

Unity, Freedom, and History: The Primacy of the Practical and Lara Ostaric's "Moral Image Realism" Thesis within Kant's Critical System

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In this paper, I explore the concept of unity in Kant's system, as laid out by Lara Ostaric. One of the key claims Ostaric makes is that, for Kant, the idea of a harmonious and ethical society is not merely a utopia, but a robust project grounded in what she terms 'Moral-Image Realism' (MIR). The MIR thesis, according to Ostaric, renders different and sometimes seemingly incompatible aspects of Kant's system coherent and, more than that, unified. I try to further develop the implications of Ostaric's view by exploring how Kant's view, known as 'Primacy of the Practical', can be used to reinforce the claim that human beings progress toward fulfilling their ends as moral agents in what is famously known as the 'kingdom of ends'. Furthermore, the MIR thesis, I try to show, renders Kant's practical philosophy not just theoretically, but empirically driven. Namely, once established that the moral image of the world is more than just an empty hope or a utopia, it becomes paramount to consider how exactly such a goal can be realised, given the complexities of the real world (Kant's as well as ours). This leads us to an entirely new way, I argue, of addressing the question of the applicability of Kant's practical philosophy, which has often been deemed to be an impossible endeavour. This also leads us to re-evaluate Kant's views and subsequent interpretations of the relationship between ethics, politics, and history.

Keywords: Ostaric; Kant; moral-image realism; practical philosophy; eds; history.

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1. Introduction

We might find it unsurprising that there is probably not an aspect of Kant's philosophical system that hasn't been examined, interpreted, and re-interpreted many times over more than two centuries since philosophers started reading his works. We might also find it surprising that in all that time, there hasn't been nearly as much literature on the very unity of his system. While there are studies discussing it, probing the underpinnings of what makes Kant's system unified has remained an important and unfinished task. One of the most important steps towards rectifying this issue has been made recently by Lara Ostaric, who made an invaluable contribution to Kant scholarship with her recent book titled *The Critique of Judgment and the Unity of Kant's Critical System*.

While there have been a number of ways in which one might conceive of what it is that underlies and establishes the unity of Kant's system, this book represents a novel approach to focusing on the *Critique of Judgment* to uncover the deep roots of what makes Kant's system unified. In this paper, I will try to add to the comprehensive picture that Ostaric has provided and explore an additional way in which it seems to me that Kant's systematic unity can be understood. Hopefully, it can serve as a supplemental look at the source of the transcendental unity of Kant's system, and as a support for Ostaric's thesis of "Moral image realism" (MIR).

2. Purposiveness and moral image realism

To see in which context the MIR thesis is put forward, let us see how Ostaric understands Kant's critical project:

Kant's Critical system does not culminate in empirical cognition of the natural world but, rather, in reason's "highest" or "final end" (KrV, A840/B868), or what Kant calls "the entire vocation of human beings" (KrV, A840/B868), namely, morality. This entails the realization of our moral ends in the world. (Ostaric 2023: 2)

Given that the realization of the final end of humanity entails the realization of morality, it is important to understand how Kant sees this realization. It is Ostaric's contention that this is more than merely a vague proposition of how things ought to be at some time in the future. As she puts it:

I shall argue that Kant's conception of the highest good and moral Glaube' is key to understanding Kant's solution to the problem of the causal efficacy of reason in the third Critique, the problem of the infinite separation between moral agency and the world in which its actions take place. (Ostaric 2023: 4)

After introducing the concept of schema-analogues (Ostaric 2023: 6), she notes that "Kant's teleological conception of human history, all serve as their indirect exhibitions, that is, their schema-analogues.

