

Chapter 10: The Will and its Objects

Anyone who spends time with Kant's practical philosophy has some kind of painful encounter with Kant's notion of will. And no wonder. It is the locus of unconditioned value; it lies at the crossroads between reason and desire; it *is* practical reason; it is the faculty of choice, and also the causal instrument by means of which reason would shape the world to its form. Add to this the will's cohabitation with things noumenal and you get a very strange notion. The question is whether it's worth trying to come to terms with it. Kant thinks he needs the will to account for free rational action: that no combination of belief, desire, intention, planning or critical reflection can explain it. It is a bold claim, and if plausible, perhaps worth some pain. But even to begin thinking about whether he could be right, we need to have a clearer idea of what sort of work the will is supposed to do.

What I will present here is something of a half-way station, still more burdened with Kant jargon that I would like, and a little schizophrenic, bouncing back and forth between interpreting Kant's gnomic remarks and trying to say in a plain way what I think he means. Overall, I argue for two theses, and try to make a little sense of one surprising consequence. The theses are that desire is not a primitive in Kant's considered view of things, and that the rational will is a *kind* of faculty of desire expressed in a norm-constituted ability. The consequence is that there is and has to be *one* end for a rational will in all of its willings.

The texts I will mainly be relying on for an account of the rational will are in the Introduction to Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals*. They came to the forefront of my thinking about the will in a roundabout way—while I was trying to make sense of something else. Since it is the “something else” that provided a kind of key, I propose to re-enter the texts on the will from that same place.

I

In his discussion of the strains of beneficence in the *Tugendlehre*, Kant makes the odd claim that unlike benevolence, which can be unlimited because it does not require anything to be done, acts of beneficence—doing good from duty—are difficult because they are “at the cost of forgoing the satisfaction of concupiscence and of active injury to it in many cases” (6:393).¹ The first odd thing is that the cost worth marking is to concupiscence and not to happiness. The second is: why *concupiscence* at all? It is hard to fathom why beneficence should conflict in some special way with sexual lust, or even with, what concupiscence also means, avidity of desire or craving in general.

Although Kant doesn't make explicit the contrast with happiness, we can still ask: is it possible that acts of beneficence don't (or don't have to) threaten happiness? Some might argue that we avoid that threat because beneficent acts are supererogatory, so it's in our control to pick the acts we want to do, or at least ones that don't threaten our happiness. I doubt this is plausible picture of supererogation, but that doesn't matter here, for if the threat to happiness were removed by its being up to us when we help, it would only make it more puzzling that beneficence does threaten concupiscence. I think a more plausible account of beneficence directs us to take the happiness of others into account when we act—indeed, whenever we act—in the way that we are to take the conditions of respect for persons into account whenever we act.² That is to say, the concerns of beneficence do not oppose our pursuit of happiness, but rather are to inflect and shape our idea of what happiness is. We might think, by analogy, of friendship, where acting for another's sake isn't separate from a concern for one's own happiness. Friendship, and beneficence as well, also require concern for self.

Let us suppose that there is no inevitable threat to happiness from beneficence; why, then, are there costs of foregoing the satisfaction of concupiscence when acting beneficently? And why is it helping *from duty* that imposes the cost? If the issue is the possible conflict between what I want for myself and what I am obliged to do for you, the cost should arise regardless of motive. It may indeed be harder to do good from duty than from love, but why is the currency of the hardness so specific and so peculiar?

A hint of an answer comes in an earlier mention of concupiscence in the Introduction to the *Metaphysics of Morals* (at 6:213). Kant says: “Concupiscence (lusting after something) must...be distinguished from desire itself, as a stimulus to determining desire.” This too is a surprising remark. If concupiscence is a *stimulus to desire*, then to say that acts of beneficence are at odds with concupiscence is not to say that they interfere with what we desire, but rather with something we *might* desire. But how would foregoing what we might desire explain why it can be difficult to do good? Here is a possible reason. If we are to take a certain sort of interest in the happiness of others, we may need to exercise restraint not just on our desire-satisfaction, but on which desires we allow ourselves to have. Some desires are strictly incompatible with concern for another’s well-being. So resisting something *as a desire*—foregoing opportunities to desire—could be what foregoing the satisfaction of concupiscence amounts, or even it “active injury.” Because concupiscence operates prior to desire, foregoing its satisfaction does not as such weigh in the scales of happiness. And further, if we come to our beneficent acts from an acknowledged obligatory end—that is, from duty in its full sense—we would forego in advance the expression of concupiscence in any desire not fitting with our end (and given the unruly nature of lust, this is not a trivial constraint). So the in-principle conflict is not between happiness or desire and morality, but between morality and a source of desire. It may look like a

small difference, but I think it is not, and that in the difference—between desire and source of desire—there is a key to making sense of Kant’s notion of the will.

Many of the familiar interpretations of the will follow a *Groundwork* metaphor that locates the will at a crossroads between two incentives for action. On the sensible side, we have desires for objects that arise directly from pleasure in our representation of them. On the moral side, we have an interest of reason which provides its own kind of incentive. Any pleasure or feeling associated with the rational incentive is consequent to its will-determining effect.³ One might characterize this as a sort of structural Humeanism about the springs of action, with the Kantian addition of a special, nonsensible incentive.

What then does the will do? One might equally ask: given these materials, what *could* the will do? The activity available to the will seems to be either as a “deciding faculty,” given competing desires, or as the faculty by means of which the agent chooses to act to realize an object of desire *or* for a rational interest. In making a choice, if the will identifies with sensible desire, it (or its act) is heteronomous; if it commits to rational or moral interests, it (or its act) is autonomous. How it does one or the other is a mystery, and one not much helped by the claim that the moral law is in some way internal to the will—its law—making all of choice dependent on its exercise and yet *autonomy* the unique form of volitional *self*-identification.

