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Nelson T. Potter Jr.

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, kjohnson6@unl.edu

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The Synthetic a priori Proposition of Kant's Ethical Philosophy

Nelson Potter

I.

I will consider Kant's claim that the categorical imperative (CI) is a synthetic a priori proposition.¹ We know from the first *Critique* that such propositions are likely to be very important, but also difficult to justify. Kant says exactly the same things about the CI in the *Grundlegung*: the CI is difficult to justify², but if we do not succeed in justifying it, morality may be a mere "phantom of the brain."³ Though little has been written on this topic, a correct understanding of this claim is important to understanding Kant's views.

Kant describes synthetic a priori propositions as ones that express a necessary relationship between two distinct concepts. Many philosophers doubt that there could be any such propositions, saying that if any propositions do express necessary relationships, one of these concepts must contain the other (as in "All triangles are plane figures"). Still, if we could come to know some such propositions, the knowledge could be quite useful to us, in moral and practical philosophy, among other areas. Ethical intuitionists or realists such as G. E. Moore, H. A. Prichard, and W. D. Ross claim to have such knowledge, whether or not they use the terminology of "synthetic a priori." Without such knowledge in ethics, we might well fear falling into relativism, scepticism, or subjectivism.⁴

¹ Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, IV, 420; cf. Critique of Practical Reason, V, 31. References to Kant's works are to the volume and page of the passages referred to in the Prussian Academy edition of Kant's works (Kants gesammelte Schriften, herausgegeben von der Deutschen (formerly königlichen Preussischen) Akademie der Wissenschaften, 29 volumes, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter (and predecessors), 1902). Most English translations of works referred to include these page numbers marginally. However, Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone, translated by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson, as revised by John Silber (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960) does not; references to this work will give first the Akademie volume and page, followed by the page of the English translation. Quotations from the Critique of Pure Reason will follow the usual practice of giving the first (A) and second (B) edition pagination.

² Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, IV, 420, 444 - 5.

³ Ibid., IV, 445.

The main reason for doubting that we can know such propositions, is that finding an adequate epistemological basis for them is hard. Do they come to us by a direct rational intuition of essences? Which mental faculty equips us to gain such knowledge?

An optimistic epistemic tradition, which goes back at least to Plato, claims that we can have such insight. Plato claimed epistemic access to a realm of independently existing abstract essences or Forms. Kant, as the creator of the terminology of the synthetic a priori, and as chief defender of the claim that we have knowledge of such propositions, might be thought to be a part of this epistemically optimistic, rationalist tradition. Though he was notoriously critical of rationalist claims in his first *Critique*, perhaps he relented when the topic changed to ethics.

Our main question, then, will be: What about the CI makes it a synthetic a priori proposition? I will develop and consider two opposed answers to this question. The first, which I will call the "rational intuitionist" interpretation⁵, says that Kant describes the categorical imperative as synthetic a priori because it expresses a direct insight by our rational faculties into the truth of a substantive moral principle. This interpretation places Kant within the Platonic rationalist tradition. In moral philosophy more recent rational intuitionists include H. A. Prichard and W. D. Ross. No interpreter has developed the rational intuitionist reading of Kant in detail, but H. J. Paton, John Marshall, and Ross himself all come close. I'll concentrate on Ross.

The second answer, which I will call the "motivational" view, is a new interpretation that I will state and defend. On this view the CI is synthetic a priori because it entails that rational agents can act from purely moral motives, that is, it expresses a causal, motivational principle of human action. It is a priori because the motivation is noumenal rather than phenomenal, a power to act from purely moral motives.⁶ If the CI had no hold on human motivation, it would have no application to human beings. Kant is thus a motivational internalist, i.e., someone who believes that obligation entails motivation.⁷

⁴ My intention in saying this is to describe a common fear among theorists without endorsing it.

⁵ I use the description "rational intuitionist," sometimes shortened to "intuitionist," rather than the overbroad "rationalist." It is hard to find a fully satisfactory term, especially since "intuitionist" is a term that has some variety of different uses. I agree with *Christine Korsgaard* in "Skepticism about Practical Reason" (see fn. 62 below) when she calls Kant a rationalist (in a different sense), and I think the present paper supports her views. The "rational intuitionist" claims that the human mind has the power to acquire the knowledge of platonic style rational essences.

⁶ It is well known that Kant thought that we could have no knowledge of noumenal causes. However, according to doctrine of the "fact of pure reason" in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the phenomena of moral consciousness point toward the existence of a noumenal moral motivation whose character these moral phenomena give us some partial, indirect knowledge of. I discuss this aspect of Kantian doctrine further below.

⁷ Recent writers who develop such a view include: *Stephen Darwall*, *Impartial Reason*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983. *W.D. Falk*, *Ought, Reasons, and Morality*, Ithaca:

On the rational intuitionist view the CI is a basic, substantive moral proposition, rather like a statement formulating one of W. D. Ross's *prima facie* duties, from which particular moral obligations can, at least in the absence of conflicting *prima facie* duties, be deduced. Such a moral principle is a priori because we know it in an extra-empirical way, viz., by direct, rational insight. It is synthetic because it is a substantive moral statement that, when combined with factual statements, enables us to deduce the moral wrongness or requiredness of certain acts. However, intuitionists like Ross often are externalists who regard such principles as mere precepts, that say nothing about our motivation to act in accord with them. Such a principle may be true, and we may even know it to be true, without our having any tendency to act as the principle says we should. Any complete moral theory must tell a story about moral motivation. But on such externalist views that story forms a separate chapter, a chapter that mentions facts logically distinct from the moral principle itself and what it entails.

According to the motivational interpretation, Kant distinguishes between "the moral law," which is a mere externalist precept, considered without reference to any agent's motivation, and the "categorical imperative," which refers to the same moral demand as commanding a reluctant human will, one which might or might not obey⁸. Kant regards the *law* as analytic, while the *imperative* is synthetic. In Kant's view, given the nature of morality, only one principle of morality is possible and hence its formula can be discovered by conceptual analysis. Kant thinks he can show that it must be a purely formal principle, and that only one formal moral principle is possible.⁹ Further, Kant appears to think that a purely formal, and hence analytic moral statement can have substantive moral implications, e.g., about the wrongness of making a lying promise. Kant writes¹⁰, "A practical law which I acknowledge as such must qualify for being universal law; this is an iden-

Cornell University Press, 1986. John Ladd, "The Desire to Do One's Duty for its Own Sake," in: Hector-Neri Castaneda / George Nakhnikian, eds: *Morality and the Language of Conduct*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963. Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970. Christine Korsgaard attributes such a view to Kant, in *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996; see especially the essay entitled "Kant's analysis of obligation: the argument of Groundwork I," pp. 43 - 76.

⁸ See *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, IV, 413.

⁹ See *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, IV, 420, for one of the several statements by Kant of this point. The doctrine of the formality and deducibility of the basic principle of morality relates to what is usually called "the first formulation" of the CI, the one that mentions "universal law." Kant in the *Groundwork* also proposed two other major and distinct formulations of the CI, the second being the formula of the end in itself, the third being that of the kingdom of ends. Kant claims these other formulations are equivalent to the first. There is considerable literature on this equivalence claim, beginning with the detailed discussion by Paton in *The Categorical Imperative*, Hutchinson of London, 1947. In this paper I will limit discussion to the first formulation, the one that Kant claims is formal and deducible from the concept of morality.

