

# Isolating Reason

## Kant's Way to the Critical Moral Philosophy<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The development of Kant's moral philosophy, more particularly its transition from the pre-critical to the critical period, can be characterized as a progressive 'purification' of its supreme principle. This paper intends to show how a well-marked empirical foundation, present, for instance, in the time period of the *Inquiry concerning the distinctness of the principles of natural theology and morality*, is gradually replaced by an approach based on an initial outline of transcendental idealism. This is firstly sketched in the *Dreams of a spirit-seer elucidated by dreams of metaphysics*, then brought to theoretical consistency in the *Inaugural Dissertation*. As part of a radical critique of central presuppositions of rationalist metaphysics and in close relation to wider plans for a *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant begins a process of purifying the basis of his moral doctrine, locating the spring of moral normativity in the pure reason, that is, the reason 'isolated' from empirical data.

### 1. The Problem of a Critical Moral Philosophy

The thesis that supports the *continuity* of Kant's moral philosophy between the pre-critical and the critical period is well known in recent Kantian scholarship. The first proponent of this interpretation is Dieter Henrich, who argues that 'the formula of the categorical imperative based on the universality of the will itself<sup>2</sup> and also the 'first

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<sup>2</sup> Henrich, D. 2009: 51.

two sections of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* were almost settled already around 1765, especially in the *Notes on the Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and sublime*<sup>3</sup>. In these *Notes* we find surprising insights which seem to anticipate the doctrine of the supreme value of the good will and also the categorical imperative. The origin of moral judgment derives, writes Kant,

[...] from the nature of the human mind, which appraises that which is categorically good not according to private or external usefulness but by considering the action in others; if contradiction or conflict arises, it displeases, and if harmony and unity arises, it pleases (Bemerkungen AA 20: 156)<sup>4</sup>.

Henrich argues that this and other passages demonstrate that the *systematical* path by which, in the *Groundwork*, the purely good will leads to the categorical imperative and the doctrine of the autonomy of reason was also the *genealogical* trajectory of Kant's moral philosophy. Already in the middle of 1760's, writes Henrich, with the help of the doctrine of the moral feeling Kant had arrived at an incipient conception of the 'Copernican revolution' in moral philosophy, that is, the idea that the 'moral good' would be something self-imposed by the agent's own will or by something like a '*sittliche Einsicht*', and therefore something

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<sup>3</sup> Idem. 52.

<sup>4</sup> The quotations of Kant's works are made according to the following model: (Gr Ak IV: 388. Practical. Philosophy, 44), that is, the volume and page number from *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the royal Prussian Academy of Science (Berlin. Walter de Gruyter & Co. 1990-), followed by the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant's* corresponding page number. The abbreviations used are the following: Bemerkungen (*Notes on the Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*); Beobachtungen (*Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*); Beweisgrund (*The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*); GMS (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*); KpV (*Critique of Practical Reason*); KrV (*Critique of Pure Reason*); MS (*Metaphysics of Morals*); Untersuchung (*Inquiry concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality*); P. Philosophie Herder (*Kant's Practical Philosophy, notes taken by Herder*); Rx (*Reflections*).

not determined by the will of God or by any external constraint. From this initial insight on the nature of morality Kant would have been able to move straight to the idea of a self-legislating will, which was therefore already established in the first half of the 1760's<sup>5</sup>. This thesis is also supported by Josef Schmucker. According to Schmucker the very issue of a formal principle determining the will belongs to any moral philosophy grounded on principles and does not depend, nor genetic nor factually <*sachlich*>, on the critical problem of theoretical metaphysics put forward by the first *Critique*<sup>6</sup>. As a consequence both Henrich and Schmucker deny that there is such a thing as a truly *critical* moral philosophy, that is, a moral philosophy based on the conceptual framework first established in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

This argument is highly questionable. As a matter of fact both early and recent scholarship cast doubts on this radical conclusion<sup>7</sup>. Paul Schilpp and Paul Menzer have argued that

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<sup>5</sup> See Henrich 1994; 1963.

<sup>6</sup> Schmucker 1961: 383. According to Schmucker, the same holds for many others elements of the so-called "critical" philosophy: the antinomies, the ideal of pure reason, the belief on the immortality of the soul, etc. As claimed by Schmucker, all these doctrines should be taken as "pre-critical" for having been formulated before the *Critique of Pure Reason*: "die Idee und die Grundprinzipien seiner Kritik der reinen Vernunft bzw. seiner kritischer Ideenlehre auf Grund der in den Schlüssen der reinen Vernunft wesentlich implizierten Dialektik (in der R 3734 und den Berliner Losen Blätter), ferner nach der radikalen Kritik der traditionellen Rationalpsychologie bzw. Pneumatologie die Begründung des *Glaubens* an die Unsterblichkeit der Seele und an das Dasein Gottes auf Grund der sittlichen Gesinnung in den 'Träumen eines Geistersehers' und schließlich, wie wir in unserem Werk 'Die Ursprünge der Ethik Kants' dargetan haben, die erste und grundlegende Formulierung der Prinzipien seiner späteren sogenannten 'kritischen' Ethik, vor allem in einer Reihe von lateinischen Reflexionen der 'Bemerkungen zu den Beobachtungen'" Schmucker 1990: 232-233.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted here that the editors of the *Kant-Index* have claimed recently that the latin passages of the *Notes*, all of them containing the alleged pieces of evidence for Henrich and Schmucker's thesis, could stem from Kant's sketches to a dissertation on moral philosophy of 1770, that is, not from the middle of the 1760s as assumed by Henrich and Schmucker: "[Es] stellt die Frage, aus welchen konkreten Motiven heraus er [Kant] gerade hier das Lateinische verwandt hat. Als Antwort sei an dieser Stelle die Vermutung geäußert – mehr als eine Vermutung kann es selbstverständlich nicht sein –, dass es sich bei diesen Aufzeichnungen um Vorarbeiten für die Dissertation *De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis forma et principiis*,