For the standard view, the paragraph about concupiscence in the Introduction strikes a discordant note. It occurs just after Kant has distinguished interests of reason from interests of desire in the narrow sense (or sensible desire); he then says we must *also* distinguish concupiscence from desire, “as a stimulus determining desire.” Kant continues: “Concupiscence is...a sensible modification of the mind...that has not yet become an act of the faculty of desire.” That is, *along with the interests of reason*, concupiscence is to be distinguished from desire, and

is prior to desire (strictly, to an act of the faculty of desire). It is no doubt distinctive among the sources of desire in its orientation to sensible pleasure, and may therefore be, like passion, a threat to rational agency. But it is not a state of desiring something intensely, or for pleasure; it is not, as Kant thinks of it, a desire at all.⁴ Its role is to offer something—an intense orientation toward pleasure—to the faculty of desire, the upshot of which may be one or another desire.

If in being antecedent to a determination of the faculty of desire, concupiscence *is* like an interest of reason, that raises the question about the transition from a “modification of mind” to “an act of the faculty of desire” in *both* cases. And since what immediately follows the remarks on concupiscence is an account of choice and will, one might suppose that they explain what this transition amounts to—in *both* cases.⁵

Now given that both choice and will are introduced as part of an account of “the faculty of desire in accordance with concepts,” it seems prudent to back up a step to get a sense of what, in a general way, a faculty of desire is supposed to do.

II

Kant attributes a faculty of desire to all things that have “life”—beings who by means of their representations act to cause the objects of these representations (6:211). To be so moved to action is to have desires and aversions, states that are essentially connected with pleasure or displeasure in a representation. Although there is always pleasure where there is desire, pleasure need not precede desire: it may either arise from desire (as it does in the case of interests of reason), or play a role in its generation (as in the case of sensible appetites).

In an animal’s faculty of desire, instinctual organization is keyed to perceptual representations in such a way that, e.g., seeing something as food or as dangerous, the animal

feels a pleasure or a displeasure, and, by a consequent determination of its faculty of desire as an effect, is moved to act (to eat or flee). Kant holds that the connection between the systems of representation and action, made by way of the faculty of desire, need not make use of materials suitable for the cognition of objects (6:212). The pleasure and displeasure essential to the generation of desire are simply functional states of an organism. Beyond the fact of the relation of some object and a subject, pleasure and displeasure, he says, “cannot be explained more clearly in themselves; instead one can only specify what results they have in certain circumstances, so as to make them recognizable in practice” (6:212).⁶

In a being who acts to bring things about by means of its representations, we might think of the pleasure as a “toward-relation” of the active being to the represented object of action. (English once also had the word “froward,” but alas, we have it no more.) *We* can come to be in such a relation by a state or condition, such as concupiscence, which serves as a stimulus-cause to desire, or, at the other extreme, by a representation of a rational principle. Imagine the state one is in, when hungry, catching the smell of newly-baked bread. It puts one in a toward-relation to an object, which gives rise to a desire for it—and then, perhaps, action. Or imagine seeing someone in need whom one recognizes one ought to help. The recognition is sufficient to make providing help one’s object. One feels “right” about acting, shame or guilt if one turns away.

This gets us to the first interpretive thesis. The Kantian faculty of desire is not a faculty of *desires*. In a simple living thing, given a toward-relation, it will desire; if unimpeded, it will go on to act to get or bring about the object of its desire. It will have been oriented toward its object by pleasure in a representation *prior to* having a desire for it. Kant calls the determination of the faculty of desire *in us* caused by prior sensible pleasure at a possible object of action “desire in the narrow sense.” These are the states we think of as “desires”—for food or sex or

sleep. But these desires *for* food, etc., are not primitive elements of the desire-system; like rational desires or interests, they are determinations *of* a desiderative faculty. About rational desire, we will need to understand how it is possible to determine (the faculty of) desire some other way than via pleasure in an object. Why such a determination, were it possible, necessarily has pleasure as its effect is an *a priori* claim for Kant: pleasure *is* the toward-relation to possible objects of action, so if the faculty of desire is determined in some way, then there is a toward relation. But *this* toward-relation is not a cause of desire.⁷

Note that in associating pleasure with desire, there is no conflation or confusion about the pleasure that can be the end of action with the pleasure that accompanies activity. What Kant does is move desire away from feeling and closer to activity, and offer a separate state, the toward-relation, which will occur either before or after desire, depending upon whether it or something else determines the faculty of desire to desire.⁸ One could think of the toward-relation as a primitive kind of pro-attitude. Among the different kinds of beings able to bring things about through their coordinated systems of representation and activity, we will find different kinds of pro-attitude, individuated by the source of the determination of their faculties of desire.

If a living thing has a faculty of desire just in case it is capable of being the cause of the object of its representations by means of those representations, it then makes sense that active agents with different kinds of representational and practical capacities—of imagination, cognition, and reason—will have differently constituted faculties of desire. The bee's desire for honey is instinctual, expressed in the activation of its flight and navigation systems. The rational agent's desire to help is, or can be, derived from a moral conception, and expressed in rationally self-governed activity. Developed interests of *both* sensibility and reason can be sufficient in us for action: just knowing it is time for lunch is enough to make me head for the refrigerator.

III.

I want to focus now on *our kind* of faculty of desire: a faculty of desire in accordance with concepts, one that *includes* will and choice. In light of the preceding discussion, we should be hesitant to regard will and choice as directed at desire already given. If we get to desire only through a determination of the faculty of desire, and our kind of faculty of desire can be determined by a rational principle, then will and choice may be seen as partly producing desire, not just engaging with it. I'll begin with the passage that introduces will and choice—the one that directly follows the paragraph about concupiscence.

The faculty of desire in accordance with concepts, insofar as the ground determining it to action lies within itself and not in its object, is called a faculty *to do or refrain from doing as one pleases*. Insofar as it is joined with one's consciousness of the ability to bring about its object by one's action it is called *choice* [*Willkür*]; if it is not joined with this consciousness it is called *wish*. The faculty of desire whose inner determining ground, hence even what pleases it, lies within the subject's reason is called the *will* [*Wille*]. The will is therefore the faculty of desire considered not so much in relation to action (as choice is) but rather in relation to the ground determining choice to action. The will itself, strictly speaking, has no determining ground; insofar as it can determine choice, it is instead practical reason itself. (6:213)

Here is a rough gloss of this very dense text. Some living things have a faculty of desire in accordance with concepts, some do not. Living things with a faculty of desire according to concepts are further distinguished by whether the ground determining the faculty of desire to action lies in its object or in the faculty of desire itself; they are further distinguished if the

determination of desire lies in the subject's reason. (We need not assume that all stages mark real possibilities.⁹) Agents with a reason-determined faculty of desire are thus *self-determining*, or capable of self-determination. Their self-determination has two faces: we see one as the faculty of desire leads to action, the other when we consider the faculty of desire in relation to its determining ground—that is, to the source of desire itself. The former is called choice (*Willkür*) “insofar as it is joined with one's consciousness of the ability to bring about its object by one's action”; the latter is will (*Wille*).

