clear in the determination of the will. Kant does indeed pursue the goal to determine carefully “in what way the moral law becomes the incentive and, inasmuch as it is, what happens to the human faculty of desire as an effect of that determining ground upon it.” (KpV, AA 05: 72; trans. 198). Kant maintains that this determination should take place “not only without the cooperation of sensible impulses but even with rejection of all of them and with infringement upon all inclinations insofar as they could be opposed to

that law [the moral law].” (KpV, AA 05: 72; trans. 199). This clarification may appear redundant, but later on Kant explains it by stating that “so far, then, the effect of the moral law as incentive is only negative, and as such this incentive can be cognized a priori.” (KpV, AA 05: 72; trans. 199). Thus, the peculiarity of the way in which the pure practical reason can have incentives consists in its need to assume the empirical dimension, in order to be able to reject it when determining the will according to freedom. Here we have “the first and perhaps the only case in which we can determine a priori from concepts the relation of a cognition (here the cognition of a pure practical reason) to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure.” (KpV, AA 05: 73; trans. 199). So, in determining the freedom of will Kant has to use the lexicon of the empirical knowledge, in order to express something that otherwise could not be expressed, since it is a matter of an immediate evidence whose reality and validity cannot be deduced as in the case of categories. That is why the pure practical reason can provide paradigmatic examples of metaphysical principles: they need the empirical dimension, in order to be recognized as attributable to the subject, but at the same time they remain a priori with regard to this subject.

At this point we have achieved the first of the two goals that we have set in the first paragraph, namely, we have identified the presence and the role of empirical elements in the determination of a free will. Now, in order to detect the role of the concept of *practical purposiveness* in this process, we need to address the relationship between causality and practical purposiveness as it is stated in a writing published in the same period of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, that is, *On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy*. Here Kant maintains that “no teleology or practical purposiveness” can compensate for our ignorance of the efficient causes in nature. This is particularly true in metaphysics, a discipline in which the subject is called to admit practical laws a priori to indicate an end, “for the sake of which I venture to determine the concept of a cause” (ÜGTP, AA 08: 159; trans. 195-196), a concept which nonetheless does not seem to concern the nature of the object at all, but only “our own goals and needs” (ÜGTP, AA 08: 159-160; trans. 195-196). This clearly testifies that the concept of causality, which was useful to conceive the actuality of the concept of freedom, can be further employed in order to individuate a practical end and therefore a *practical purposiveness*. This concept meets a need that characterizes the human being when he deals with metaphysics, that is, when he has to reconcile the a priori nature of a principle with the empirical component of its actuality. This kind of

tension reaches its peak, but at the same time it finds its solution, in the concept of an “end which is also a duty” as it is treated in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Through this concept we can also understand why Kant chooses the concept of *practical purposiveness* as an example of a metaphysical principle.

### 3. THE PRACTICAL PURPOSIVENESS AS AN EXAMPLE OF KANT’S METAPHYSICAL A PRIORI

In the *Introduction to the Doctrine of Virtue* of the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant again needs to presuppose sensibility in the determination of a free will, namely, in the determination of the will according to the practical reason as regards both the form (as in the case of right) and the matter of this will. This material determination of the will according to the practical reason gives rise to the concept of an *end which is also a duty*, a concept through which Kant defines the duty of virtue. It is “an end that could be set against the end arising from sensible impulses.” (MS, AA 06: 381; trans. 513). Also in this case it is clearly a matter of a *particular kind* of end, since duty requires to be fulfilled only because of the respect that it deserves. This applies especially to ethical duties, whose wide obligation escapes any physical constraint. Thus, such a respect for the law is very peculiar for several reasons: 1) it motivates the fulfillment of the ethical duty, 2) its object is defined through the rejection of any sensible inclination, and 3) it determines the will as free since nobody can constrain the subject to accept that end as his own end. For these reasons, this particular concept of finality should be acknowledged as being endowed with a moral-practical dignity that its more immediate and individualistic meaning does not have.

Once stated the moral-practical value of the peculiar finality implied by the fulfillment of the ethical duties, in the *Discussion of the Concept of a Doctrine of Virtue* Kant can define ethics as a “system of the *ends* of pure practical reason.” (MS, AA 06: 381; trans. 513).

