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Alexander T. Englert

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# How a Kantian ideal can be practical

Alexander T. Englert 

University Center for Human Values, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA

## ABSTRACT

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant states that ideas give us the rule for organising experience and ideals serve as archetypes or standards against which one can measure copies. Further, he states that ideas and ideals can be *practical*. Understanding how precisely these concepts should function presents a challenging and understudied philosophical puzzle. I offer a reconstruction of how ideas and ideals might be practical in order to uphold, to my mind, a conceptually worthy distinction. A practical idea, I argue, is best understood as a reference to the categorical imperative (and its various formulations), which guides conduct directly as a rule. A practical ideal, by contrast, I think is a substrate that serves two functions: one that (a) helps us gauge moral deficiencies and another that (b) reveals the potential for moral improvement. In response to well-grounded sceptical concerns, I argue that ideals are indirectly practical in that they ground the possibility to recognise moral states of affairs and be moral in the first place.

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## 1. Introduction

Kant distinguishes frequently between practical ideas (*praktische Ideen*) and practical ideals (*praktische Ideale*). Per their definitions in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781),<sup>1</sup> they should serve unique functions in thought and action: ideas as rules and ideals as archetypes (or *Urbilder*). What does it mean, though, for an idea to be a rule? And how are we to understand the nature and function of an archetype in practical terms? Deciphering the extent to which these two terms function in the moral-practical<sup>2</sup>

**CONTACT** Alexander T. Englert  aenglert@princeton.edu  1 Nassau Hall, Princeton, NJ 08540, USA

<sup>1</sup>All references will be abbreviated and refer to the volume and page number from *Kants gesammelte Schriften* as edited in the *Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften* (1902-). References to the first *Critique* refer, as is custom, to the first edition pagination (A) and the second edition pagination (B). Please see the references section for the abbreviations' key.

<sup>2</sup>For Kant there is a distinction between moral rules and prudential rules, the former categorical in nature and absolute, the latter hypothetical and ends-directed. When it comes to ideas and ideals, although I refer to their 'practical' nature, I will be focusing exclusively on their *moral-practical* employment.

sphere presents a challenging philosophical puzzle with wide-ranging implications. Practical ideals such as the holy will, the highest good, and the perfect civil constitution play a major role for Kant in how we reason about the world. Yet, Kant offers only brief definitions of the terms and often appears inconsistent in his usage. Perhaps for this reason – while practical ideas and ideals are often taken up in the secondary literature – a specific account of *what* they are and *how* they respectively manifest in relation to agency is most often either skipped over or presupposed. Because of the importance of *particular* practical ideas and ideals in Kant's system it is imperative to get clear on what they mean in *general*.

In what follows, I provide a Kantian account as to how both ideas and ideals remain central to our practical lives respectively without blurring together into some fuzzy, fused concept.<sup>3</sup> I contend that there are philosophically good reasons to interpret them as distinct. I conclude that the only practical (*moral*) idea that can serve as a rule is the categorical imperative (along with perhaps specifications of it and reference to the formula of humanity), whereas ideals as archetypes individuate the highest moral rule in various guises to ground the possibility of a moral life in the first place. While the practical idea tells us *how* to act, I will argue that practical ideals ground the possibility of being moral at all by (a) constantly revealing the morally imperfect state of affairs and (b) revealing potential for permanent world and self-improvement. Drawing on lecture notes and other texts from Kant's corpus, I will refer to ideals serving as a 'substrate' since they underlie and contextualise morality by fulfilling the two functions just mentioned.

Beyond the philosophical puzzle and the paucity of passages to work from, further layers of confusion arise. As noted, Kant is frequently inconsistent regarding the practical employment of ideas or ideals, even though he reiterates the distinction many times. Sometimes it seems as if practical ideals truly do have unique domains and functions<sup>4</sup> and at others Kant seems to use idea and ideal together as if they were interchangeable or synonymous.<sup>5</sup> If the terms were synonymous, then we need not dig deeper. However, Kant clearly differentiates the two as technical terms with independent meaning in the first *Critique*, the third

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<sup>3</sup>While I use the term 'practical', I think that one could also use the term 'moral' interchangeably when it comes to ideals. As will become clear, I think that ideals are possessions of reason. And I don't think there are technical-practical possessions of reason, but rather only those grounded in *a priori* principles. And the only *a priori* principle in practical matters is the categorical imperative.

<sup>4</sup>See, e.g., A569/B597; KU (5:232); and RGV (6:60).

<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., KpV (5:32; 127n), and cf. RGV (6:60), and V-MS/Vigil (27:610).

*Critique*, and elsewhere throughout his works.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this sloppiness is to blame for why many interpreters see the relation between practical ideas and ideals as requiring no detailed philosophical examination.

In fact, most often the secondary literature quickly glosses a practical ideal as, for example, a ‘model to guide moral action’<sup>7</sup> or a standard that ‘governs practice’<sup>8</sup> or an empty ‘framework [to leave] room for creativeness (...) of human will’<sup>9</sup> without exploring what this means in detail. Thus, one often takes for granted a meaning and springs ahead of the important initial task of a careful definition of practical ideas and ideals.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, as a result of this assumption – namely, that moral ideals figure directly into our practical deliberations as a repackaging of the categorical imperative – a further problem of superfluity arises, namely, that ideals (such as the holy will or the highest good) represent redundancies in Kant’s system. After all if we have the categorical imperative guiding our conduct, what unique function can a practical ideal serve, if, as Kant maintains, the law serves to determine it? This ostensible problem, I will refer to as the *root problem*.

As a result of the root problem, an interpretive trend has emerged that has elicited two reactions, one dismissive and the other favourable. The trend is to assign an ideal some sort of psychological function that aids us, as weak-willed and imperfect human beings, to realise an absolute moral law. As one might expect, the dismissive reaction bases itself on a rejection of such an impure crutch’s inclusion in a pure moral theory. For example, Lewis White Beck defines the highest good qua practical ideal as perhaps ‘psychologically necessary’ but not important ‘logically or ethically’ since it provides no ‘separate command, independent of the categorical imperative, which is developed without this concept’.<sup>11</sup> While aimed at the highest good, Beck’s critique could, *mutatis mutandis*, apply to other ideals such as the holy will or the perfect civil constitution. All remain conditioned on the moral law while the moral law remains

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, *KU* (5:232); *RGV* (1793) for where he refers to the ‘ideal of moral perfection’ as the ‘personified idea’ (6:60–1); *Contest of the Faculties* (1798, 7:91); the *OP* (1798–1800): ‘Transcendental ideas are different from ideals’ (21:81); *V-Mo/Mron II* (1784, 29:605); and *V-Met-L2/Pölitiz* (1793, 28:555).

<sup>7</sup>Silber (1959, 478). Or as he says elsewhere, that such an ideal is ‘necessary in order to give concrete direction to moral volition’ (1963, 195).

<sup>8</sup>Auxter (1979, 122). He also refers to it as that which ‘regulates conduct’ and as a ‘guide’ (128).

<sup>9</sup>Paton (1947, 187).

<sup>10</sup>Two recent exceptions are Cureton and Hill Jr. (2018) and Dean (2013). The former point out the necessity of ideas, but do not distinguish them from ideals. Dean points out the distinction of idea and ideal in relation to humanity, but blurs together functions that I think are best understood as related but fundamentally distinct. For example, he refers to them both as equally ‘regulative’, ‘action-guiding’, as ‘standard[s] to live up to’, and as serving an epistemic function all in the same breath (174).