To begin unpacking this, we might start with the role concepts play in generating desire. Concepts are a particular way of representing. Since concepts can be used in the representation of objects, one natural role for them in the determination of the faculty of desire is in the recognition of some object as a “this”—i.e., *as* food, or *as* a love object, or *as* someone in pain—something which, represented as “this”, triggers the toward-relation that determines the faculty of desire (or just: gives rise to a desire). But the contrast Kant is interested in does not seem to be between agents who represent via concepts and those who don't (concept-users might in principle include some animals; animals can represent things as a “this” or “that”¹⁰), but between those in whom the concepts that figure in the ground determining a faculty of desire to action lie “within itself, and not in its object.” Only then do we have “a faculty to do or refrain from doing as one pleases¹¹.”

Where we put the emphasis matters. If it is a faculty to do or refrain as one *pleases*, why need concepts? The faculty of desire of the lowest sort of living thing leads to action according to its state of pleasure. So perhaps the phrase should be read, “to do or refrain as *one* pleases”: that is, at one's discretion. The latter emphasis points to a self-conscious agent, not just a system of representation and activity. Where there are merely coordinated systems of representation and

activity, some activity may arise through representations generated by aspects or elements of the agent, some by what the agent as a whole is responsive to. A locus of agency that can act or not as *it* pleases has something of its own to add to the generation of activity—a determining ground of activity that does not lie in objects external to the faculty of desire. But an exercise of discretion is not an arbitrary preference; it is for a reason. And if the reason is not in the objects (because it lies within the faculty of desire itself), then the most natural Kantian thought is that it is from reason: principles of practical reason or rational concepts of the good. What else could come from the faculty of desire of a rational agent? So, while some animals might and most human agents can come to desire using concepts, only the faculty of desire of a rational agent brings to the generation of activity something of its own, the representation of which produces, or is a condition of, its desire. It is in this way that the faculty of desire of a rational being is self-determining. One's rational nature is a source of what pleases, and it somehow gives one the power to act or refrain from acting *as* one pleases.

The faculty to do or refrain from doing as one pleases is called *choice* when combined with consciousness of the ability to bring about its object by action, and *wish* when it is not.¹²

So in the case of rational beings, it follows that *no* exercise of choice is object-determined. This resembles but is not quite the same as what has come to be called “the incorporation thesis,” according to which rational agents act on their desires or inclinations only as they incorporate them into their maxims of action. What I am suggesting here is that *prior* to choice the desiderative state of an agent is *already* partly constructed by an inner and rational determining ground of our kind of faculty of desire. Choice is responsive to reasons already there.

The idea is familiar. When we choose, we do so for a reason; and when we act for a reason we do not merely act on brute desire. We say that something is sweet is a reason to eat it;

that someone is in need is a reason to provide help. But in the context of action and choice, our so saying carries *ceteris paribus* clauses that point both to further external conditions (that the sweet thing is not a poison; that the person in need is not already being helped) and to standards of rationality (that the reason fits with my scheme of ends—I am not on a diet, or allergic to chocolate; or that the need in question is one we may permissibly support). Once we are in the space of reasons, there are norms of correctness that apply. And they apply not merely to choice, but to wish also—a result that is not uninteresting, given how much closer to one’s heart wish can be.

There is also the issue of the voluntary status of an act—the conditions that make choices and actions our own, a matter of *our* discretion. Kant remarks: “We call it a natural cause, or inclination, when, for example, a person is brought by hunger and physical hardship to obey his parents, or to be diligent. Even among animals, these *causa determinantes* operate to possible ends, for taming them, and man is like them in that respect”.¹³ When hunger and physical hardship—two sources of pain—bring us in this way to obedient and diligent actions, the principle of action is external to the agent’s discretion or will. That we can know what we are doing, even why, does not make the action or the choice in such circumstances any more our own. Nor does the fact that our “taming” proceeds by way of *our* feelings: what is tamed—that is, brought to respond as another wills—is our feelings. For any way of determining the will to count as an agent’s acting or not as she pleases, for there to be something that counts as her discretion, there has to be a way to connect choice to a principle that belongs to the agent. We cannot say straightaway what the principle is, only that there must be one.¹⁴

I used to think that we got to Kant’s view of voluntary action through the notion of an elective will. Choice (*Willkür*), the vehicle of election, as part of a whole, *Wille*, which contains

a rational principle that choice can, but need not, use. As part of its free spontaneity choice could make it its principle to act on the strongest presenting desire, or for the greatest good for the greatest number, or for the moral law. But, as I have already indicated, choice does not seem to be in the business of electing principles, but of using or doing its work by way of them. So we are left with a puzzle about where in the analytic history of a determination of the rational faculty of desire principles of choice or reasons enter.

It seems clear in the passage at 6:213 that the object of choice is action, not ends or principles. The activity of choice shows in the agent's consciousness of herself as an "acting cause" for the sake of something that is either the effect of action, or is the action itself conceived of as something "to be done." Actions are chosen when we are not compelled by external forces—passions, other persons, etc.—and when the determining ground of action lies within the faculty-of-desire-in-accordance-with-concepts. We can choose to reach some desired state by this means or by that. But our reasons for choosing, our ends, cannot themselves be the object of choice, at least not directly.¹⁵

So we say: having the end of climbing Mt. Whitney, I have reason to buy new boots. Reasons of this kind triangulate between the way the world is and the ends we have. Given my end and a shopping opportunity, other things equal, I will buy boots. But what of *reasons for ends*? Ends, for Kant, are connected to what pleases, and what pleases is a function either of the toward-relation we are in with objects or the toward-relation we have given rational practical interests. But ends are not given by the toward-relation. Given a representation of that stuff as water, if I am thirsty, I am inclined toward it. I may or may not be in a position to do something to get it. Given a representation of A's need as "to be taken care of," whether or not I am in a position to act, I will want to. In neither case do I yet have an end.