¹⁰ At *Critique of Practical Reason*, V, 27.

tical and therefore a self-evident proposition.” Thus in Kant’s view we don’t need a special rational (synthetic) insight into the moral essence of certain kinds of acts, for the criterion of right and wrong can be discovered by mere philosophical analysis, the results of which would be expressed by analytic propositions. In contrast, the categorical *imperative* is synthetic because it adds to the moral law this motivational command directed at the human will. Both moral laws and moral imperatives may be described as *principles*.

Here we can note what might seem the peculiar character of Kant’s arguments against heteronomous moral principles.¹¹ They have sometimes seemed question-begging because they merely show that the principles under discussion *are* heteronomous, and assume that the true principle of morality must be a principle of autonomy. This approach makes sense if the basic precept of morality is a self-evident, analytic proposition that is the only possible principle of moral autonomy.

Kant’s view that the analysis of morality yields a unique, substantive moral principle has always had its critics. I will not try to support further or establish this characteristic Kantian claim here. My only point now is that in Kant’s view an analytic moral principle, arrived at through conceptual analysis, can yield substantive moral conclusions. Hence, in interpreting Kant we must look elsewhere for an account of the CI’s being synthetic.

Section I of this paper has introduced and defined the issues. In Section II, I will develop the rational intuitionist interpretation of the synthetic a priori character of the CI. In Section III I will critique that interpretation by showing that Kant rejected it. In Section IV I will isolate the core practical synthetic a priori proposition, according to the motivational interpretation. Section V will argue that our moral nature includes the motivational capacity to act from purely moral motives, according to Kant. Section VI will discuss passages from some of Kant’s later works on moral philosophy, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* and *Metaphysics of Morals*, and show how they support the motivational interpretation.

II.

W. D. Ross in *The Right and the Good* states his well-known list of *prima facie* duties, a list that includes six distinct items. He then adds, “It is a *prima facie* classification of the duties which reflection on our moral convictions seems actually to reveal. And if these convictions are, as I would claim they are, of the nature of knowledge...the list will be a list of authentic conditional duties.”¹² Later, expounding on the nature of this moral knowledge he writes,

¹¹ See *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, IV, 440 - 444; *Critique of Practical Reason*, V, 39 - 41.

¹² *Sir David Ross, The Right and the Good*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1967 p. 23.

The moral order expressed in these propositions is just as much part of the fundamental nature of the universe (and, we may add, of any possible universe in which there were moral agents at all) as is the spatial or numerical structure expressed in the axioms of geometry or arithmetic. In our confidence that these propositions are true there is involved the same trust in our reason that is involved in our confidence in mathematics. . . In both cases we are dealing with propositions that cannot be proved, but that just as certainly need no proof.¹³

In describing his own views, Ross does not call these propositions synthetic a priori. But in discussing Kant's views on the categorical imperative in his later book *Kant's Ethical Theory*, he does indicate approval for such a description. Discussing Kant's claim that we cannot ascertain empirically whether there are any categorical imperatives, Ross writes,

Now it is true that we cannot by experience, i.e., by sense-perception or by introspection, discover (for example) that to break a promise is wrong. Wrongness and rightness are not attributes that can be experienced, i.e., just found, to be present in a given subject. But it is possible, by reflection on what we mean when we say that promises should not be broken, to discover that we mean. . . that the breaking of them has a perfectly distinct character which we express by the word 'wrong'. . .¹⁴

Ross continues:

As in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant thinks that a special difficulty attaches to the possibility of knowing any synthetic a priori propositions; and he *rightly* [my emphasis] describes moral laws as being of this nature. But there is no more mystery about the knowledge of synthetic than about the knowledge of analytic propositions. Given the possibility of the unique thing called knowledge, then if there are necessary synthetic connexions between different elements in reality, there is no more reason why these should not be known than why the correct analysis of wholes into their elements should not be known.¹⁵

Ross here describes his own conception of *prima facie* duties and Kant's categorical imperative in similar fashion. He even accepts as correct the Kantian description of moral laws as synthetic a priori propositions. In both cases Ross thinks we are dealing with insights that have the character of axioms: basic, intuitive, unprovable truths. Thus Ross agrees with Kant about the status of moral principles, and their correctness, so far as they go. His main quarrel with Kant is on a different matter: Kant thinks all duties can be derived from a single principle, whereas Ross thinks we need at least six distinct sources of *prima facie* duties.¹⁶ Following Sigdwick's terminology, we can describe Ross as a principle intuitionist, who thinks that there are a plurality of such moral intuitions. In Ross's interpretation

¹³ Ibid., pp. 29 - 30.

¹⁴ Sir David Ross, *Kant's Ethical Theory*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954, p. 41.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 22, 28 - 29.

Kant also emerges as a principle intuitionist, but with only a single intuition.¹⁷ Both Ross himself and Kant, according to Ross's interpretation, are "rational intuitionists," in the sense mentioned in Section I.

Most rational intuitionists think human knowledge of objective moral reality is only contingently related to human motives. Intuitionists thus tend to be motivational externalists.¹⁸ In an intuitionist picture the facts which justify moral propositions are objective ones which may have nothing directly to do with human interests and desires; hence justifying reasons and motivating reasons tend to be distinct. Indeed, the risk of internalism, Frankena writes, is that it may "trim obligation to the size of individual motives."¹⁹

Let us develop Ross's understanding of *prima facie* duties somewhat further. Take the example of duties of fidelity. Ross's idea seems to be that the basic characteristic of moral requiredness attaches synthetically to certain kinds of acts, including all examples of promise-keeping.²⁰ The attachment is furthermore *a priori*,

¹⁷ In fact on p. 21 of Kant's *Ethical Theory*, *Ibid.*, Ross tells us that "Kant's view is one variety of intuitionism." It seems natural to suggest that Ross arrives at his interpretation of this aspect of Kant's ethical theory based on his own understanding of how moral theory proceeds; he finds Kant to be a kindred deontological principle intuitionist.

Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, Seventh edition, reprinted by Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1907, pp. 100 - 102, develops a related three fold distinction, distinguishing between two versions of what I have called "principle intuitionism," "Dogmatic" and "Philosophical."

¹⁸ For one of the classic discussions of the contrasts between motivational externalism and internalism, see William D. Frankena, "Obligation and Motivation in Recent Moral Philosophy," in: A.I. Melden, ed: *Essays in Moral Philosophy*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958, pp. 40 - 80. A more recent discussion of the same issues is found in Chapter 3 of *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, by David O. Brink, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

¹⁹ Frankena (op.cit. fn. 18), p. 80.

I mention here four other interpreters, some of whom may be representatives of the rational intuitionist view.

H.J. Paton, in *The Categorical Imperative*, Hutchinson of London, 1947, on pp. 246 - 8, writes of the "direct insight" we have into the principle of autonomy and the associated imperative.

John Marshall, "The Syntheticality of the Categorical Imperative," pp. 185 - 200, from *Proceedings: Sixth International Kant Congress*, The Pennsylvania State University, 1985, ed. Gerhard Funke / Thomas M. Seebohm, copyright 1989, Volume II / 2, Washington: University Press of America, emphasizes the syntheticality of the main claims Kant makes in the *Grundlegung*.

M.H. McCarthy, "Kant's Application of the Analytic / Synthetic Distinction to Imperatives" in: *Dialogue*, 1979, 18, 373 - 391, and "Kant's Rejection of the Argument of Groundwork III," in *Kant-Studien*, 1982, 73, 169 - 180. McCarthy claims that the categorical imperative can be understood as synthetic only because it is understood as affirming the necessitation of the will of an imperfectly rational being; hence it would not be synthetic if it affirmed the moral law as applicable to a holy will.