<sup>11</sup>See Beck (1960, 244); as well as Auxter (1979), and Simmons (1993, esp. 358–360).

unconditioned. Without a biconditional relation holding, ideals seem expendable – particularly for those who want to hold Kant to account for an ethics lacking any reference to results, rewards, or self-interest.

However, some favourable reactions for the inclusion of practical ideals find strength precisely in a psychological reading. For example, John Rawls and Barbara Herman offer accounts of how an ideal might bring the categorical imperative in line with experience.<sup>12</sup> The psychological function helps us visualise the categorical imperative as something that we can actually bring about. The thrust of such readings is that the psychological component is actually important for making pure ethics a *human* ethics. This is one way of explaining how a Kantian ideal can be practical, but it ultimately swerves much further from the letter and spirit of Kant's texts than what I propose. It also fails to address the root problem successfully.

Ultimately, while I find the scepticism of the dismissive reaction warranted and the ingenuity of the favourable one promising for creating something beyond a Kantian account, neither can qualify as kosher in a Kantian sense. I will take both as necessary foils in bringing my own reconstruction to light, which I think stands closest to Kant's theory.

In Sections 1 and 2 I develop my account of practical ideas and ideals respectively. If one finds the important historical work of textual exegesis tedious, then one can skip ahead to Section 3. There I present the sceptic's concern and the root problem, along with an account for rejecting the distinction (à la Beck) and an account in favour of keeping it (à la Rawls and Herman). Both approaches I will argue should leave us unsatisfied and, indeed, shed light on why a novel Kantian reconstruction should be sought. In Section 4, I present my reconstruction in response to the root problem and combine the elements excavated in Sections 1 and 2. Finally, in Section 5 I present a way of conceiving of the practical influence of ideals by looking to metaphysical grounding and the in-virtue-of relation to understand their noncausal function.

## 2. Ideas as practical rules

Starting with initial definitions: both 'ideas' and 'ideals' (or 'archetypes' [*Urbilder*]) represent *a priori* concepts of reason for Kant. They do not play a direct role in the formation of cognitions as do empirical concepts

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<sup>12</sup>Rawls (2000) and Herman (2007). See also Denis (2005) for an account related to the highest good that is similar in spirit.

and the categories of the understanding. Their function is to help combine and relate individual moments of experience into one experiential whole. And while an idea serves as a general rule, ideals go a step beyond ideas. They are ideas thought as being thoroughly determined to the maximum degree so that they constitute fully determined individuals.

While in *theoretical* employment ideas and ideals give structure to experience, help provide an architectonic for natural scientific exploration, or arise as beneficial *foci imaginarii* thanks to the antinomial conflicts of reason, Kant also states unequivocally in the first *Critique* that reason possesses ideals that are practical in nature, such that they 'have *practical* power (as regulative principles), and form the basis of the possible perfection of certain *actions*'.<sup>13</sup> And in detail, Kant defines their respective functions as follows: 'As the idea gives the *rule*, so the ideal in such a case serves as the *archetype* [zum Urbilde] for the complete determination of the copy'.<sup>14</sup> At this point where he is the most explicit, he is also the most brief. While this brevity is unfortunate, it also has systematic reasons since he does not think in 1781 that morality can undergo a critique.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, I think he offers enough material – along with aid from other texts and lecture notes – to reconstruct their respective functions in a Kantian enough fashion to deserve the title.

How can a practical idea serve as a rule? Again, one faces an interpretive challenge due to Kant's initial stance in the first *Critique* that: 'In accordance with our plan we leave aside practical ideas, and consider reason only in its speculative, or rather, [...] only in its transcendental employment'.<sup>16</sup> At this crucial origin of his conceptual distinction in the critical period we are left alone to decipher how ideas and ideals can be practical. I think that as a rule, which we must approximate, it makes the most sense to retroactively deem the categorical imperative as the *only* unconditioned moral-practical idea – though it might receive further specification in connection with the formula of humanity, as well as virtues, such as, courage or kindness, that are conditioned by it. To not merely beg the question, though, I begin by referring to practical 'ideas' in the plural as Kant often does and work my way to the conclusion.

Since we are offered so little in the way of direct definitions of practical ideas, it is perhaps best to search for clues about the function of ideas in

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<sup>13</sup>A569/B597.

<sup>14</sup>A569/B597.

<sup>15</sup>A15/B29.

<sup>16</sup>A329/B386.

their theoretical employment. So how can a theoretical idea serve as a rule? A Kantian idea – in contrast to concepts of the *understanding* (i.e. the categories as worked out in the transcendental logic) – does not aid us in the immediate cognising of possible objects in experience. Kant takes ideas to be ‘even further removed from objective reality than are categories’.<sup>17</sup> They exceed the limits of experience in giving it form and ‘contain a certain completeness to which no possible empirical knowledge ever attains’.<sup>18</sup> The completeness is ‘a systematic unity, to which [reason] seeks to approximate the unity that is empirically possible, without ever reaching it’.<sup>19</sup> Rather than constitute what is given in experience through judgments, they *regulate* the overall unity of experience. Theoretical ideas as rules function in investigations of nature by marking each experience, as it were, with signposts pointing beyond it, signalling there is more to discover since it is part of something greater. They forbid us ‘to bring the regress to a close by treating anything at which it may arrive as absolutely unconditioned’.<sup>20</sup> That is, the theoretical rule prescribes that we never forget to treat the parts as parts, and gives us indirectly the notion of the whole in which they fit. Let us take how ideas function in theoretical employment as our backdrop for working through what could make them practical.

How does this regulative utility of ideas relate to practical-moral matters? In the first *Critique*, Kant is ambiguous on the specific function. In a manner that obfuscates the distinction between ideas and ideals respectively, Kant sometimes treats practical ‘ideas’ as regulative in that they guide our actions directly (Meaning One, which fits well with the rule function). At other times, however, he treats them as regulative in that they enable judgments of moral states of affairs as well as make up morality’s ultimate source (Meaning Two, in which a rule function is obscure).<sup>21</sup> Since the former works better as a rule and the latter sounds very much like an ideal according to Kant’s initial definition, the simplest solution is to disambiguate the two.

Meaning One: Regarding the guiding of action directly, practical ideas in the first *Critique* appear to enable morality to extend itself universally

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<sup>17</sup>A567/B595.

<sup>18</sup>A568/B596.

<sup>19</sup>A568/B596.

<sup>20</sup>A509/B537.

<sup>21</sup>Kant is not clear as to the number and nature of practical ideas. Indeed, Kant refers to many practical ideas throughout the *KrV*, such as the ‘idea of virtue’, the ‘idea of humanity’ (A318/B374), ‘human wisdom’ (A569/B597), the ‘moral law, which is a mere idea’ (A812/B840), the idea of a ‘perfect [legal] constitution’ (A316/B373), and the ‘idea of a moral world’ (or the ‘highest good’) (A808/B836), many of which I think should ultimately be referred to as ‘ideals’.

and find consistency between diverse scenarios. They produce a rule that should cause us to approximate through action what the idea of morality contains. Herein we see the ingredients that will become essential for articulating the categorical imperative four years later in the *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785): namely, universalisability and consistency. Though Kant at the time of the first *Critique* did not have a fully worked out theory of morality as part of his transcendental system, he makes clear in the chapter on 'The Ideas in General' of the Dialectic that: 'Nothing is more reprehensible than to derive the laws prescribing what *ought to be done* from what *is done*, or to impose upon them the limits by which the latter is circumscribed'.<sup>22</sup> Our morality cannot be organised by nature, but must find organisation through its own ideas, through its own *rules*.