In sensible beings with needs and interests, the faculty of desire secures the transition from representation to action. It can do this via nonrational systems (providing efficient causes of action), or via rational concepts that govern choice of action for a goal judged to be good (a final cause). When rational concepts secure the transition from representation to action, they do so by casting a possible object of action as an end. The difference is in the representation of the object—not merely as pleasing, but *as good*. How Kant gets to this is the next thing to consider.

IV

If a rational being can represent its own agency to itself, it can ask, “What shall I do?” And if the structure of its faculty of desire gives it even limited power to constrain its activity to wait on an answer, and then to act in conformity with the answer it gives, this would be one way of understanding what it means to have the capacity to act or not as one pleases. We associate this capacity of choice with Kant’s “negative idea of freedom”: the freedom from compulsion or constraint by external, chiefly sensible, causes. We are in this sense free even if we take direction from authority, or decide to act on our strongest presenting desire.¹⁶ We encounter this sense of freedom in any and every deliberative engagement. However, Kant’s contention, here and elsewhere, is that the negative idea of freedom cannot account for freedom of choice or will: something positive is necessary as its condition. A faculty-of-desire-according-to-concepts cannot be self-determining with respect to choice if it is not also self-determining with respect to reasons (or ends)—that is, what pleases—and, Kant holds, it can only be self-determining with respect to reasons if its determining ground is *in reason*.

Kant’s startling claim is that the ground in question is, more specifically, the moral law. That is, if there were no moral law, there could not be free choice at all. There are two ways to

take this. One is that given the moral law as its metaphysical condition, choice is both possible and unconstrained; the other is that the exercise of choice, *any* choice, depends in some way on the moral law as *its* determining ground (or final end). I think the latter is Kant's view; indeed, that it has to be. The harder task is to show that it makes some sense. In any case, here is what Kant says:

That choice which can be determined by *pure reason* is called free choice. That which can be determined only by *inclination* (sensible impulse, *stimulus*) would be animal choice (*arbitrium brutum*). Human choice, however, is a choice that can indeed be *affected* but not *determined* by impulses, and is therefore of itself (apart from an acquired proficiency of reason) not pure but can still be determined to actions by pure will.

Freedom of choice is this independence from being *determined* by sensible impulses; this is the negative concept of freedom. The positive concept of freedom is that of the ability of pure reason to be of itself practical. But this is not possible except by the subjection of the maxim of every action to the condition its qualifying as universal law. (MM, 6:213-214)¹⁷

The most obvious reason to balk at this is the implausibility of having morality as the basis or final end of all action and choice. But morality and the moral law are not the same thing, so we should wait to see what the claim amounts to before digging in. The other worry is that if human choice is only free when maxims of action are subjected to the condition of “qualifying as universal law,” contra-moral choice is unfree. Some have tried to save the positive idea of freedom by arguing that “qualifying as universal law” is not a moral criterion, but only the reflective requirement of the generality of reasons, necessary for something to count as a proper action at all.¹⁸ This is partly right; but it is wrong about the point of the positive

requirement, and, more curiously, about Kant's understanding of moral error.

So why does Kant deny the possibility of free choice without the strong condition of the positive idea of freedom? The contrary possibility amounts to the confinement of rational action and choice to the principle of happiness, broadly understood, and the end of happiness, though it depends on reason, is not sufficient to support freedom.

The argument goes this way.¹⁹ Our consciousness of ourselves as a locus of activity allows us to take aspects of ourselves as objects of desire or aversion. Given our ability to understand causal connections and to imagine things otherwise, we come to have desires directed at our desires, and construct an idea of our happiness as a scheme of preferences. We also can figure out and then act on practical principles for maximizing their satisfaction. But, Kant claims, neither ability gives us freedom of choice or will. This is because as an object of desire, the idea of happiness supports no more than a toward-relation to a subset of our preferences. It is a more complex toward-relation than, say, being moved by the idea of the taste of an apple, but in both cases the faculty of desire is dependent on a represented object that we find pleasing. Nonmoral principles of satisfaction-maximization provide sound strategies, but they can give no *reason* for acting if our simple and complex desires do not.

It is true that in developing our idea of happiness, we become managers of our desires: we learn to encourage, redirect, or even suppress desires as fits our emerging scheme of what we overall want. We will likely discover that we need to coordinate what we do for our happiness with what others do for theirs. It would be surprising if there were not convergence between principles of coordination that arise among relative equals and principles of moral obligation. But the one can't stand in for the other, Kant claims, because morality does, and happiness does not get us beyond a complex toward-relation *to a reason* for action. I don't mean that we cannot

figure out *why* we desire happiness—why, that is, the idea of a coherent scheme of ends the overall satisfaction of which we judge possible is pleasing; rather, the claim is that unless a rational agent comes to choice and action by way of a representation that is different in kind from mere desire or preference—a representation that could possibly be of something *as objectively good*—she remains determined by sensible impulses, however fancy they may be.²⁰ Kant remarks that what animals cannot do is “make the representation of a thing that they desire, much less of an end, why they want or do not want something.”²¹ It is this “why” that is at issue in the claimed unintelligibility of any free-standing idea of negative freedom.

In thinking about this, we might equally well ask where *value* or good enters in the history of rational action. When the system of desire of a lower organism is working as it is supposed to, it will desire what is functionally good for it. But this sort of value plays no role in the operation of the system of desire: it cannot guide or regulate its activity; the system works or not. Preferences are action-guiding: they provide a functional notion of *valuing*: supporting principles or goals around which an agent purposefully organizes her action and projects so that she has a sense of accomplishment when she is successful—she has done something that matters to her—disappointment if she fails. But while preferences can express what an agent values, but they have no internal connection to what is *of value*, no matter how ramified they are. There is something missing from the self-direction the agent attributes to herself.

