

On the Practical Necessity of the Categories

Anil Gomes[†] and Andrew Stephenson[‡]

[†]Trinity College, University of Oxford

[‡]Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich

Forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*

Abstract

Kant tells us that we cannot know whether all finite rational beings must share the same forms of sensibility. Can we know whether all finite rational beings must share the same forms of understanding? Recent discussion of this issue has focused on whether Kant thinks this can be decided from the theoretical point of view. But sometimes when knowledge gives out, we must have faith. Our concern in this essay is whether Kant thinks we can settle the question on distinctively practical grounds. We set out and evaluate an argument which would show that we have practical grounds to accept that all finite rational beings must share our forms of understanding. We consider ways in which this argument might be resisted and investigate the implications of the argument for the possibility of deciding the question on theoretical grounds. The connections Kant draws between morality, freedom, and causation show that any account of the kind of knowledge he thinks we can have of the forms of understanding of other finite rational beings must be part of a more general story about Kant's account of the nature and limits of our knowledge of the moral law.

I. Introduction

In the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant famously compares what is to follow to the ‘first thoughts of Copernicus’, suggesting that we should ‘try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition’, i.e., ‘that we can cognize of things *a priori* only what we ourselves have put into them’ (Bxvi–xviii).¹ In adopting this Critical method, Kant seeks to explain the possibility and limits of our a priori cognition of things, and thus solve the problems of metaphysics, by appeal to a priori elements in our faculty of cognition.

How much variation is possible for these a priori elements? One form of this question is temporal: is it possible for the a priori elements to change over time? Hegel raises this question in his lectures on the philosophy of history and it threads through much of the post-Kantian German idealist tradition. Another is personal: is it possible for the a priori elements to differ across individuals? Hegel raises a form of this question too, in charging Kant with a form of subjective idealism. And, of course, although we have raised this question with attention to Kant’s theoretical philosophy, corresponding questions, with corresponding dimensions of variation, can be raised for any part of the Critical philosophy which makes appeal to some sort of a priori structure of the mind.²

¹ References to Kant’s works are given by the Academy edition volume and page number along with abbreviations that are listed at the end, except for those to the *Critique of Pure Reason* which take the standard A/B format. Translations are from the Cambridge editions listed at the end.

² On the temporal question, see especially Sedgwick (2023, 155–158). On the personal question, see especially Ameriks (1985, 13–15). For some relevant passages in Hegel (1968–

Kant explicitly considers a version of the personal question for the pure forms of sensibility. Sensibility is that part of our faculty of cognition which relates us to objects by means of intuitions, immediate and singular representations through which objects are given to us (A19/B33). Kant argues in the *Transcendental Aesthetic* that these intuitions possess a form which ‘must all lie ready for it in the mind a priori’ (A20/B34). This is the a priori element to sensibility—its pure form. For human beings, the pure forms of sensibility are space and time. But ‘we cannot judge at all’, Kant tells us, ‘whether the intuitions of other thinking beings are bound to the same conditions that limit our intuition, and that are universally valid for us’ (A27/B43). It is ‘not necessary for us to limit the kind of intuition in space and time to the sensibility of human beings; it may well be that all finite beings necessarily agree with human beings in this regard (though we cannot decide this)’ (B72).

In a recent paper with A.W. Moore, we characterise Kant’s view here as an undecidability thesis: we cannot know whether or not discursive cognizers with other forms of sensibility are possible (Gomes, Moore, and Stephenson 2022).³ The concern of that paper—hereafter *GMS*—is the question of whether Kant endorses a symmetrical undecidability thesis for the understanding. Understanding is that part of our faculty of cognition through which we think of objects by means of concepts (A69/B94). Kant argues in the *Transcendental Analytic* that our understanding, too, has an a priori element, a pure form, which consists of twelve pure concepts he calls the categories (A80/B106). Does he think that we cannot know whether or not there could be discursive cognizers with different forms of understanding to our own? *GMS* argues that it is surprisingly difficult to determine whether Kant commits to the same sort of undecidability thesis regarding other forms of understanding that he explicitly endorses regarding other forms of

), see: the *Science of Logic*, vol. 2, §1312, §1338; *Encyclopedia*, part 1, §40, §42; the *Preface to the Philosophy of Right* and §135; the section on Kant in part 3 of the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*; and ‘The Individual as Subject of History’ in the *General Introduction to the Philosophy of History*.

³ Note the restriction to ‘discursive cognizers’, or what Kant calls finite rational or thinking beings—these are beings with sensibly conditioned intellects, i.e., with both sensibility and understanding. We are not here concerned with intuitive intellects or with sensible creatures with no capacity for rational thought.

sensibility, or whether he rather thinks that we can know that all discursive cognizers must share the same forms of understanding.

But even if Kant is not explicit about whether we can know whether discursive cognizers with other forms of understanding are possible, does he say anything about other cognitive relations we might stand in to this issue? Kant carefully distinguishes claims which are decided or judged on theoretical grounds from those which can be accepted on practical grounds.⁴ GMS confines its discussion to textual and systematic considerations from Kant's theoretical philosophy, and so in effect to the question of whether Kant thinks we could have theoretical knowledge of the possibility of discursive cognizers with other forms of understanding. But even if it is unclear whether Kant thinks we could settle the question *from the theoretical point of view*, perhaps he thinks we can settle it from a practical point of view. This is our topic in this essay: does Kant think we can settle the question of whether there can be discursive cognizers with other forms of understanding on practical grounds? This question is of interest in its own right. It also has relevance for the debate set out in GMS. For the unity of the Critical system ensures that the possibility of settling questions from the practical point of view has implications for the theoretical grounds available for those claims.

Here is the plan for what follows. In §2 we introduce a distinction between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge and refine our target question. In §§3–4 we present an argument for the view that we can have practical knowledge that forms of understanding different to our own are impossible. In §5 we consider ways to resist this argument, and in §6 we consider how it relates to the possibility of knowledge from the theoretical point of view.

2. Practical Knowledge

Kant draws a broad distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge in a number of places and in a number of ways.⁵ One important distinction comes from the *Critique of Practical Reason* where Kant distinguishes theoretical and practical grounds for assenting to some claim (5:4–5). In very broad terms, theoretical grounds are evidential grounds which bear on the

⁴ See e.g. Bxxx, A824–31/B852–59; CPtR 5:4–6, 120–22, 142–46; JL 9:67–69.