Mark Timmons, "Necessitation and Justification in Kant's Ethics," pp. 223 - 261 in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 22:2, June 1992. It is difficult briefly to characterize the views in this essay, which is in part a response to McCarthy.

in the sense that we understand that this requiredness attaches to the kind of act, and to this specific act, which exemplifies that kind, only through an act of reflection; such requiredness is not a sensible quality, nor does Ross postulate anything like an inner moral sense. In this instance the synthetic a priori proposition is: "Promise-keeping is required," which also presents us with the paradigmatic form of moral principle: a subject-term referring to a kind of act of which we may have experience, and a predicate-term referring to a moral characteristic that attaches to this action. This, I suggest, is the model for moral judgment both for Ross and for Ross' interpretation of Kant.

III.

The difficulty with the rational intuitionist interpretation of the CI is that Kant strongly rejected the rationalist tradition. This is clearest in one of Kant's best known letters, to Marcus Herz of 21 February 1772.²¹ Kant writes this letter while he is thinking through the project of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, though he has not yet arrived at his "Copernican revolution" solution. But the ground rules as to what will constitute an acceptable solution are all the clearer because this solution is not yet in hand. His problem, Kant writes, is, "On what ground rests the relation of that in us which is called representation to the object?"²² In some cases the object causes the representation, as in sense perception. In other cases the representation causes the object, "as when Divine knowledge is conceived as the archetype of all things."²³ (There is an echo of this idea in the first *Critique's* idea of intellectual intuition, understood as a power that brings a thing into existence by cognizing it.²⁴) But in the case of a priori concepts (which include both the concepts of central interest in the first *Critique*, and moral concepts), neither of these relations can be correct. Then Kant explains what he thinks are obviously unsatisfactory resolutions of the issue:

²⁰ The kind of requiredness is *prima facie*, not *toti-resultant* requiredness. Notice that *prima facie* requiredness remains a characteristic of an action, even when it is overridden by contrary considerations. For example, A breaks a promise to meet a friend in order to render emergency assistance at an accident; the fact that the obligation to provide assistance is overriding does not mean that the *prima facie* obligatoriness of promise keeping disappears.

²¹ The translation is by Arne Unhjem, in: Lewis White Beck, *Studies in the Philosophy of Kant* 1965, Indianapolis: The Bobbs Merrill Company. Quotes from this letter are followed by references in the text that give first the page of the passage in this book by Beck. The same letter is in Arnulf Zweig, editor and translator, *Kant: Philosophical Correspondence, 1759 - 1799*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967. The letter is in the Akademie edition, X, 130 ff. There is a specific echo of the sorts of contrasts found in this letter in KrV A92/B125, and in the references in KrV to the idea of intellectual intuition (e.g., B68). As I will urge below, the doctrines of the first *Critique* are fully in keeping with the ideas expressed in this letter.

²² Letters in Akademie edition, X, 130.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See *Critique of Pure Reason*, A87 - 8/B65.

Plato assumed a previous intuition of Divinity as the primary source of the pure concepts of the understanding and of first principles. Mallebranche [*sic*] believed in a still effective eternal intuition of this Primary Being. Various moralists have accepted precisely this view with respect to basic moral laws. Crusius believed in certain implanted rules for the purpose of forming judgments, together with the concepts which God – to the extent to which they are necessary to harmonize with things – implanted in the human soul. Of these systems one may call the former the *influxum hyperphysicum*, and the latter the *harmoniam praestabilitam intellectualem*. But the *Deus ex machina* in the determination of the origin and validity of our knowledge is the greatest absurdity one could hit upon, and has – besides its deceptive circle in the closing link of reasoning of our human perceptions – also this disadvantage that it provokes all sorts of fancy ideas and every pious and speculative sort of brainstorm.²⁵

His ironical Latin phrases for these conceptions, the Platonic “hyperphysical influx” and the rationalist “intellectual preestablished harmony,” together with the reference to the *Deus ex machina* make it clear that he rejects the rationalist/intuitionist tradition that he is presenting. This rejection is all the more striking because he had stated contrary views two years earlier in his *Inaugural Dissertation*. Kant’s concluding statement points out the unhappy consequence of allowing such unsupported claims to knowledge: If we fail to discipline our knowledge claims through an awareness of our limitations, we open ourselves to wild claims of “fancy ideas” and “pious brainstorms.” Given these statements it would be surprising if Kant were a rational intuitionist in his moral philosophy.²⁶

In the first *Critique* Kant discusses three other kinds of synthetic a priori propositions: (i) mathematical propositions; (ii) principles of nature, that lie at the a priori basis of natural science and our knowledge of the empirical world; and (iii) the propositions of traditional metaphysics. According to the *Critique*, what is the character of our knowledge of each of these kinds of synthetic a priori?

(i) Mathematical propositions are known because of their basis in the a priori form of sensible intuition that is universal among human beings. Intuition is what enables us to join subject and predicate, and, for example, to know that a two-sided plane figure is not a possible spatial construction.²⁷ Is this discussion of intuition Platonic, perhaps recalling the slave boy passage in the *Meno*? Is the Kantian doctrine of pure intuition of space and time an example of rational intuitionism in Kant’s philosophy? No, for several reasons. (a) For Kant the “reality” apprehended is internal rather than external, a point expressed by the well-known Kant-

²⁵ Letters in Akademie edition, X, 131. In *Beck* (op.cit. fn. 21) see pp. 232 - 33.

²⁶ Henry Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Freedom*, Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 232, also talks about the problems of attributing an “intuitionist” view to Kant, citing Beck, who expresses similar difficulties. The intuitionist view Allison discusses has to do with Kant’s characterizations of the “fact of pure reason” as either subjective or objective. See Beck’s “The Fact of Reason: An Essay on Justification in Ethics,” in: *Studies in the Philosophy of Kant*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965, pp. 200 - 214.

²⁷ Compare *Critique of Pure Reason*, A47 - 49/B65 - 66.

ian doctrine that space and time are empirically real and *transcendentally ideal*. (b) The doctrine of the aesthetic concerns the form of sensibility; hence it has to do with sense perception rather than the rational apprehension independent of sense that is the rational intuitionist/Platonic paradigm. (c) The knowledge of these forms of sensibility found in mathematics is itself indirect, obtained only through the procedures characteristic of mathematics, which according to Kant are constructions in space and time, and proofs. (d) Finally, the forms of intuition are *purely formal*. If one objects that “transcendentally ideal” is just Kant’s term for “innate,” Kant would probably urge in his defense that traditional innate ideas are material, whereas a priori concepts and intuitions are merely the form of the empirical elements of our knowledge of appearances. Whether this formal/material distinction, which runs all through Kant’s philosophy, is defensible, I do not here judge. But Kant’s idea is that the formal elements of experience are supplied by the mind. Hence Kant does not think that sensible intuitions are templates of an external reality.

(ii) The principles that are the subject of the “Transcendental Analytic” are proved true by being shown to be necessary conditions of the possibility of experience. They are thus not directly intuited to be true, but rather proved through an indirect and discursive argument that Kant calls “transcendental.” So again, there is no rationally intuitive apprehension of essences, but rather an indirect inference based on (analytic) argument and conceptual analysis, which leads Kant to claim that experience presupposes them.

(iii) Finally, Kant *rejects* the claims to have metaphysical knowledge precisely because they would be instances of the rational intuitive knowledge of external rational essences, and no such claims can be sustained. All such arguments to metaphysical conclusions are non-sequiturs (“Paralogisms,” “Ideal of Pure Reason”) or lead to contradictions (“Antinomies”), which is a symptom of their being based on false premises.