What can be misleading is that the capacity for negotiating value, that is, for organizing one’s activity with respect to a final end, is exercised when we act from higher-order preferences. This general capacity is identified in the *Groundwork* as a rational agent’s ability “to act in accordance with the representation of laws...[or]...in accordance with principles” (G 4:412). It is in virtue of this capacity that an agent has a will. And having this capacity, she can

act in accordance with *all sorts of* principles. The issue about value that lives between the negative and positive concepts of freedom can then be put this way: is the capacity to act in accordance with principles fully independent of the nature or content of principles, or is it a capacity whose exercise depends on some good-related principle or law that nonetheless leaves us able to act on other principles? If the role of the rational faculty of desire is to bring us from whatever sources of desire there are to the possibility of choice, the view has to be the second. Some concept of value has to play a role to translate (Kant would say “synthesize”) the material of desire into a form that can be addressed by judgment and deliberation, and so choice. The difficulty is not that choice must negotiate heterogeneous possibilities; what I have been arguing on Kant’s behalf is that the raw stuff of desire cannot even make an appearance as part of the subject-matter of deliberation (or on, what I elsewhere call, an agent’s deliberative field)..

Interestingly, the same point can be made in developmental terms. An infant’s first urges have no object—they are not desires *for* anything; they are states of feeling that can be affected by what they meet. States that “cathect” with an object become individuated by it—they become desires for that thing (or later, for that kind of thing).²² But there is yet nothing for choice to work on, nothing to deliberate about; there are just facts of need or desire. These facts are like other facts—a wall, parental love, a stop sign—things which, engaged with one way or another, will have a subjective effect. For there to be deliberation and choice, we require additional conceptualization, not just as a this or a that, but in terms that render states and objects deliberatively salient. A wall is an obstacle or a potential climbing adventure; parental love the balm that heals or a suffocating embrace; a stop sign an inconvenience or a signal of danger. Only if one already knows that they are one or the other, or both, can one deliberate and choose. And when one chooses, the idea is to get something right.

So for there to be rational action, there has to be a synthesis of the stuff of desire to bring it under concepts, and something must determine the concepts that direct the synthesis so that correct deliberation and choice are possible. It is a bit like doing taxes. There is the file of receipts and canceled checks, then the categories one sorts them into as determined by the rules one will later use to figure out what one owes or can get away with not paying. Temporally one starts with the clutter; formally, the first thing is the rule or principle.

Now for the possibility of *free* action, it is not enough to say that deliberation and choice depend on concepts to synthesize the manifold of feeling, the concepts must be rational concepts. Specifically, Kant claims, every determination of free choice depends on reason's own principle—the moral law. Of course, even if we can now understand *why* Kant might think there has to be such a principle, we still need to see *how* the moral law might possibly play this role. Here is how I think Kant thinks it works.²³

If the will is the capacity of a rational agent to be moved to action by her representation of reasons or principles, it is a power of a certain sort. Every power is constituted by a law, or inner principle, that is responsible for producing its characteristic effects. So among the laws we can represent to ourselves is the law constitutive of the will's own power. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the law of the power that is the will is, or is equivalent to, the moral law.²⁴ Now for a rational agent to will something she must have a conception of herself as willing (e.g., of herself as an acting cause for her ends). Then, in willing an action—any action—an agent is moved by a perceived connection of the action to her representation of herself willing an end, which is to say, according to a representation of the will's constitutive principle (as a power to produce effects). If the principle constitutive of the will's own activity were the moral law, then *it* would be what we (always and necessarily) represent to ourselves in and as a condition of

rational choice. When we represent it accurately, we in fact see the moral law as the ultimate justificatory or good-constituting principle of our action. When we *misrepresent* it, as we may when non-rational influences affect or interfere with our representation of the will's own law (as they can our representation of any law), then we may or may not act permissibly, but our willing will not exhibit the form of the law. Still, whether or not an agent's specific volition is in conformity with the moral law (whether it accurately represents it), the moral law always is the condition of a possible willing, and so is, in that sense, its principle. We thus explain how it can both be the case that the will *is* practical reason and our willings not necessarily be good—they do not necessarily follow reason's principle.

This is still not to say that the moral law does or can play this role—that it could be the principle of the will's distinctive causal power—only that Kant thinks it does. Showing this is a large project, and for another occasion. What we can do here is provide some elaboration of the idea of the will as a power which has a norm as its law or principle. Its usefulness in thinking about both will and moral action is at least some evidence that the idea is on the right track.

V.

Let us go back to the general idea that a rational agent acts by way of a representation of a law or principle. Suppose I would fire an arrow at a distant target. However I think of it, my activity falls under the laws of gravity: if the target is distant, I will not succeed unless I aim high. If I am aware of the laws governing this activity, and have the end of hitting the target, then I consciously make the law which anyway governs what I am doing my principle, and use it to calibrate my release-point. When I act well, I represent a law which informs a standard of correctness for my action, given my end. The essential difference in the claim about willing is

that the law in question is the law of the will's own power.

One exhibits freedom of the will in having a practically effective conception of oneself as acting for reasons: one has some consideration in mind that one judges to provide justification for what one would do, whether or not one is correct that it does provide justification. But, I take Kant to argue, this is only because there *are* reasons or objective standards of justification for action which one's mistaken (or correct) judgment purports to represent. If our sense of acting freely, which seems only to require the negative concept of freedom, is to be more than an illusion, it depends on our power to act for reasons; if there are no reasons, no objective standards, then there is no such power, and we are not free.

Consider on just this point the striking conclusion of a discussion about freedom of choice. In rejecting the claim that a person can come to know freedom from his experience of being “able to choose in opposition to his (law-giving) reason,” Kant says: “Only freedom in relation to the internal lawgiving of reason is a *capacity*²⁵ [*Vermögen*]; the possibility of deviating from it is an *incapacity* [*Unvermögen*]” (6:227).²⁶ This is an idea worth exploring.