⁵ See Kohl (2024), Schafer (2023, 85–88), and Engstrom (2002).

truth of the claim. They arise from reason's interest in the cognition of objects (5:120). But reason also has an interest in 'the determination of the will' (5:120). And this allows practical grounds for assenting to some claim—for example, when assent to the claim is a condition on the pursuit of some end which we are required to set. There is thus a distinction between assenting to some claim on grounds which are broadly evidential and assenting to some claim on grounds which are broadly related to the determination of our will.⁶

This distinction comes apart from another way in which Kant sometimes characterises the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge—in terms of a difference between representations of what is and representations of what ought to be (A633/B661). The difference is manifest in the case of the practical postulates: those claims about freedom, immortality, and God which Kant thinks we must accept on practical grounds. The practical postulates are representations of what *is* but ones which we must accept on practical grounds (CPrR 5:122; 5:142f.). Given that claims about the possibility or otherwise of discursive cognizers with forms of understanding different to our own are claims about what is rather than what ought to be, the relevant distinction for our purposes is the distinction between theoretical and practical grounds for assent.⁷

This gives us a broad distinction between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge corresponding to a distinction between theoretical and practical grounds for assent. But what exactly is practical knowledge? There are a multitude of practical epistemic notions and attitudes in Kant: practical knowledge, practical cognition, belief or faith (*Glaube*), hope, wisdom, and many others. Which of these is in play will depend in part on the kinds of practical grounds available for the claim in question and the way in which those grounds relate to the will. For our purposes here, we will abstract from these details and operate with a broad contrast between theoretical and practical knowledge. We will use 'theoretical knowledge' and its cognates to pick out assent which is based solely on grounds which bear on the truth of the claim in question. And we will take 'practical knowledge' and its cognates to pick out assent which is based at least in part on grounds broadly related

⁶ See Willaschek (2010), Gardner (2006), Wood (2020, 29–34), Gomes (2024, 101–118).

⁷ See JL 9:86–87 for an account of both distinctions and how they relate.

to the determination of our will, where the sense of ‘practical knowledge’ is fixed most basically by that epistemic relation, however it is to be understood, which Kant thinks we stand in to our freedom, to immortality, and to God.

Some clarifications. Our definitions ensure that the distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge is exhaustive and exclusive. But one could guarantee exhaustiveness and exclusivity by defining practical knowledge as assent which is based solely on practical grounds and theoretical knowledge as assent which is based at least in part on theoretical grounds. Or one could give up on either exhaustiveness or exclusivity, for instance by defining the terms so that mixed cases fall into neither category. Why opt for our regimentation?

One principled reason is that our usage tracks Kant’s own. Assent to the practical postulates is the paradigm case of practical knowledge—and, as we will see below, Kant takes this assent to be based only in part on practical grounds. In contrast, our empirical knowledge and our knowledge of the synthetic a priori principles laid out in the *Critique of Pure Reason* are paradigm cases of theoretical knowledge, and Kant takes these to be based solely on theoretical grounds.

Moreover, we can see why Kant should draw the relevant distinctions in this way. That there can be legitimate cognitive attitudes based solely on theoretical grounds is never seriously in doubt—even if part of the role of the Critical philosophy is to explain how such knowledge is possible. But, given the limitations placed on theoretical knowledge in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, there is a genuine question about whether there can be legitimate cognitive attitudes towards matters that outstrip the availability of theoretical grounds. And that is just to say that there is a genuine question about whether there can be legitimate cognitive attitudes that are *not* based solely on theoretical grounds. Kant’s innovation in addressing this issue is to introduce practical grounds, i.e. grounds which relate to the determination of the will. And he captures these facts efficiently by distinguishing our relation to the theoretical principles from our relation to the practical postulates in the way we have described. Proceeding otherwise would obscure the philosophical issue at stake as well as Kant’s innovation.

Two final observations on the distinction between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. First note that, while drawing the distinction in the way that we have ensures exclusivity in the sense that no single act of assent can be classed as both theoretical and practical knowledge, it does not of itself entail that there could not in principle be two acts of assent towards the same claim, one of which qualifies as theoretical knowledge, the other as practical knowledge. For all we have said so far, it may be that there are some claims for which there are both sufficient solely theoretical grounds for assent and sufficient partly practical grounds for assent. Perhaps there are issues that can be settled by both theoretical and practical reason. We return to this issue in §6. Second, note that drawing the distinction in the way that we have ensures that practical knowledge exhibits a kind of dominance under inference. For instance, if we have practical knowledge that p and theoretical knowledge that p entails q , and if *on this basis* we infer q , then our knowledge of q will be practical. This is just the inferential aspect of the fact that mixed cases—cases of assent on the basis of both theoretical and practical grounds—qualify as practical knowledge. It will be important in what follows, and again, for reasons that will become clear, we take ourselves to be following Kant here.

How does the distinction between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge bear on the debate set out in *GMS*? That paper formulates three theses about the variability of intellectual forms, i.e., the categorial forms of understanding.⁸ The first is symmetrical to the undecidability thesis which Kant endorses about sensible form:

(UNDECIDABILITY) We cannot know whether or not discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are possible.

Undecidability is equivalent to the conjunction of two claims: we cannot know that discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are possible and we cannot know that discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are

⁸ We put to one side issues about the different aspects of intellectual form—the functions of judgement and apperception, say—and focus only on the question of whether Kant thought it undecidable that discursive cognizers with different categories are possible (see *GMS*, §3). The option of taking a different stance on each element of intellectual form complicates the taxonomy of available positions but what we say below holds irrespective of one's views on the relation between the various aspects of intellectual form.

impossible. And this gives us two ways of opposing the view, each corresponding to the negation of one of its conjuncts:

(CONTINGENCY) We can know that discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are possible.

(NECESSITY) We can know that discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are impossible.

Contingency is rejected in GMS on the grounds that it is implausible that Kant would think that our knowledge of the possibility of other intellectual forms extends further than our knowledge of the possibility of other sensible form. In §6 we will see a more principled reason for ruling out Contingency, but for now we put it to one side. What is important for our purposes is that Kant's distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge gives us two ways to understand Undecidability and Necessity:

(THEORETICAL UNDECIDABILITY) We cannot have *theoretical* knowledge of whether or not discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are possible.

(THEORETICAL NECESSITY) We can have *theoretical* knowledge that discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are impossible.

(PRACTICAL UNDECIDABILITY) We cannot have *practical* knowledge of whether or not discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are possible.

(PRACTICAL NECESSITY) We can have *practical* knowledge that discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are impossible.

GMS argues that textual and systematic considerations do not settle whether Kant endorsed Undecidability or Necessity, but in effect its focus is solely on Theoretical Undecidability and Theoretical Necessity. Our focus in what follows is on Practical Undecidability and Practical Necessity. (In §6 we return to the question of how the practical theses relate to their theoretical counterparts.) Practical Undecidability says that we can have no practical

grounds for determining whether discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are possible. Practical Necessity says that we can have practical grounds for ruling them out. Which, if either, would Kant endorse?

3. The Argument from Freedom

Consider the following argument, which we'll call the Argument from Freedom:

1. Necessarily, all discursive cognizers are subject to the moral law.
2. Necessarily, all discursive cognizers that are subject to the moral law are free.
3. Necessarily, all discursive cognizers that are free possess the concept of freedom.
4. Necessarily, possession of the concept of freedom requires possession of the concept of causation.
5. Necessarily, if you possess the concept of causation, you possess the categories.

By 'the categories' we mean all and only those which constitute the pure form of our own understanding. Premises (1)–(5) thus imply that, necessarily, all discursive cognizers have the same form of understanding that we do, or equivalently, that discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are impossible. If we can have grounds for assenting to premises (1)–(5) of this argument, and if among these grounds are practical grounds, then we can have practical knowledge that discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are impossible—the Argument from Freedom would be an argument for Practical Necessity.

