Artigo Original doi:10.1590/0100-512X2024n15811kb

*KANT'S CONCEPT OF THE HOLY WILL: A MORAL ARCHETYPE FOR RECONCILING HUMAN NATURE**

O CONCEITO DE VONTADE SANTA DE KANT: UM ARQUÉTIPO MORAL PARA RECONCILIAR A NATUREZA HUMANA

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ABSTRACT *This essay is devoted to a thorough analysis of the role and significance of the holy will in Kantian moral philosophy, highlighting its status as a crucial moral archetype and a pathway for reconciliation with human rational nature. By concentrating on the holy will, this paper illuminates its role as a normative model that not only sheds light on human capabilities and limitations within moral contexts but also advances a renewed understanding of freedom and duty. It is argued that the holy will, inherently aligned with moral laws and free from coercion, contrasts with the human will, which is characterized by conflict and restrictions. This contrast emphasizes the holy will as a fundamental ethical principle in Kant's work, playing a key role in shaping his views on morality and human autonomy.*

Keywords: *Kant. Holy will. Human will. Archetype. Morality.*

* Article submitted on: 25/09/2023. Accepted on: 17/04/2024.

RESUMO *Este estudo se dedica à análise do papel e significado da vontade santa na filosofia moral kantiana, sublinhando sua posição como um arquétipo moral essencial e uma via para a reconciliação com a natureza racional humana. Ao focar na vontade santa, este trabalho ilumina sua função como um modelo normativo que não só esclarece as capacidades e limitações humanas em contextos morais, mas também promove uma compreensão renovada de liberdade e dever. Argumenta-se que a vontade santa, alinhada inerentemente com as leis morais e isenta de coações, contrapõe-se à vontade humana, caracterizada por conflitos e limitações. Este contraste reforça a vontade santa como um princípio ético fundamental na obra de Kant, desempenhando um papel crucial na articulação de sua visão sobre a moralidade e a autonomia humana.*

Palavras-chave: *Kant. Vontade santa. Vontade humana. Arquétipo. Moralidade.*

Initial considerations

Kantian moral philosophy, anchored in transcendental idealism, has garnered extensive scholarly attention, both for its normative implications and its explanatory reach concerning the human condition. However, one often overlooked or cursorily examined element is the concept of the divine or holy will (henceforth referred to as holy will (Wood, 1970, p. 41). This article intends to probe the significance and role of the holy will as both a moral archetype and a condition for reconciling with our rational nature.

While the focus of this paper is not on the historical reconstruction of the concept of holy will in Kant, it is vital to acknowledge that his investigation into a perfect will began with his critiques of Wolff's theories. This dissatisfaction with the prevailing notions of morality led Kant to deepen his understanding of moral perfection and the existence of God, thereby establishing a contrast with Wolff's ideas and developing his rational theology in dialogue with Leibniz's concept of God. Such an approach resulted in a distinct Kantian moral framework, marking a significant evolution in moral philosophy and highlighting the originality of his moral psychology (Henrich, 1963, pp. 421-422).

In this regard, while the human will exists in a perpetual state of tension—bound by obligations and propelled by imperatives—the holy will is portrayed as being analytically congruent with moral laws, free from any form of coercion. This investigation seeks to illuminate the implications of this contrast both

for the comprehension of the moral imperative and for the broader landscape of Kantian moral philosophy. Specifically, we inquire how this dichotomy enriches our understanding of the complex interplay of duties, freedoms, and moral possibilities that characterize Kantian ethics.

Furthermore, we will investigate how the dichotomy that Kant establishes between the holy will and human will serves as a crucial element in his ethical framework. This differentiation allows the philosopher from Königsberg to circumvent both deterministic theories of human conduct and ethical systems that root morality in a form of divine voluntarism.

To achieve these ends, we will advance two central arguments. First, we assert that the holy will operates as a normative archetype rather than as a causal force in moral action. It serves as an ideal that elucidates both the potentials and limitations of human beings in ethical contexts, redefining our understanding of freedom and duty. Secondly, we argue that the holy will presents itself as a site of reconciliation with our practical nature, facilitating the overcoming of sensory obstacles, to the extent that our will surrenders to the commandments of reason.

Bearing this structure in mind, the article unfolds across four pivotal sections. Initially, we delineate the distinctions between the holy and human wills, arguing that the former consistently aligns with moral guidelines, thus obviating the need for synthetic a priori judgments in practical reasoning. Subsequently, we address and refute prevalent critiques of Kant's depiction of the holy will, an effort crucial for reinforcing the strength of our arguments and for enriching the overall understanding of the concept.

In the third section, we delve into the holy will's role as a beacon of moral perfection, arguing that it exemplifies how moral actions can be guided by law. Furthermore, we argue that adherence to the categorical imperative endows us with a decision-making capacity reminiscent of the divine, given that the moral law is not a product of divine voluntarism.

In the concluding section, I synthesize the principal arguments related to the holy will, positing it as an archetype of moral perfection that becomes accessible through our compliance with the moral law. This model not only transforms our understanding of freedom and duty but also offers a framework for reconciling our nature with the concept of freedom.