Kant's mature moral philosophy could only be understood within the framework established by the *Inaugural Dissertation* of 1770 and its distinction between sensibility and understanding, feeling and reason<sup>8</sup>. More recently Clemens Schwaiger claimed that the foundation of the categorical imperative and hence of Kant's critical practical philosophy could only have taken place in the 1770's within the context of the establishment of Kant's critical terminology and his threefold concept of imperatives (categorical, prudential and pragmatic)<sup>9</sup>. Other authors like Paul Guyer and Henry Allison defend a *via media* between these two extremes. They claim that, even though Kant had in fact arrived at a primary formulation of the categorical imperative in the *Notes*, some crucial tenets of his mature moral philosophy, e.g. the autonomy of the will and the transcendental freedom, were not fully developed at the time. Instead of a pre-critical or critical moral philosophy it would be more appropriate to speak of a '*semi-critical ethics*'<sup>10</sup>

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sondern für eine ganz anders gelagerte Dissertation. Kant wußte ja in den ersten Monaten des Jahres 1770 noch nicht, welche der beiden infragestehenden Professuren er gegebenenfalls erhalten würde, die für Logik und Metaphysik (die ihm dann in der Folge Anlaß zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft gegeben hat) oder die für Moralphilosophie. Seine Vorliebe galt der letzteren. Am 16. März 1770 erklärt Kant „[...] bey der Bewerbung um die moralische Profession“ würde ich „meiner eigentlichen Bestimmung zu folgen glauben“ (Ak 10: 91). Vorbereiten aber mußte sich Kant zunächst, bevor die Entscheidung gefallen war, auf beide Fälle. Viel Zeit blieb ihm nicht. Das mag das konkrete Motiv für jene lateinischen Aufzeichnungen zur Grundlegung der Ethik gewesen sein. Da das Ministerium, aus welchen Gründen auch immer, anders entschieden hat, als Kant es sich eigentlich gewünscht hatte, blieben jene Aufzeichnungen aus dem Felde der Moralphilosophie bis zum Abschluß der Kritik der reinen Vernunft (und dann der Prolegomena) ungenutzt liegen“. (Delfosse and Hinske 2007: xxii-iii). Considering the difficulty of dating the Notes, we will not take them into consideration in the present paper.

<sup>8</sup> Menzer 1898: 51. Schilpp 1998: 104.

<sup>9</sup> Schwaiger 1999.

<sup>10</sup> This expression appears in the title of a paper from Henry Allison (1986). Guyer resumes what Allison calls Kant's 'semi-critical ethics' as follows: 'I (...) argue that Kant arrived at his primary formulation of the categorical imperative in these Notes and clearly manifested his intention to argue that adherence to it is the necessary means for the realization of human freedom, but that he did not succeed in providing an explicit and unequivocal account of how the categorical imperative's requirement of the universalizability of maxims (in Kant's later terminology) is connected to freedom'. Guyer 2012: 80.

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In this paper I shall shed some light on this controversy in a somewhat indirect way. Instead of discussing in detail its major proponents and theses I would like to stress how the development of Kant's moral philosophy in the precritical period can be grasped as a 'critical *purification*' of its supreme principle, firstly taken as a combination of the Wolffian principle of perfection and the British moral sense, and then finally conceived of as the principle of autonomy, 'carefully cleansed of everything empirical' <*von allem Empirischen sorgfältig gesäubert*> (Gr Ak IV: 388; Practical Philosophy, 44). In other words, a principle detached of every feeling or sentiment based on empirical grounds. In contrast to the authors mentioned above, I sketch an interpretation that takes a 'critical turn' in Kant's moral philosophy seriously by highlighting how the supreme principle of morality could only have arisen within the broader plans of a *Critique of pure reason* and the 'procedure of the reason which isolates itself' <*Das Verfahren der sich selbst isolierenden Vernunft*> (Ak X: 144), that is, from the insight that morality has its origin in the *pure reason*. I assume, therefore, a *unified development* of Kant's philosophy based on the critical conception of the 'purity' and 'autonomy' of the reason. This means that the development and turning points of Kant's practical philosophy cannot be understood separately from the development and the turning points of his theoretical philosophy. An interpretation of the genesis of any aspect of the Kantian philosophy cannot lose sight of the critical perspective on the *unity of reason* that underlies it.

In general, even though particular themes and even specific contents of the critical moral philosophy are already outlined or sufficiently exposed in the period prior to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I claim that a conceptual movement perceived from 1765 onwards, starting with the *Dreams of a spirit-sheer* and the *Notes*, and intensified throughout the 1770s, reaches its peak only in the 1780s

within the new critical standpoint<sup>11</sup>. This movement can be characterized as the *purification* of the supreme principle of morals which reaches its first mature conceptual expression in the *Inaugural Dissertation* and its diagnosis about the contagion of the intellectual knowledge by the sensible knowledge (Dissertatio Ak II: 411. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 407). Such conception of a ‘purification’ of the intellectual knowledge was originally developed in the *Inaugural Dissertation* and culminated in the project of a *critique of reason* as the investigation of the sources <Ursprung>, boundaries <Grenzen> and extension or domain <Umfang> of pure reason’s activity in both theoretical and practical perspectives<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, with regards to the turning points in Kant's moral philosophy, I argue argued that the explicit refusal of both moral sense and rationalist formal principles as the basis of morality came about only from the end of the 1760s onwards. In this respect the *Inaugural Dissertation* represents a crucial stage in Kant’s continuous demand for the ‘purity’ of the principle of morality, which stands in a close relation to the broader methodological goal of ‘purifying’ reason. Along with the transcendental idealism, the formulation of an antinomy of reason, the problem of a transcendental deduction of the categories, and so on, the pro-

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<sup>11</sup> Manfred Kuehn expresses something similar regarding the development of the *Metaphysics of Morals*: “There is every reason to suppose that the final work on morals that appeared in 1797 is as different from the projected work of 1765 as the *Metaphysical First Principles of Natural Science* of 1786 is different from what he thought it would be in 1765. The ‘system of metaphysics... of morals, in conformity with ... critical demands’ had to be very different from what Kant thought it would be in 1765 or 1770. On the other hand, there can also be little doubt that the *Metaphysics of Morals* was the fulfillment of the early hopes and the intermediate promises. We might, therefore, ask what, if anything, remained the same, and thus would justify the claims of some scholars that the practical philosophy is non or precritical, and what precisely it was that that changed, and whether it goes to justify the claims of other scholars that it presents the final form of Kant’s critical moral philosophy. I think that the answer to both questions is a qualified yes. What remained the same is the actual content of Kant’s *Rechts- and Tugendlehre*. What changed was the perspective from which this content must be viewed according to Kant. This gave rise to tensions in Kant’s system, but they are not tensions that are fatal to Kant’s view, at least not when the content and form of his moral philosophy are properly understood”. Kuehn 2010, 16.