We will motivate attributing these premises to Kant in a moment, but note first that one can run a structurally similar argument which makes use of the category of necessity:

1. Necessarily, all discursive cognizers are subject to the moral law.
2. Necessarily, all discursive cognizers that are subject to the moral law experience the moral law as an imperative.

3. Necessarily, all discursive cognizers that experience the moral law as an imperative possess the concept of necessity.
4. (...)
5. Necessarily, if you possess the concept of necessity, you possess the categories.

We suspect that there are further arguments invoking different categories which share this form—consider the connections between the concept of a person and the categories of subsistence, reality, unity, and existence (A403) or the way in which at least the presentation, and perhaps also the structure, of the three formulas of the categorical imperative connect to the categories of quantity: unity, plurality, and totality (G 4:436). We will focus here on the concept of freedom and its link to the category of causation but much of what we say will carry over to these other arguments.

Would Kant accept the premises of the Argument from Freedom? We take them in turn.

Premise (1): *Reason to Morality*. Kant holds that the absolute necessity characteristic of the moral law is to be explained, in part, through its connection with reason. It is only because morality has its basis in reason that it has an authority which does not depend on our individual desires. We cannot ground the moral law in any ‘*special property of human nature*’, he writes:

For, duty is to be practical unconditional necessity of action and it must therefore hold for all rational beings (to which alone an imperative can apply at all) and *only because of this* be also a law for all human wills.
(G 4:425)

It is the requirement to ground morality in reason which links the scope of the moral law to the category of rational beings.

This link between morality and reason takes a particular form for finite rational beings—discursive cognizers—since it is only beings with competing

inclinations who experience the moral law as an imperative. But, again, this does not turn on anything distinctive about human beings:

imperatives are only formulae expressing the relation of objective laws of volition in general to the subjective imperfection of the will of this or that rational being, for example, of the human will. (G 4:414; cf. G: 4:428)

Thus ‘since morality serves as a law for us only as rational beings, it must hold for all rational beings’ (G 4:447). Which is to say at least that, necessarily, all discursive cognizers are subject to the moral law, premise (1) of the Argument from Freedom.

Premise (2): *Morality to Freedom*. Freedom of the will is a necessary and sufficient condition of the moral law. This ‘reciprocity thesis’ is presented in §III of the *Groundwork* and then again in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. A will which is free in the negative sense is one which operates independently of extraneous causes such as desire or inclination. But a will which is free in the negative sense must also be free in the positive sense—which is to say that it cannot be lawless but must operate according to a principle which is itself independent of extraneous cause. The only universal rational principle, the only law, which could determine the will in this way is the moral law. Thus, as Kant puts it in the *Groundwork*, ‘a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same’ (G 4:447; cf. 4:450), and in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, ‘freedom and unconditional practical law reciprocally imply each other’ (CPrR 5:29).

The reciprocity thesis, its defence, and its role in Kant’s search for and establishment of the supreme principle of morality (G 4:392) have been central in discussions of Kant’s ethical views.⁹ We return to some of these subtleties below. For now it suffices to support attributing to Kant the claim that, necessarily, all discursive cognizers that are subject to the moral law are free, premise (2) of the Argument from Freedom.

⁹ See e.g. Allison (1990, ch.11), Tenenbaum (2012), and Timmermann (2010).

Premise (3): *Semantic Ascent*. The third premise of the Argument from Freedom moves from freedom to the concept of freedom. We have seen reason to think that, for Kant, all those who are subject to the moral law are free. But why must they be able to *think* their freedom? The converse is stated clearly in §III of the *Groundwork* when Kant says that ‘the human being can never think of the causality of his own will otherwise than under the idea of freedom’ (G 4:452), and, this time notably without the restriction to human beings, that ‘every being that cannot act otherwise than *under the idea of freedom* is just because of that really free in a practical respect’ (G 4:448). If acting under the idea of freedom requires possession of the concept of freedom, then possession of the concept of freedom requires being free, at least in a practical respect.

But Kant also appears to endorse the other direction of entailment. Earlier in the *Groundwork*, Kant defines the will as ‘the capacity to act *in accordance with the representation* of laws, that is in accordance with principles’ (G 4:412). A free will is one which thus operates in accordance with the representation of the moral law. It must thus ‘regard itself as the author of its principles independently of alien influence; consequently, as practical reason or as the will of a rational being it must be regarded of itself as free’ (G 4:448). This means that ‘to every rational being having a will we must necessarily lend the idea of freedom also, under which alone he acts’ (G 4:448). For Kant, discursive cognizers that are free must possess the concept of freedom, premise (3) of the Argument from Freedom.

These considerations concern the connection between being free and possessing the concept of freedom. One might wonder, for that reason, whether they can be generalised to the other cases suggested above. In some cases, the line of thought will be much the same: if the will of a rational being who stands under the moral law has to act in accordance with the representation of those laws, being presented with the moral law as an imperative will require representing oneself as necessitated. So experiencing the moral law as an imperative will require the concept of necessity. In other cases, the corresponding semantic ascent may need to be motivated by more general considerations concerning the connection between consciousness and self-consciousness. We think it is plausible, for instance, that Kant thinks

being a moral person involves partly thinking of oneself as such. We do not pursue these extensions here.¹⁰

Premise (4): *Freedom to Causation*. Freedom is not lawlessness. It is a ‘kind of causality’ (A445/B473)—the capacity to initiate causal chains independently of extraneous influence. The moral law is thus itself ‘a law of causality through freedom’ (CPrR 5:47). And this shows up in the way we think about freedom. Consider the distinction between negative and positive freedom. The negative concept of freedom is the idea of a capacity to act without determination from external causes. This idea does not provide us with insight into freedom’s essence. But ‘there flows from it a *positive* concept of freedom’ (G 4:446) which connects our idea of freedom with the idea of a certain law-governed causality. The positive concept of freedom—the concept of freedom at play in Kant’s reciprocity thesis and thus premise (2) and premise (3)—is the concept of a kind of causality independent of natural necessity.

It is for this reason that the concept of a will which is subject to the moral law contains within it, Kant thinks, the concept of freedom as a kind of causality:

In the concept of a will, however, the concept of causality is already contained, and thus in the concept of a pure will there is contained the concept of a causality with freedom, that is, a causality not determinable in accordance with laws of nature (CPrR 5:55)

Thus to think of a being as free is to think of it as possessing a certain kind of causal power: ‘the concept of a being that has free will is the concept of a *causa noumenon*’ (CPrR 5:55; cf. 5:15). For Kant, possession of the (positive) concept of freedom requires possession of the concept of causation, premise (4) of the Argument from Freedom.

Premise (5): *One to All*. The concept of causation is one of the twelve pure concepts of the understanding. They are listed in the Table of Categories which is itself derived from the table of the logical functions of the understanding in judgement. Kant often suggests that these tables are complete and can be derived from a single principle (A68/B94, A80–

¹⁰ See e.g. Boyle (2024) and Longuenesse (2007).

80/B106–7). And in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he takes proof of the objective reality of one pure concept of the understanding to suffice for proof of the objective reality of them all (5:56). There are interesting questions about whether we can rule out the possibility of discursive cognizers who possess only a proper subset or a proper superset of the categories. We do not pursue them here. We assume, roughly on grounds of Kant's claims about the completeness of the Table of Categories, that he thinks the categories as a group stand or fall together. Thus any being that possesses one category possesses them all. Specifically, any being that possesses the category of causality must possess the full set, premise (5) of the Argument from Freedom.