Hence none of the synthetic a priori propositions in the first *Critique* are known by the rational intuition that Kant rejects. Kant thinks that the appropriate method of philosophy is simply conceptual analysis.²⁸

In the first *Critique* Kant wrote the following against the recent use of “postulate,” where it meant treating a proposition as immediately certain, without justification or proof. Ross’s idea that we may have synthetic a priori intuitions or axioms that are self-evident and incapable of proof could equally well be the target of Kant’s criticism:

[I]f, in dealing with synthetic propositions, we are to recognise them as possessing unconditioned validity, independently of deduction, on the evidence [merely] of their own

²⁸ See KrV, “The Discipline of Pure Reason,” in the “Methodology,” A708/B736 ff. See L.W. Beck, “Kant’s Theory of Definition,” in op. cit., fn. 21. This conception of philosophy is found in Kant as early as the “Prize Essay” (1763).

claims, then no matter how evident they may be, all critique of understanding is given up. And since there is no lack of audacious pretensions, and these are supported by common belief (though that is no credential of their truth), the understanding lies open to every fancy, and is in no position to withhold approval of those assertions which, though illegitimate, yet press upon us, in the same confident tone, their claims to be accepted as actual axioms. Whenever, therefore, an a priori determination is synthetically added to the concept of a thing, it is indispensable that, if not a proof, at least a deduction of the legitimacy of such an assertion should be supplied.²⁹

Kant made approximately the same point more poetically in the Introduction: "The light dove, cleaving the air in her free flight, and feeling its resistance, might imagine that her flight would be still easier in empty space."³⁰ Clearly Kant's anti-rationalism is not limited to the 1772 letter to Herz.

Kant uses "metaphysics" in two senses: there is the old, bad, rationalistic metaphysics that he rejects, and his own, new metaphysics, found in titles like *Metaphysics of Morals*. The Kantian metaphysics rejects all a priori knowledge of external reality, and gives us a doctrine of the internal workings of the mind, as revealed in the formal aspects of our concepts. Hence, though Kantian new metaphysics is retained, the old rationalist metaphysics is gone.

The transcendental arguments of the first *Critique* are not the only indirect arguments. Kant's argument for the CI is indirect in a similar way, according to the authoritative account of the "fact of pure reason" in the second *Critique*. We are directly aware only of the various moral phenomena of consciousness such as feelings of guilt and indignation that Kant thinks presuppose the validity of the CI, and hence also presuppose our freedom, and we infer from them the validity of the CI for us, and also the proposition that is implied by it, that we are free.³¹

Let me give a brief, rough sketch of the kind of synthetic a priori proposition the practical synthetic a priori proposition is, a sketch that anticipates the interpretation offered in the next two sections. It is not like the propositions of the Aesthetic or the Analytic of the first *Critique*, since it has nothing directly to do with experience. It is more like the synthetic a priori propositions discussed in the Dialectic, in that it is a product of *Reason*, in the sense in which that faculty is opposed to the faculty of Understanding. However, it is not a theoretical proposition, but a practi-

²⁹ Critique of Pure Reason, A233 - 34/B285 - 86.

³⁰ Ibid., A5/B8.

³¹ I do not mean to suggest that the doctrine of the fact of pure reason is clear, straightforward, and problem-free. The interpretation of Chapter III of the *Grundlegung* is, if anything, even more difficult and complex, so I have not attempted at all to address it here. Obviously, however, the topics of the present paper and of these passages where Kant, by different routes, seeks to justify the CI are linked topics. Here I can only suggest that if one comes armed with a correct interpretation of the status of the synthetic a priori practical proposition of Kant's moral philosophy, one would have a considerable advantage in trying to understand these difficult passages.

cal proposition, where, as Kant said in the letter to Herz, the representation causes the object. Such a thing happens in human beings only via a choice, a bringing to bear of incentives, a commitment to pursuit of an end, and finally, when and where appropriate, action. We can know the proposition, in a practical respect, because we know its effects, which are the phenomena referred to in the discussions of the fact of pure reason. These consequential phenomena give us insight into the nature of the moral law, and so, in this one instance, we can come to know a noumenal proposition, a law of freedom.

IV.

The rational intuitionist interpretation of the categorical imperative as a moral axiom is unsatisfactory because it makes Kant out to be inconsistent with his own deeply held beliefs about the limits of human knowledge. Let us begin developing a more satisfactory interpretation by identifying the core element of the categorical imperative that best exhibits its synthetic a priori character.

In Chapter Two of the *Grundlegung*, shortly after informing us that the categorical imperative is synthetic a priori, Kant writes,

There is therefore only a single categorical imperative and it is this: 'Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.'³²

Usually only sentences in the indicative are said to be synthetic a priori; here Kant tells us an imperative is. Since Kant tells us that "imperatives are expressed by an 'ought,'"³³ we may rewrite this one accordingly, which will give us an indicative in (A), below. Let us also bring out the imperative's implied subject by supposing it addressed, as Kant says³⁴, to rational beings, but let us understand them to be finite beings rather like us humans. Thus we get:

(A) A rational being ought to act on a maxim only if she can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.³⁵

Also, let us alter the predicate of (A) so that we may concentrate on the issues of present interest. In Chapter One of the *Grundlegung*, Kant analyzes the concept of a good will, arguing that a good will acts only from the motive of duty, and that the principle of actions from the motive of duty is the purely formal principle of action

³² Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, IV, 421.

³³ Ibid., IV, 413.

³⁴ Ibid., IV, 420n, 426 - 7, 435, 440; Critique of Practical Reason, V, 46; Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone, VI, 26 - 28; 21 - 23.

³⁵ This proposition (A) is followed below by versions (B) and (C). However, (A) is already a synthetic a priori proposition, which already contains all the moral "substance" built into the CI. (B) and (C) are merely implications or presuppositions of (A), designed to make aspects of the character of (A) more perspicuous.

that is stated by the “universal law” formulation of the categorical imperative, i.e., the formulation quoted in (A). This principle is the only purely formal principle, in the sense that it is detached from all personal material ends of human action.³⁶ The point of this analysis is to discover the principle that is present and active in actions that well exhibit this moral quality of personality. Chapter One’s result may be summed up in the following proposition:

(G1) “A good will is a will which always acts only on that maxim which can at the same time be willed as a universal law.”³⁷

“Good will” is, then, a term for the positively developed moral nature of persons. Remember that Kant is assuming the existence of morality in the first two chapters of the *Grundlegung*, and undertaking to justify it only in the third and last chapter. An agent’s capacity to develop a good will we may call a person’s “moral nature.”³⁸ “Moral nature” is thus a concept that stands at the starting point of Kantian analysis. Let us restate (A) by substituting “moral nature” for the universal law principle that appears at the end of the analytic process. We then get:

(B) A rational being has a moral nature.³⁹

This proposition, then, is synthetic a priori.

³⁶ For a more detailed presentation of this view, see the *author’s* “The Argument of Kant’s *Grundlegung*, Chapter One,” in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supplementary Volume, No. 1, Part 1 (1975), pp. 73–92. A very similar reading of the argument of Kant’s Chapter One is given in a later essay by *Christine M. Korsgaard*, “Kant’s Analysis of Obligation: The Argument of Foundations I,” *The Monist*, July 1989, 72:3, pp. 311–340.

³⁷ See the *author’s* essay, op. cit. fn. 36, p. 80.