<sup>12</sup> See. Beck 1978. Tonelli 1963. Santos 1990.

gressive ‘purification’ of reason should be counted as a truly *critical motive*, also in Kant’s practical philosophy. As result, in the silent decade the principle of autonomy as a principle of pure practical reason starts to gain its ‘final form’<sup>13</sup>. Only within this broader framework the progression of Kant’s thought can be properly grasped.

In short, although one cannot deny that elements of the later critical philosophy are already present in the pre-critical period, we have to start from the assumption that the continuity of *themes* does not entail the continuity of the *method* through which those themes are grounded and justified in the system of transcendental philosophy<sup>14</sup>. If we consider that Kant conceived the *Critique* as a ‘treatise on the method’ (KrV B xxii-xxiii. Critique of Pure Reason. p. 113) and not a mere aggregate of given philosophical subjects, we understand more properly what is at stake in this assumption.

We can sketch the development of Kant’s moral philosophy from the 1760s until the *Critique of Pure Reason* as follows. In the first stage of this development we can still see Kant in search of a proper foundation of ethics: the British influence, especially the theory of moral sense of Hutcheson, contrast and live side by side with the Wolffian rationalist tradition. In the wake of this fruitful and intense debate with the philosophical traditions of his time Kant identifies a contagion between sensible and intellectual knowledge that endangers the scientific character of metaphysics. As a result of this diagnosis, Kant abandons a moral philosophy with strong anthropological resonances and adopts a model that can be defined, despite its Platonic inheritance, as ‘properly Kantian’. According to Kant, the central concepts of moral philosophy should not be based on the empirical world and the observation of the actual behavior of man in society or on considerations regarding his specific nature as a human being. Such concepts are rather only apprehensible within a peculiar framework, namely in a ‘moral world’ in which reason finds its

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<sup>13</sup> See Schwaiger 1999 and Busch 1979.

<sup>14</sup> See Oberer 1973, 1983.

particular seat as practical faculty This insight, which is continuously revised in the silent decade, allows for the development of the idea of freedom of will as the law of pure practical reason which characterizes the critical moral philosophy.

## 2. Moral Sense and Empirical Temptation: Kant's Early Views about Morality

The text serving as the starting point for this study is the *Inquiry concerning the distinctness of the principles of natural theology and morality*. Written near the end of 1762, this is the first work in which Kant discusses at length problems concerning moral philosophy<sup>15</sup>. The last section of the publication presents a disappointing diagnosis: the principles of moral philosophy would still be lacking of the same certainty that, for instance, natural theology possesses. A significant example of this is the concept of obligation <*Verbindlichkeit*>, which would be 'little known', that is, scarcely analyzed <*zergliedert*> in its fundamental components. The notion of 'analysis' <*Zergliederung*> is central here. According to Kant, and also to a great part of the rationalist tradition, the distinctness of a given concept could only be attained by means of a logical analysis or decomposition of the marks <*Merkmale*> which constitute the definition of the concept and which thus render it determined:

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<sup>15</sup> It seems misleading to claim that Kant was already deeply concerned with [moral] issues as early as the mid-1750s' (Shell 2009: 8), more specifically in the *Nova Dilucidatio*. Even though it is true that Kant discusses in this work questions concerning the proper understanding of freedom (freedom as indifference towards the incentives to action or freedom as the determination to action through internal grounds. ND Ak I: 401-404), he seems more interested in the *metaphysical*, and not moral or practical conception of human freedom. It is no coincidence that Kant first mentions his project of a metaphysics of moral in 1765, in a letter to Lambert (Ak X: 54), which demonstrates his unprecedented interest on moral issues *per se*. The reason thereof could be ascribed to his reading of Rousseau and moral sense philosophers such as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Hume, causing what one could call a "moral turn" in Kant's thinking during the 1760s. See Velkley 1989.

It is the business of philosophy to analyse concepts which are given in a confused fashion <verworren> and to render them complete <ausführlich> and determined <bestimmt> (Untersuchung Ak II: 278. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 250).

The logical procedure of analyzing concepts is what distinguishes philosophy and mathematics. The mathematician deals with quantities that can be conceptually determined through a *synthetic* construction, and the definition of the concepts thus obtained is therefore already set up at the beginning of the procedure (Untersuchung Ak II: 281-282; *Theoretical Philosophy*, 253-254). On the contrary, the philosopher deals with confused concepts that are *given* instead of *constructed* by him. Hence there is nothing left to him but to *analyze* what is given in order to make it clearer and hence, at the end of this procedure, define his concepts.

As mentioned above, in Kant's view this logical procedure of analysis was lacking in moral philosophy, more specifically with respect to its first and most fundamental concept: that of obligation. According to Kant, the obligation is expressed as an *ought to* <sollen> which describes the (practical) necessity of a given action. The *ought* refers either to something that shall be done as a means to any given end, or to something that shall be immediately done as the end itself aimed at by the action. Kant designates the first expression of the ought 'necessity of means' (*necessitatem problematicam*) and the second one 'necessity of ends' (*necessitatem legalem*) (Untersuchung Ak II: 298. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 272). In this incipient sketch of the distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives Kant notes that the 'necessity of means' does not actually disclose any obligation. Instead it describes a mere prescription <Vorschrift> and in this sense they are 'recommendations <Anweisungen> to adopt a prudent behavior <geschickten Verhaltens>' (Untersuchung Ak II: 298. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 272), in order to solve a given problem, such as, for instance, the promotion of one's own happiness.