4. Practical Necessity

Premises (1)–(5) of the Argument from Freedom together entail that, necessarily, all discursive cognizers possess the same categories that we do, and thus that discursive cognizers with other forms of understanding are impossible. So if the premises can be known, at least one them practically, and if warrant can be transmitted over the argument, then what we have here is an argument which enables practical knowledge that discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are impossible, i.e., an argument for Practical Necessity.

What grounds does Kant think we can have for assent to premises (1)–(5) of the Argument from Freedom? He cannot think that we can have theoretical grounds to assent to *all* the premises. For, if we did, we would be able to have theoretical knowledge of our own freedom by modus ponens on premises (1) and (2). And that is exactly what Kant thinks is impossible.¹¹ For Kant, the Argument from Freedom does not motivate Theoretical Necessity: we cannot have theoretical knowledge of all of the premises, and thus the argument cannot be used to show that we can have theoretical knowledge that discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are impossible.

¹¹ See e.g. the Resolution to the Third Antinomy in the first *Critique* (A532–58/B560–86), §III of the *Groundwork*, and the final section of Chapter I of the *Analytic* in the second *Critique* (5:50–57).

So, if not theoretical grounds, what grounds do we have for endorsing premises (1)–(5), according to Kant?

Let us start with premise (1): Necessarily, all discursive cognizers are subject to the moral law. We assume here that this is a statement about what is rather than a statement about what ought to be—even though, in some sense, it is equivalent to the imperative that discursive cognizers ought to follow the moral law. Perhaps this is a point at which the contrast between representations about what is and representations about what ought to be breaks down. But note that if premise (1) is to feature in an argument, then it is natural to treat it as truth-assessable, and that recommends treating as a statement about how things are.¹²

What grounds does Kant think we can have for assent to premise (1)? A full answer to this question turns on difficult questions about how exactly the ‘fact of reason’ is supposed to warrant our assent to the claim that we are subject to the moral law. But we think it should be reasonably uncontroversial that Kant does not think it provides us with theoretical grounds for assent. For, as noted, that would allow us theoretical knowledge of our freedom (at least if we take the reciprocity thesis, or premise (2), to be an object of theoretical knowledge—see below). So Kant must think that the fact of reason provides us with practical grounds. And this is what we should expect, since he thinks our recognition that we are subject to the moral law is grounded in our awareness of an imperative. It thus traces back to the determination of the will, as Kant insists for practical grounds (CPrR 5:120). Kant thinks we assent to (1) on practical grounds.

This way of understanding our grounds for assent to premise (1) links it closely to Kant’s account of the grounds for assent to the practical postulates—and appropriately so, since freedom is inferred from premise (1) and premise (2) (or the reciprocity thesis), and Kant treats freedom as one of the postulates. Some have worried about Kant’s decision to group freedom as a postulate with God and immortality because the former is directly established via consciousness of the moral law whilst the others are only indirectly connected with the moral law via the requirement to set the highest

¹² See the discussion in Willaschek (2017, 107–108), which we follow here.

good as our end.¹³ This distinction doesn't matter for our purposes. The important point for now is just that practical grounds are those which relate to the determination of our will, and this is true of the grounds for our recognition that we are subject to the moral law.¹⁴

What about premises (2)–(5)? Premises (2) and (4) are plausibly analytic truths for Kant. The first is an analytic truth connecting freedom and the moral law, established with effort over the first two sections of the *Groundwork* and the first part of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. So too premise (4), since it is part of the concept of freedom, Kant thinks, that it is a kind of causality. In both cases, we have purely theoretical grounds for assent. The status of premises (3) and (5) is more delicate. The first concerns the semantic ascent which takes us from being free to possessing the concept of freedom; the second is the claim that possessing one category means possessing them all. But we will assume that each of these claims is also established on theoretical grounds without taking a stand on the kind of theoretical grounds in question.¹⁵

The Argument from Freedom is an argument for Practical Necessity. For Kant, it is the fact that we recognise ourselves as subject to the moral law—the fact of reason—which ultimately affords us practical knowledge of the invariance of intellectual form among finite rational beings, discursive cognizers, as such.

5. Restriction

Are there ways in which a defender of Practical Undecidability can resist this argument for Practical Necessity? In the earlier paper, GMS, some broad interpretative strategies are noted which can be used by defenders of Theoretical Necessity or Theoretical Undecidability in dealing with challenges to their views. Theoretical Undecidability is challenged by those passages from the theoretical philosophy in which Kant seems to rule out the possibility of discursive cognizers with other forms of understanding (e.g. B148–9, A80–81/B106–7; Prol. 4:322). It is open to those who defend Theoretical

¹³ See Ameriks (2012, 250) and Guyer (2000, 353).

¹⁴ See Willaschek (2017) for commentary.

¹⁵ See GMS §6.1 on issues relating to the status of premise (5).

Undecidability to argue that these passages involve a tacit restriction to *our* forms of the understanding. That is, for any particular text from the theoretical philosophy in which it looks as though Kant is ruling out the possibility of discursive cognizers with alternative forms of the understanding, the defender of Theoretical Undecidability can argue that the passage in question only rules out the possibility of alternative forms of the understanding *for us*. Call this the *Restriction Strategy*. It is a way of defending Theoretical Undecidability against passages which seem to support Theoretical Necessity.

Can a comparable strategy be used to defend Practical Undecidability against the Argument from Freedom? If there is a premise in that argument which Kant would only endorse in a restricted form, then this would either render the argument invalid or else render its conclusion compatible with Practical Undecidability. We start with premise (1).

Premise (1): *Reason to Morality*. The restricted version of this premise holds that we only have practical grounds to claim that all *human* discursive cognizers are subject to the moral law. That is, Kant does not take himself to have shown that all discursive cognizers are subject to the moral law—only that human beings are so. How might a defender of Practical Undecidability motivate this restriction?

Here is the broad thought. The case for premise (1) sketched above focused on the connections between morality and reason. But if this is to go further than a merely analytic claim—if it is to establish the *reality* of the moral law—then something more than a connection between pure practical reason and the moral law must be provided: we need reason to think the moral law actually applies. And one might argue that Kant's reasons for thinking that the moral law actually applies restrict the class of beings over whom we can know it to apply.

We'll focus on the establishment of the moral law in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Chapter 1 of the Analytic of the second *Critique*—like the first two sections of the *Groundwork*—looks to involve an analysis of the possibility of pure practical reason in order to show that the fundamental principle of pure

practical reason is the moral law. This sort of analysis can show us what is contained in or presupposed by the possibility of pure practical reason. But it cannot show us that the moral law presupposed by pure practical reason is anything more than illusory. Something more is needed.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, that something more is provided by the ‘fact of reason’ (5:31–32). There is little consensus on how to understand the role played by this fact of reason, its content, and its relation to Kant’s justificatory project, but in very general terms Kant seems to hold that we are conscious of the moral law (5:29–30) and it is this consciousness of the moral law that he calls a fact of reason (5:31). It is the fact of reason which establishes that we are subject to the moral law. So if we are interested in the domain of beings whom we can practically know to be subject to the moral law, we need to ask about the range of beings who fall under the first-person plural used to formulate consciousness of the moral law (see especially 5:29–30).