The holy will

Kant introduces the concept of the holy will in the Second Section of the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (GMS). Prior to articulating the notion

of the holy will, Kant emphasizes that a rational being "possesses the *Vermögen* to act in conformity with the representation of laws, that is, in accordance with principles, or possesses a will" (GMS, AA VI, 413). In essence, whereas the natural world is governed by deterministic laws (*nach Gesetzen*), a being equipped with reason and will can be influenced by practical reason alone. If reason solely guides a being's will, then what is deemed objectively necessary aligns with what is subjectively regarded as necessary by that being. In other terms, the decision-making capacity of such a being will exclusively hinge upon what reason identifies as indispensable and, consequently, morally good (GMS, AA VI, 413).

While Kant distinguishes us from a natural world underpinned by deterministic laws, he also cautions against overestimating the determinative capabilities of a being endowed with reason and will to abide by practical reason's mandates. On this note, Kant contends that reason alone in humans does not adequately direct the will; it remains subject to subjective conditions (specific motives) that do not invariably coincide with objective conditions. This indicates that actions considered objectively necessary may be subjectively contingent. Hence, the determination of our will, aligned with objective laws, is a matter of obligation (*Nötigung*). Consequently, the relation of objective laws to a will, which is not entirely good, is portrayed as the determination of the will through principles of reason, to which this will, however, by its nature (*seiner Natur nach*), does not necessarily obey (GMS, AA VI, 413).

Thus, given the nature of our will, the representation of the objective principle is a commandment, and its form is an imperative, which expresses itself in terms of duty (*Sollen*). It follows that the practical good is that which determines the will through representations of reason, that is, not from subjective causes, but objectively, i.e., from grounds valid for every rational being as such. Distancing itself from hedonism, the practical good is distinguished from the pleasant, which influences the will solely through sensation, from merely subjective causes that are valid only for the senses, and not as a principle of reason that is valid for all.

Consequently, given the distinctive nature of our will, the representation of an objective principle manifests as a commandment, adopting the form of an imperative that articulates itself in the language of duty (*Sollen*). It ensues that the practical good serves to orient the will not through subjective inclinations but objectively, through rational principles—grounds universally valid for any rational being. This conceptualization distinctly separates itself from hedonism; the practical good diverges from the pleasant, which sways the will solely

through sensory experiences and relies on merely subjective causes rather than on universal principles of reason.

Kant adopts, it may be argued, a didactic approach at this point, elucidating the nuanced scope of the will for human beings in specific terms: i) the will of a rational being operates not strictly according to, but rather in alignment with, its own rational representations; ii) the will of a being like us, endowed with both reason and volition, possesses the capacity to act in consonance with the principles dictated by reason; iii) the inherent composition of our will, also susceptible to sensual influences, does not analytically coincide with the moral law, thus rendering said law as an obligation imposed upon our will and articulated through the categorical imperative; iv) the practical good should not be conflated with hedonism but is to be understood as the alignment of the will with rational imperatives.

In this nuanced landscape of the oscillations inherent in human volition, Kant introduces the concept of the "holy will." Prior to this, he delineates the attributes of a perfectly good will (*ein vollkommen guter Wille*), which, akin to the human will, is likewise subject to objective laws. However, a pivotal *distinction* surfaces: unlike human will, perfectly good will is inconceivable as being under any form of obligation to act, for its determination arises solely from the rational representation of the good. Absent of coercion (*Nötigung*), both the divine will and the holy will (*für den göttlichen und überhaupt für einen heiligen Willen*) stand outside the jurisdiction of the categorical imperative. The very concept of duty becomes incongruous when applied to a will in which the act of willing and the law analytically coincide (GMS, AA VI, 414).

In Stern's analysis, Kant utilizes this dichotomy to elucidate the nature of coercion (*Nötigung*), contrasting it against the backdrop of the holy will and the human will. Stern posits that the concept of moral duty emerges in our conduct precisely because human dispositions often deviate from what is morally good. In Kant's own words, "Holy dispositions (*Gesinnung*) are morally good, but not those of man" (*V-Mo/Collins*, AA XXVII, 263).

In this intellectual context, the notes taken by Georg Ludwig Collins (1763–1814) during Kant's lectures in the winter semester of 1784–1785, subsequently published in the Academy Edition of Kant's works under the title *Moralphilosophie Collins*, serve as a crucial resource for comprehending Kant's thinking during the time when the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* was published.

> In the case of the divine will, the subjective laws of this divine will are identical to the objective laws of the general good will; however, its subjective law is not the foundation of morality. It is intrinsically good and holy because its will is in compliance with this

> objective law. Therefore, the question of morality does not at all pertain to subjective foundations but can be determined solely on the basis of objective grounds. If we were to differentiate morality into objective and subjective morality, this would be utterly absurd (*gantz wiedersinnig*[1]); for all morality is objective, and only the condition for the application of morality can be subjective (*V-Mo/Collins, AA XXVII, 264*)[2].

Kant continues in the same vein as presented in the GMS. While some thinkers prefer to evade the requirements of Kantian dualism as a result of his idealism, the text aims to highlight the differentiation of the holy will in relation to a will like ours insofar as it presents the incidence of the moral law. Kant suggests that in the sphere of the holy will, the distinction between the subjective and the objective collapses into a unity: the holy will is both the subjective guiding principle and the objective standard of morality. However, for human beings, moral legislation must be objective and cannot depend on subjective conditions.

The fact that Kant declares dividing morality into objective and subjective to be utterly absurd should not be underestimated. This statement attests to Kant's intention to distance ethics from any form of relativism or subjectivism. The idea that only the condition for the application of morality can be subjective reflects the tension of the will between the categorical imperative as an objective norm and sensible affection.