³⁸ I think that “good will” is an individual’s moral nature, plus the fact that in this individual that nature has been cultivated and given priority among the agent’s motivations. Hence a good will can be possessed only by an individual who was in some sense morally good. “Moral nature” is presumably possessed by all humans, or more broadly, all finite rational beings, but only in an individual possessing good will would this moral nature exhibit itself in action sufficiently to be analyzed. Such analysis reveals that the principle of the agent’s action is the universal law principle, which is the supreme principle of morality. For a more detailed discussion of various issues concerning good will, see *Karl Ameriks*, “Kant on the Good Will,” in: *Otfried Höffe*, ed: *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten: Ein kooperativer Kommentar*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1989.

³⁹ Notice the radical difference between the two models of ethical propositions being used by the rational intuitionist and the motivational interpretations. Ross’s version of rational intuitionism takes the subjects of ethical propositions to be actions, thought of descriptively, and without reference to motives, and their predicates to be non-natural moral qualities that reflection tells us attach to these actions. According to proposition (B), which formulates an intermediate stage of my analysis of Kant’s view, according to the motivational interpretation, the subject of the proposition is rational beings or persons, and the predicate mentions a set of cognitive and motivational characteristics of such individuals (their “moral natures”) that, so far as we can tell, could fail to be possessed by subject-concept persons without contradiction. Kant is often read as focusing in a primary way upon acts, like Ross, but the motivational interpretation disputes that reading. *Korsgaard’s* “Kant’s Analysis of Obligation: The Argument of Foundations I”, op. cit. fn. 36, draws a similar contrast between moral Sen-

One of the clearest textual confirmations that Kant wished to affirm (B) comes from *Religion*, where he writes about the “Original Predisposition to Good in Human Nature”:

We may conveniently divide this predisposition, with respect to function, into three divisions, to be considered as elements in the fixed definition of man:

- (1) The predisposition to animality in man, taken as a *living* being;
- (2) The predisposition to *humanity* in man, taken as a living and at the same time a *rational* being;
- (3) The predisposition to *personality* in man, taken as a rational and at the same time an *accountable* being.⁴⁰

In a very significant footnote to the end of this passage Kant explains,

We cannot regard this [the third predisposition] as included in the concept of the preceding, but necessarily must treat it as a special predisposition. For from the fact that a being has reason it by no means follows that this reason, by the mere representing of the fitness of its maxims to be laid down as universal laws, is thereby rendered capable of determining choice (*Willkür*) unconditionally, so as to be “practical” of itself; at least not so far as we can see.⁴¹

We can now understand why the categorical imperative itself, and our derivation from it, (B), should be regarded as synthetic: there is no contradiction in imagining an otherwise rational being lacking the power to determine choice independently of heteronomous incentives.

Kant presents what seems to be an identical view in the *Grundlegung*⁴² as he seeks to explain why the categorical imperative is synthetic a priori:

Here we have a practical proposition in which the willing of an action is not derived analytically from some other willing already presupposed [as in actions governed by hypothetical imperatives] (for we do not possess any such perfect will), but is on the contrary connected immediately with the concept of the will of a rational being as something which is not contained in this concept.

This characterization of “a rational being” is at least consistent with the quotations from *Religion*.⁴³ Both *Grundlegung* passages emphasize the unconditional character of the moral imperative, i.e., the absence of a hypothetical condition.⁴⁴

timentalism, which constructs morality from the perspective of a spectator or judge, and Rationalists like Kant (Korsgaard is using the term in a different sense than I am), whose approach is agent-centered; Ross’s approach resembles that of Sentimentalism in the sense that it is spectator-centered.

⁴⁰ *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, VI, 26n; 21n.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* Henry Allison, in Kant’s *Theory of Freedom*, op. cit. fn. 26, p. 149, quotes this same passage, characterizing it as “a highly significant footnote . . .” He returns to this footnote, quoting it again to make a point on p. 206.

⁴² *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, IV, 420n.

⁴³ See also *Ibid.*, IV, 426 for a similar passage.

Hence a rational being is a being capable of (i) theoretical ratiocination, and knowledge of a phenomenal world, as described in the first *Critique*, and also capable of (ii) practical reasoning about desire fulfillment, and means-ends relations of the sort that get embodied in hypothetical imperatives. But, so far as we can tell, it may lack (iii), the power of being moved by purely moral considerations, and hence of being directly moved to act on categorical imperatives.

Why should (B) be regarded as also a priori? At a general level, we can say that the concepts of rational being and moral nature are likely to be regarded by Kant as a priori concepts, with the synthetic connection between them unlikely to be based merely on experience. More specifically, in the next Section we will find that "moral nature" includes a motivational element, viz., the power of acting from the motive of duty. This power is the power of our moral will to be the cause of action; in action from duty the CI is the principle that motivationally determines the action. Such an unconditional cause (dependent on no pre-existing desire the agent may happen to have) is a free cause, which violates the conditions of possible experience; any statement that claims such a causal/motivational power for a person would not be empirical but a priori. Kant's presentation and resolution of the third antinomy excluded such free causes from the phenomenal, but left open the possibility that there might be such free causes noumenally.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ The unconditional character of categorical imperatives distinguishes them from the Ideas of Reason in the Antinomies of the first Critique, each of which present series of conditions that cannot have a first unconditioned member (according to the arguments of the antitheses) and also cannot have a completed infinite series of conditions (according to the arguments of the theses). The next section of this paper will show that the conditions being discussed are causal-motivational conditions. Once Kant determined to his own satisfaction that morality was based on unconditional precepts and motivations that mirrored the precepts in their unconditionality, i.e., was based on categorical imperatives, he would have been in a position at once to conclude that moral freedom has to be extra-phenomenal, since the phenomenal world could never contain such an unconditional motive.

⁴⁵ A prominent Kantian text conflicts with the interpretation proposed in this Section. The text occurs in the third paragraph of Chapter Three of the *Grundlegung*. Kant proposes to state explicitly what the synthetic a priori proposition to be justified in Chapter Three is:

... [T]he principle of morality is still a synthetic proposition, namely: "An absolutely good will is one whose maxims can always have as its content itself considered as a universal law"; for we cannot discover this characteristic of its maxim by analyzing the concept of an absolutely good will. (G, IV, 447)

It is hard to make sense of this statement. The proposition that Kant says is synthetic a priori is, or seems to be, the same one that Kant's argument of Chapter One of the *Grundlegung* attempted to show to be an *analytic* proposition. That is, Chapter One is best read as an analysis of the concept of a good will to discover the principle operative in actions that exhibit this quality, and the analysis results in the discovery and initial statement of the "universal law" principle. I can make no sense of the above statement. Here I'll just make three comments, each of which may have some ameliorating effect.

(1) It might be suggested (and Allison pursues this line, though he does not put it this way) that the issue in this statement is not the connection of subject ("an absolutely good will") and predicate ("one whose maxim can as its content itself be considered as a universal

V.

Part IV yielded us:

(B) A rational being has a moral nature,

as a statement of the central synthetic a priori proposition embedded in the CI. But we need to consider more precisely what it means to have a moral nature. The element of greatest interest is the claim that the agent has the motivational power to act from purely moral motives. It is this motivational claim that at last gives a full account of the categorical imperative as synthetic a priori, and that also presents Kant as a motivational internalist.