Now, not every absence of a capacity is an incapacity. An incapacity is not just a lack of ability to do something. Our lacking the capacity and the ability to leap tall buildings at a single bound is not an incapacity. Absence of song in a bird is an incapacity only if what it *is* doing—trying to mate—is a failure that cannot be described without reference to song.²⁷ In the case of the will, there is something we *are* able to do: choose contrary to the “internal lawgiving of reason”; it is an *incapacity* only if it can be shown to be a deviant or defective mode of an ability we have in virtue of a conceptually prior capacity. And this is just what Kant thinks.

Looking at the will this way directly eliminates the permissive interpretation, according to which we have a general power to act according to a conception of law or principle that allows

us to act for the moral law *or* against it: a power to pick our rule. We then do not need a separate argument to show that in acting against the moral law we make a mistake or misuse our power.²⁸ On the strict reading, in virtue of the capacity or *power* to do the right thing we have the *ability* to do wrong, so wrongful action is directly a misuse of the power (an act of a free will, though not an expression of freedom in action).

But this may seem too quick. Suppose I use a fancy hand-tool as a doorstep. In the way that I use it, it seems better to say that I ignore its powers than that I misuse it—the tool’s powers are irrelevant to my use. So not every anomalous use of a power implies misuse. Sometimes the real capacities of things are used counter to their natural or designed purpose and for something else. Consider the separation of pleasure from the reproductive use of our sexual powers; the use of a peach-basket to play a new kind of ball game. Many artifacts and powers fit variously into our intentions; sometimes subsystems are retooled for the emerging needs of the whole. They are also not for that cases of misuse or incapacity.

Closer to the kind of *Vermögen* that Kant could have in mind are what we might call “norm-constituted powers.” As a teacher, I have the power to assign grades. More precisely, I have the power to assign grades according to judgments of merit. (A baseball umpire’s power is to call balls and strikes based on judgments about the location of pitches in the strike zone.) We know what the power is because it is granted in specific terms. Having this power, I can misuse it. But compare my putting grades down according to some aesthetic feel for the pattern of As, Bs, and Cs on the grade sheet and assigning grades according to favoritism or bribes. It’s not clear that the former is a use of the power at all, whereas the latter clearly is a use that is a misuse. (Or compare an umpire who called the game according to some astrological algorithm with one who takes money to fix a game.) The power that I have as a teacher is not the power to

assign grades by merit *or* by personal preference, though having the power to assign grades by merit I am able to assign them by preference. In misusing the power in this way, I exercise it. I may think I have the power to do whichever I want, but I am mistaken—what I then exhibit is an incapacity, an *Unvermögen*.²⁹

So if the will as a faculty-of-desire-in-accordance-with-concepts is this kind of power to act and refrain from acting as we please, then to explain the power, there must be a principle of choice—of value—internal to the faculty that constitutes it. For if not, the principle of the will that constituted its power would not provide a principle of justification for choice, and such a will would be heteronomous, not free. But if the principle of value in question is constitutive of the power of choice, it is involved in all willed action: that is, all rational action necessarily depends on a single principle of choice.³⁰

Note that in saying this, no claim is being made that all values, or all valid claims of value, reduce to a single kind of value. Kant's argument is about the metaphysics of value, not about what is of value. The single principle of value defines a power: the capacity to act for reasons. Although the kinds of value may be many, the principle of a power has to be one.³¹

As a heuristic, consider another, slightly exaggerated, norm-constituted power whose principles function somewhat like the moral law. The principles of accountancy define a power that enables accountants to evaluate the financial condition of persons and corporations. Although the power can be used to defraud, the power does not stand equally toward assessing *and* defrauding. One is a straight-forward exercise; the other a misuse that hides its intentions behind a deceptive appearance of straightforward exercise. Fraud thus depends on the standards of correctness. (One should begin to see the shape of the CI procedure in this.) As a standard of correctness in bookkeeping, the principles of accountancy are principles of value. They set an

end that accountants ought to realize in their assessments. One can engage in accountancy or not; but if one does, one has the end of doing it correctly: one does not elect it. Of course, some accountants serve other ends as well.

To describe the will as a norm-constituted power, we can draw on this form. It will be a power defined by a principle; the principle—a principle of correctness (and so of value) for a kind of activity—giving an end of pursuing activity of that kind according to its standard.³² The power of the will, of our kind of faculty of desire—enables actions for reasons. This is not merely action accompanied by the thought of justification, but action from reasons which are beholden to a standard of correctness for reasons. The principle thus gives rational agents the end of pursuing their activity according to the standard of good reasons, and warrants understanding the activity of others in the same normative light³³. But unlike accountancy, which one can engage in or not, the employment in choice and action of the power of the rational will is not up to us. Whenever we act we are subject to the standard of correctness in willing: it is our end if anything is. Since the principle that is the standard of correctness in willing is constitutive of the will's power, it cannot be elected (or rejected), though it bears on the election of other ends and the choice of action for ends as the condition of their possibility. In short: the will as a power to act freely gives rational agents the end of conforming their activity to the norm of free willing.³⁴

Now the end of rational willing as such has to be a formal end, since the will itself has no “material,” no object of interest beyond itself. On the other hand, since the principle of the will has no condition to limit it, its end is always in play. As an end that is not an end in the to-be-produced sense (as a state of affairs that could be the effect of action), it can serve as a limiting condition on action or as a standard for elective ends. Limiting conditions are eliminative,

directing agents not to act in ways that conflict with them. Standards of end-election direct agents to objects of concern—giving them positive reasons to do something. Though a formal end does not provide the material content of ends, it can require that we conceive of our material ends in its terms, and choose them for its reasons.³⁵

Drawing on some Kantian moral theory, we should suppose that the formal end in question has to be rational nature as an end-in-itself. It functions as a limiting condition on all of an agent's willings—agents are to refrain from acting on any maxims that fail to be consistent with rational nature as an end-in-itself³⁶—and so in that sense it is always one's end whatever else one does or aims to do. But we are also looking for a positive standard for elective ends that is not a directive to adopt a to-be-produced end. Consider the difference between accepting as a condition on my acting for an end that its pursuit will not harm you, and having your interests part of what I attend to in determining and pursuing my ends. Your interests figure in both, but not in the same way. Rational nature as an end-in-itself constrains end-adoption in this second way, requiring that we make concern for the happiness of others and our own rational and moral well-being a standard for end-adoption for all our ends. In giving us these obligatory ends, we are directed to connect the value to us of our ordinary ends with the value of (our own and others') rational nature as an end-in-itself. So, for example, while natural happiness is not a source of reasons, our own and others' happiness, understood in relation to the development and health of rational agency, is a source of reasons. This doesn't mean that in acting for our happiness we act for morality or the good of rational nature. Rather we understand something about why happiness matters beyond the fact that we desire it (not everything we desire is, after all, something we have reason to have). Further, in seeing the value of our own happiness in terms other than those of our own desire, we make use of a reason that is equally a reason to be

attentive to the happiness of others.