And here is a point where the Practical Undecidability theorist might motivate a restriction on premise (1) of the Argument from Freedom. For they might claim that *our* consciousness of the moral law establishes only that *human beings* are subject to the moral law. And we are not in a position to determine whether consciousness of the moral law extends further. Perhaps all discursive cognizers are so conscious. But this cannot be established solely on the basis of the fact of reason.

Why think that consciousness of the moral law is restricted in this way? One quick route to the restriction would be to argue that since *we* are human beings, our consciousness of the moral law can only establish the reality of the moral law for human beings and not for discursive cognizers more generally. But this won’t work because we are also discursive cognizers. So the fact that we can know that the moral law applies to us does not, in itself, settle the scope of those to whom we know it applies. The quick route to restriction is unsuccessful.¹⁶

¹⁶ Compare the quick route to restricting our knowledge of the pure forms of sensibility discussed in Gomes and Stephenson (2024).

A better reason for thinking that the fact of reason establishes only a claim about human beings is provided by an analogy between the role that the fact of reason plays in allowing cognition of the moral law (CPrR 5:29) and the role that intuition plays in allowing cognition of appearances. In the latter case, the role of intuition is to prove the objective reality of the objects of thought in order that Kant's modal constraint on cognition is met.¹⁷ Similarly, one might think, the role of the fact of reason is to serve as the practical source of cognition and ensure that freedom is cognized assertorically (CPrR 5:105). That there can be such a source of cognition is prefigured in the preface to the second edition of the first *Critique* (Bxxvi n.; cf. Bxxii). And 'freedom is real', Kant tells us in the preface to the second *Critique*, 'for this idea reveals itself through the moral law' (5: 3–4).

Why would this have implications for the scope of the fact of reason? There is a difference between the two cases since, in the case of sensible intuition, our cognition is confined to appearances, whereas, in the case of consciousness of the moral law, we gain some sort of practical access to the noumenal realm. But in both cases one might think that our knowledge of form, be it the form of sensibility or the form of pure practical reason, cannot extend to all discursive cognizers because of the way it is grounded in something *given*. Indeed, Kant emphasises the connection between the givenness of the moral law and the givenness of spatiotemporal intuition in a *Reflexion* where he says that the possibility of pure, yet still practical, reason 'must be proven in the manner in which we prove that the representations of space and time are a priori, with the difference being that the latter are intuitions and the former mere concepts of reason' (R 7201. 19: 275).¹⁸ And someone who thinks that the restriction on our knowledge of sensible form is tied closely to the givenness of sensible form will hold that since 'the moral law is *given*, as it were, as a fact of pure reason' (CPrR 5: 47, our emphasis), a similar restriction applies in the case of practical knowledge.¹⁹

¹⁷ Bxxvi n., A151/B190, A264–5/B320–1. For discussion see e.g. Chignell (2009; 2010), Stang (2016, ch.6), Gomes and Stephenson (2016), and Watkins and Willaschek (2017).

¹⁸ For related discussion see e.g. Kain (2010), Schönecker (2013), and Allais (2019).

¹⁹ For givenness in relation to epistemic humility for the sensible case, see Langton (1998). For discussion relevant to the present context, see Gomes and Stephenson (2024).

A second set of considerations in favour of restricting premise (1) of the Argument from Freedom concern Kant's various appeals to other people's moral experiences as evidence for our being conscious of the moral law. Immediately after introducing the fact of reason as the sole fact of pure reason, Kant writes:

The fact mentioned above is undeniable. One need only analyze the judgment that people pass on the lawfulness of their actions in order to find that, whatever inclination may say to the contrary, their reason, incorruptible and self-constrained, always holds the maxim of the will in an action up to the pure will, that is, to itself inasmuch as it regards itself as a priori practical. (CPrR 5:32; cf. 5:88)

And later: "The justification of moral principles as principles of a pure reason could also be carried out very well and with sufficient certainty by a mere appeal to the judgement of *common human understanding*' (CPrR 5:91, our emphasis). In both cases, considerations about other human beings look relevant to the establishing the fact of reason in a way which restricts its scope accordingly.²⁰

Finally, there are straightforward textual reasons to think that the claim is restricted. In the corollary to the remark in which Kant introduces the fact of reason, he writes, 'Pure reason is practical of itself alone and gives (*to the human being*) a universal law which we call the moral law' (CPrR 5:31, our emphasis). This looks like Kant enforcing exactly the kind of restriction on his claim suggested by the Practical Undecidability theorist.

Our aim here is not to defend these readings of the fact of reason and Kant's proof of the moral law more generally. For there are at least as many texts that seem, just as straightforwardly, to tell *against* the proposed restriction. For instance, in the Introduction to the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant adds a parenthesis to the opposite effect to the one above: 'if we can now discover grounds for proving that this property [i.e. freedom] does in fact belong to the human will (*and so to the will of all rational beings as well*), then it will not only be shown that pure reason can be practical but that it alone, and not reason empirically determined, is unconditionally practical' (5:16, our

²⁰ Proops (2003) stresses this aspect of Kant's discussion.

emphasis). This tells against any restriction to premise (1) *and* to premise (2). For it suggests that whatever route we have to knowledge that all human cognizers are free suffices for knowledge that all rational cognizers are free, and it is the fact of reason together with the reciprocity thesis that provides that knowledge. Neither, then, can be restricted to human cognizers alone.

Further, Kant seems precisely to counsel against any such restriction to premise (1) or premise (2) in a passage from §III of the *Groundwork* entitled ‘Freedom must be presupposed as a property of the will of all rational beings’:

It is not enough that we ascribe freedom to our will on whatever ground, if we do not have sufficient ground for attributing it also to all rational beings. For, since morality serves as a law for us only as rational beings, it must also hold for all rational beings; and since it must be derived solely from the property of freedom, freedom must also be proved as a property of all rational beings; and it is not enough to demonstrate it from certain supposed experiences of human nature (though this is also absolutely impossible and it can be demonstrated only a priori), but it must be proved as belonging to the activity of all beings whatever that are rational and endowed with a will. (4:447–8)

Indeed, such passages might well be taken to suggest not only that we should not restrict premises (1) or (2) of the Argument from Freedom, but that Kant is committed to even more general premises. For he talks here of rational beings *simpliciter*, not of specifically *finite* rational beings, or discursive cognizers, and it is plausible that Kant also thinks of God as both subject to the moral law (albeit not as an imperative) and free (albeit not in exactly the way that we are).²¹

The issue we face here is that of determining the scope of the first-person plural when ‘we become immediately conscious [of the moral law]’ (CPrR 5:29). Does this include only human beings, all finite rational beings and discursive cognizers, or perhaps even all rational beings per se? Perhaps the case for restricting premise (1) and/or premise (2) to human cognizers alone can be made good even in the face of texts like those immediately above. But perhaps, precisely in light of such texts, the defender of Practical

²¹ See G 4:414, LE 27:1425, Rel. 6:50–51n., PR 28:1068. For discussion see Timmermann (2007, 127) and Insole (2013, ch.3).