On the other hand, the 'necessity of ends' presents us with a genuine obligation: the agent is faced with an *ought* which motivates his will immediately. It does so without any previous representation of an end that compels him and reduces a given action to the condition of being a mere means to such end. As an example of this strict obligation Kant mentions the principle of perfection: 'I ought to advance the total greatest perfection' (Untersuchung Ak II: 298. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 272).

What is important here is the complement that Kant provides to this principle taken from the Wolffian school<sup>16</sup>. According to Kant, such a formal principle, also described as the 'first formal principle of every obligation to act' (Untersuchung Ak II: 299. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 273), would be *tautological* and *empty* if there were no '*material principles*' of the 'practical knowledge' upon which the formal one depends. This opposition between material and formal principles is first mentioned in a work written almost at the same time as the *Inquiry*, namely, *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, and can be traced back to Crusius and his criticism of the formalism in rationalist metaphysics<sup>17</sup>. In order to understand Kant's criticism of the tautological character of the formal principle of obligation and the necessity of material principles for our actions, it is worth examining briefly this opposition.

According to Kant, these material principles would constitute

[...] the foundation <*Grundlage*> of human reason and the guarantor of its stability. For [...] they provide the stuff of definition and, even when one is not in possession of a definition, the data from which conclusions can be reliably drawn (Untersuchung Ak II: 295. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 268).

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<sup>16</sup> See Wolff, C. *Philosophia Practica Universalis*, I § 153; *Ratio praelectionum*, Sec. II, Cap. VII, § 9 and Baumgarten, *Initia*, §§ 43-4. Ritter 1971: 47. Schwaiger 2011: 135-136.

<sup>17</sup> See Ritter 1971: 47-48. Schmucker, 1961: 81-85.

Hence, the logical procedure of analysis, the basic philosophical proceeding, should depend on these material principles in order to attain its objectivity. By analyzing a given concept the philosopher is faced with an 'unanalyzable material' that constitute the data from which he can infer its inner possibility and also the conclusions that can be formally drawn therefrom. In the *Only Possible Argument* Kant goes a little further and attributes to the material principles a more far-reaching function. He asserts here that this material element presents a 'something given' <Etwas gegebenes> that allows the inner possibility of any object to be conceived in the first place, that is, these principles present a 'something thinkable' <einem Denklichen>, something 'absolutely posited' <absolute Position oder Setzung> (Beweisgrund Ak II: 73-74. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 119) as the only thing that can stand in logical or formal relations (Beweisgrund Ak II: 77-78; *Theoretical Philosophy*, 122-123). According to Kant this material element prevails over the formal one: if there is nothing absolutely given, no *data* to be thought, then no formal or logical relation whatsoever can take place, be it a contradiction or any other fundamental logical principle (Beweisgrund Ak II: 78. *Theoretical Philosophy*, p. 123). In the theoretical sphere, this material is an existence, something absolutely posited that composes a concept, gives its *data* and therefore can be analyzed and decomposed, so that its inner possibility could be presented and its definition given.

The same happens in moral philosophy. Kant maintains that the material principles of practical philosophy are those that establish a determined action as immediately good, that is, they produce a direct approval or acquiescence with regard to the actions prescribed by the formal principles of obligation. Without a material principle that states, or better, that *determines* what is good in itself, no formal principle of obligation would be binding. In other words, the formal principle of perfection would be empty and tautological if there were no material principles upon which it rests, in the

same way logical or formal relations, such as the principle of contradiction or the principle of sufficient reason, would be innocuous if there were no 'material' or 'anything thinkable' in relation to which something is said to be contradictory or to be its real ground.

The rule: perform the most perfect action in your power, is the first *formal ground* of all obligation *to act*. Likewise, the proposition: abstain from doing that which will hinder the realisation of the greatest possible perfection, is the first *formal ground* of the duty *to abstain from acting*. And just as, in the absence of any material first principles, nothing flowed from the first formal principles of our judgement of the truth, so here no specifically determinate obligation flows from these two rule of the good, unless they are combined with indemonstrable material principles of practical cognition (Untersuchung Ak II: 299. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 273).

In the practical domain we can say therefore that the material principle presents us the data of the desire, the 'something desirable' or the 'absolutely posited material of volition'. In the same way, the material in knowledge presents us with a 'something thinkable', an existence 'absolutely posited' in which formal and logical relations take place.

The material practical principles thus rest upon an 'unanalyzable feeling of the good', only possible in a being endowed with *sensibility* (Untersuchung Ak II: 299. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 272) and obtained when the 'understanding tries to analyze and render distinct the compound and confused concept of the good by showing how it arises from simpler feelings of the good' (*idem*). The ultimate and immediate feeling that something is good by itself and, as such, should be willed as an end and not as a means to something else, is a *moral feeling, unanalyzable and therefore completely indemonstrable*. This feeling, the 'final yard-

stick' of morality (P. Philosophie Herder Ak XXVII: 6. CUP, 5), consists in 'simple [and material] sensations' on which the merely formal moral principles are based and which provide us with a 'positive disclosure of our duties'<sup>18</sup> as categorical obligations:

If an action is immediately represented as good, and if it does not contain concealed within itself a certain other good, which would be discovered by analysis and on account of which it is called perfect, then the necessity of this action is an indemonstrable material principle of obligation (Untersuchung Ak II: 299-300. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 273-274).

Here we can leave aside the problems that Kant faced in this sort of mixture of the Wolffian principle of perfection and the British moral sense.<sup>19</sup> For instance, how can one demonstrate the evidence of a material principle which presents itself as an immediate rule of practice and thus as an immediate certain proposition? Actually Kant does not try to solve this puzzle. Instead, Kant ends the discussion acknowledging that there was yet a lot to be investigated in the practical domain. Initially the *basis* on which the first principles of all moral philosophy rest was yet to be uncovered:

It is clear from what has been said that, although it must be possible to attain the highest degree of philosophical certainty in the fundamental principles of morality, nonetheless the ultimate fundamental concepts of obligation need first of all to be determined more reliably. And in this respect, practical philosophy is even more defective than speculative philosophy, for it has yet to be determined whether it is merely the faculty of cognition, or whether it is feeling (the first inner ground of the faculty of desire) which decides its

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<sup>18</sup> Delbos 1969: 85.