These schema-analogues are the products of reason's poiesis, its creation or production, which is a hallmark of its finitude" (Ostaric 2023: 6) This leads into Ostaric's formulation of the (MIR) thesis, which I quote in full:

With reflective judgment, the objects practical reason demands that we conceive as real are represented as if obtaining in nature. Because representations of reflective judgments are normatively necessary in the epistemic sense and also serve as a schema for the Ideas whose objects are normatively necessary in the practical sense, I refer to the role Kant assigns to reflective judgment in his moral teleology as "moral image realism" (MIR). (Ostaric 2023: 9)

As I understand it, Ostaric's key insight is that there is more than merely a heuristic interest into establishing what Kant calls 'A kingdom of ends', a 'Civic culture', or, to put it in different words, an enlightened alliance of republican states in an arrangement that guarantees perpetual peace and is based on a consensus of moral agency. That we can imagine this as a realistic endeavour, encapsulates the entirety of the three guiding questions from the first *Critique*: 'What can I know', 'What should I do', 'What may I hope' (Kant 1998, A805/B833). And even if there is a pessimistic undertone in the first *Critique* when it comes to the first answer, only a semblance of what it is that the second answer is, and quite an unclear view of a proper reply to the third question, Ostaric shows us in her comprehensive analysis that all three questions are robustly and coherently replied to by the end of the third *Critique* and given further substance in later, historical and political writings. She also rightly notes that this way of approaching reason's unity is distinct from post-Kantian idealist approaches from Fichte to Schopenhauer).¹

One upshot of the MIR thesis pertains to how freedom is viewed in Kant's system. As Ostaric points out: "Kant famously refers to freedom as 'the keystone of the whole structure of a system of pure reason' (KpV, 5:3-4) to which 'all other concepts (those of God and immortality) [...] attach themselves [...] and by means of it get stability and objective reality' (KpV, 5:3-4)" (Ostaric 2023: 10). For Kant, as she further notes, the "objective reality of freedom should be understood as a form of practical cognition" (Ostaric 2023: 11). This also leads to the thesis that Kant was a "realist" when it comes to moral *Glaube*, i.e. that he thought there is a reality behind the structure of the world as realized within the moral framework he envisioned.

3. *The domain of freedom and the MIR thesis*

In what follows, I will try to show how Kant offers us resources to further support the (MIR) thesis. This pertains to a topic that has been gaining some traction, and that is the thesis of the primacy of the prac-

¹ On the analysis of post-Kantian idealism, see. e.g. Sedgwick 2000.

tical (over the theoretical).² The main thesis argued here is that practical autonomy is necessary for theoretical autonomy within Kant's idealism and that this provides robust additional support for treating the MIR thesis as true.³ We can also express this by saying that freedom is built into the very constitutive use of our cognitive powers. In that sense, if we are looking for a way to show what the transcendental conditions of the unity thesis are, we can, I will try to argue, start with how it is that theoretical and practical domains are related in terms of the gap that Kant discusses in the third *Critique* and Ostaric shows how to bridge in her book.

Let us remember, in searching for what is transcendental, Kant argues by describing the function of the powers of knowledge and specifying these functions by using what amounts to a set of (implicit or explicit) counterfactual claims. For example, if we say that understanding is the power of concepts, this tells us that the function of understanding is to provide conceptual knowledge, which can be counterfactually expressed by saying: "If we did not have reason, we would not be able to formulate transcendental concepts." In that sense, we can say that we have identified a transcendental condition of *x* in Kant's system when we have found an accompanying counterfactual claim of its necessary importance for *x*.

Analogously, the most general counterfactual formulation of the thesis of the primacy of the practical could go like this: "If we were not free, we would not be able to use our cognitive powers autonomously." Since this use is necessarily constitutive according to Kant, this can then be expressed in the following way: "If we were not free, our cognitive activity could not be constitutive." Within a system in which the Absolute figures the way it does for the most prominent idealists after Kant, the metaphysical grounding of cognition and action does not lie in the subject. An individual agency is situated within the broader scope of the nature of the Absolute. This scope limits the extent to which subject can act, and frames what it can know. Thus, it is not metaphysically free, and it cannot be practically free, as it is bound to the nature of the Absolute. Since the source of metaphysical determination is not only action but also cognition, then no act of knowledge is truly the subject's. In other words, the subject is not free, and therefore its cognitive acts cannot have a constitutive character.⁴

This shows us that constitutiveness transcendently requires freedom for the use of cognitive powers. Moreover, just as in a practical context, one's freedom does not necessarily lead to ethical behaviour, but one is free to lie, commit morally blameworthy actions, and be held

² See, e.g. Gardner 2006, McLearn 2020.