Working out how obligatory ends shape our other ends, and what imperfect duties they support, is the topic of Chapter 11 (“Obligatory Ends”). Here, I would briefly note three things. If this is the way the formal end affects our material ends, it is not directing us to discrete, independent goals; the formal end does not moralize everything it touches; nor does it force us to value the multiplicity of things we care about only in moral terms. The standard of correctness for willing directs us to care about and care for the dignity and rational well-being of persons as we go about our business with and among them. If this is right, the seemingly implausible requirement that there be one end, one principle, for all of our choices and willings may not be so implausible after all. It is just the requirement that we act morally when we act.

Notes

1. “Benevolence can be unlimited, since nothing need be done with it. But it is more difficult to *do good*, especially if it is to be done not from affection (love) for others but from duty, at the cost of forgoing the satisfaction of concupiscence [*Konkupiszenz*] and of active injury to it in many cases” (*Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:393).
2. For more on these issues see see chapters 8, “The Scope of Moral Requirement,” and 11, “Obligatory Ends,” of this volume.
3. We get interests of inclination when we understand that certain *kinds* of desired objects will please us. Pleasure, either antecedent or consequent to the determination of the faculty of desire, always precedes action.
4. Compare with “inducements of the senses” (*Lectures on Ethics*, 27:395).
5. A word about the structure of the discussion in this section of the Introduction. The section is about the “faculties of the human mind” as they relate to the moral law. It begins with a generic account of the faculty of desire—something common to all things that can be said to have “life”—beings who are moved by means of their representations to be the cause of the objects of these representations (6:211). Two paragraphs are devoted to the general account of a faculty of desire, then one about the difference in the order of the role of pleasure in the determinations of the faculty of desire, distinguishing interests of inclination and reason, and then the paragraph about concupiscence. At this point, the discussion shifts from talking about the elements of the faculty of desire in general and introduces the idea of a “faculty of desire according to concepts”

which leads to the introduction of “will”. So it is not a far stretch to conclude that the reason for introducing the faculty of desire according to concepts is precisely to explain how the faculty of desire is determined (comes to desire) by the sources in appetite and reason.

6. In particular, they indicate or express nothing at all about the object, but “simply a relation to the subject.” This is one way pleasure and displeasure are unlike sensation: Kant says that a sensation *of* red or sweet makes reference to an object; the pleasure *in* what is red or sweet does not. These are definitional claims.

7. So Kant’s sympathetic man, by virtue of his sympathetic temperament, is in a toward-relation to what will bring someone relief. He is not caused by his sympathy to act; his sympathy causes a desire to help. In the contrasting morally worthy action, the faculty of desire is determined directly by the recognition of a need-that-morally-ought-to-be-met; only then is the agent in a toward-relation to what will bring relief. As we might say, his recognition of need provides sufficient reason for helping. The effect of this kind of toward-relation shows in the typical affect associated with either being unable to act (frustration and distress), or with a choice not to act (guilt or shame).

8. Given a determination of desire, nothing further, causally, need come between desire and activity, though activity will be directed toward its object under the control of some guiding mechanism, which may include rational deliberation and choice.

9. The method of the *Metaphysics of Morals* account of will is constructive. Suppose you were trying to understand human locomotion. You might begin with the most general idea of self-

moving things—animate beings whose principle of motion is internal (unlike a rock, that can move, but cannot move itself). Or in trying to get at speech, you began with the idea of an animal for whom con-specific communication was a natural function. Then you would add pieces that were necessary until you got to the capacity. There might or might not be a kind of creature that inhabits (or could inhabit?) every stage. Each piece added is necessary; it yields an analytically distinct stage that may or may not correspond to one that is, or is naturally, possible.

10. Certainly, very small children and many nonhuman animals have informationally rich and specific perceptual representations. The slender textual evidence about animal minds suggests that Kant might accept this point, not the ‘in principle’ claim. I use the stronger since it seems to me that Kant’s presentation of the faculty of desire allows it.

11. *Belieben*: in the sense of at one’s will, pleasure, or discretion.

12. Choice and wish are the two modes of the faculty of desire in accordance with concepts, insofar as the ground determining it to action lies within itself. Wish is directed at possible ends (we can construe wish with possible negative as well as positive sense, as in: “I wish I hadn’t done that”). It is not clear what the full domain of wish is. Weakly, it can be “I wish I were in Paris now”—having as its object something that pertains to me as a possible effect action, but not something I can bring about (not because it is, e.g., too costly, but because I cannot be in Paris if I am in Los Angeles). But then, what of “I wish *you* hadn’t done that”? Or “I wish I were 10 years younger.” Does wish encompasses all that we care about happening but are not in a position to effect by our own action? that our children arrive safely at their destination, that flood waters recede before they do more damage, that time heal some wounds. Are these just

things I would act to effect if I could? (Can't I wish for something and be unwilling to act for it? Something I want to happen, but not by my agency?) Wish only possible in a rational being. Clearly there are other modalities of wanting that non-rational animals may have: a sense of loss, yearning, hope. Because wish also involves ends, it sorts with choice.

13. *Lectures on Ethics*, 27:494.

14. Such "taming" would not affect our freedom, just the self-directedness of our wants and preferences.

15. We can put ourselves in a position where we will come to have reasons we want to have; but the reasons we have, given the maneuver, are not then objects of choice.

16. It is a power of choice "so long as the opposite of my desire is still in my control" (*Lectures on Metaphysics*, 28:677). Note that it is the opposite of desire that must remain in my control, not any action.