Meaning Two: As for the second meaning, namely, of ideas forming our judgments of morality and providing its ultimate source, Kant states unequivocally in the *Vienna Logic* (1780s): 'The whole of morality rests on ideas'.<sup>23</sup> And in the first *Critique*, reason is where we need to look for morality's origin, 'since it contains within itself the source of certain concepts and principles, which it does not borrow either from the senses or from the understanding'.<sup>24</sup> For Kant, this moral material in our reasoning hints at a different function for ideas that goes beyond giving a rule.

Starting with an example of Meaning Two – in which 'ideas' ground morality and our knowledge of it – one sees quickly that Kant is thinking of *more* than a rule for moral action. Kant has something entirely different in mind: namely, an archetypal source in reason that enables the *possibility* of moral knowledge and emulation in the first place. Take Kant's example, at one point, of the 'idea of virtue' as a 'pattern' whose 'original' we carry in our minds, and 'in respect of which the possible objects of experience may serve as examples'.<sup>25</sup> He goes on to explain that: 'For it is only by means of this idea that any *judgment* as to moral worth or its opposite is possible; and it therefore serves as an indispensable foundation for every approach to moral perfection'.<sup>26</sup> Here, an 'idea' helps us judge the moral status of things. In contrast to Meaning One, a practical idea in this sense is *indirectly practical* in that it plays an epistemic role

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<sup>22</sup>A319/B375.

<sup>23</sup>V-Lo/Wiener (24:906).

<sup>24</sup>A299/B355.

<sup>25</sup>A315/B372, my emphasis.

<sup>26</sup>A315/B372, my emphasis.

by revealing moral states of affairs without commanding action. As an original or standard of comparison no rule is evident, no extra command. I think we must correct Kant's word choice here and direct him towards his own terminological distinction; namely, we must say that he is actually speaking here of ideals, not ideas.<sup>27</sup> That is, even after defining the terms explicitly in the same text, he accidentally refers to an ideal – an archetypal pattern by which we can assess copies – as an 'idea', a term which should instead be applied only to cases in which a rule is at play.

Returning to Meaning One, which does bespeak a rule, Kant notes how practical ideas should bear an immediate influence on our actions. That is, they are not in any way related to our assessment of the moral state of affairs but indeed (and as originally defined) relate to our activity as rules. Kant writes:

The practical idea is, therefore, always in the highest degree fruitful, and in its relation to our actual activities is indispensably necessary. Reason is here, indeed, exercising causality, as actually bringing about that which its concept contains.<sup>28</sup>

This passage suggests that practical ideas function *directly* as practical rules. That is, they command us to bring about what the idea contains whenever we set ends for action. And it is at this point where one moral-practical rule – as regulative of our actions, though not constitutive – would seem to suffice, namely, the categorical imperative which allows us to seek perfect virtue in our actions and character.<sup>29</sup> Since Kant himself refers to the categorical imperative (or moral law) at times as an 'idea'<sup>30</sup> and it is the only *unconditioned* moral rule for action in Kant's works, it would seem the closest both to the letter and spirit of his texts to view the categorical imperative (along with its various formulations in the *Groundwork*) as the quintessential practical idea qua rule.<sup>31</sup> The rest of

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<sup>27</sup>Occasionally while referring to ideas that serve as examples in this epistemic sense, Kant refers to them as 'archetypes'. I think Kant slips in this context because he is excavating the term 'idea' from Plato, who, Kant asserts, took ideas to be the 'archetypes of the things themselves' (A313/B370). For a thorough discussion of this portion and Kant's employment of a Platonic *Urbild*, see Heimsoeth (1966, esp. 34-36), as well as White (1993).

<sup>28</sup>A328/B385.

<sup>29</sup>For specifying the application of the categorical imperative, we might need to appeal of course to its further specification in the formula of humanity, as well as think of it conditioning certain moments of action often associated with other virtues (see also note 32 below). Spelling this out, however, goes beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>30</sup>See A812/B840 for where Kant refers to the 'moral law, which is a mere idea', the *GMS* where he writes of the categorical imperative as 'the idea of reason' that we would follow if purely rational (4:420n), as well as, the *KpV* for a detailing of it as arising from reason alone (5:31-2).

the ideal sphere makes the most sense as individuations of this idea in various guises.<sup>32</sup>

To make the parallel clear between a practical and theoretical idea as a rule, we can summarise as follows: Just as the theoretical idea of a systematic whole brings us to *search* for what the idea contains beyond one conditioned moment, so too a practical idea as the categorical imperative influences us to *bring about* what this idea contains by forming a maxim to fit a universal standard. We approximate theoretical ideas in our investigations of nature; we approximate the practical idea of the moral law whenever acting. In both attempts, we can be sure that our approach is asymptotic. Theoretically and practically, the ideas never lose their force. Thus, both rules persist no matter what we have found of the idea and no matter how virtuously we think ourselves to be. While Kant is not perfectly consistent with his employment of ‘practical idea’, the interpretation that presents the most consistent picture is to treat practical ideas (qua ‘rules’) as all referring to but one idea: the categorical imperative and its various formulations. It is regulative in that it presents the agent with an unconditioned and direct rule of conduct that we should follow but can simultaneously refuse.

### 3. Ideals as practical substrate

In this section, I undertake an initial analysis of practical ideals.<sup>33</sup> This sets the foundation for my reconstruction of its unique functions, which I complete in Section 4. Though I focus here mostly on passages from the first *Critique*, practical ideals recur throughout Kant’s career: the wise man, the divine will, Jesus Christ, the highest good, and the perfect civil polity, all present cases in which the categorical imperative as an idea is individuated as either an individual subject or individual object. As I did in Section 1 and since one has little to work with when it comes to explicit detailing of practical ideals, I place the investigation against the backdrop

<sup>31</sup>For an example of where he refers the categorical imperative as a practical rule in different applications, see, e.g., the *TP* essay, where the idea of right plays a role in determining other ideas of justice, such as the ‘idea of equality’ (8:292), and the ‘idea of the original contract’ (8:302).

<sup>32</sup>Of course, one might speak of the ‘idea of courage’, but such a rule need not mean that we have further moral-practical ideas beyond the categorical imperative. For all virtues (e.g., courage, generosity, wit, etc.) – as I read Kant – can only count as *virtuous* if morally conditioned. Thus, I think it perfectly cogent in Kantian ethics to speak of one moral-practical idea, with many employments in various situations in which the expression of virtue might differ. The nature of the situations and the actions required to *fit* them will naturally require modifications and further notions that after the fact one might call ‘virtues’. But these need not, in themselves, be considered ideas in the unconditioned regulative sense that Kant puts forth in the first *Critique*.

<sup>33</sup>And subsequently build off of what has already been discussed in regards to Meaning Two above.

of the concept of an ideal in a theoretical sense. Then, I can turn to Kant's two examples in the first *Critique* of practical ideals to mine for relevant elements.