To have a moral nature, first, means to be subject to the moral law in the sense of being morally responsible for one's actions. At times Kant seems to use "accountable" and "moral" as synonyms.⁴⁶

Second, to have a moral nature would include being aware of moral principles, and on occasion judging one's own and others' actions by moral principles, perhaps on occasion feeling guilt, indignation, and other moral feelings. Kant discusses moral emotions, in particular "respect (*Achtung*)," as an important ethical

law"), but the *existence* of beings who are in possession of a good will. After all, in Aristotelian syllogistic, the existence of S's in "All S is P" is assumed, permitting an inference from "All S is P" to "Some S is P" that is not permitted in modern logic, which does not assume the existence of items answering to the subject term. (Kant states this doctrine in Section 46 of Jäsche's Logic, see pp. 121-2 in the translation by Robert Hartman and Wolfgang Schwarz, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974.) The statement that some S's exist, arguably part of the meaning of the problem proposition, is clearly synthetic, thus making the entire proposition synthetic. But this suggestion contradicts the explanation of the syntheticity of the proposition that Kant gives directly after the problem passage.

(2) This statement is a problem for *any* interpretation of the issue in this paper that I am familiar with. All the interpreters I am aware of are troubled by it, because on any reasonable interpretation it seems to be analytic, not synthetic. Hence, if we take it seriously, it cuts equally against any view of the texts yet devised. Allison discusses this passage in Kant's Theory of Freedom, op. cit. fn. 26, p. 226. Paton discussed it on pp. 201-2 of The Categorical Imperative, op. cit. fn. 9. Both Allison and Paton are also puzzled by the passage and try to explain it away, as I do. Korsgaard calls this a "misstatement" in "Kant's Analysis of Obligation", op. cit. fn. 36, p. 339, endnote 57.

(3) A simple change in the proposition would make it into a *bona fide* synthetic a priori moral proposition: substituting "rational being" for "good will." Perhaps this was Kant's error, his "slip of the concept" – we can't quite call it a slip of the pen. There is another place in the Grundlegung itself where Kant seems to be making the same kind of point as in our problem passage:

Our question therefore is this: "Is it a necessary law for all rational beings [Kant's emphasis] always to judge their actions by reference to those maxims of which they can themselves will that they should serve as universal laws?" If there is such a law, it must already be connected (entirely a priori) with the concept of the will of a rational being as such. (G, IV, 426)

Here the subject of the proposition is "a rational being" rather than "an absolutely good will."

⁴⁶ See Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone, VI, 26-28; 21-23.

concept.⁴⁷ We are conscious of a “moral law within”⁴⁸; this consciousness in all its elements constitutes the “fact of pure reason” that Kant uses in the second *Critique* to argue for our freedom, and hence the validity of the moral law. Kant’s lectures on education tell us that the moral law is in each of us, and needs only to be led out and brought to full consciousness by an educational process of the proper sort.⁴⁹

Third, and most important, to have a moral nature is to be capable of acting from purely moral motives. If this motivational power is part of the very concept of moral nature in Kant’s view, Kant is a motivational internalist in the sense mentioned earlier. In fact, Kant appears to be internalist in a strong sense: he believes that purely moral motivation must be adequate to assure, even in the face of contrary sensible motivations, that performing the morally required action is in our power.

Let us look at some of the evidence. Throughout the *Grundlegung* Kant is concerned with moral motivation when he is discussing the categorical imperative. For example, at the beginning of Chapter Two, when he is considering whether morality may not be a “phantom of the human imagination”⁵⁰, the question he considers is whether a morally *motivated* action has ever been performed. And when in Chapter Two he raises the question of whether the categorical imperative is “possible,” he seems to be asking a question about the possibility of moral motivation.⁵¹ Again, his discussion of autonomy is largely in terms of *motivation*; autonomy is the will’s self-determination, and heteronomy is determination by something outside the will.⁵² Also, in the second *Critique* the central question is said to be: Can pure reason be practical? And if pure reason can be practical, this means that “...of itself and independently of everything empirical it [i.e., pure reason] can determine the will.”⁵³ So again and again the issue concerns, not merely making a correct moral judgment, but “determination of the will.” The categorical imperative is a principle, not just in the sense of being a basic “*Satz*” and thus a “*Grundsatz*”, but also in the sense of being a causal principle of explanation. Analogously, gravity or the law of gravitation might be said to be a physical principle which may be invoked to explain physical phenomena.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, IV, 400; Critique of Practical Reason, V, 71 ff.

⁴⁸ Critique of Practical Reason, V, 29 - 30; 161.

⁴⁹ Akademie, IX, 437 - 500.

⁵⁰ Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, IV, 407.

⁵¹ Ibid., IV, 417 - 420.

⁵² Ibid., IV, 431, 433.

⁵³ Critique of Practical Reason, V, 42.

⁵⁴ Henry Allison emphasizes that the moral law is a sort of causal law, though he does not connect this claim with the thesis that the categorical imperative is synthetic a priori. Allison writes, “... [T]his characterization of the moral law as a causal law is crucial for Kant because he also holds that freedom as a mode of causality can be thought determinately only if a law (*modus operandi*) of such causality can be given. Since the moral law is just such a

In the general introduction to the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant writes,

Every legislation (*Gesetzgebung*) contains two elements (whether it prescribes external or internal actions, and whether it prescribes these a priori by mere reason or by the choice of another person): first, a law, which sets forth as objectively necessary the action that ought to take place, i.e., which makes the action a duty; secondly, a motive, which joins a ground determining choice to this action subjectively with the thought of the law. Hence the second element consists in this: that the law makes the duty into the motive. The first presents an action as a duty, and this is a merely theoretical recognition of a possible determination of the power of choice, i.e., of a practical rule. The second connects the obligation to act in this way with a ground for determining the subject's power of choice as such.⁵⁵

Kant then distinguishes between ethical legislation where duty is also the motive, and juridical, where an external motivation, the provision of punishment for violations, is the only motive. We don't have ethical legislation unless both the law and the motive are available.

In a discussion of "equivocal rights" Kant discusses the "right of necessity."⁵⁶ Following a shipwreck, a man floating in the water finds another who saved himself by clinging to a large piece of wood. He knocks him away, causing him to drown, and takes possession of the piece of wood for himself, thereby saving himself. The first man has murdered the second, and yet in this instance, if the first had not killed the second by taking possession of the wood for himself, the first would surely have drowned. Since the penalty for murder is also death, the law in such a case is unable to provide a superior incentive for obeying the law, since no penalty is more severe than death. In such a case the law is subjectively not a law at all, because it fails to provide an adequate incentive. Kant for this reason reluctantly concludes that a person who exercises this "right of necessity" should not be punished.⁵⁷

In these passages the same concerns provide philosophical motivation for Kant as for contemporary internalists: if moral obligation is to be practically effective, it must have motivation internal to itself that will help or assure that the fact of the moral duty makes a difference in action. Moral precepts can be no more valid without incentives than criminal laws can be valid and effective without provision for punishment for violators. Kant knew the work of British moralists like Hutcheson

law, it provides positive content to the idea of an intelligible or noumenal causality, which reason requires in its theoretical function." Kant's *Theory of Freedom*, op. cit. fn. 26, p. 244. See also pp. 239, 241, 248.

⁵⁵ *Metaphysics of Morals*, VI, 218.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, VI, 235 - 6; the same case is mentioned in "Theory and Practice," VIII, 300n.