17. Note two things. Neither here nor in the *Groundwork* does Kant talk about negative freedom. There is no such property of the will; there is only a negative *concept* of the will's freedom—a concept "unfruitful for insight into its essence" (4:446). Second, "animal choice" is not the same as human choice minus the practicality of pure reason. "Choice" names that aspect of a faculty of desire in its relation to action; in the case of animals, this relation is by way of efficient causality between systems of representation and activity (whether or not the animal can make use of concepts); in the case of human beings, the determining ground of choice lies within the faculty-of-desire-according-to-concepts.

18. I am thinking here of Christine Korsgaard’s position in her *Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

19. Here I follow in a loose fashion the argument of §1 of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

20. Both elective principles and empirical concepts of the good—things that are good for you, or good for doing this or that—are, like objects of sensibility, external to the will.

21. *Lectures on Metaphysics*, 28:589.

22. Some states are keyed to pick up some objects, and will do so if the environment is normal. The configuration of light and dark that maps the features of the human face for a newborn; the shape of nipple and breast; etc. Other states are less coded, and often less tractable. Adults are familiar with diffuse anxiety states that resist object-interpretation.

23. What follows offers a somewhat cleaner version of an idea sketched in chapter 7 of this volume, “Bootstrapping.”

24. Recall that assuming just this much is consistent with the moral law being the metaphysical condition of fully unconstrained choice.

25. Gregor translates *Vermögen* as “ability”; it is variously Kant’s term for power and sometimes for a faculty. I take “capacity” to be more fundamental than “ability” (capacities are the conditions of abilities), and therefore in this context the more apt term. But the governing concept is about powers.

26. Here is the full text.

“But we can see indeed that, although experience shows that the human being as a *sensible being* is able to choose in opposition to *as well as* in conformity with the law, his freedom as an *intelligible being* cannot be defined by this, since appearances cannot make any supersensible object (such as free choice) understandable. We can also see that freedom can never be located in a rational subject’s being able to choose in opposition to his (lawgiving) reason, even though experience proves often enough that this happens (though we still cannot comprehend how this is possible). – For it is one thing to accept a proposition (on the basis of experience) and another to make in the *expository principle* (of the concept of free choice [*Willkür*]) and the universal principle for distinguishing it (from *arbitrio bruto s. servo*); for the first does not maintain that the feature belongs *necessarily* to the concept, but the second requires this. – Only freedom in relation to the internal lawgiving of reason is really an ability [*Vermögen*]; the possibility of deviating from it is an inability [*Unvermögen*]. How can the former be defined by the latter? It would be a definition that added to the practical concept the *exercise* of it, as this is taught by experience, a *hybrid definition*...that puts the concept in a false light” (MM 6:226-227 [unless otherwise indicated, “choice” in this passage is not *Willkür* but *das Vermögen der Wahl*]).”

27. In a species, one can imagine a mating ritual that is punctuated with intervals for a performance that is never forthcoming. Perhaps here we would speak of the loss of a capacity. Straight ahead empirical investigation may be inadequate to say whether an absence or lack is an incapacity. One might need to know some history of a species, or have a comparison species of

the right sort at hand to see which of its actions are ineffectual tryings, failed attempts, or just unhappy omissions. Biological cases are difficult since species adapt to changes, and old “incapacities” can come to be or be part of new powers.

28. As best as I can tell, this is Henry Allison’s interpretation. It is also implicit in Christine Korsgaard’s revisionary Kantianism. (Henry Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*.)

29. Note a further Kantian point: we cannot tell what powers someone has merely from observing what she does or knowing what powers she thinks she has. Authorizing someone to act on my behalf, I give him certain powers. I thereby (often) put him in a position to abuse them. We might think of the power as an ability plus a set of permissions. If I loan my car to you, I give you the ability and the permission to drive it. You do not thereby have the power to loan it to someone else, though you are able to do that.

30. Lest one think this is just too much to take on, consider the obvious less Kantian alternative to the norm-constituted view: the will as a wholly executive faculty, making decisions and setting the agent to action (perhaps also belief) on the basis of reasons it receives either from an independent faculty of intuition or from judgment about the reasons that bear. The will then either is a bridge from judgment to intention, or it mobilizes our forces to carry out intention (if we think that intention is already implicated in the last step of practical deliberation). We do use “weakness of will” to describe failures to act on our judgment of what is best, and “strong willed” as a term of criticism (sometimes admiration) when we do not allow countervailing reasons to affect an already set course of action. Together they suggest a faculty that ought to be

but isn't always or necessarily responsive to the balance of reasons, both in the formation of an intention and in support of a continuing course or plan of action. It seems to me that we have here an account of will in a theory of coming to act that either contains one faculty too many, or one too few. If one is drawn to the thought that what it is to be a creature capable of responding to considerations as reasons is to be moved by judgment to action or belief, as the case may be, then the will looks as though it is adding something extra (if it is not just the generic name of being so moved). This is the one too many. If, on the other hand, one thinks that there has to be an extra step—there is judgment, whose verdict is about the balance of reasons, and then there is a separate deciding or executive faculty that initiates (and perhaps controls) action—then unless the will is just a passive mechanism that receives judgment and executes it (takes orders, as it were), there needs to be something else that established the will's relation to reasons judgments. So here we have one too few.

31. It really is a principle of *value* because it gives the will its formal object. Think of the analogous claim we might make about belief: that a principle of the norm-constituted power of belief-formation gives belief its formal object, truth.

32. In the case of the will the principle is in addition a law of rational nature's causality.

33. One acknowledges this whenever one asks for a justification for action.

34. The argument for this is the argument for autonomy. If the rational will does not have an end give by its inner principle, then its ends would be given in some other way—by nature, or by some other principle (e.g., the principle of happiness). Such a will would be subject to external

determination, and not free.

35. Not every material end can be so conceived; when not, we may not act for it. One might think of this as a permissibility condition for ends.

36. In terms closer to the formula of universal law we might say that a maxim is to be rejected whose principle could not be the principle of a rational will: namely, when it has the form of an *Unvermögen*: the form of willing both a principle of correctness *and* its misuse.