Grounded on 'ideas', Kant employs the term 'ideal' to refer to one or more ideas conceived as a completely determined individual. An ideal is not simply a rough approximation given *in concreto*,<sup>34</sup> but rather the formal, systematic whole conceived '*in individuo*'.<sup>35</sup> The ideal is: 'an individual thing, determinable or even determined by the idea alone'.<sup>36</sup> An ideal for us, Kant states, 'was in Plato's view an *idea of the divine understanding*, an individual object of its pure intuition, the most perfect of every kind of possible being, and the archetype of all copies in the [field of] appearance'.<sup>37</sup> This outermost conceptual reach 'seems to be further removed from objective reality even than the idea'.<sup>38</sup> They designate the objects of ideas at their highest degree of completion or 'perfection' [*Vollkommenheit*].<sup>39</sup>

An ideal adds one element to completeness, then, that an idea lacks: namely, individuation. Individuation is based on the principle of thoroughgoing determination of all predicates that belong to something. In this case, Kant means that we think of ideas *as if* they were individuals because we can think of them as completely determined (or determinable) through a combination of all requisite predicates to form corresponding, complete entities in thought: '*Idea* properly means a rational concept, and *ideal* the presentation of an individual being as adequate to an idea'.<sup>40</sup> These totalities remain only intelligible objects since no schematism is possible for them via an adequate corresponding intuition. They count as individuated nonetheless in so far as they remain distinct in our thinking from other such ideal objects.

In the theoretical sphere, there is one primary ideal: namely, the *ens realissimum*<sup>41</sup> (the most real being) or God,<sup>42</sup> a postulation of 'the whole store of material from which all possible predicates of things must be taken'.<sup>43</sup> Without some unconditioned reality posited that

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<sup>34</sup>E.g., if one were to encounter the Good Samaritan, it would be an *example* of virtue given *in concreto* but 'only in part' (see, A328/B385).

<sup>35</sup>A568/B596.

<sup>36</sup>A568/B596.

<sup>37</sup>A568/B596.

<sup>38</sup>A568/B596.

<sup>39</sup>A568/B596.

<sup>40</sup>KU (5:232).

<sup>41</sup>A576/B604. There might be other theoretical ideals since Kant does refer to the '*ideal philosopher*' as an 'archetype' in the Architectonic chapter of the first *Critique* (A838-9/B867-8). It would be something like the individuated intellect that possesses a complete science of reality.

<sup>42</sup>A580/B608.

underlies all conditioned elements (a presupposed reservoir of being), Kant thinks we would lose the systematic grasp of experience as a whole. The transcendental ideal not only offers an unconditioned foundation, which he refers to as a 'transcendental substrate'<sup>44</sup> or 'ground'<sup>45</sup> for our knowledge, but it also acts as a model for the concept of wholes as such.<sup>46</sup> When it comes to the *practical* employment of reason, by contrast, he maintains that there are many practical ideals: '[W]e are yet bound to confess that human reason contains not only ideas, but ideals [*Ideale*] also, which although they do not have, like the Platonic ideas, creative power, yet have *practical* power'.<sup>47</sup> As I transition to his limited discussion of practical ideals, I would like to highlight the *theoretical* ideal's function as an unconditioned and intelligible substrate, which we presuppose for the possibility of systematic and thoroughgoing predication of reality in the first place.

What is a practical ideal for Kant in the first *Critique*? We have two examples to work from: The first is humanity 'in its complete perfection';<sup>48</sup> the second is the perfect will or wise man of the Stoics, who acts in complete conformity with the moral law.

Beginning with the ideal of humanity, it combines not only 'all the essential qualities which belong to human nature and constitute our concept of it [...] but also everything which, in addition to this concept, is required for the complete determination of the idea'.<sup>49</sup> Everything required for the complete determination of an idea is further clarified: 'For all contradictory predicates one only [of each pair] can apply to the idea of the perfect man'.<sup>50</sup> As a practical-moral ideal, we can fill in Kant's account as follows: We are not concerned with predicates that are conditioned (e.g. eye or skin colour, height, weight, etc.) but those that contribute to humanity's unconditioned nature as an end. To think of the difference here from an idea consider the rule: 'Treat everyone as an end and not as a means'. In what sensible experience though do we encounter the *dignity* of humanity, i.e. that which is end-bearing? The answer is: nowhere ... if focusing exclusively on the sensible realm. That

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<sup>43</sup>A575/B603.

<sup>44</sup>A575/B603.

<sup>45</sup>A579/B607.

<sup>46</sup>Cf. A576/B604: 'For only in this one case [namely, the transcendental ideal] is a concept of a thing – a concept of a thing – a concept which is in itself universal – completely determined in and through itself, and known as the representation of an individual'. See though note 41 above.

<sup>47</sup>A569/B597.

<sup>48</sup>A568/B596.

<sup>49</sup>A568/B596.

<sup>50</sup>A568/B596.

is, the rule tells us to treat humanity as an end but provides no independent grounds for recognising the dignity that we supposedly all share. We need to determine the idea further so that we can universalise beyond the impoverished sample of human beings in experience to *every* being sharing this form.<sup>51</sup> The ideal of humanity serves then as a standard for identification and comparison. Kant at this point does not articulate the predicates that belong to the ideal of humanity, but we can assume that they will be those properties that make us worthy of moral respect or determine how that respect will take shape, e.g. something akin to our embodiment and capacity to think, act, and feel. Though we – as heterogeneous, spatiotemporal instantiations – all differ, we can find grounds for comparison in such an ideal to which we and other embodied-rational species all stand in relation. This practical ideal does not tell us directly *how* to act in the here and now, but rather anchors our understanding of those whom we are obligated to respect when acting.

The second example of a practical ideal is that of the ‘divine man within us’ or the ‘wise man (of the Stoics)’.<sup>52</sup> It is an ideal in so far as it is ‘a man existing in thought only, but in complete conformity with the idea of wisdom’.<sup>53</sup> The idea of wisdom is shorthand for the moral law, which is here combined with the ideal of humanity. The ideal is wisdom fully determined in *one individual* to whom we can predicate no selfish or weak moment. Kant here offers the most that we receive in terms of an explicit definition of a practical ideal: ‘[W]e have no other standard for our actions than the conduct of this divine man within us, with which we compare and judge ourselves, and so reform ourselves, although we can never attain to the perfection thereby prescribed’.<sup>54</sup> Practical ideals ‘supply reason with a standard which is indispensable to it, providing it, as they do, with a concept of that which is entirely complete in its kind, and thereby enabling it to estimate and to measure the degree and the defects of the incomplete’.<sup>55</sup> Thus, a practical ideal is practical because it offers the ultimate standard for *estimating* and *measuring* the degree of imperfection in the copies, here, namely, in our own character as that from which our actions spring. Kant is explicit that it does not tell us how to act in the here and now, but rather provides a ‘standard’ that we use to ‘compare and judge ourselves, and so reform ourselves’.

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<sup>51</sup>Cf. *KU*, 5:235, and *MM*, 6:434-5; see also, Dean 2013 as well as Firestone and Jacobs 2008, 159ff.

<sup>52</sup>A569/B597.

<sup>53</sup>A569/B597.

<sup>54</sup>A569/B597.

<sup>55</sup>A570/B598.

What Kant is referring to here is certainly tethered to what will become the categorical imperative as a practical rule – however, its scope extends beyond a moment of choice and serves the indirectly practical, epistemic function that I referred to above as Meaning Two and that is shared by the ideal of humanity. We carry this ideal with us *at all times* as a reminder to check us, humble us, and remind us of the room for moral self improvement.