Undecidability would do better to focus their restriction strategy instead on the next premise in the Argument from Freedom.

Premise (3): *Semantic Ascent*. We assumed in §4 that premise (3) is established on theoretical grounds. But this is compatible with thinking that the premise is restricted. The restricted version holds only that all *human* discursive cognizers that are free must possess the concept of freedom, not that all discursive cognizers that are free must possess the concept of freedom. One might appeal to God as an example of a being which is free but lacks the concept of freedom—either because the concept of freedom involves the concept of causality which God does not possess or because it requires a form of modal thinking which God would not possess or because as an intuitive intellect God possesses no discursive concepts at all. But such considerations would show only that Kant’s claims must be restricted to discursive cognizers in general, not to human discursive cognizers specifically.

The more plausible way to motivate the relevant restriction here is to deny that we can be assured that all those who are subject to the moral law must conceptualise it in the way that *we* conceptualise it. Indeed, this is the exact place where someone who endorses Practical Undecidability would expect us to be undecided on the possibility of variation in intellectual form. It follows from the fact that all discursive cognizers are subject to the moral law that all discursive cognizers are free. But they may not need to think their freedom *as* freedom, or as *we* think freedom, for them to be free.

Consider again the case of God. Some recent commentators have noted a tension between the thought that the intuitive intellect would not make modal distinctions (CPJ 5:403) and the thought that our noumenal wills have the power to do or choose otherwise.²² A proper resolution of this tension should not deny that we are noumenally free—it should either allow that the modal aspect of our freedom might be represented by God in non-modal terms, or else say that God represents our freedom without representing its modal aspect. On either option, considerations about God motivate the thought that a noumenal capacity for freedom like ours need not be

²² See Kohl (2015), Stang (2016, ch.10) and Abaci (2022). For a distinct but related issue see Brewer and Watkins (2012).

represented in the particular way that we represent it. And although this was motivated by appeal to God specifically, the considerations generalise: we have no reason to think that freedom must be represented in the way that we represent freedom. This leaves open the possibility of discursive cognizers who are free but represent their freedom in some other form.

This bears on the case for semantic ascent sketched in §3. The suggestion there was that since the will was defined as ‘the capacity to act in accordance with the representation of laws’ (G 4.412), a free will would need to operate in accordance with the representation of itself as free. But perhaps this is too fast. Perhaps *we* need the concept of freedom in order to act in accordance with the representation of laws but it does not follow that every will that acts in accordance with the representation of laws needs to represent itself as free in doing so. All that is required is that they have *some* representation of the laws under which they act. And note how Kant formulates his claim: ‘to every rational being having of a will *we must necessarily lend* the idea of freedom also, under which alone he acts’ (G 4.448, our emphasis). But that *we* must lend the idea of freedom to any discursive cognizer with a will does not mean that those discursive cognizers themselves must make use of that idea in their own representation of laws.

Again, however, there are significant problems with this proposal. For it is not clear that we can make sense of discursive cognizers who are free, and thus subject to the moral law, but do not represent themselves as free in the way that we do. In particular, the proposed restriction must dovetail with Kant’s explication of the grounds for accepting premise (1) of the Argument from Freedom. We noted above that Kant takes premise (1) to be supported by the fact of reason which, in broad terms, is equivalent to our consciousness of the moral law (CPrR 5:31). But Kant also writes that ‘the fact in which pure reason in us proves itself actually practical... is inseparably connected with, and indeed identical with, consciousness of freedom of the will’ (CPrR 5:42). That is to say, consciousness of the moral law is, at the same time, consciousness of freedom of the will.

The restriction strategy mooted here is supposed to enter only with premise (3) of the Argument from Freedom. That is, it accepts that, necessarily, all discursive cognizers are subject to the moral law and, as such, are free. And it

accepts that all those who are subject to the moral law must act in accordance with its representation (G 4:412). It denies only that we can rule out the possibility of discursive cognizers who act in accordance with representations of the moral law without representing it as a law of freedom. But given the identity of consciousness of the moral law with consciousness of freedom of the will, the proposed restriction of premise (3) is committed not just to the claim that we cannot rule out the possibility of discursive cognizers who are free but do not represent their freedom using the category of freedom but also to the stronger claim that we cannot rule out the possibility of discursive cognizers who are *conscious* of their freedom but do not represent themselves as free. This introduces a gap between consciousness of freedom and the ability to self-consciously recognise it which sits uncomfortably with Kant's wider claims about the relation between the capacities for conscious and self-conscious representation in discursive cognizers.²³

Perhaps there are ways in which a defender of Practical Undecidability can assuage these concerns. And if either of these restriction strategies can be made good, then the route from premises (1) to (5) of the Argument from Freedom to Practical Necessity would be blocked. But a case remains to be made.²⁴

Let us take stock. We have formulated and examined two views Kant could hold, from the practical point of view, about the possibility of discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms. Practical Undecidability says that we cannot have practical grounds for determining whether discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are possible. Practical Necessity says that we can have practical grounds for ruling them out. We articulated an argument—the Argument from Freedom—for Practical Necessity. And we outlined a way in which defenders of Practical Undecidability could respond to this argument, namely by restricting certain of its premises so that Practical Necessity no longer follows. The considerations adduced here are not final: their force will depend on one's views about, for example, Kant's deduction of the moral law, its starting point, and its reach. That is to say, the kind of practical stance we

²³ See, e.g., A117n, A341/B399, B277, and the discussion in Boyle (2024, §3).

²⁴ We forgo explicit consideration of how to motivate suitable restrictions on premise (4)—from the concept of freedom to the concept of causation—and premise (5)—from the concept of causation to the categories. Plausibly, the points we have made about premise (3) would generalise to these premises.

can take towards the possibility of discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms will depend on the reach and kind of practical stance we can take to freedom and morality more generally. But in lieu of plausible grounds for restriction, there is a strong case for Practical Necessity.

6. Postulates and Bridges

We want to close by asking how these theses concerning practical knowledge relate to their theoretical counterparts. Are there any general connections between practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge such that considerations about one can be used to motivate conclusions about the other? Consider the practical postulates. Kant characterises a postulate of pure practical reason as ‘a *theoretical* proposition, though one not demonstrable as such, insofar as it is attached inseparably to an a priori unconditional valid *practical* law’ (CPrR 5:122). This is often taken to require two conditions on having practical grounds for assent—*practical necessity* and *theoretical undecidability* (to use terminology from Willaschek (2010)). This entails that there can be practical grounds in support of a claim *only if* it is theoretically undecidable (cf. CPrR 5:119f.). Call this the *Strong Bridge Principle*.

If the Strong Bridge Principle is correct, we have a way to connect practical and theoretical concerns. For if there can be practical grounds in support of a claim, it follows that there cannot be theoretical grounds which determine the claim—which is to say, the claim must be theoretically undecidable. So if we have *practical* grounds for assenting to the claim that discursive cognizers with other forms of understanding are impossible, it follows that this claim is theoretically undecidable. And that is just to say that any argument for Practical Necessity will also entail Theoretical Undecidability, precisely in virtue of supporting Practical Necessity. The Argument from Freedom would then establish both Practical Necessity *and* Theoretical Undecidability.