³ Such an interpretation also has wider repercussions on understanding the nature of Kant's idealism in contrast to post-Kantian systems. I will not pursue this point here (it is discussed in Šoć 2021).

⁴ I elaborate on this point in Šoć 2021.

accountable for it, so in a theoretical context one is free to err, to draw wrong inferences, to believe false propositions made through the use of senses, reason, or the power of judgment, etc. In other words, to put it in Wittgensteinian terms,⁵ where there is no room for immoral action, there is no room for morality, and (to slightly paraphrase) where there is no room for error, there is no room for knowledge. That transcendental freedom can be built into our use of cognitive powers within Kant's system in this way is also seen by the fact that the source of our faculties is noumenal, not phenomenal. Although we cognize the phenomena, our cognitive abilities themselves are not something that is located within that framework. If they had, Kant would not have written the following:

But for the peculiarity of our understanding, that it is able to bring about the unity of apperception a priori only by means of the categories and only through precisely this kind and number of them, a further ground may be offered just as one can be offered for why we have precisely these and no other functions for judgment or for why space and time are the sole forms of our possible intuition (*CPR*, B146).

As we can see from this quote, Kant does not think that we can answer fundamental questions about the nature of our cognitive powers, which is one of the reasons why he believes that we can only talk about their function. Thus, although the output of a cognitive function resides within the phenomenal domain, the cognitive powers themselves rest in the noumenal domain. Since, as noumenal beings, we are free, our freedom is not only the key characteristic of our practical actions but also of our constitutive use of the cognitive powers.

Thus, we can express in the most general terms the thesis about the primacy of the practical over the theoretical by saying that it is the basis of the free use of the cognitive powers, and that, before this use can be constitutive at all, it must be free. This, in a way, demonstrates why it is that Ostarić's MIR thesis must be true. Namely, if the transcendental freedom is encapsulating the entire system – from the status of our cognitive powers to the understanding of human beings as ultimate and final purposes of nature, then the moral image referred to in this book and by Kant must indeed far surpass a mere sketch or a vague hope. History can only make sense if it drives us toward expressing this ultimate transcendental freedom in the manner in which the MIR thesis requires.

To make this clear, let us take into account the first upshot of this thesis. Namely, if theoretical use of our powers is predicated on us being free, and if our freedom is a transcendental condition of this use, then there is no true gap between the theoretical and the practical domains. Now, this might sound contrary to what Kant explicitly claimed, but we have to take the context of his view into account. Namely, when Kant

⁵ We can recall here *On Certainty*, §121 and Wittgenstein's views of the relationship between knowledge and doubt (Wittgenstein 1969).

was referring to the gap, he was thinking about the very existence of two distinct domains – one in which determinism is a primary mechanism, and causation is what drives the processes and events, and the second, which has freedom of action as an essential characteristic. And while this is certainly the case, this duality is not as pervasive as it might think, and as Kant's critics in later German idealism and beyond thought was the case.

To understand this, we need to distinguish between two claims. One claim is that the object of the use of our powers is of a certain nature – free or deterministic. So, the powers of understanding, such as the category of causation are applied to the intuitions in space and time under the concept of causality. The things they are applied to are representations which do indeed exhibit deterministic features, i.e. are such that we can subsume them under the concept of causation. Conversely, when deliberating on practical maxims, we are directing them toward beings (ourselves, or others) who exhibit freedom of agency.

The second claim, however, is that the nature of our powers is dual – phenomenal and noumenal. But that claim would be false, as all our cognitive powers belong to the same, noumenal domain in their origin. To see how this is the case, consider the passage we quoted above (B146), and recall that beyond what we cannot know there are either claims which are incorrectly formulated and essentially mistaken (such as the first two antinomies, paralogisms, proofs for God's existence), and there is that which can never be known but must be the case – a class of transcendental elements that comprise Kant's system – cognitive powers, moral law, human purposiveness. It is this second claim that is relevant to the broader point, and the fact that all human powers have this in common has systematic priority over that which generates the gap Kant was referring to. This is what ultimately grounds unity of Kant's system and in the next section, we can explore further implications that such grounding entails.