> Every obligation (*Obligation*) is not just a necessity (Nothwendigkeit) for action but also a coercion (Nötigung), a necessitation of action, and is therefore also an *obligatio neceßitatio* and not mere *neceßitas*. The divine will (*göttliche Wille*) is necessary with respect to morality, but the human will is not necessary, but obligated. Therefore, the practical necessity in relation to the supreme being is not an obligation (Obligation); the supreme being acts with moral necessity (*moralisch nothwendig*) but has no obligation (*keine Obligation*). Moral necessity (*moralische Nothwendigkeit*) is then an objective necessity and an obligation when the subjective necessity is contingent. All imperatives express the objective necessitation (*objective Nothwendigmachung*) of actions, which are, however, subjectively contingent. Thus, with respect to a perfect will (*vollkommenen Willens*), in which the moral necessity (*moralische Nothwendigkeit*) is not just objective but also subjectively necessary, there is no necessitation (*Neceßitation*) and coercion (*Nötigung*); but with respect to an imperfect being, where the moral good is objectively necessary, necessitation and compulsion occur, and therefore also obligation (*Obligation*). Consequently, moral actions are contingent when they are a compulsion (*Nötigung*), and those with a morally imperfect will are subject to obligation (*Verbindlichkeit*), and these are human beings. But every obligation (*Obligation*) is a practical *necessitatio* and not a pathological one, an objective necessity and not a subjective one (*V-Mo/Collins,* AA XXVII, 256-257).

1 I have preserved the manner in which the words were originally composed.
2 The translation from German is my own.

This extensive text reveals a complex interrelationship between agency, rationality, and morality. Firstly, Kant makes a distinction between *Obligation* and *Nothwendigkeit* (necessity). While necessity is a condition that must be met, obligation implies an active force that compels the subject to act in accordance with the necessity. This is the element of *Nötigung* and *Nothwendigmachung* in action. However, it is crucial to distinguish this *neceßitatio* from *neceßitas*. While *neceßitas* may be a purely deterministic or fatalistic condition, with no room for freedom, *neceßitatio* is anchored in a framework of freedom and rationality. *Obligation* is, therefore, a call to freedom in accordance with reason, and not a restriction of freedom by necessity.

In contrast, divine will (*göttliche Wille*) is identified as necessary (*moralisch nothwendig*) in moral terms. In contrast, human will is described as obliged, not necessary. While the holy will necessarily follows moral laws (as it is perfect), the human will needs to be obliged or coerced to do so. In this manner, for the perfect will (*vollkommenen Willens*), the moral necessity is not only objective but also subjectively necessary. This is a state that transcends *Nötigung* and enters into a realm of perfect congruence between the objective and the subjective, between law and will.

The aforementioned text also suggests that moral necessity (*moralische Nothwendigkeit*) is objective, but its application may be subjectively contingent. This resonates with Kant's efforts to establish an objective foundation for morality while recognizing the variability of human experience. For imperfect beings like humans, morality not only remains objectively necessary but also demands *Neceßitation* und *Nöthigung* (necessitation and coercion), thereby engendering *Obligation* (obligation).

It is important to recognize the complex interrelationship between the concepts of *Nothwendig* and *Neceßitation*. These terms are not isolated entities; rather, they exist in a complementary relationship. Practical necessitation (*Neceßitation*) serves as the mechanism through which moral necessity (*Nothwendig*) becomes manifest in the realm of action. Kant asserts that moral necessity delineates the 'what'—the condition that must be met—while practical necessitation prescribes the 'how'—the process of actualizing this condition within the actions of the moral subject. Hence, Kant states that "all imperatives are formulas for practical necessitation (*practischen Neceßitation*). Practical necessity (practische Neceßitation) is a necessity of free actions (*Nothwendig Machung freier Handlungen*)" (*V-Mo/Collins*, AA XXVII, 255).

Kant further argues that, given our imperfect will, actions can be necessitated (*neceßitirt*) in two distinct manners: they can either be practically necessary (*practisch nothwendig*) or pathologically necessary (*pathologisch*

nothwendig). Practically necessary actions are guided by the laws of free will (*freien Willkühr*), analogous to the noumenal domain, in which the will is determined solely by reason. This constitutes an objective necessitation, as it aligns with the universal principles of practical reason. Conversely, actions that are pathologically necessary (*pathologisch nothwendig*) are governed by the *Gesetzen der sinnlichen Gefühls Neigung*, thus aligning more closely with the phenomenal domain. The necessity here is subjective and confined to empirical conditions, lacking the universal character that underscores practical necessity. The Kantian distinction between divine will (*göttliche Wille*) and human will lies in the nature of obligation and moral necessity. For the holy will, morality is both objectively and subjectively necessary (*moralisch nothwendig*). The deity, bearer of a perfect will, need not be coerced or obliged to act morally, for its action is intrinsically moral. Holy will knows no *Neceßitation* und *Nöthigung*. We may "consider all objective morality as the subjective morality of the holy will, but not as a subjective morality of the human will. The holy dispositions are morally good, but not those of man" (V-Mo/Collins, AA XXVII, 263).