<sup>19</sup> Henrich 2009: 39. Schmucker 1961: 76.

first principles (Untersuchung Ak II: 300. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 274-275).

Even though Kant states that there was a true alternative between the 'faculty of cognition' and the 'feeling' yet to be explored, he was convinced of what he called the 'starting point' from which to develop further investigations: Hutcheson and the moral feeling (Untersuchung Ak II 300. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 274). In fact, other works written between 1762 and 1765 suggest that Kant was about to definitely affiliate himself with the British moral sense and find in the *feeling* the first principles of moral philosophy.

In the *Announcement of the programme of lectures for the winter semester 1765-1766*, written in 1765, Kant states that he would employ Baumgarten's text book for his lectures on 'universal practical philosophy' <*allgemeine praktische Weltweisheit*> and on the 'doctrine of virtue' as a sort of complement to the 'attempts of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Hume', which, 'although incomplete and defective, have nonetheless penetrated furthest in the search for the fundamental principles of all morality' (Nachricht Ak II: 311. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 298). As a matter of fact, Kant advances an argument similar to the one presented in the *Inquiry*. The moral judgments about the good and evil are 'known, easily and accurately, by the human heart through what is called *sentiment*' (Nachricht Ak II: 311. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 297). There is also an additional and significant suggestion on the method considered the most suitable in practical philosophy which reveals to great extent Kant's central concerns in this period. The *Announcement* exhorts that the '*study of man*' is necessary in order to consider, in the '*Doctrine of Virtue*', 'historically and philosophically what *happens* before specifying what *ought to happen*'. With this method it would be possible to place in the foreground 'which perfection is appropriate to man' and thus to prescribe the 'rule <*Vorschrift*> of his behavior' in order to 'attain the highest level of physical and moral excellence <*Vortrefflichkeit*>'. This method of moral inquiry, Kant continues, was

'an admirable discovery of our times, which, when viewed in the full extent of its programme, was entirely unknown to the ancients'. There would be no other possible approach to uncover the 'unchanging nature of man' despite all the distortions that are caused by 'the contingencies of his condition' (Nachricht Ak II: 311-312. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 298).

This method, conceivably a mixture of anthropological inquiry and psychological analysis inspired by the 'British novelty' as well as permeated with a Rousseauist purpose of unveiling the 'immaculate nature' of man<sup>20</sup> had characterized a Kant's work written about two years before, in 1763: *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and sublime*. We cannot get into the details of this unique work in Kant's corpus, which earned him the nickname of 'Shaftesbury' and 'La Bruyère' of Germany<sup>21</sup>. It is enough to note that this writing, one in which Kant would be 'more independent of the methods of school'<sup>22</sup>, offers a rich analysis of psychological types, genders, nations and moral feelings, based on a dichotomy of characters according to the 'feelings of the beautiful and sublime'. The purpose of such an investigation was clear: assuming the attitude of 'an observer [more than] that of the philosopher' (Beobachtungen Ak II: 208. Anthropology, 23), Kant investigated the man in his facticity and variety of expressions, uncovering thus that which would befit him as the moral and physical perfection mentioned afterwards in the *Announcement*. What is at stake is a method of *analysis of the human nature* according to the way by which it presents itself in the effectiveness of its expressions in society and in the anthropological and cultural multiplicity of human types. Kant's objective was to describe what is apparent in order to unveil what could be accounted for as essential to human morals.

As mentioned above, the method of analysis was central to Kant's enterprise. Instead of analyzing, for example, the

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<sup>20</sup> See Schilpp 1998: 23-24; 75-78. See also Cassirer 1970: 18ff.

<sup>21</sup> Kuehn 2001: 132-4.

<sup>22</sup> Delbos 1969: 90.

concept of obligation, Kant in the *Observations* takes as 'raw material' the *human interaction* in society. In this perspective, his proceeding was similar to Rousseau's, but in opposite direction: 'Rousseau proceeds synthetically and begins from the natural human being; I proceed analytically, beginning from the civilized human being' (Bemerkungen Ak XX: 2008. Notes, 3). In the framework of the *Inquiry*, Rousseau would be a sort of 'mathematician' of morals and Kant, adopting the 'analytic method', would correct his mistake by proposing a genuine moral *philosophy*. In sum, the human being given in its empirical appearance was the starting point to the moral doctrine envisaged by Kant in this period.

### 3. The Moral World: A Platonic Turn?

This image of Kant as a German moral sense philosopher fades away when we look at the following writings in his philosophical journey, more precisely the *Dreams of a spirit-seer elucidated by dreams of metaphysics* (1766) and *On the form and principles of the sensible and the intelligible world* – also known as *Inaugural Dissertation* (1770). In both writings Kant proposes a 'purification' of his moral philosophy, or rather, of the foundations of the morality. Kant then abandons the moral feeling and the analysis of human conduct as it is given in the empirical world as the basis for moral philosophy. Instead, he attempts to ground his moral doctrine in a principle 'carefully cleansed of everything empirical' and whose foundations are laid in a domain completely different from that of the sensible. He pursues a moral philosophy grounded on a '*moral*' or '*intelligible world*' that resembles the 'kingdom of ends' of the *Groundwork*. Although certainly the moral feeling and the analysis of man still play a significant role in the critical moral philosophy, they can no longer *ground* morality in this new 'Platonic' perspective<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Max Wundt and Klaus Reich claim that Kant came under a decisive platonic influence in the mid-1760s. According to Wundt it was the reading

In the *Dreams of a spirit-seer* Kant connects the moral feeling to a nonsensible 'moral reality' referred to a '*universal human understanding*' (Träume Ak II: 334. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 322), which, considered as the determining ground <*Bestimmungsgrund*> of any right action, does not have its foundation in the 'world of senses':

All the morality of actions, while never having its full effect in the corporeal life of man according to the order of nature, may well do so in the spirit-world, according to pneumatic laws (Träume Ak II: 336. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 323).