⁵⁷ Only the law fails here. Kant thinks the survivor is still morally speaking a murderer. The incentive provided by the law, since it is empirical, is somewhat uncertain; in other cases the legal incentive may fail because the state and its legal system collapse, or because the criminal anticipates not being caught. The inner moral incentive, however, will have no such empirical failures, as the present case illustrates.

and Hume, who were internalists, and he was influenced by them. His criticism of British sentimentalism as represented by Hutcheson was that since it required the presence of an empirical psychological motivating principle, whose presence as empirical could only be contingently provided for, it undermined the necessity of the moral ought, making it equally contingent. If one were a motivational internalist about ethical obligation, the result would be, Frankena writes, that one would have to “trim obligation to the size of individual motives,”⁵⁸ and this characterization would fit Hutcheson and an internalist like Falk. But Kant, with his insistence that the agent act from the motive of duty, aims to escape this contingency. The reasons that justify performing an action, committing oneself to an end, or even committing oneself to giving priority to morality over self-interest in one’s entire life, are also the motivating reasons in action from duty. Indeed, in action from duty justifying and motivating reasons are identical. The fact that we have the power so to act is the same as the fact that we are free⁵⁹.

When Kant introduces his famous principle (in *Religion*) that ‘ought’ implies ‘can,’ he does not use it, as almost all recent discussions of the principle do, in the contrapositive. He uses it as stated, to mean that my awareness of an obligation implies that I have the power to undertake the obligation.⁶⁰

Let us return to our earlier formulation of the synthetic a priori proposition that lies at the core of the categorical imperative:

(B) A rational being has a moral nature.

We have been investigating more closely what having a moral nature consists in. Our main conclusion is that Kant thinks that to have a moral nature is to have the power to perform our moral duties from purely moral motives. This is not a small or easily validated claim; to have the power to act from the motive of duty is to have a power to initiate actions that have no motivational basis in any personal wish, want or desire. The logical model of the categorical imperative is the model

⁵⁸ Frankena, op. cit. fn. 18, p. 80.

⁵⁹ See *Metaphysics of Morals*, VI, 226 - 27.

⁶⁰ My colleague Mark van Roojen suggested that Kant’s motivational internalism is closely related to his acceptance of “Ought implies can.” Unless there is an assured moral motive (one that is more than merely contingently connected with obligation), the agent might not have the power to perform her obligation, which would by “Ought implies can” mean she would not have the obligation.

Van Roojen also states the contrast between what I am calling the rational intuitionist and the motivational interpretation of the synthetic a priori character of the CI, as follows: According to the motivational interpretation it isn’t the content of the obligation that makes the CI synthetic. Kant thinks you can deduce the content of the CI; even if the content has some bite for telling one what to do, Kant thinks that it comes entirely from deduction. For Kant the question closely related to the CI’s being synthetic is: Does the CI apply to me? The answer to this question is synthetic, and it depends on certain (a priori) facts about our motivation.

These seem to me enlightening ways of putting these points.

that the argument for the antithesis of the third antinomy showed to be incompatible with the requirements of phenomenal existence. That is, in phenomenal experience everything that happens is causally, and hence hypothetically conditioned by something else; but any categorical imperative states a moral demand that is causally (i.e., motivationally) unconditional. Therefore the power to follow categorical imperatives, and hence to act from the motive of duty, which is just the agent's moral nature, entails the existence of a power of noumenal freedom in her, for such a power is one that is both causal and unconditioned. Thus we get a version of (B) which focuses more closely on the distinctive thesis of the CI:

(C) A rational being has the (extra-phenomenal) power to act from purely moral motives.

Based on the above quotations from *Religion* concerning rationality and personality in human beings, the subject concept of (C) would include the theoretical capabilities described in the first *Critique*, together with the power to act on hypothetical imperatives. (C) is clearly synthetic, since the predicate mentions a characteristic related to morality that is not a part of the subject; it is a priori, since it makes claims about extra-phenomenal capabilities of such rational / moral beings.

This motivational interpretation provides an alternative to and thereby dispenses with the temptation to ascribe to Kant rational intuitionist views in ethics that are incompatible with his deeply held theoretical commitments about the limits of human powers of knowledge.⁶¹ And it brings to the front of our attention another important characteristic of Kant's ethics, and gives it a clear textual basis: Kant's motivational internalism.⁶²

⁶¹ I think that one of the reasons why people have adopted the rational intuitionist view is because they have had no clearly worked out alternative to consider.

⁶² Christine Korsgaard in "Skepticism about Practical Reason", *Journal of Philosophy*, January 1986, 83:1, pp. 5-25, has emphasized Kant's internalism in ways I entirely agree with; see especially her Section VII (pp. 23-25).

It might be useful to contrast the interpretation I have been offering here with "Kantian constructivism," a sort of interpretation being developed by John Rawls, Onora O'Neill, and others. I would mention first an important point of similarity. Probably all who call themselves constructivists in ethics are at the antipodes from ethical rational intuitionism, since they wish to minimize epistemological and metaphysical claims that might seem to be entailed by their ethical theories. Constructivists are mostly metaphysical minimalists, and in that sense my reading of Kant should be closer to theirs than Ross' reading. However, secondly, Rawls' own philosophy, and his interpretation of Kant as well, at least so far as I know it, has had little or nothing to say directly about inner motivation for morality, and hence about that part of moral theory that Kant calls ethics. Rawls, centered as he is on justice, has tended to emphasize the political aspects of the CI. And indeed those passages in Kant that are the most explicitly constructivist are from the *Rechtslehre* (MS, VI, 232) and "Theory and Practice" (Ak., VIII, 297, and *passim*), where the subject is politics and law. In politics and law the kind of freedom we are most directly concerned with is external freedom. But ethics, and hence inner freedom, is central in the present paper. Hence, the interpretation offered here and Kantian constructivism as I understand it, do not either agree or come into conflict because they are largely concerned with different topics.

VI.

Kant also discusses the categorical imperative as synthetic a priori in his later works, *Religion* and *Metaphysics of Morals*. In the Preface to the first edition of *Religion*, Kant focuses on the idea of an objective, moral end, as an end that is generated by pure practical reason, though it is not required for morality in general. Since human beings always have to conceive an end for any action, we should talk about such an end as a part of moral theory, Kant urges. The end in question is the highest good, which has two parts: virtue, and the happiness for which virtue is the condition.⁶³ Kant wishes to talk about the highest good in this context, because this is the topic that lies on the border between morality and religion, which is the area under discussion in *Religion*.

In a long note⁶⁴ Kant writes about synthetic a priori propositions that arise in this connection:

But that everyone ought to make the highest *good* possible in the world a *final end* is a synthetic practical proposition a priori (and indeed objectively practical) given by pure reason; for it is a proposition which goes beyond the concept of duties in this world and adds a consequence (an effect) thereof which is not contained in the moral laws and therefore cannot be evolved out of them analytically.⁶⁵

Kant presents this idea more fully a bit later⁶⁶ where he talks about the extension beyond the law to the end.

This extension is possible because of the moral law's being taken in relation to the natural characteristic of man, that for all his actions he must conceive of an end over and above the law (a characteristic which makes man an object of experience). And further, this extension (as with theoretical propositions a priori which are synthetic) is possible only because this end embraces the a priori principle of the knowledge of the determining grounds in experience of a faculty of choice, so far as this experience, by exhibiting the effects of morality in its ends, gives objective though merely practical reality to the concept of morality as causal in the world.

Here Kant seems to be applying the doctrine of the fact of pure reason from the second *Critique* to ends. The point seems to be this: we can sometimes notice that people's actions seem to be affected by moral considerations, and more specifically, that their goals of action are so affected. From this we infer the practical reality of morality in them. For instance, when I observe someone being scrupulously honest in situations in which dishonesty could not be readily detected, what I seem to be seeing is the practical effect of the influence of morality in this person's actions.

⁶³ See *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, VI, 4; 4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, VI, 6-8n; 5-7n.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, VI, 7n; 6n.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, VI 7-8n; 7n, later in the same long note.