Conversely, human will is obligated to adhere to moral principles. Though morality is objectively necessary (*moralische Nothwendigkeit*), the human will, being imperfect, is subject to coercion (*Nötigung*) and obligation (Obligation). In contrast to the divine will, which acts out of moral necessity (*moralisch nothwendig*), human will requires the imposition of moral obligation due to its flawed nature.

In his *Vorlesungen über die philosophische Religionslehre* (*VpR*), Kant posits that divine wisdom is also constituted by the self-consistency of divine choice (*Einstimmung der göttlichen Wahl*). A plan of selection (*Auswahl*) that, upon execution, results in conflicts and subsequently *necessitates* exceptions cannot be considered perfect (*VpR*, 1830, 114)[3]. Unlike the human will, the divine will is not subject to selection; it simply chooses. This internal coherence within the divine will effectively dispels any notions of arbitrariness or contradiction. Thus, God's will is depicted as fundamentally consistent and harmonious with itself, embodying the perfection and unity inherent in the divine nature. In this context, A. Wood underscores the difference in purposiveness between the human and divine wills. The purposiveness of the divine will is immediate and efficacious, whereas that of the human will is invariably oriented toward a specific end, a condition imposed by human limitations (Wood, 1970, p.53).

3 The translation from German is my own.

In discussing the nature of human will, Kant contends that the maxims guiding human actions seldom align with objective laws. He states, "There are objective laws of action, referred to as *praecepta*, and then there are subjective laws of action, known as maxims. The latter seldom (*selten*) accord with the former" (*V-Mo/Collins*, AA XXVII, p. 263). Contrastingly, a good will in humans is attainable only through the imposition of obligation. Paton elaborates on this by suggesting that "a holy will would act both necessarily and spontaneously in accordance with moral law, yet without any consciousness of obligation" (Paton, 1946, p. 116)

In this context, the distinction between the holy will and the human will serves as an implicit critique of ethical frameworks that ground morality solely in divine will—a perspective often associated with divine voluntarism. For Kant, relying on such a foundation is both inadequate and problematic, as it would reduce morality to mere divine caprice, thereby undermining its objective and universal dimensions. As evidence, in Gottlieb Bernhard Powalski's notes on Kant's lectures on practical philosophy, titled *Praktische Philosophie Powalski*[4], dated 1782–83, Kant declares that actions are not virtuous simply because God commands them; rather, God commands them because they are inherently good. "We do not obey God's will merely because He dictates in a despotic manner, but because what He dictates is good... God's commands are not arbitrary; they are inherently good" (P, AA XXVII, 136). Supporting this interpretation, A. Wood argues that our unique understanding of a divine will—characterized by moral perfection—must necessarily arise from our own rational criteria for benevolence, which in turn stem from the moral law binding us. Consequently, it is logical to argue that the realization of our ethical obligations aligns with such a divine will. However, this claim does not necessarily mean that these duties are explicitly mandated by a divine being (Wood, 1970, p. 188)

This statement serves as a forceful declaration of moral objectivity, affirming that the moral law possesses an objective nature, independent of both the divine and human wills. This perspective is congruent with Kant's categorical imperative, which posits morality as a function of practical reason, rather than as an act of obedience to any external authority. Within the domain of theodicy, Kant's position also implies that God cannot be held responsible for the existence of evil or immorality. If God's commands are intrinsically good, then the genesis of evil must be accounted for through alternative means,

4 The translation from German is my own.

potentially as a product of human will that is influenced by pathological interests (GMS, AA IV, 414). In the realm of the philosophy of religion, Kant's viewpoint radically redefines the relationship between the divine and the moral. It stresses that morality is not an arbitrary construct of divine will but possesses intrinsic and objective validity. This understanding repositions God not as a cosmic legislator who arbitrarily determines what is good or evil, but rather as the ultimate exemplification or manifestation of moral goodness.

As early as the 1760s, Kant appears to have been open, at least in principle, to a divine view of moral motivation. This is according to Kain, who contends that Kant had not yet solidified his theory of moral motivation during this period (2021, pp. 314-315). However, Kant's Herder lectures provide evidence to the contrary, stating that, in a state of nature, it is possible to be "morally good, even without God" (*alsdenn sind wir auch ohne Gott Moralisch gut*[5]) (H, AA XXVII, 76).

> Supposing that I have come to know the will (arbitrium) of God, whence comes the necessity (*Nothwendigkeit*) to follow it? If I do not derive the obligation (*Verbindlichkeit*) from the nature of the thing itself—"God wills, why should I?"—He will punish: then it is detrimental, but not intrinsically vicious. This is to obey a despot; then this is not sin in the strict sense, but rather a lack of political wisdom. And why does God will it? Why does He punish? Because I am obliged (*verbindlich*) to it, not because He has the power to punish. The application of the divine will (*arbitrii Divini*) to the fact (factum) as a foundation already presupposes the concepts of obligation (*Verbindlichkeit*). And as this constitutes natural religion, this is a part, but not the foundational principle of morality (H, AA XXVII, 9).

Without veering into a discussion rooted in the philosophy of religion, Kant's framework undermines the foundation of a morality that is solely predicated on divine authority. If God metes out punishment on the basis that humans are morally obligated (*verbindlich*) to behave in a particular manner, then the obligation's existence must be logically prior to, and serve as the justification for, divine retribution. This highlights that the rational underpinning of moral obligation (*Verbindlichkeit*) operates autonomously, independent of any divine command. As Kant notes, "I myself could not possess adequate conceptions of the divine will's goodness if the concept of moral good did not precede it" (H, AA XXVII, 9). To put it another way, the notion of a good will is conceptually antecedent to the will of God. "God is an exception solely because the concept of duty is inapplicable to a holy will; however, the same moral law binds both human and divine will" (Beck, 1963, p. 202).