From these examples, in particular the second, I think we see the key elements emerge. Above all else, an ideal is a standard for *estimating* and *measuring* the moral status of reality – i.e. a tool for recognising the moral states of affairs and their degree of imperfection. In a way that parallels the theoretical ideal (*ens realissimum*), the practical ideal as a standard importantly presents a substrate or ground for morality in the first place. It does not give us a rule for action, but rather represents a background concept for self and world appraisal that we carry in our reason at all times. These original models of perfection serve to show how the rules constituting them are applied in a fashion such that one could see them if one only had eyes to see perfection in the same way that we see the rough copies (*ectypa*). And though we never *see* practical ideals as individuated in ourselves or the world – just as we never see but only *think* of the theoretical ideal underlying all conditioned reality – they nevertheless count as individuals in that we can automatically exclude any and all predicates that are not consistent with the categorical imperative or moral law.

This last point is important: Kant thinks ideals are not simply the arbitrary combinations of qualities. Rather, they offer a stable standard to measure ourselves against because they are determined from ideas via ‘complete determination in accordance with *a priori* rules’.<sup>56</sup> This offers a much needed constraint when it comes to their formation: Ideals never arise independently of the rules used to conceive them. Nevertheless, they do more than a rule does on its own since they present the underlying substrate that should always accompany our thoughts, maxim-formation, and actions as its visible correlates.<sup>57</sup> And because

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<sup>56</sup>A571/B599.

<sup>57</sup>I think my reconstruction provides a possible answer to the puzzle of whether certain maxims are more general than others, of which there has been much discussion in the literature. When it comes to question of the generality of a maxim and whether or not certain maxims are more foundational than others as, say, rules for life or ‘*Lebensregeln*’, cf. Höffe (1979, 87–96), and Bittner (1974), or as an underlying intention, see O’Neill (1983, 1989) or as ‘arranged hierarchically’ in Allison (1990, 89–94), we might do better with a basic individuated ideal of reason as a sort of metaphysical grounding as opposed to a regress to the *most* general practical idea qua rule.

the standard function of an ideal can range beyond particular moments of action, there is I think a need to treat ideals as independent concepts from ideas.

Indeed, I think we see here an essential distinction come to light, a distinction that holds because of the unique contribution that individuation might introduce into Kant's ethical metaphysics. The individuation points beyond a mere rule function. For if we have an individuated entity of thought, then we have *something* – in a loose, non-spatiotemporal sense of the term – to serve as a point of comparison with other individuated entities, namely, us as persons and the world as a shared arena of action.<sup>58</sup>

In his *Metaphysik L<sub>2</sub>* (probably delivered in 1790–1791), Kant distinguishes between ideas and ideals in a way illuminating for this reading. He maintains that an ideal is an object of thought determined through an idea and that it is distinct in the manner it *grounds* the possibility of imitation. An archetype based on an idea of reason is:

actually an object of intuition, insofar as it is the **ground** of imitation. *Thus Christ is the archetype of all morality.* [...] But if we have an idea of something, e.g. of the highest morality, and now an object of intuition is given, someone is represented to us as being congruent with this idea, then we can say: this is the archetype, follow it!<sup>59</sup>

And: 'The model is a **ground** of imitation. [...] In morality one must assume no model, but rather follow the archetype which is equal to the idea of holiness'.<sup>60</sup> But what does Kant mean when he speaks of 'grounding'? And what role does grounding play in this use of ideals as points of comparison?

To the first question, Kant is quite explicit in his *Metaphysik L<sub>2</sub>* that ground and cause are distinct. A ground is the 'principle of being' for something, while cause is the 'principle of something's becoming'.<sup>61</sup> One example he offers is of a triangle. Its grounding – its principle of being – is the presence of three straight lines. Without these its possibility to *be* in the first place vanishes. Its cause – its principle of becoming – is the act of bringing these lines together at intersecting angles to actually form the triangle.

<sup>58</sup>Even if these entities differ, since the latter have sensible correlates in spatiotemporal experience.

<sup>59</sup>*Metaphysik L<sub>2</sub>* (28:577), my emphasis.

<sup>60</sup>*Metaphysik L<sub>2</sub>* (28:577), my emphasis.

<sup>61</sup>Kant writes in *Metaphysik L<sub>2</sub>*: 'Cause and ground are to be distinguished. What contains the ground of possibility is ground <ratio>, or the principle of being <principium essendi>. The ground of actuality is the principle of becoming <principium fiendi>, cause <causa>' (28:571).

With this distinction in mind, one can answer the second question as follows: A practical ideal as a ground of imitation is presupposed by the *act* of imitation. The *ground* of imitation – namely, the very presence of something with which comparison is possible in the first place – must come prior to the act. Through comparison, if one of the compared objects reveals something that the other lacks, this can be the inspiration for the other to amend its deficiency. The further behaviour to align oneself with the item is then the ‘*act* of imitation’. Take this example. When I say, ‘I ought to imitate Jesus Christ’, then I am talking about the act of imitation. But I cannot act to imitate Christ without first possessing the ideal of Christ in comparison with which I realise all my deficiencies.<sup>62</sup>

The Kantian thought here is that an ideal is not the *cause* of becoming moral, for which the categorical imperative as a rule and my concomitant freedom suffices. Instead, it has to do with representing the grounds for why imitation is necessary in the first place: namely, an indirect awareness of our and the world’s moral potential. Thus, the ideal provides the ground for an individual to *be* a certain way and acts as a substrate for one’s practical life taken as a whole; while the categorical imperative – as the rule – provides the rule for *becoming* a certain way in the moment, a multitude of which forms our moral lives. In Kant’s theory, the idea as the rule comes first, yet this rule extends and fills in a picture of the whole that should arise as a result. And this whole – present in our thinking – reveals how we and the world fall short.<sup>63</sup>

In line with this reading of an archetype as a grounding substrate, I will argue below that it should not be read as a standard for measuring

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<sup>62</sup>One finds in the *Anth* an example of this sort of comparative grounding, namely, in a passage where Kant states (albeit in the original handwritten draft) that only based on the ideal of perfect humanity can we judge its true nature. In experience we find no other rational beings with which to compare ourselves: ‘The human being is conscious of himself not merely as an animal that can reason (*animal rationabile*), but he is also conscious, irrespective of his animality, of being a rational being (*animal rationale*); and in this quality he does not cognize himself through experience, for it <would> can [sic] never teach him the <objective> unconditional necessity <of the determination of his will> of what he is supposed to be. [...] [W]ith respect to himself the human being cognizes from pure reason (*a priori*) <the humanity also as a [sic]>; namely, the ideal of humanity which, in comparison to him <with which he> as a human being through the frailties of his nature as limitations of this archetype, makes the character of his species recognizable and describable <and thus can show the pure character of his species>. However, in order to appreciate this character of his species, the comparison with a standard that can<not> be found anywhere else but in perfect humanity is necessary’ (7:321, footnote of the *Cambridge Academy Edition*).

<sup>63</sup>Though my account differs in substantial respects and though I came to their work only after writing this, I think that my view shares the same thrust as Firestone and Jacobs’ 2008 view when they detail the prototype of humanity from Book Two of Kant’s *Religion*. Though not concerned primarily here with Kant’s work on religion, I think they are correct to see the ideal archetype (or prototype) in that work as not bringing us via some influence from God to *become* moral. Rather and as they state, the prototype provides only the ‘*availability*’ to be moral in the first place, as opposed to a ‘mystical stirring of the will to become like the prototype’ (167).

maxims, but rather for estimating moral imperfection and potential for moral growth in one's own character and the world at large. Whether Kant remembers to remain consistent throughout the intricacies of his whole corpus seems to me less important so long as the thoughts behind the terminology can be connected in a coherent fashion.