The ends under discussion have been adopted and pursued because of the moral commitments of the agents. They presuppose the moral motivation without which they would not have been adopted. So although the talk in these *Religion* passages is of ends rather than motives, the ends are the product of the motives, and the underlying synthetic a priori principle being alluded to is still (C).

Kant also writes about basic moral principles as analytic or synthetic at Section X of the Introduction to the *Tugendlehre*, entitled, "The Supreme Principle of the Doctrine of Right Was Analytic; That of the Doctrine of Virtue Is Synthetic."⁶⁷

It is clear in accordance with the principle of contradiction that, if external constraint checks the hindering of outer freedom in accordance with universal laws (and is thus a hindering of the hindrances of freedom), it can coexist with ends in general. I need not go beyond the concept of freedom to see this; the end that each has may be whatever he wills. The supreme *principle of Right* is therefore an analytic proposition.

But the principle of the doctrine of virtue goes beyond the concept of outer freedom and connects with it, in accordance with universal laws, an *end* that makes it a *duty*. This principle is therefore synthetic. Its possibility is contained in the deduction (IX) . . .

This extension beyond the concept of a duty of Right takes place through *ends* being laid down, from which Right abstracts altogether.⁶⁸

Here is how I understand these statements: only for the ethics do we need to presuppose an inner motivational power of self-constraint. This power of self-constraint is the power to act purely from the motive of duty. Any human motivation must express itself through the adoption of an *end*. So the purely moral motivation has as its effect the adoption of an end which is at the same time a duty. Kant's "deduction of" (=argument for) ends that are at the same time duties in his Section IX is that "free" actions, which I understand as actions motivated by a purely moral motive, must have an end of action like all other human actions, if that motive is to be effective. The end of a morally motivated action cannot be a desire-based end; it must rather have its basis in morality.⁶⁹ This is what Kant calls an end that is at the same time a duty.

Although Kant here explains the syntheticity of the ethical proposition in terms of the adoption of an *end*, such an adoption presupposes the presence of the purely ethical motivation of self-constraint as the motivational basis of its adoption. Hence, here as in the earlier works, the syntheticity of the supreme principle of morality is based on the power the principle has to be motivationally efficacious.

⁶⁷ *Metaphysics of Morals*, VI, 396.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ For a much more detailed discussion of this argument and Kant's doctrine of ends that are at the same time duties, see my "Kant on Ends that Are at the Same Time Duties," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 66 (1985), pp. 78-92. Henry Allison has commented on this essay in "Kant's Doctrine of Obligatory Ends," *Jahrbuch für Recht und Ethik*, Vol. 1 (1993), pp. 7-23. My "Reply to Allison" is in the same volume, pp. 391-400.

In contrast, the principle of the philosophy of law, the universal principle of right⁷⁰, makes no similar motivational assumption. The source of the motivation to obey the law is not internal, but external, viz., the fear of punishment. So we need to make no such special internal motivational assumptions in the case of an external law. (We rather must assume an external structure, a state, with an enforcement system in place.) The principle of Right, since it has no motivational assumptions, is thus analytic.

The view that the CI expresses a basic moral insight or intuition, and that this is why it is a synthetic proposition, is contradicted by Kant's statement that the philosophy of law version of the categorical imperative is analytic. It is the necessity of presupposing the availability of a certain kind of motivation that makes this otherwise analytic proposition into a synthetic proposition, when it is altered to become the supreme principle of ethics.

What makes the ethical propositions synthetic is their extension beyond the idea of the moral law itself and the introduction of the idea of a morally determined end or goal of action into the proposition. The passages from *Religion* and *Metaphysics of Morals* that we have looked at in this section express the same Kantian view we presented in Sections IV and V; Kant is throughout concerned with the motivational efficacy of moral principles, but that idea is spelled out in terms of the agent's pursuing morally determined *ends* in the later works. Hence Kant is talking about the same synthetic a priori practical proposition, but he is doing so by mentioning the ends our moral natures move us to adopt, rather than by mentioning the moral incentives that lead us to adopt those ends.

In summary, I conclude that all of these discussions of synthetic a priori ethical propositions from four different works (*Grundlegung*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Religion*, *Tugendlehre*) are talking about one single synthetic a priori proposition, though it is being talked about from different points of view, and in different ways:

(C) A rational being has the (extra-phenomenal) power to act from purely moral motives.⁷¹

Is this proposition defensible? How would it be best understood in terms more familiar to philosophers of the late 20th century? These are good questions, but they bring us to the end of the present paper.⁷²

⁷⁰ See *Metaphysics of Morals*, VI, 230.

⁷¹ Kant writes, "Every legislation (*Gesetzgebung*) contains two elements . . . : first, a law, which sets forth as objectively necessary the action that ought to take place . . . secondly a motive, which joins a ground determining choice to this action subjectively with the thought of the law." (MS, VI, 218, also quoted above) (C) expresses the "motive" part of the CI principle. The "maxim that can be willed as a universal law" statement gives us the precept or law portion of that same principle. The aim of this paper has been to focus attention on the often neglected "motive" part of the CI.

Zusammenfassung

Nach Kant ist der kategorische Imperativ ein synthetischer Satz a priori. Kant könnte damit sagen wollen, wir hätten in die grundlegende moralische Wahrheit, die der kategorische Imperativ darstellt, eine vernünftige Einsicht a priori, die unserer Wahrnehmung der Formen, wie Plato sie sieht, vergleichbar wäre. W. D. Ross vertrat eine ähnliche Auffassung von einer vernünftigen menschlichen Einsicht in gewisse grundlegende moralische Prinzipien, und in seinem Buch „Kant's Ethical Theory“ schreibt er diese Auffassung auch Kant zu.

Ich behaupte, daß diese auf den ersten Blick als plausibel erscheinende Interpretation nicht richtig ist, und daß der „rationale Intuitionismus“, den sie impliziert, Kants philosophischem Ansatz, sowohl in der ersten Kritik als auch in der Moralphilosophie, ganz grundsätzlich widerspricht. Ich entwickle eine neue, alternative Interpretation: Der kategorische Imperativ ist synthetisch, weil er eine Behauptung über eine kausale / motivationale Kraft enthält, die uns zukommt und die uns befähigt, ohne irgendeine Unterstützung durch bloß empirische oder Beweggründe der Zweckrationalität wie Freude oder Schmerz allein aus der Vorstellung der Pflicht heraus zu handeln. Soweit sie den vernünftigen Beweggrund zu handeln betrifft, geht die Behauptung über die Bedeutung des kategorischen Imperativs als eines rein ethischen Gebots hinaus. Sie ist a priori, da die Quelle des vernünftigen Beweggrunds das noumenale Ich ist.

Jede Rechtfertigung des kategorischen Imperativs muß folglich zeigen, daß die fragliche Art vernünftiger Beweggründe, die nicht Beweggründe bloßer Zweckrationalität sind, in uns als Handelnden aktiv ist oder jedenfalls aktiv sein könnte und daß Kant insoweit ein „Internalist“ ist: das ist jemand, der meint, Moral und Motivation seien innerlich, analytisch miteinander verbunden.

⁷² Earlier versions of this paper were read at the University of Wyoming, to the American Philosophical Association Central Division in 1984, and to the Smith summer conference on the Metaphysics of Morals in August of 1996. On all these occasions I received helpful comments. The following additional readers were also sources of useful comments: Marcia Baron, Edwin Curley, Harry Ide, Kathleen Johnson, John Marshall, Mark Timmons, Mark van Roojen, and a number of anonymous referees.