5 The translation from German is my own.

In this context, it is imperative to underscore that the sanctity of the holy will is not a function of contingent adherence to ethical norms but rather stems from an analytical congruence that is intrinsic to the fabric of moral law itself. In contrast, human volition is devoid of such inherent analytical consonance with moral principles and therefore requires coercion through a synthetic a priori judgment, which finds its manifestation in that of the categorical imperative.

It is worth noting that in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant does not explicitly address the complex conceptual relationship between *Nothwendig* and *Neceßitation*; the concept of *Neceßitation* is notably absent from the work. Near the end of the Second Section of the GMS, Kant reiterates the differentiation between the holy will and a will that is not absolutely good.

> The will whose maxims necessarily harmonize with the laws of autonomy is a *holy,* absolutely good will. The dependence of a will which is not absolutely good on the principle of autonomy (*moralische Nötigung*) is *obligation* (*Verbindlichkeit*). Thus, the latter cannot be referred to a holy being. The objective necessity (*objektive Notwendigkeit*) of an action from obligation is called *duty* (*Pflicht*) (GMS, AA VI, 439).

In this regard, Stern asserts that Kant employs his transcendental idealism coupled with his dualistic conception of the will as tools to address the transcendental question he articulates concerning the imperative essence of morality. The Kantian bifurcation between the holy will and the human will serves as an inescapable component in the resolution he offers to the dilemma of elucidating the imperativity of moral duty. This solution aims to circumscribe the possibility of duty without subscribing to the problematically theocentric notion of a divine legislator as the *fons et origo* of this imperativity, thereby avoiding the need to endorse a divine command theory (Stern, 2013, p. 129).

Furthermore, according to Stern (2013, pp. 130-132), it is important to point out a certain ambiguity. As previously mentioned, Kant presents the holy will as one that does not resist the moral law. However, Kant sometimes asserts that the holy will has maxims and that, unlike us, its maxims always coincide with the moral law: "The will whose maxims necessarily harmonize with the laws of autonomy is a holy, absolutely good will" (GMS, AA IV, 439). At other times, he claims that the holy will does not possess maxims[6]. This arises from

6 "Alle drei Begriffe aber, der einer Triebfeder, eines Interesses und einer Maxime, können nur auf endliche Wesen angewendet werden. Denn sie setzen insgesamt eine Eingeschränktheit der Natur eines Wesens voraus, da die subjektive Beschaffenheit seines Willens mit den objektiven Gesetzen einer praktischen Vernunft nicht von selbst übereinstimmt; ein Bedürfnis, irgendetwas zur Tätigkeit angetrieben zu werden, weil ein inneres Hindernis diesem entgegensteht. Auf den göttlichen Willen können sie auch nicht angewandt werden" (*KpV*, AA V, 141).

the ambiguity in the way Kant uses the understanding that the maxim is "*das subjektive Prinzip zu handeln*" (GMS, AA IV, 420).

Kant describes maxims as subjective principles of action, a characterization that admits of two possible interpretations. First, it could signify that a maxim is simply the principle according to which an agent acts or intends to act. In this context, one could easily attribute maxims to the holy will, asserting that its principles are invariably in conformity with the moral law. However, Kant also characterizes the subjective nature of maxims in another manner, specifically as principles possessing merely subjective validity, in contrast to the practical law's objective validity. This interpretation implies that a maxim holds validity solely for the subject, insofar as it pertains to their individual conditions and inclinations, without applicability to others in differing circumstances. In contrast, the practical law is objective and universally applicable, irrespective of individual conditions.

Based on this understanding of maxims, Kant argues that the holy will lacks them entirely, as none of the conditions conferring merely subjective validity to maxims are applicable to the holy will. The holy will is guided solely by the principles of an objective will, which are universal and necessary. However, owing to the complex manner in which Kant employs the concept of maxims, he also allows for the possibility that the holy will may possess maxims, provided that these maxims are in complete conformity with the principles of an objective will.

Paton addresses this apparent ambiguity by delineating that the term "maxim" serves as a category, or genus, that encompasses two distinct types, or species: formal maxims and material maxims. Material maxims, also known as empirical or *a posteriori* maxims, are contingent upon our experiential understanding of desire. Conversely, maxims not influenced by sensual inclinations are termed a priori maxims; these are not reliant on experiential desire. In this context, material maxims specifically refer to the desired ends that an action aims to realize, constituting the matter of the maxim. On the other hand, a priori maxims are also categorized as formal maxims. Given this nuanced differentiation, it becomes plausible to posit that a holy will would not entertain maxims that are not simultaneously objective principles. However, making this assertion does not negate the possibility that the holy will operates in accordance with maxims, provided we understand maxims as principles manifest in action. Crucially, it is vital to acknowledge that, although maxims frequently emanate from inclinations, actions based on maxims without such inclined origins are still conceivable (Paton, 1946, p. 61).

Does the holy will make sense?