#### 4. The sceptic's challenge

The sceptic challenges us here. Indeed, there seems to be a problem for any attempt to define practical ideals as potent over and above the moral law. The sceptical rebuttal focuses on the source of ideals being ideas themselves. Could it be that ideas and ideals present a redundancy in Kant's system? What does an archetype contribute to practical reasoning and action that the rule cannot? Indeed, one could maintain a parsimony of principles if one simply removed the distinction altogether. This is the root problem since it suggests that at root practical ideas and ideals might require no distinction at all.

Take, for example, Rose. She is a good person by all accounts. Ask Rose why, and she says: 'Just because it seems right; *and* I had great examples. My parents were good Christians and always tried to follow Jesus' example'.<sup>64</sup> Though Rose has meanwhile become an atheist, she always seeks to do the right thing. Now, a situation arises: Louise, her neighbour, needs immediate aid. Rose, despite having an important engagement, helps Louise because she thinks it is what one *ought* to do. Now ask Rose the following: In your reasoning, were you thinking of what Jesus Christ or a holy person would have done? Rose, it seems, need say nothing of the sort – indeed, it seems absolutely reasonable for her to say: 'Look, I just realised that helping her was what one ought to do – what everyone ought to do; I wasn't thinking of Jesus or some divine person at the time'. There seems nothing wrong or irrational with Rose's answer. What would an archetypal personification or individuation of the idea of virtue add to moral deliberation that the moral law leaves out? If it is merely to buttress us psychologically, that should find no fit in Kant's pure ethics.

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<sup>64</sup>Kant refers in the *RGV* (see 6:60ff.) and in *V-MS/Vigil* to Jesus Christ as the *Urbild* or '[archetype] of humanity', the 'ideal of moral perfection'; for example: '[The Idea of humanity] is rendered practical, if we conceive thereunder a person adequate to the Idea, or an ideal, just as Christ, for example, is presented to us as an ideal' (27:610). For an exposition as to why one cannot take more earthly moral paragons as examples see Baron (2006) for where not even Mother Teresa should be held as a moral paragon per se, since this invites the notion that moral perfection is something that some people actually *do* attain (341-3 and 347-8).

Let us try – as a first counter argument against the sceptic – to see how an ideal might favourably fit into an account in which it guides action. Suppose, now, that Rose does think of a practical archetype. Rose reasons, ‘The perfectly wise person could *only* have X-property: to always help others despite selfish interests. Not helping seems contrary to the divine person within me. Hence, I should help’. The rule tells her what property would belong to the perfect human individual, and imagining it helps her realise how the general rule should take shape individually. In personifying the rule qua ideal person, we can picture virtue in a fashion akin to us as persons.

Rather than ad hoc, this reading is in line with interpretations by John Rawls and Barbara Herman, who – until now and as far as I know – have presented the only plausible Kantian account of how an ideal can be practical. For Rawls, an ideal acts as a tool to bring the categorical imperative ‘nearer to intuition’, namely as a model in which we picture ourselves to ‘stir our moral sensibility far more deeply than did the categorical imperative in its first formulation’ (Rawls 2000, 213). Herman extends this position and claims that an ideal is essential since it allows us to take general principles and apply them to our particular existence: ‘The animation [of rules into an ideal] is not trivial; it is necessary in order to represent the Stoic principles as ones that can be the principles in a *human life*’, making the ideal ‘a formal *embodiment* of regulative principle’ (Herman 2007, 68). There must be ways for taking the supersensible principles of morality and applying them to the sensible realm. Thus, it helps to have these principles embodied in representations of people like us. Herman writes: ‘The wise man eats, marries, negotiates the obligations of citizenship, raises children, and the rest. These are the kinds of things that a human person must do’.<sup>65</sup> By possessing this personification of the moral law in a person like myself, ‘I have a model for how to behave: a way to think about what to do’ (Herman 2007, 69). So goes one Kantian way of approaching the practical idea/ideal distinction.

As intriguing as this line of interpretation is I think it faces two major issues: First and most importantly, I think it will not assuage the sceptic who still wonders about the necessity of this extra step of personifying rules. Second, I think that it is actually something

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<sup>65</sup>Herman (2007, 68). Here is where the notion breaks away from Kant’s since the ideal can never be taken from experience or placed in its trappings without doing harm to the ideal itself. Indeed, see the helpful exegetical note by Heimsoeth in regards to Kant’s employing the notion of ideal almost exclusively with holiness of the will (1969, 417n18); and again Baron (2006, 341–3).

that Kant forbids against in his very definition of ideals. And if we can come up with an interpretation that both answers the sceptic while standing in close proximity to the letter and spirit of Kant's texts, then *that* reading should take the prize.

Starting with the second issue, namely, that it cannot qualify as a completely kosher Kantian account, Kant warns against imagining the ideal in a fashion that seeks to 'realise the ideal in an example, that is, in the [field of] appearance, as, for instance, to depict the [character of the perfectly] wise man in a novel'.<sup>66</sup> His reason is that any attempt to picture or imagine an ideal in the trappings of our own empirical existence 'far from edifying', is actually 'absurd', since 'the natural limitations [...] are constantly doing violence to the completeness of the idea, [...] and so cast suspicion on the good itself [...] by giving it the air of being a mere fiction'.<sup>67</sup> Thus, *pace* Rawls and Herman, Kantian ideals cannot function in quite the way they seek. We should never personify an ideal in the same way that we can picture, say, fictitious persons. This explains Kant's choice of the Christ as the archetypal embodiment of moral perfection in later works – a figure whose life and suffering are an individual's, but whose status remains divine in that he is manifestly unlike us. Thus, an ideal is and must remain an individuated entity of the intelligible realm as opposed to a rule animated with all the accoutrements of the phenomenal realm.

Now to the first issue of not assuaging the sceptic: Even if it were kosher in Kantian terms to personify the moral law as someone who eats, marries, and has children, why think of this ideal person *at all* if both she and you decide on the course of action provided by the moral law, namely, the law that *everyone* should follow? It seems like the rule should and, indeed, *must* suffice. Such an ideal instantiation of a rule is flat-out superfluous if it is just to showcase the rule in action. The very fact that this perfect person only offers guidance *because of the rule* makes it seem anything but necessary.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>A570/B598, translation altered.

<sup>67</sup>A570/B598.

<sup>68</sup>I don't think that the Rawls-Herman approach is totally out of options for responding to the sceptic. But I do think that these options will require bringing ideals down to earth *so much so* that they cease to be ideals, but rather become merely fictitious displays of virtue in action. Now this might provide a strong tool for helping us to imagine acting morally ourselves, but we don't need ideals in the strong conceptual sense to do so. Hence, the ideal would remain more or less superfluous and lack the subjective necessity that Kant thinks it possesses.

## 5. Two functions of practical ideals as moral substrate

As strong as the sceptic's objection appears, I see compelling reasons for maintaining the idea-ideal distinction because of how one's life cannot be chopped up into moral episodes, but rather should constitute a holistic experience of oneself and the world as progressing towards a morally better state. Building off of the analysis begun in Section 2, I develop now the two functions of ideals that might solve the root problem. The upshot of my analysis is: Ideals are practical not *in* action per se, but rather in how they prime us to be moral in the first place. By prime, I mean that they enable us (a) to recognise our and the world's moral imperfections, while (b) revealing our and the world's moral potential as a result. As a substrate or grounding, they represent principles of *being* as opposed to principles of *becoming*.