This 'spirit-world' is a 'moral world' where the true intentions and genuine 'moral impulses' (Träume Ak II: 335. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 322) can rise and be properly judged, but the knowledge of which is unattainable by the limited human cognitive powers:

As a result, we recognize that, in our most secret motives, we are dependent upon the *rule of the general will* <*Regel des allgemeinen Willens*>. It is this rule which confers upon the world of all thinking beings its moral unity and invests it with a systematic constitution <*systematische Verfassung*>, drawn up in accordance with purely spiritual laws. We sense within ourselves a constraining of our will to harmonize with the general will. To call this sensed constraining 'moral feeling', is to speak of it merely as a manifestation of that which takes place within us, without establishing its causes (Träume Ak II: 335. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 322).

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of the *Historia critica philosophiae* from Jakob Brucker that presented Kant to the platonic doctrine of Ideas and lead him to an "idealistic turn". Wundt 1984: 162-165. For his part Reich asserts that under the impact of Mendelssohn's *Phaedon*, inspired in Plato's own *Phaedon*, Kant transformed, in the *Inaugural Dissertation*, the "moral world" discussed in the *Dreams* into a "Platonic Ideal" of moral perfection only attainable in a noumenal world. Reich 2001.

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The analogy Kant employs in order to explain how the moral feeling acts in this 'spirit-world', namely the *natural and universal reciprocal interaction* between physical bodies, reminds us of some central tenets of his later practical philosophy. In the *Doctrine of Right* Kant exposes the concept of right as the universal coexistence of external freedom which can be 'presented in the *pure intuition a priori*' as the *law of the equality of action and reaction*:

[The] right need not be conceived as made up of two elements, namely an obligation in accordance with a law and an authorization of him who by his choice puts another under obligation to coerce him to fulfill it. Instead, one can locate the concept of right directly in the possibility of connecting universal reciprocal coercion with the freedom of everyone [...]. The law of a reciprocal coercion necessarily in accord with the freedom of everyone under the principle of universal freedom is, as it were, the *construction* of that concept, that is, the presentation of it in pure intuition a priori, by analogy with presenting the possibility of bodies moving freely under the law of the *equality of action and reaction* (MS Ak VI: 231-232. Practical Philosophy, 388-389)<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> See also Reflection 6667. "Recht ist (g zwischen zweyen ), was durch ihren gemeinschaftlichen Willen möglich ist. (Was durch denselben nothwendig ist, heißt Schuldigkeit.) Ein Recht hat der einer in ansehung des Andern (affirmative), in so fern wenn sein privatwille als einerley mit dem gemeinschaftlichen angesehen werden kan. Die Nothwendigkeit einer Handlung um der allg Regel des Rechts willen heißt formale Schuldigkeit, um des Rechts der andern willen aber materiale Schuldigkeit. Die Regel, die dem gemeinschaftlichen Willen überhaupt nothwendiger weise anhängt, wird gefunden, indem die condition des Willens gesucht wird, welche nothwendig ist, damit sie er allgemein gültig sey. Man kan die Verhältnisse des Rechts mit denen der Körper vergleichen. Ein ieder Körper ist gegen alle andere in Ruhe, ausser so fern er durch andere bewegt wird, und eben so hat iederman gegen andere Pflichten der Unterlassung, ausser so fern andere entweder mit ihm einen Einstimigen Willen machen oder seinen Zustand wieder seinen Willen verändern. Actio est aequalis reactione. So viel ein großer Körper auf den kleinen wirkt, so viel dieser auf den groosen zurück. Der gemeinschaftliche Schwerpunkt, d. i. der gemeinschaftliche Wille, ist vor und nach der Handlung einerley [...]" (Ak XIX: 128. 1769-1770? 1772).

In the *Doctrine of Virtue* Kant compares the two principles of the duties of human beings to each other, namely love and respect, to two ‘moral forces’ which give support to the ‘moral world’. These two principles are depicted by Kant with the help of the similar image of a *universal law of attraction and repulsion*:

In speaking of laws of duty (not laws of nature) and, among these, of laws for human beings’ external relation with one another, we consider ourselves in a moral (intelligible) world where, by analogy with the physical world, *attraction* and *repulsion* bind together rational beings (on earth). The principle of mutual love admonishes them constantly to *come closer* to one another; that of the respect they owe one another, to keep themselves *at a distance* from one another; and should one of these great moral forces fail, ‘the nothingness (immorality), with gaping throat, would drink up the whole kingdom of (moral) beings like a drop of water’ (if I may use Haller’s words, but in a different reference) (MS Ak VI: 449. Practical Philosophy, 569).

These two ‘analogies’ employed by Kant in the *Metaphysics of Morals* to illustrate how right and virtue can become more ‘intuitive’ are more understandable within the framework of both the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In the *Groundwork* the formula of law of nature<sup>25</sup> has the function of expressing ‘the validity of the will as a universal law of possible actions’ (that is, the formula of universal law<sup>26</sup>) according to an ‘*analogy* with the universal connection of the existence of things in accordance with universal laws, which is the formal aspect of nature in general’ (GMS Ak 04: 437. Practical Reason,

<sup>25</sup> “Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature” (GMS Ak 04: 421. Practical Philosophy, 73).

<sup>26</sup> “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (GMS Ak 04: 421. Practical Philosophie, 73).

86). In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, more precisely in the chapter on the 'Typic of Pure Practical Judgment', Kant claims that our 'most ordinary judgments' on practical issues have 'the law of nature always at hand, only that in cases where causality from freedom is to be appraised it makes that *law of nature* merely the type of *law of freedom*, because without having at hand something which it could make an example in a case of experience, it could not provide use in application for the law of a pure practical reason' (KpV Ak 05: 70. Practical Philosophy, 196). It is true that the moral law and the freedom of the will have their 'seat' in the sole reason and its 'purity'; nevertheless, both the typic and the formula of the law of nature have a systematical utility that should not be overlooked: they 'bring an idea of reason', namely the idea of freedom, 'closer to *intuition* (by a certain *analogy*) and thereby to feeling' (GMS Ak 04: 436. Practical Reason, 85).