Prichard critically evaluates Kant's notion of the holy will, contending that this conception is both unsustainable and internally inconsistent. Central to his critique is the challenge to Kant's assertion that a holy will can exist entirely devoid of a sense of obligation. Kant differentiates between the good will, in its imperfect form as found in humans—susceptible to non-rational desires—and the holy will, which is entirely rational and unencumbered by such desires. According to Kant, the holy will remains unsubject to obligations because the sense of obligation arises only in conflict with inclinations that could otherwise thwart the will.

Prichard, however, problematizes this framework. He argues that even a morally impeccable being cannot escape the sense of obligation. In his view, the apprehension of a moral principle inherently involves an emotional component, specifically, a sense of obligation. Consequently, even for a morally perfect being, this sense would persist. Prichard also dismisses the notion that the holy will could be guided by a specialized form of desire, such as a "good desire." He maintains that actions spurred by desires rooted in affection or public spirit, while indicative of a form of goodness, do not meet the criteria for moral goodness. Thus, Prichard disputes the feasibility of a holy will that is wholly devoid of either desires or obligations, contending that such a conceptualization is intrinsically flawed (2002, pp. 55-56).

Kant might respond to Prichard's critique by emphasizing the pivotal distinction between the holy will and the imperfect will, particularly regarding the interplay between maxims and moral principles. Kant would argue that the holy will, inherently rational and aligned with the objective dictates of moral law, operates without the necessity for a sense of obligation. This absence of obligation stems from the holy will's immunity to inclinations or desires that might otherwise contravene moral law. Consequently, the holy will aligns with moral principles not because of a felt obligation but due to its acknowledgement of these principles' objective and universally applicable nature. This critical differentiation between acting out of duty, characteristic of the holy will, and acting based on inclination or desire, typical of an imperfect will, forms a cornerstone of Kant's ethical philosophy.

One could also challenge the assumption that the apprehension of a moral principle invariably entails a feeling of obligation. The holy will, in acting in accordance with moral law, is acting in harmony with pure rationality, thereby not necessarily involving emotions or feelings. Thus, the absence of a sense of obligation does not render the concept of a holy will implausible; rather, it represents a higher manifestation of the potential for morality.

Lavin presents a critique of what he regards as the paradoxical nature of a perfectly rational will, stating that "a would-be perfectly rational will—something whose will is in a state of perfection and thus which can't really go wrong—must amount to no more than a strange sort of mechanism or automaton" (2004, p. 443). Lavin contends that in the scenario of a perfectly rational will, normative principles function merely descriptively, similar to the way physical laws map the trajectories of celestial objects. From this viewpoint, he argues that a will directed solely by rational principles turns into a blind mechanism. This configuration, while rendering the will infallible, simultaneously robs it of what is widely regarded as true agency.

Kain introduces what he terms the *Blind Mechanism Objection* to counter Lavin's critique (2021, p. 299). Central to Kain's refutation is an exploration of how Kant conceptualizes the relationship between the holy will and moral necessities. According to Kant, certain moral imperatives are indeed contingent upon, or constituted by, God's will. This negates the portrayal of God's will as a mere blind mechanism, for it operates under the aegis of normative representations such as goodness and justice. These representations are not merely epiphenomenal or devoid of explanatory power; rather, they serve as fundamental components in comprehending the character and actions of God.

Kant posits that the holy will is influenced by an intrinsic full appreciation of its own reality, which is inherently good. Consequently, a will that is normatively directed does not lack agency. Instead, it exemplifies a more elevated form of agency. Kain asserts that Kant offers a robust model of rational agency that successfully amalgamates perfect rationality with normative guidance, without degenerating into a blind mechanism. This perspective underlines the notion that the will—whether it is classified as holy or human—is not subjugated to rational or moral principles. Rather, it possesses the agency to autonomously guide itself by these principles in an intrinsically meaningful manner. Kain further contends that this conceptualization of free, rational, holy agency can be considered a significant advance within the historical context of Kant's time, particularly in relation to Leibniz's campaign against Spinozism (Kain, 2021, pp. 314-319).

In turn, Allison addresses the question of the unattainability of the ideal of a perfectly good or Holy Will in Kant's philosophy, attributing this limitation to the sensuous nature of human beings. However, Allison is cautious not to directly blame this sensuous nature for our moral shortcomings. He emphasizes that for a perfectly good will, as described by Kant, there is no possibility of conflict between inclination and morality, as such a will is not affected by sensory experience. In contrast, finite rational beings like us are both autonomous moral

agents and creatures of desire and inclination, which are grounded in natural causes and thus are neither completely under our control nor necessarily in accordance with the dictates of morality. Allison notes that this characteristic does not render us incapable of subordinating our sensuously-based needs to moral considerations; rather, we are always susceptible to temptation and the need for moral restraint.

Allison further underscores the complexity of the relationship between duty and the cheerful disposition (or readiness of will) to follow the moral law. He observes that although we may perform acts in accordance with duty and experience a sense of pleasure in doing so, these acts are not carried out from duty and, thus, lack moral value. In sum, Allison emphasizes that the inescapable necessity for moral restraint in human beings is analogous to the impossibility of acting joyfully from duty, fundamentally diverging from the disposition of a holy will (1990, p. 156).

W.D. Ross offers a pivotal critique of Kant's notion of a holy will in his work *The Right and the Good*, posing a challenge to the Kantian framework. Ross decries the circular logic inherent in Kant's conception of duty and morality; according to Kant, one is morally obliged because it is one's duty, and it becomes one's duty simply because one should act morally. For Ross, this circular reasoning diminishes the Kantian system's capacity to serve as an objective and practical foundation for ethics.