4. Freedom through history and politics

Given the considerations above, we can see that the source of our powers is not divided but cohesive. Everything that human beings cognize or do leads back to the noumenal realm, even if some of the objects of these actions and cognitions are empirical or phenomenal. Thus, the moral image that Lara Ostaric discusses cannot be a mere construct, but a transcendental part of Kant's critical system. As we have seen, Kant has every resource and reason to claim that it is, as Ostaric puts it, real. Furthermore, in terms of a concrete realization of such an image, it is human history that serves as a vehicle for this realization. There is a road toward the progress of culture and the foundation of a kingdom of ends, i.e. of a civic society focused on culture, rather than mere happiness (as Kant puts it in his third *Critique*, §82-84).

If, then, there is no gap, and the epistemic domain does work in sync with the practical, we can see how the realism of the moral image can be supplemented with concrete details obtained from directing our epistemic activity at the relevant empirical factors for obtaining such civic society. Especially in the context of the (MIR) thesis, the more concrete this realist picture is, the more one is able to understand how Kant was not primarily advocating for a vague, general, distant picture of what ought to be the case, but that what ought to be, and what is apt to be, is both cognizable, real, and informed by empirical context. More specifically, we can see from Kant's practical writings that one of his central ambitions was to understand how what he refers to as the "ultimate end of nature" – and what Ostaric rightly emphasizes throughout the book as closely tied to the (MIR) thesis – needs to take place in concrete circumstances in the real world. For example, we recall the stated goal of *Toward Perpetual Peace* (Kant 2000). Kant aims to show how exactly a state has to function in order to avoid going to wars, and his claims are readily recognizable – the demand for separation of powers, federalism of autonomous states, gradual and concerted elimination of standing armies – are all topics we contend with in contemporary context as well.⁶

In that regard, we can tell that for Kant it was important for actual states to become the way they have to be in order to ensure the establishment of civic culture. After all, in despotic states that violate the rules of war, go to war too easily, go in debt in order to finance wars, exhibit imperialist pretenses (i.e. violate the autonomy of other states), etc., there can hardly be a sustainable environment for enlightenment and consistent moral behavior. The requirements of freedom, equality, and independence, which Kant mentions in *Theory and Practice* (Kant 2000: 8:313), are predicated upon the circumstances of a state being of the right type – i.e. being republican. But one key aspect of the MIR thesis in real circumstances is how exactly this ultimate end might be accomplished. The complexity of such circumstances also requires not just the use of theoretical reason and practical cognition on their own, but also the use of our empirical cognition along with the practical in order to take into account the circumstances of the given situation. After all, it is plausible to claim that there is an underdetermination of facts of a situation regarding the required solutions. Not every situation will be subsumable under the same general principle, and because both theoretical and practical cognition have the same fundamental nature – originating in the noumenal realm – the practical analysis of the state of affairs that ought to lead to the realization of a moral image will be that much more in tune with the image, and its practical moral background.

This also brings into focus the role of history in realization of such a moral image, which is the topic of the final chapter of Ostaric's book.

⁶ I cannot pursue this notion further, as it is beyond the scope of this paper.

She rightly notes that it is precisely in this context (Ostarcic 2023: 235) that we can connect Kant's shorter writings with his critical system:

Kant offers both an epistemic and a moral justification of his view of human history as continuously progressing. That is to say that the representation of human history as continuously progressing is in service of both the minimal but also the final ends of reason.