In the *Dreams of a spirit-seer* Kant already refers to something similar. He tries there to explain the functioning of the moral world by taking recourse to an analogy with the Newtonian laws of attraction and repulsion in the sensible and physical world. In the same way as the particles of matter attract each other and are set in motion by this very force of attraction, each particular will is attracted to an 'universal will' by means of an ubiquitous power. This 'moral force', Kant says, is the moral feeling (Träume Ak II: 335. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 322).

If the phenomenon of the moral impulses were re-presented in this way, the moral feeling would be this sensed dependency of the private will on the general will: it would be an *effect produced by a natural and universal reciprocal interaction*. And it would be in virtue of this reciprocity that the immaterial world would attain its moral unity, and that as a result of having formed itself into a system of spiritual perfection, in accordance with the laws governing the

cohesive unity peculiar to it (Träume Ak II: 335. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 323).

The moral feeling is then considered as a sort of force which, according to the analogy with the forces of attraction, explains how the private will can conjoin with the universal will in a moral community<sup>27</sup>. And what is more significant: the scope of sensibility is circumscribed entirely to the physical world, leaving the 'jurisdiction' of the moral domain to a different legislation<sup>28</sup>. The moral feeling seems to be just a by-product, an effect of a more fundamental moral demand, namely the one that compels our private wills to conjoin in a universal will. We have here something similar to the later conception of the autonomy of the will: a Rousseauist 'general will' is evoked to emphasize the only possible explanation of morality 'in terms of community rather than in terms of self-interest'<sup>29</sup>. The morality has now a 'social character' which 'gives to moral behavior its 'objective', ie., self-transcendent aspect'<sup>30</sup>. The feeling can at best reflect this moral claim, but by no means ground it; as a physical and subjective event, the moral feeling cannot completely overcome its 'privateness', even if it is 'a disinterested feeling' for the happiness of the other. (P. Philosophie Herder, Ak XXVII: 4-5; Lec. Ethics, 3-4).

One can argue that the series of conditional clauses in the passages quoted above from the *Dreams* is a sign of the character of this writing, to wit, a mere parody or a simple skeptical writing that should not be taken seriously, or, as Kant himself confessed in a letter to Mendelssohn, a *Blendwerk* and a mere *Erdichtung* (Ak X: 72. Correspondence, 91-2). However, two arguments speak against such conclusion. The first, already mentioned, is the resemblance that the passages from the *Dreams of a spirit-seer* quoted above have with important passages of the

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<sup>27</sup> Brandt 1990. See also Tonelli 1987.

<sup>28</sup> Brandt 2007: 252.

<sup>29</sup> Schilpp 1998: 81.

<sup>30</sup> Schilpp 1998: 82.

critical work.<sup>31</sup> The second argument concerns the conceptual coherence that the *Dreams of spirit-seer* share with the next truly important writing published by Kant: *The Inaugural Dissertation*. This work can be considered as the genuine starting point, although a defective one, of the critical philosophy, as Kant himself suggests in a letter to Tieftrunk (Ak XII: 208), in which he agrees with the proposal of a collection of his minor works provided that it begins with his latin *Dissertation*<sup>32</sup>.

In the *Dissertation*, the analysis of human nature and moral feeling are no longer considered as appropriate methods for moral philosophy – although this discipline is barely discussed in such work. Kant conceives in the *Inaugural Dissertation* space and time as two 'pure forms of sensibility' in contrast to the understanding or 'intelligence' <*intelligentia*>, with both being two different sources of representations. While the objects that the sensibility provides are all sensible, that is, phenomena, the objects given to the intelligence are characterized as intelligible, that is, as noumena (Dissertatio Ak II: 392. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 384). Consequently Kant contrasts the sensible world to the intelligible world. The former refers to what is 'subjective in human mind' or which can be given in space and time. Hence a world 'which contains the ground of the universal connection of all things, in so far as they are phenomena'

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<sup>31</sup> In addition to passages from the *Critique of Practical Reason* and from the *Metaphysic of Morals*, we can mention also the 'community of rational beings' under the guidance of the 'universal will' that brings to mind the 'kingdom of ends' in the *Groundwork* and also the autonomy of the will in the *Groundwork* and in the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

<sup>32</sup> "I agree to your proposal to publish a collection of my minor writings, but I would not want you to start the collection with anything before 1770, that is, my *Dissertation* 'On the Form of the Sensible World and the Intelligible World, etc'" (Ak 10: 208; Correspondence, 528). It is known that the *Dissertation* allows completely opposite judgments as to the precise nature of the work in regard to the development of Kant's philosophy, namely whether it is a dogmatic relapse, the cornerstone of criticism or even an independent and intermediary phase of Kant's philosophical development. See Kreimendahl, 1990: 213-46. As G. Lehmann states, 'Die Kritik der reinen Vernunft ist der Inauguraldissertation eng verwandt und zugleich sehr fremd' (Lehmann, 1957: 40). There is no doubt, however, that with the sketch of the *Transcendental Aesthetics* made on the *Dissertation* the critical philosophy of *Critique of Pure Reason* was already there *in nuce*.

(Dissertatio Ak II: 398. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 391). The latter, on the other hand, is that whose form 'recognizes an objective principle, that is to say, some cause in virtue of which there is a combining together <colligatio> of the things which exist in themselves' (Idem).

From this first sketch of the transcendental idealism, explicitly laid out in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, comes an argument that is of crucial importance to Kant's rejection of the 'British solution' to the foundation of the moral philosophy and, in general, also vital for the denial of any attempt to draw the principle of morality out of empirical facts. The *Inaugural Dissertation* presents a radical critique of the conception about the logical criteria for the distinction between sensible and intellectual representations. In particular, Kant criticizes the idea that a sensible knowledge is confused and that intellectual knowledge is, on the contrary, clear and distinct. He rejects the rationalist thesis according to which the intellect should be differentiated from the sensibility through the 'distinctness' and 'clearness' of the representations of the former in contrast to the 'indistinctness' and 'confusion' of the representations of the latter. He assumes instead a radical distinction in the *source itself* of both sorts of representations. It is absolutely possible that a sensible knowledge could be entirely clear and distinct, and an intelligible knowledge, by contrast, indistinct and confused in the highest degree<sup>33</sup>. Is there a better example than that of metaphysics and its extremely confused representations?