Contrary to Kant's monistic view of a universal moral duty, Ross introduces the concept of multiple *prima facie* duties — duties that are self-evident but not absolute — such as fidelity, reparation, and justice. These duties can conflict, thereby providing a more realistic and flexible moral framework. Ross challenges Kant's assertion that moral obligation necessarily conflicts with desire, positing that a holy will could act under a sense of obligation without this being in discord with other desires. Ross contends that moral perfection doesn't necessitate the eradication of internal conflicts but rather the absence of malevolent desires.

Moreover, Ross introduces the idea of "conscientious action," rooted in a specific desire to fulfill one's duty. The ethical merit of an action is thus conditioned upon this particular desire. This perspective not only advocates for deontological pluralism — the view that multiple principles can guide moral action — but also offers a nuanced alternative to Kant's rigid concept of a holy will (Ross, 2002, pp. 159-160).

Given the critique, a response could be formulated from Kant's *Vorlesungen über die philosophische Religionslehre*, in which he implicitly criticizes the idea of anthropomorphizing God. In his discussion on the *Selbstgenügsamkeit* (Self-

sufficiency) of God, Kant notes: "God's self-sufficiency, tied to His intelligence, is omnipotence" (*Allgenugsamkeit*) (*VpR*, 1830, 120). This assertion subtly refutes the anthropomorphic tendency to attribute human needs or desires to God, emphasizing divine self-sufficiency as an intrinsic and singular attribute, incomparable with any human faculty.

In this sense, holy will emerges not merely as an ethical beacon, outlining an ideal of ethical perfection beyond the prescription of actions, but also as a formative force, capable of inspiring the rational being towards a deeper adherence to morality, characterized by autonomy and voluntary compliance with the moral law. It is important to note that the Holy Will does not manifest directly as a motivational impulse for human action; rather, it presents itself as the supreme exemplification that freedom under the law is not only viable but constitutes the ideal state of moral congruence. Thus, by positioning the holy will as an archetype, we move beyond mere prescription to enter the realm of ethical development, where normativity unfolds in a continuous process of aspiration and moral refinement.

This conception expands to incorporate Kant's view on the divine will, asserting that God's will operates as a unique form of causality (*Causalität*), entirely different from human will. He articulates this by stating that God's will rests solely on His supreme understanding. This marks a significant departure from human will, which is often compelled by desires, inclinations, and necessities. In contrast, God's will emanates from a state not of deficiency, but of completeness, upheld by divine intelligence" (VpR, 1830, 120).

The concept of *Wohlgefallen* serves as a salient counterpoint to anthropomorphic frameworks that ascribe human-like attributes such as need or desire to God. Kant emphatically posits that divine *Wohlgefallen* should not be construed as a mechanism to fulfill an existential void or specific need; rather, it manifests as an expression of the inherent perfection and excellence of the divine nature. As Kant asserts, "In this unrestricted capacity in relation to all possible things, He has the greatest *Wohlgefallen*" (*VpR*, 1830, 121). This statement cogently demonstrates that, within the context of the divine will, pleasure is not an external pursuit but a form of self-recognition of its intrinsic capability to bring things into existence.

Another constructive approach to addressing Ross's critique might involve viewing the holy will as a practical archetype—a normative model that humans strive towards but, due to their inherent flaws, never fully achieve. This perspective could mitigate potential circularity in Kant's understanding of duty and moral action by allowing for ethical development and sophisticated judgment in complex situations, which Ross deems essential. Furthermore,

conceptualizing the holy will as part of a larger Kantian ethical framework rather than an isolated moral axiom could offer deeper insights.

Acting morally is also being a kind of God!?

In Beck's assessment, the concept of the holy will is conceptually tenable, though its actual existence is contingent upon belief in the existence of God. This notion assumes considerable significance as it serves as a heuristic device for elucidating the specificities of human cognitive and practical faculties. In the instance of an intrinsically holy will, the concept of duty becomes null and void. This is because the notion of duty presupposes the existence of conflicting motives that could stand in opposition to rational law. In a holy will, such a duality between what is desired and what ought to be desired simply does not manifest (Beck, 1963, p. 50).

On this note, it is worth reemphasizing that Kant stipulates the perfection of the moral law is not determined by its nature as a divine edict: "Moral perfection can be understood by itself" (P, AA XXVII, 151). Here, Kant remains unswervingly committed to the principle of practical reason's autonomy. The moral law does not necessitate divine authority to substantiate its validity. It is self-sustaining, predicated on its own rational logic and universality. Kant further cautions against the problem of *Indolem servilem*, which may emerge if moral actions are performed with an eye toward rewards or fear of punishments. This issue is of critical significance, as it undermines the quintessence of Kantian morality, which should be founded on moral law rather than external inducements. In this context, rewards and punishments become problematic because they qualify as sensual stimuli (*Sinnliche Antriebe*), carrying the potential to corrupt (*verderben*) the will and reducing morality to a transactional relationship, rather than an unconditional categorical imperative.