As it has been effectively maintained by some scholars, these ends, which are at the same time duties—*one’s own perfection* and *the happiness of others*—can be considered a *rational matter* as opposed to the influence of the sensible matter. According to A. Trampota’s words, these ends must be interpreted as “the material aspect of internal freedom under the conditions of finite rational beings.” (TRAMPOTA, 2013, p. 149,155). Of course one could object



to the suitability of referring to the *Metaphysics of Morals* for clarifying the concept of *practical purposiveness* as it was stated seven years before in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In fact, this choice seems to be not only theoretically, but also historically justified. Indeed, in a course on moral philosophy of the early Nineties, the so-called *Metaphysik der Sitten Vigilantius*, Kant admits the possibility of considering “duties and their grounds of determination in regard to *matter*”, and adds that

apart from the freedom of the action, there is thus another principle present, which in itself is enlarging, in that, while freedom is restricted by the determination according to law, it is here, on the contrary, enlarged by the matter or end thereof, and something is present that has to be acquired. (V-MS/Vigil, AA 27: 542-543; trans. 300-301).<sup>4</sup>

Thus, exactly like in the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant could talk about *incentives* of practical reason—insofar as before he had rejected any sensible incentive—so, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he can not only define ethics as a “system of the *ends* of pure practical reason”—as we have seen—but he can also state that the doctrine of ethical duties, that is, the doctrine of virtue, can be considered a *doctrine of ends* [*Lehre der Zwecke/Zwecklehre*]. Through such a characterization, the doctrine of virtue goes indeed beyond the mere conformity with the law [*Gesetzmäßigkeit*] required by the right, because it has its own “conformity with ends”<sup>5</sup> [*Zweckmäßigkeit*], a conformity which has nothing to do with the satisfaction of the ends suggested by the inclinations (MS, AA 06: 410; trans. 538).<sup>6</sup> This purposiveness must be considered as practical and, as such, it must be interpreted as a metaphysical principle. Indeed, the determination of the free will that we reach through this purposiveness remains *a priori* even though it supposes, in order to be fulfilled, a negative reference to the field of sensible inclinations.

This shows the subtle clarification of the concept of *a priori* in Kant’s moral-practical reflection. It is a clarification which is certainly detectable also in Kant’s theoretical philosophy, but which does not reach there the seemingly paradoxical peak it reaches in the moral part. As we have already pointed out at the beginning of this essay, the theoretical reason is targeted to determine the objects of experience and this already explains why its *a priori* structures can acquire a sense only through their application *in concreto*. On the contrary, the fact that the practical reason (in which, by definition, form must precede matter) may admit, albeit negatively or indirectly, empirical components in its work a

priori, is the result of the change which affects the same concept of a *Metaphysics of Morals* between 1785 and 1797.

As P. Guyer has clearly pointed out, in the *Groundwork* Kant uses the term “metaphysics of morals” to designate the pure completely a priori part of moral philosophy, its derivation from the fundamental principle of morality, which is valid for all rational beings and contains nothing empirical (GMS, AA 04: 388). In the *Introduction* to the *Metaphysics of Morals*, however, Kant says that “a metaphysics of morals cannot dispense with principles of application” that take as their “object the particular *nature* of human beings, which is cognized only by experience, in order to *show* in it what can be inferred from universal moral principles.” (MS, AA 06: 216-217; trans. 372). This is the meaning of “metaphysics of morals” used in the title of the work. It is a title that recalls the sense of “metaphysics” as it was employed in the 1786 *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, a text in which, as we have seen above, the applicative feature of the theoretical side of reason reached its peak (GUYER, 2015, p. 192). But even with regard to the same concepts of *finality* and *purposiveness*, the difference from the *Groundwork* is evident, insofar as the text of 1785 explicitly excluded any reference of the good will to ends, and only admitted that the subject of the good will could represent an independent end in itself (GMS, AA 04: 437).

Hence, we are now in condition of answering the question that we have placed at the end of the first paragraph and that has guided our analysis. By choosing to take the example of a metaphysical principle from the practical part of reason, Kant is emphasizing the unity of reason. Indeed, if in the theoretical part of reason we can find several examples of a priori concepts which require an empirical application for their complete determination, this must be true, *mutatis mutandis*, also for the practical part of reason. The concept of *practical purposiveness in the determination of a free will* is particularly suitable for emphasizing the need of an empirical reference within the *a priori* exactly because it is concerned with a concept like freedom, in which no empirical elements, by definition, should and could play a role.