As any historical reconstruction, I will attempt to provide a charitable and close reading of Kant's thought, but – again – this requires pushing past what the texts provide. Hence, it seems safest to couch this interpretation in Kantian terms as opposed to Kant's own. When I am forced to supplement his explicit statements, I draw on resources from his lectures and argue in a manner consistent with his thinking overall. For the historical sticklers out there who find any inconsistency between an interpretation and a single passage as grounds enough for dismissal of a theory, this reading might not suit their needs. But among other Kantian approaches, I think this comes nearest to Kant's theory in important respects.

Consulting again the function of the theoretical ideal from the first *Critique* is informative here. In an important passage on the transcendental ideal as a theoretical archetype Kant writes: 'The ideal is, therefore, the archetype [*Urbild*] of all things, which one and all, as imperfect copies (*ectypa*), derive from it [*daher nehmen*] the material of their possibility, and while approximating to it in varying degrees, yet always fall very far short of actually attaining it'.<sup>69</sup> And in another passage, he notes that reason must think of 'a transcendental substrate that contains, as it were, the whole store of material from which all possible predicates of things must be taken'.<sup>70</sup> As I will show below, Kant's descriptions of ideals in practical reasoning parallel quite nicely what he says here about the transcendental ideal with some minor adjustments. We postulate them as the source of morality or a store of potential material, which

<sup>69</sup>A578/B606, translation altered.

<sup>70</sup>A575/B603.

cannot be derived from the world of sense. And they enable in turn the estimation of our characters and the world. In sum, they help us *estimate* morality, but ultimately are also the rational *source* that contains morality in its unconditioned form – a source that we do not find in the sensible world, but rather in the intelligible one.

Consider the following passage from the *Metaphysik L<sub>2</sub>* lecture notes:

A being of the reasoning reason <*ens rationis ratiocinantis*> is an *ideal*. Reason is constrained to assume such an ideal of perfection as a *greatest* <*maximum*> in a matter, according to which the other is judged, e.g. a model of the most perfect friendship. Such an ideal is the greatest, and for that reason only one; for the greatest is only a single one. – Imaginary beings <*entia ficta imaginaria*> are things which we can think; but these are not ideals. For *ideals are a matter of reason and without intuition*. They are necessary substrates <*substrata*> of reason. Chimeras and ideals are different from each other. An *ideal* arises by a necessary use of reason; a *chimera* on the other hand is an arbitrary predicate of straying reason.<sup>71</sup>

From this passage we can see the functions of an ideal as a moral substrate emerge, functions that connect back with both the negative epistemic quality Kant references in the first *Critique*, as well as to the more general positive function vis-à-vis morality's source. An ideal serves as a substrate that offers two aspects to the practical sphere that ideas as rules do not, namely: functioning as (a) a measuring stick for copies (negative *standard function*) and (b) a reservoir of material for the copies – the possession of which enables (a) and reveals our potential to *be* moral in the first place (positive *constitutional function*).

These two functions reveal a way to conceive of ideals' practical power as unique in response to the sceptic. The first functional aspect – reminiscent of Meaning Two from Section 1 – does not tell us *how* to act morally, but rather is negative in that it (a) reveals constantly the morally impoverished state of affairs. Ideals are not guidelines or inspirations for *acting*, but inform us constantly of the extent to which we and the world fall short of a moral standard that we do not find outside ourselves, but within our reasoning about ourselves and the world. In this way, they serve a totally different function than rules. It is only because we have these ideals that we are even capable of recognising goodness, virtue, etc., as coherent frameworks in which we *ought* and *can* take an active part.

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<sup>71</sup>V-Met-L2/Pöhlitz (28:555).

Support for this interpretation can be found most explicitly in the Mrongovius notes from Kant's lectures on ethics (1785). There, Kant first details that practical *ideas* 'constitute guidelines to which we must constantly approach' and 'make up the law of approximation'.<sup>72</sup> Kant goes on, however, to say that we nevertheless 'have to possess a yardstick by which to estimate our moral worth, and to know the degree to which we are faulty and deficient'.<sup>73</sup> For this, we conceive of the maximum as an *ideal*, 'so that I know how far away I am, or how near I come to it'.<sup>74</sup> As the rule qua law of approximation serves a primary function in determining action, the ideal serves an auxiliary function as a backdrop to action. The ideal provides the yardstick that shows me to what degree my moral worth is waning or waxing. This function is also referred to in Kant's lectures on pedagogy, where he states that everyone 'has an ideal of humanity before his eyes', with which one 'compares himself' in order to note how one falls short.<sup>75</sup> Of course, it will never be waxing to the point where we attain the ideal fully. Instead, we will always face our degree of moral imperfection. This, in turn, is an implicit and indirect indication that we stand before a moral space that we can fill with steps towards moral self-improvement.

With this 'negative standard function', I mean a judgment in which a conceptual standard finds no particular case as corresponding to it adequately, but instead myriad imperfect moments that approximate it to some wanting degree. A practical ideal will always aid judgment because *each and every case in concreto* will fail to be judged as fully adequate to the standard of complete goodness that the practical ideal represents. Thus, we're dealing here with what might be called a *negative constitutive judgment*<sup>76</sup> that will occur whenever we estimate practical states of affairs. Some states of affairs will possess greater commonality with the ideal than others, but they are never enough and never finished and never absolutely transparent as cases of the unconditioned good. Nevertheless, the recognition affords an indirect awareness of our and the world's potential to be moral in a comprehensive manner. Thus, a positive aspect to the practical ideal must obtain as well if it is to be

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<sup>72</sup>V-Mo/Mron II (29:604).

<sup>73</sup>V-Mo/Mron II (29:604-5).

<sup>74</sup>V-Mo/Mron II (29:605).

<sup>75</sup>Päd (9:489).

<sup>76</sup>This negative sense of constitutive judgment is my own terminology and not Kant's. At the time when Kant writes the first *Critique*, constitutive judging would never seem to apply to moral estimations of our self or the world. Ideals – as concepts – can never find cases of possible objects that provide corresponding intuitions in experience, since no such intuition would provide a perfect exemplar.

known at all. Knowing something to be *not-M* (or *not-fully-M*) remains fully indeterminate if *M* remains a total unknown. Thus, the negative standard function depends on inferring a tacit positive presence of the moral ideal substrate that we possess as rational beings.

This brings out the second aspect also reminiscent of Meaning Two above, namely, that ideals possess a positive function (b) to reveal the moral potential for self- and world-improvement in a systematically coherent way. It is this function that I think one can call the constitutional function of a practical ideal as a moral substrate. For one might conclude that the negative epistemic function will only demoralise us. But this reminder of our own and the world's moral imperfection should not cause us despair, but instead inform us of the moral material left to realise and which we infer as *there* in potential.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, when introducing Christ as an 'ideal' in *Vigilantius'* notes on his lectures on ethics (1793), Kant points out that such a personified rendering of the practical idea of humanity's virtue provides us with a crucial point of moral 'comparison' (which connects with the discussion of imitation in Section 2). First, from the comparison Kant points to the negative function (a) sketched above, in that an ideal reveals 'the insignificance of our moral worth in consciousness of its inadequacy to the law'.<sup>78</sup> However, the second function is just as important. Indeed, out of this comparison between our own imperfect state and that of the archetypal ideal within our reason, we find a relation to 'no special duties', but rather to 'the general dutifulness that we must observe in all our moral conduct', which awakens a 'need for firm determination in our principles and tenacious pursuit of them'.<sup>79</sup> Important is the emphasis on ideals holding up for us a *general dutifulness*. Rather than tell us how to act in some proximate moment of action via practical ideas, the ideal provides us a point of comparison (a ground of imitation) that contextualises the moral parts of experience within one, progressing moral whole.