Sensible representations can be very distinct and representations which belong to the understanding can be extremely confused. We notice the first case in that paradigm of sensible cognition, geometry, and the second case in the organon of everything which belongs to the understanding, metaphysics (Dissertatio Ak II: 394-395. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 387).

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<sup>33</sup> See Capozzi 2002: 362-376. Santos 1990: 164-166; 171-174.

Shortly after this passage Kant elucidates what kind of representation is at stake in morals:

Nonetheless, each and every one of these cognitions preserves the sign of its ancestry, so that those belonging to the first group, however distinct they be, are called sensitive because of their origin, while those belonging to the second group continue to belong to the understanding, even though they are confused. Such, for example, is the case with *moral* concepts, which are cognized not by experiencing them but by the understanding itself (Dissertatio Ak II: 395. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 387).

This distinctive mark of morality, to wit, to have the origin of its concepts and representations in the intellect itself, has as consequence the denial of an 'analytical method' in moral philosophy according to the model praised in the *Inquiry* and specially in the *Announcement*, be it the analysis of the concept of obligation down to the 'material data' and 'the simple sensations of good' or even the observation or analysis of the 'civilized man'. Intellect and sensibility, intelligible world and physical world are then characterized as *two completely distinct sources of representations*. Therefore, to 'analyse' <*zergliedern*> or to 'observe' <*beobachten*> the human nature or any material data in order to make it 'distinct' or to grasp what would be its 'moral perfection' or 'inner possibility', becomes a vain enterprise. There is no analysis or observation of man in society or of any feeling, no matter how meticulous it is, which could be able to change, as it were, the jurisdiction that this object of inquiry belongs to and give a full account of what morality consists in. According to Kant, moral perfection should be understood as an Ideal in the Platonic sense of Idea (Dissertatio Ak II: 396. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 388). In short, the analysis of the 'human nature' or of any empirical element such as the 'feeling' does not elucidate the ground of obligation or the first principles of moral philosophy. The

psychological or anthropological method must be abandoned for the sake of another which, in one way or another, paves the way to the *Critique of Pure Reason* and to the critical moral philosophy.

Despite having rejected any sort of empirical foundation to morality, Kant is still not clear as to what to replace it with. What is sufficiently obvious and unequivocal is the rejection of the moral feeling as the basis of morals and also the demand for a *purified* moral:

Moral philosophy [...] in so far as it furnishes the first principle of judgment, is only cognized by the pure understanding and itself belongs to pure philosophy. Epicurus, who reduced its criteria to the sense of pleasure or pain, is very highly blamed, together with certain moderns, who have followed him to a certain extent, such as Shaftesbury and his supporters (Dissertatio Ak II: 396. *Theoretical Philosophy*, 388).

In order to understand exactly what is at stake in this rejection of moral feeling it would be necessary to discuss different issues, specially the distinction between *principium diiudicationis* and *principium executionis* (Cf. Rx 6760. Ak XIX: 151. 1772; Rx 6972 Ak XIX: 217. 1778 (1773-1777?)). That is, on the one hand, the principle that determines *what* is good and, on the other hand, the principle that determines *how* and *why* we do what we judge to be good. However, it is enough for the present purposes to note how the denial of an empirical foundation to morality – only conceivable in the time period of the *Inaugural Dissertation* (as also testified by a great number of Reflexions) – is closely related to the new conceptual framework reflected on the first sketch of the transcendental idealism. Moreover, the idealistic approach of the *Inaugural Dissertation* sets the stage for Kant's solution to the problem of the possibility of a free action, discussed in the third antinomy of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The agent is free whenever her action is not determined by nature, that is, whenever its cause, or better,

its ground of determination is not influenced by any feeling, any physical or empirical event. Even if such event is provoked by another agent or another will, such as that of God.

#### 4. Pure Reason: The Absence of Empirical Data

What does the 'purity' of the critical moral philosophy mean? By way of conclusion we can say that at the time of the *Dissertation* the 'purity' in moral philosophy means, as a matter of fact, the denial of the moral feeling or of any empirical or material data as the basis from which the practical philosophy can extract its first principles. The still defective transcendental idealism of the *Inaugural Dissertation* showed that the problem of freedom could not be solved through a 'naturalist' approach observed previously. The *Dreams of a spirit-seer* demonstrated that the moral action could not be conceived of as a private event and the morality as an outcome stemming from a personal or private choice not subjected to a 'universal will' or deprived of any universalist pretension. It is impossible to grasp the 'critical turn' in moral philosophy, without considering two particular sets of claims Kant makes after 1766. First, those raised by the conceptions of a community of rational beings in reciprocal relations. Second, those brought up by the opposition between an 'intelligible world' and a 'physical world' which renders the critical conception of freedom conceivable. Instead of hastily concluding the continuity of Kant's moral philosophy from isolated passages which reproduce particular conceptual schemes from the critical period, it is more prudent to pay due attention to the whole framework within which the critical moral philosophy could only have arisen. To assert that Kant's view on ethics in the mid 1760's is already 'critical' by the sole fact that some passages of the *Notes* hint at a conception of moral action that claims an (simply aesthetic) universality overlooks the main problem of how to grasp the systematical changes in Kant's thinking and also the intersections between theoretical

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and practical philosophy in its development. However, denying that significant contents of the later critical philosophy were already presented in writings of the pre-critical period and therefore sustaining a sort of *ex nihilo* critical turn in moral philosophy is textually and genealogically misleading. Trying to follow a middle way in which the critical turn in moral *and* theoretical philosophy is taken seriously seems the most promising option. It is unnecessary to say that this path runs through the discussion about the concept of reason and its purity in Kant's transcendental philosophy.

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