However, to exclude *tout-court* the empirical dimension from the description of the *a priori*, even the moral-practical *a priori*, means to conceive the concept of “independence from experience” as if experience would not play any role in thinking the *reality* of the concepts a priori. Yet this cannot be true

even for *pure* concepts a priori, like the categories, because—as Kant states in the B-Version of the *Transcendental Deduction* of the first *Critique*—they give rise to knowledge, and have indeed an objective reality, only insofar as they “can be applied to empirical intuitions.” (KrV, B 147; trans. 254).

Doubtless freedom imposes itself as an immediate evidence implied by the fact of reason, but when it is associated to a human will, it cannot avoid confronting itself with the faculty of desire which strives in the human will. Therefore, it seems more appropriate to adopt a conception of the *a priori* in which the “independence from experience” means that the experience is excluded from the *deduction*, but not from the *reality* of the concepts a priori.<sup>7</sup> This seems to be exactly the case of the concept of the *practical purposiveness in the determination of a free will*. Moreover, this concept seems to exemplify the Kantian conception of the *a priori* as it is affected by Kant’s more general rethinking of traditional metaphysics. In this sense, it is worth remembering that Kant has always defined metaphysics as a discipline dealing with the sources, extent and limits of our knowledge. In so doing, metaphysics is assigned a task by Kant which Locke had assigned to his research on the human cognitive faculty (LOCKE, 1975, p. 43).<sup>8</sup> This is the reason why it is not surprising that Kant conceives a metaphysical principle as a principle that must, at least partially, go into the realm of experience and walk its trails, until it reaches its limits.

## EDITORIAL NOTE

In this essay Kant’s works are indicated with the abbreviation of the German title, followed by volume and page number of the *Akademie Ausgabe*: I. Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Königlich-Preußische (now Deutsche) Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin 1900-. For the translation of Kant’s passages we followed, when possible, the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.

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## NOTAS / NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A similar reference to the concept of *purposiveness* in a moral sense can be found also in the *First Introduction* to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, though this reference does not appear in the context of a confrontation between transcendental and metaphysical principles: cf. (EEKU, AA 20: 246, trans. 45-46): "Thus nature grounds its lawfulness on a priori principles of the understanding as a faculty of cognition; art is guided a priori in its purposiveness in accordance with the power of judgment in relation to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure; finally morals (as product of freedom) stand under the idea of a form of purposiveness that is qualified for universal law, as a determining ground of reason with regard to the faculty of desire".

<sup>2</sup> This passage seems to anticipate the primacy of the practical reason over the theoretical, which will be stated in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (cf. KpV, AA 05: 119-121).

- <sup>3</sup> This seems to be a clear example of the articulated idea of “unity of reason” we can appreciate in Kant’s moral philosophy. A. Hutter has aptly defined this unity by stating that it does not subsist *despite* the differences between its parts, but exactly *by virtue of* these differences: cf. Hutter (2003, p. 31).
- <sup>4</sup> Moreover, it is worth remembering Kant’s explicit reference to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* in the *Introduction of the Metaphysics of Morals* with regard to the moral characterization of the practical part of philosophy. At the end of this reference Kant stresses that “Hence philosophy can understand by its practical part (as compared with its theoretical part) no *technically practical doctrine* but only a *morally practical doctrine*.” (MS, AA 06: 217-218; trans. 372).
- <sup>5</sup> In M. J. Gregor’s translation for the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, this is the only occurrence of the term *Zweckmäßigkeit* which is rendered by “conformity with ends” and not by “Purposiveness”, maybe in order to stress the juxtaposition with the “conformity with law”.
- <sup>6</sup> For the occurrence *Lehre der Zwecke* (cf. MS, AA 06: 381; trans. 514).
- <sup>7</sup> For a detailed discussion of the many facets that the concept of *a priori* can assume in this sense, see Kitcher (2006, p. 30-31).
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Locke, 1975, p. 43: “This, therefore, being my purpose—to inquire into the original, certainty, and extent of human knowledge, together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent;—I shall not at present meddle with the physical consideration of the mind”.