Certainly, the support for that claim can be found in both the first and the third *Critique*, especially sections 82-84 of the latter. In what follows, Ostarcic rightly distinguishes between culture of skill and culture of discipline, both of which signify stages of progress that humanity makes or is apt to make in the course of its history. Since for Kant there is no strong teleological component of history at the metaphysical level, as there is for say, Hegel (Hegel 1956), the endpoint of history is not pre-determined, nor does it have a necessitarian nature. However, what is fixed, is that it is that *as a final or ultimate end* represents the realization of the human potential. For that there is no contingency or uncertainty. Moreover, regardless of whether such ends will in the end come about, we can also know what the necessary conditions are for them. Here we can recall Kant's writings on *Perpetual Peace*, or *Idea of a History*, and Ostarcic herself quotes one of the key conditions: the republican constitution is the necessary condition for the self-transformation of the civil society into a "moral whole" (Kant 2007: 8:21, Ostarcic 2023: 244). The connection between politics and morality is further elucidated via the claim that: "the idea of morality belongs to culture insofar as culture, and more proximately the "culture of discipline," is the necessary condition for making progress toward the realization of the highest good (the "final end") in nature" (Ostarcic 2023: 244).

Here we arrive at an important upshot of a previous discussion about the thesis of the primacy of the practical. Namely, because there is a concrete relationship between the idea of morality and the notion that human agency is constitutive of the way societies ought to function in order to be conducive of morality, it is important to use theoretical cognition in addition and as a supplement to practical cognition. As Ostarcic (2023:250) notes:

In *Theory and Practice*, Kant's focus is on the normative force of what the moral law commands, or what "ought to be," in relation to whether "it is possible (in praxis)" or whether "it can be" (TP, 8:313). The possibility of realizing what reason commands Kant refers to as the question of practice while he refers to the absolute normative necessity of what the moral law commands as the question of theory. It is a "theory that is based on the concept of duty" and according to which "concern about empty ideality of this concept quite disappears. For it would not be a duty to aim at a certain effect of our will if this effect were not also possible in experience (whether it be taught as completed or as always approaching completion" (TP, 8:313).

If in practice we are required to traverse certain steps in order to achieve the conditions conducive for the realization of the final end,

then just applying a general imperative or a notion of duty would indeed constitute what Kant himself recognizes as “empty ideality”. Contrary to the ways in which he was accused of overly empty or inapplicable practical conceptions from such distinctive directions as by Hegel and John Stuart Mill, Kant does recognize the concrete complexity of the challenge. Moreover, he has means to render his conceptions applicable precisely by providing the empirical tools, namely the different capacities of theoretical cognition, that can help us analyze distinctive circumstances of this or that political and historical context, and provide a viable path from point A to point B that would be in accordance to the overarching practical conception of morality, and of the ultimate end of nature. As Ostaric emphasizes (2023: 260) near the end of her book:

with the establishing of the civil constitution based on the principle of right, of the federation of states the goal of which is to prevent war, and with the development of arts and sciences, favorable conditions are made for moral education.

Standing with the agreement on this, there are two points I would like to note at the end of this paper. First, the role of theoretical cognition within the context of the primacy thesis demonstrates its aptness for making sure that we can know *how* exactly the civic constitution, federation and ultimate prevention of war can in fact be achieved in all the different circumstances of politics globally. It can also help us analyze what went wrong in different situations, recognize, or even reverse course where political conditions begin to deteriorate. This is a very important point to emphasize as it maintains the connection between Kant’s political project, the overall unity of his system, with challenges we examine in contemporary political thought (both theoretically and empirically). If that is the case, and if indeed there is no fundamental gap between theoretical and practical cognition, that can help provide support for the claim that indeed a Rawlsian reflective equilibrium among them is something that can viably lead us toward specific answers as to how what Wood terms “the epoch of freedom” can be obtained.

The second important point is that this also shows us why Ostaric is right to criticise the sharp division that Wood makes between the “epoch of nature” and the “epoch of freedom”. Namely, if there is such a close connection between theoretical and practical cognition, and if it is reflected in the importance of the combination of both practical and moral conditions obtaining the way MIR thesis implies, then there is a thoroughline within Kant’s system that leads without exemption from the theoretical and practical domains to the “kingdom of ends” and the culture of discipline that Kant regarded as the ultimate end of nature (Kant 2001: §84).

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