This suggests a way in which we could capture the attractions of both Necessity and Undecidability. Someone who endorses Practical Necessity thinks that we *do* have grounds for thinking that discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are impossible—it is just that those grounds are distinctively practical, and thus support, not Theoretical Necessity, but Practical Necessity. It is in virtue of recognising our practical grounds for

thinking that discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are impossible that we can see why the claim itself is theoretically undecidable: the recognition that our forms of thinking are the forms of thinking for *all* discursive cognizers is not given to us in theoretical reason alone. It is through our consciousness of the moral law that we come to recognise the impossibility of alternative forms of understanding, of reason. Kant can accept Practical Necessity—and, because of this, Theoretical Undecidability.

However, the cogency of this line of reasoning rests on the cogency of the Strong Bridge Principle: that practical knowability entails theoretical undecidability. This principle is often assumed in discussions of the practical postulates.²⁵ It is generally motivated by the fact that reason forms a unity. For if practical knowability did not entail theoretical undecidability, there could be practical reason to assent to a claim which was opposed by theoretical evidence. And that would call into question the very unity of reason: practical reason would support something which theoretical reason undermined.

But this reasoning is not secure. For it is a mistake to think that a conflict within reason can only be avoided—and so the unity of reason maintained—if a proposition recommended by practical reason is theoretically *undecidable*. There would also be no conflict if practical reason gave support to some claim which was already established by theoretical reason, or if practical reason told against some claim which was already undermined by theoretical reason. Indeed, Kant's discussion of conflict within reason focuses precisely on the avoidance of contradiction—e.g. “That which is required for the possibility of any use of reason as such, namely, that its principles and affirmations *must not contradict one another*, constitutes no part of its interest but is instead the condition of having reason at all’ (CPrR 5:120, our emphasis). If Practical Necessity is to support Theoretical Undecidability, we need some reason for ruling out cases in which both practical and theoretical reason point in the same direction. Kant's proscription of conflict within reason does not itself rule out such cases.

What Kant's proscription of conflict within reason *does* rule out is a case in which we have practical grounds to assent to some claim together with

²⁵ See e.g. Beck (1960, 261), Willaschek (2010), and Allison (2012, 110).

theoretical grounds to assent to its negation. Call this the *Weak Bridge Principle*: the practical knowability of p entails the theoretical unknowability of not- p . And since by the same ‘no-conflict’ reasoning Kant would also rule out cases in which we have practical grounds to assent to some claim together with *practical* grounds to assent to its negation, what we have here is a route from Practical Necessity to the rejection of *Contingency*. Recall that this is the claim that we can know (in whatever way) that discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are possible. It is rejected in GMS on the grounds that it is implausible that Kant would think that our knowledge of the possibility of other intellectual forms extends further than our knowledge of the possibility of other sensible forms. But that paper does not distinguish between theoretical and practical knowledge. What we now have in the Argument from Freedom is more principled reason to reject Contingency in general, regardless of the kind of knowledge at issue. If we can have practical knowledge that discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are impossible, then, on pain of generating a conflict within reason, we can have neither practical nor theoretical knowledge that discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are possible.

Kant’s proscription of conflict within reason motivates the Weak Bridge Principle, which takes us from Practical Necessity to the rejection of Contingency; it does not motivate the Strong Bridge Principle, which would take us from Practical Necessity to Theoretical Undecidability. Are there other ways to motivate the Strong Bridge Principle? Perhaps one of the strongest considerations in support of the Strong Bridge Principle comes from Kant’s claim in the Preface to the B-edition of the first *Critique*, published after the *Groundwork* and before the second *Critique*, that he ‘*had* to deny **knowledge** in order to make room for **faith** [*Glaube*]’ (Bxxx, our italics).

It is a famous line. And with good reason. For it reflects the fact that there are some cognitive attitudes that, on conceptual grounds alone, are incompatible with theoretical knowledge. Faith is one of these, in the sense that a subject’s having faith that p would be in some way inappropriate if they also had theoretical knowledge either that p or that not- p . Hence it makes sense to say that, to make room for faith, you *have* to deny theoretical knowledge. So, if there are cases where we are required to have faith that p , then it will follow that, in those cases, we are not able to have theoretical knowledge of either p

or not- p : faith in a claim can only be necessary if that claim is theoretically undecidable.

But this does not establish the Strong Bridge Principle. For we cannot assume that what is true of faith holds of all of the relevant cognitive attitudes. That is, Kant will certainly argue that having a positive practical attitude to the theoretical propositions in the practical postulates is necessary in a suitable sense. But we only get to the theoretical undecidability of those propositions if we then also argue that the appropriate practical attitude here is that of faith specifically—or at least some other notion that seems to conceptually entail undecidability in the way sketched above. And the problem is that it's hard to see how we could establish this latter point without arguing directly that the propositions in question are theoretically undecidable, which of course is exactly what Kant does in the Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Kant must, as he says, deny knowledge to make room for faith. But more precisely, what he does is first argue for theoretical undecidability, and then argue for the practical necessity of a positive practical attitude, *from which it follows* that this positive practical attitude can appropriately be described as one of faith. Trying to get to the Strong Bridge Principle from Kant's point that he had to deny knowledge to make room for faith puts the cart before the horse.

This points towards a more general problem for the Strong Bridge Principle: it would mean that much of Kant's argument in the Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is rendered otiose by his argument in the Dialectic of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. In the former Kant argues that claims about our freedom, the immortality of our soul, and the existence of God are theoretically undecidable. In the latter Kant argues that we can have practical grounds to assent to our freedom, the immortality of our soul, and the existence of God. He undertakes these tasks separately, and in each case at considerable length. Yet if the Strong Bridge Principle is correct, the first was unnecessary given the second. In other words, what would be the point of the Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, given that we also have the Dialectic of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, if showing that we have practical knowledge of p , and thus that some positive practical attitude towards p were suitable

necessary, could suffice, independently, to show that p is theoretically undecidable?

What then are we to make of Kant's characterisation of a postulate of pure practical reason as 'a *theoretical* proposition, though one not demonstrable as such, insofar as it is attached inseparably to an a priori unconditional valid *practical* law' (CPrR 5:122)? We noted above that this is often taken to require two conditions on having practical grounds for assent—*practical necessity* and *theoretical undecidability*. We of course agree with the first and have effectively assumed it throughout: having practical grounds for assent and thus practical knowledge requires some suitable connection to the determination of the will (§2), and thus, ultimately, to the moral law (§§3–4). But we do not think that Kant thinks it in general true as an independent principle that having practical grounds or practical knowledge requires theoretical undecidability—he is not here stating a commitment to the Strong Bridge Principle. Rather, Kant does think that the practical postulates are theoretically undecidable, but this is because he has argued for that conclusion in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Kant also thinks that the practical postulates, as themselves objects of practical knowledge, are the necessary basis of all other practical knowledge. But all that follows from this is that practical knowledge can never yield theoretical knowledge. It does not follow that what is practically knowable can never be theoretically known. That is, since the practical postulates are theoretically undecidable objects of practical knowledge, any acts of assent that are based on inferences from the practical postulates will not be acts of assent that satisfy the conditions of theoretical knowledge. But this is not to say that claims assented to on this basis might not also be assented to on another basis, including one that makes no appeal to practical grounds. There is no quick route from our ability to settle a question from the practical point of view to our inability to settle it from the theoretical point of view.