Ideals, therefore, are grounds that make living a life primed for moral action coherent – models in thought that provide checks but also from which we infer potential for growth and a system in which such moral growth can make sense in the first place. In such a way, ideals accompany our thinking at all times as a moral reservoir of material – the divine man within us, the divine intelligence above us, the moral world before us, etc.

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<sup>77</sup>Cf. *V-MS/Vigil*, where he refers to 'despondency' as a 'defective disposition' (27:611).

<sup>78</sup>*V-MS/Vigil* (27:610).

<sup>79</sup>*V-MS/Vigil* (27:610).

– by which we gauge the degree of moral imperfection, and remind ourselves that there is plenty of moral brick and mortar left to be set down.

## 6. Ideals as mental grounding

Will this reconstruction assuage the sceptic and provide a practicable solution for the root problem? An answer to this question depends not only on my interpretation but equally on the metaphysical slant of the sceptic. But even a sceptic who finds the use of grounding propitious and who accepts moral realism might ask: Can something be considered an influence if it *does* nothing, i.e. remains in the background? In conclusion, I address this sort of sceptic's concern.

To summarise: Ideals on my reading remain an essential point of orientation without which moral experience as a lifelong, meaningful activity would lose coherency. I think this moral priming is also easy to take for granted. If the Kantian view as I present it holds, then it is always *there* or *graspable* in our rational nature. That is, it speaks to our capacity or the very *possibility for us to be* a certain way – our *enabled* state to become moral in the context of projects that stretch a lifetime. Consequently – and to answer the final sceptical question – I think we can consider this enabling capacity to be a real and necessary influence of sorts. That is, to enable something is to influence something in an indirect way, even if it does not form a causal component in the chain of reasoning but instead acts as a grounding component. I will work with the terms 'substrate', 'ground', and 'background', to illustrate something that challenges easy description, but all of which apply to the same basic idea: namely, that there is a practical influence at work in something's being ready at hand.

The challenge facing my task is that we want things – and particularly practical elements – to *do* something for us, to motivate us, guide us, move us, etc. It is not clear how one can think of practical power in non-causal terms. As posited above, I think a practical ideal possesses practical influence because it constitutes a moral grounding in virtue of which moral experiences are possible in the first place. For the Kantian theory, it is in virtue of this grounding being at all times present and unalterable (i.e. unalterable by our own conscious desires) that we are in a position to experience moral life in a coherent way even when moments to act are not at hand.

To make this sort of relation clear, I would like to use the 'in-virtue-of' relation as a heuristic to get at how this relation might be articulated. I do

not want, however, to identify the sort of grounding I have in mind with any modern theory. Modern theories operate within their own parameters with their own presuppositions that do not allow simple comparisons with historical theories. Nevertheless, I think that there is a similar motivation at work in these projects, namely, to investigate meaningful relations of dependence that are metaphysically necessary but noncausal in nature.<sup>80</sup> Paul Audi's definition, for example, is: 'I propose that [*grounding*] expresses a primitive, noncausal relation of determination' (Audi 2012, 686). This very loose definition suits my purposes quite well for the sort of determination that must be at play with practical ideals. 'Primitive',<sup>81</sup> as something non-reducible and required; 'noncausal' as influencing without effecting anything directly.

Since this sort of relation is rather counter-intuitive, consider the following examples of a '*dispositional*' form of a grounding relation offered by Audi: 'The ball is disposed to roll in virtue of being spherical. The wire has the power to conduct electricity in virtue of being copper' (Audi 2012, 689). Both examples articulate the way that certain underlying traits must precede actions or processes without causing those to occur. Because the ball is spherical – *in the first place* – its rolling is *then* possible. Because the wire is copper – *in the first place* – its power to conduct electricity is *then* possible. Furthermore, it is because these underlying traits *persist* that ongoing and future rolling or conducting of electricity is possible. Thus, there is a power or influence at work in these traits in so far as without them these events could not occur. And yet, they on their own do not cause anything to happen.

Returning to Kantian ideals: All direct guidance or governance of our actions is due to our freedom and the guidance of the categorical imperative. That said, this idea as a moral-practical cognition or rule of reason causes individuated entities of thought to arise, which play an indispensable albeit indirect role in our practical lives. Individuated as a subject, the moral law forms a person in the form of the holy will, wise man of the stoics, or Jesus Christ. Individuated as an object, the moral law

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<sup>80</sup>A Kantian account of grounding calls for a study in its own right. I cannot offer such an account here, but I think that – as part of his transcendental idealist project – it would be one that included many of the elements currently debated, cf. Bliss and Trogon (2014). To shoot from the hip, I would venture that the notion of grounding for Kant – when it comes to ideals, at least – must go deeper than serving a mere explanatory role, though it clearly serves in philosophical explanations. Indeed, the necessity of the highest good in these explanations must track or align with some *real* or *universal* grounding in our rational nature. Otherwise, there would be no common standard for grounding a collective moral experience. For an insightful challenge to the notion of metaphysical grounding, see Wilson (2014).

<sup>81</sup>Schaffer (2009) and Rosen (2010, see pp. 113–4) also see grounding as 'primitive'. Shaffer notes that grounding is a primitive relation in so far as it 'is an unanalyzable but needed notion' (2009, 364).

forms the highest good possible in the world. Taken together, these form an underlying substrate (read: grounding) to our constitution as beings in the world. It is because this basic constitution persists and permeates as a background condition that we can intelligibly progress towards these standards of perfection as persisting points of comparison. That is, they are grounds of imitation, which make it first clear that (a) moral deficiencies exist and (b) acts of imitation might correct these by realising the moral potential we possess in reason.

To use an example of my own of the sort of grounding relation that I have in mind, consider: 'I can navigate the world coherently in virtue of there being ground under my feet, a connected terrain, and Polaris holding North: all of which remain constant despite my movements'. The example is imperfect since it relates my physical navigation with a physical terrain, and I want it to relate to intelligible elements in reason as they condition the very coherency of certain experiences in actual lived life. But the general idea aids in grasping the sort of influence that I have in mind, namely, a primitive and unconditionally fundamental one that does not cause anything, but rather must be presupposed in the first place. That is, one could not make any sense of navigation or movement were it not for the terrain and (here: literal) grounding that must precede the possibility of navigation to unfold. Whether we move remains up to us. And though we may forget the terrain under our feet and take for granted Polaris above us as we wander, all serve an essentially primitive and noncausal role by enabling our navigation and providing the space in which our experience of progress *as progress* is first possible.

I think Kant confesses the tacit nature of ideals in experience in *On the Common Saying* where he remarks that the principle of the moral law can 'pass over and set aside (as episodic)' the doctrine of the *highest good* as its ideal object.<sup>82</sup> I think he is, first and foremost, highlighting the secondary or indirect importance of this ideal for moral action. But furthermore I think he is pointing out that the highest good is in some ways marked by its absence in everyday conscious life. We need not always think of ideals. It is only when we reflect on how the moral parts fit together that we must indeed – when an episode of reflection takes grip – think of the whole. Yet this thought is of something constant and permeating – a model that we carry in us and that represents the point of reference for our moral activity in the world. This substrate of goodness is one we possess as a standard

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<sup>82</sup>TP (8:280).

and which serves as a moral constant against which we can orient ourselves in moral matters by identifying through comparison the moral improvement left to be realised. However, this priming remains nothing over and above the basic grounding of goodness in us and in the world. Ideals cause nothing, but rather permeate our thinking.

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## ORCID

Alexander T. Englert  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7275-8318>

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