Our concern in this essay has been the possibility of discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms. Kant is explicit in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that we cannot decide, on theoretical grounds, whether all discursive cognizers must share our forms of sensibility. He is not similarly explicit on whether we can decide, on theoretical grounds, whether all discursive cognizers must share our forms of understanding. We have canvassed, in this essay, a way that he

might think we can nevertheless decide the question on practical grounds. For we recognise ourselves as subject to the moral law, and given the connections between morality and freedom and between freedom and causation, this provides us with practical grounds to hold that all discursive cognizers must share our intellectual forms.

This argument could be resisted in much the same way that arguments which claim that we can decide the question on theoretical grounds could be resisted: by restricting our knowledge of one of its premises to some subset of finite rational beings. Perhaps Kant's claims about morality, freedom, or causation are only known to be true for human beings. But without that restriction, we have an argument for practical knowledge that discursive cognizers with other intellectual forms are impossible—one part of a more general story about Kant's account of the nature and limits of our knowledge of the moral law.²⁶

²⁶ Some earlier material related to this paper was presented to an audience in Oxford. Our thanks to James Hutton, Maya Krishnan, Robert Watt, Ralph Walker, Nicholas Currie, Christopher Benzenberg, and Joseph Schear for comments and discussion. This paper builds on earlier work with Adrian Moore and we owe a particular debt of gratitude to him for ongoing discussions on these, and other, topics.

References

Kant

The following abbreviations have been used when referencing works in Kants *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: De Gruyter and predecessors, 1900–)

- CPJ *Critique of the Power of Judgment*
CPrR *Critique of Practical Reason*
G *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*
JL *Jäsche Logic*
LE *Lectures on Ethics*
Prol. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*
PR *Pölitiz Religion / Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*
R *Reflections*
Rel. *Religion Within the Bounds of Mere Reason*

Translations have been from the following works in the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992–):

- . *Lectures on Logic*, edited and translated by Michael J. Young, 1992
———. *Practical Philosophy*, edited and translated by Mary J. Gregor, 1996
———. *Religion and Rational Theology*, edited and translated by Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni, 1996
———. *Critique of Pure Reason*, edited and translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, 1997
———. *Lectures on Ethics*, edited by Peter Heath and J. B. Schneewind, translated by Peter Heath, 1997
———. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, edited by Paul Guyer, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, 2000.
———. *Theoretical Philosophy After 1781*, edited by Henry Allison and Peter Heath, translated by Gary Hatfield, Michael Friedman, Henry Allison, and Peter Heath, 2002.
———. *Notes and Fragments*, edited by Paul Guyer, translated by Curtis Bowman, Paul Guyer, and Frederick Rauscher. 2005.

Other Authors

- Abaci, U. (2022). Noumenal freedom and Kant's modal antinomy. *Kantian Review*, 27, 175–194. doi: 10.1017/S1369415421000340
- Allais, L. (2019). The given in theoretical and practical cognition: intuition and the moral law. In S. R. Palmquist (Ed.), *Kant on Intuition: Western and Asian Perspectives on Transcendental Idealism* (pp. 69–85). London: Routledge.
- Allison, H. E. (1990). *Kant's Theory of Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . (2012). *Essays on Kant*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ameriks, K. (1985). Hegel's critique of Kant's theoretical philosophy. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 46, 1–35. doi: 10.2307/2107654
- . (2012). *Kant's Elliptical Path*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Beck, L. W. (1960). *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Boyle, M. (2024). Kant on consciousness and self-consciousness. In A. Gomes & A. Stephenson (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Kant*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brewer, K. & Watkins, E. (2012). A difficulty still awaits: Kant, Spinoza, and the threat of theological determinism. *Kant-Studien*, 103, 163–187. doi: 10.1515/kant-2012-0010
- Chignell, A. (2009). Kant, modality, and the most real being. *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, 91, 157–192. doi: 10.1515/AGPH.2009.07
- . (2010). Real repugnance and our ignorance of things-in-themselves: a Lockean problem in Kant and Hegel. *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus*, 7.
- Engstrom, S. (2002). Kant's distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge. *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, 10, 49–63. doi: 10.5840/harvardreview20021017
- Gardner, S. (2006). The primacy of practical reason. In G. Bird (Ed.), *A Companion to Kant* (pp. 259–274). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Gomes, A. (2024). *The Practical Self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gomes, A., Moore, A. W. & Stephenson, A. (2022). On the necessity of the categories. *Philosophical Review*, 131, 129–168. doi: 10.1215/00318108-9554678
- Gomes, A. & Stephenson, A. (2016). On the relation of intuition to cognition. In D. Schulting (Ed.), *Kantian Nonconceptualism* (pp. 53–79). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Gomes, A. & Stephenson, A. (2024). Kant on the pure forms of sensibility. In A. Gomes & A. Stephenson (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Kant* (pp. 64–83). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Guyer, P. (2000). *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/CBO9781139173339
- Insole, C. J. (2013). *Kant and the Creation of Freedom: A Theological Problem*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kain, P. (2010). Practical cognition, intuition, and the fact of reason. In B. Lipscomb & J. Krueger (Eds.), *Kant's Moral Metaphysics: God, Freedom, and Immortality* (pp. 211–230). Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Kohl, M. (2015). Kant on the inapplicability of the categories to things in themselves. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 23, 90–114. doi: 10.1080/09608788.2014.978838
- . (2024). Kant on cognition and knowledge. In A. Gomes & A. Stephenson & (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Kant*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Langton, R. (1998). *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Longuenesse, B. (2007). Kant on the identity of persons. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 107, 149–167. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9264.2007.00216.x
- Proops, I. (2003). Kant's legal metaphor and the nature of a deduction. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 41, 209–229. doi: 10.1353/hph.2003.0019
- Schafer, K. (2023). Practical cognition and knowledge of things-in-themselves. In D. Heide & E. Tiffany (Eds.), *The Idea of Freedom: New Essays on the Kantian Theory of Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schönecker, D. (2013). Kant's moral intuitionism: the fact of reason and moral predispositions. *Kant Studies Online*, 2013.
- Sedgwick, S. (2023). *Time and History in Hegelian Thought and Spirit*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stang, N. F. (2016). *Kant's Modal Metaphysics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tenenbaum, S. (2012). The idea of freedom and moral cognition in Groundwork III. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 84, 555–589. doi: 10.1111/j.1933-1592.2010.00462.x
- Timmermann, J. (2007). *Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: A Commentary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . (2010). Reversal or retreat? Kant's deductions of freedom and morality. In A. Reath & J. Timmermann (Eds.), *A Critical Guide to*

- Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* (pp. 73–89). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Watkins, E. & Willaschek, M. (2017). Kant's account of cognition. *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 55, 83–112.
- Willaschek, M. (2010). The primacy of practical reason and the idea of a practical postulate. In A. Reath & J. Timmermann (Eds.), *A Critical Guide to Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* (pp. 168–196). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- . (2017). Freedom as a postulate. In E. Watkins (Ed.), *Kant on Persons and Agency* (pp. 102–119). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wood, A. W. (2020). *Kant and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.