The philosopher additionally posits that "the ideal of the holy will (*göttlichen Willens*) constitutes the apex of moral perfection" (P, AA XXVII, p.121). From this vantage point, the holy will should not be construed as a causal impetus for ethical behavior, but rather as a practical ideal that serves as an archetypal standard—whose approximation alone befits finite rational beings (*KpV*, AA V, 58). This conceptualization aligns with the tenets of Kant's transcendental idealism, illuminating the dichotomous nature of human will: a faculty that teeters precariously between the deterministic forces exerted by the sensible world and the normative mandates of pure reason. Such ambivalence situates us, on the one hand, in a continuum with the animal kingdom, subjected to the caprices of instinct, and on the other, in an asymptotic alignment with

holy will, characterized by the capability for autonomous and unconditional choice.

Kantian ethics, as explored by A. Wood, first considers the concept of motive or determining ground. In the Kantian framework, human will is perpetually influenced by some form of motive, negating the idea that it is a tabula rasa or a neutral entity. Instead, it is incessantly steered by either moral or non-moral determinants. Here, it is relevant to insert the Kantian concept of *Begehrungsvermögen*, which situates the human will as an inherently purpose-oriented mechanism (1970, p. 42). In this way, while the divine will is conceived as necessarily determined solely and exclusively by the objectively practical, the human will is constantly oscillating between the poles of duty and desire. This contrast elevates the divine will to an archetype of ethical objectivity.

The complexity of the human will in relation to morality is encapsulated in its dualistic nature, which comprises both inclination and duty. Kant posits that the human will is steered by maxims, subjective rules that link specific actions to underlying rational principles (GMS, AA IV, 420). Far from being mere guides for conduct, these maxims constitute the normative architecture of human volition, integrating ethical principles into the spheres of desire and action. In this framework, human will is beholden to the moral law as an imperative; this is not due to any inherent deficiency but rather to its multifaceted constitution. Human will is influenced by both duty and inclination, which are "naturally adopted into its maxims" (Wood, 1970, pp. 42-43). This pivotal point underscores that the interplay between duty and inclination is not a simplistic antithesis but a nuanced interrelation. Thus, good and evil within the human will are not adjudicated by the mere presence or absence of duty or inclination, but by the hierarchical arrangement of these incentives relative to one another

Maxims both exemplify human freedom and signal their subordination to conditions of sensibility. These guiding orientations are determined by reason, serving as demarcations that distinguish human will from the subrational volition of animals. Yet they are also conditioned by the specificities of the subject, differentiating them from divine will (Wood, 1970, p. 43). This dual aspect—balancing the rational and the contingent within maxims—introduces a captivating implication: to act in accordance with reason is to approximate ourselves to the divine, experiencing, albeit to a limited extent, a form of divine conduct.

Consequently, it becomes plausible that human actions could manifest, within the phenomenological domain, the decisions that would be taken by the holy will. "The divine dispositions (*göttlichen Gesinnungen*) or subjective divine morality align with objective morality, and if we act according to

objective morality, we are also acting in accord with the divine will" (*V-Mo/Collins*, AA XXVII, 263).

In this regard, to address the focal question of this subsection—"Is acting morally also a kind of being God?"—the answer is affirmative. We can approximate the same moral decisions as God to the extent that we act in accord with the obligations set forth by the categorical imperative. Action, in this context, is not merely an act of compliance with a moral norm but represents an experiential engagement with the holy will itself. Such an engagement imbues the human act of moral choice with profound dignity. Adherence to the categorical imperative, in this setting, transcends mere duty and serves to emulate the divine. Consequently, moral action becomes a conduit for transcendence, for it is through alignment with the categorical imperative that individuals discover the purest expression of their freedom.

Allison sheds light on a fundamental tension within Kant's theory of virtue, juxtaposing the concepts of virtue and holiness. While Kant delineates virtue as the apex of moral achievement for finite and imperfect rational beings like humans, he also posits the pursuit of holiness as essential to virtuous living. This raises a paradox: the moral mandate to strive for holiness, an inherently unattainable goal for finite beings, seems to conflict with Kant's principle that "ought implies can". Kant attempts to resolve this contradiction across his works, yet it persists as a challenging aspect of his virtue theory, placing us in the dilemma of being morally obliged to pursue what is fundamentally unachievable.

While the focus of this discussion is not on the concept of virtue, it is pertinent to highlight Allison's argument as it serves to illuminate our understanding of the notion of holy will. Allison attempts to resolve this inherent tension in Kant's ethics by undertaking a comprehensive analysis of three seminal works: *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, and *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*. It is the argument presented in this last work that is of particular relevance to our present discussion.

Allison underscores the notion of "ineliminable uncertainty" with respect to human motivations as a pivotal aspect of Kantian moral theory. Drawing on his interpretation of MS (AA VI, 393), Allison contends that, given our inability to achieve absolute certainty about our own motives, the most that can be reasonably expected of us is a rigorous conscientiousness in our moral self-examination. This insight is instrumental for grasping the function of the holy will in Kant's ethical framework—a will that operates exclusively in conformity with duty and remains impervious to egoistic inclinations. In

Kantian terms, striving for this form of will is simultaneously an ethical duty and an unreachable ideal, given the constraints of human nature. The absence of certainty about our own motivations, compounded by our propensity for self-deception, engenders a "justifiable suspicion concerning any appearance of purity". Nonetheless, this does not negate the necessity of pursuing a holy will. Rather, it is precisely this endeavor that imbues the process of moral self-examination with significance and indispensability, thereby rendering it an inalienable duty within the Kantian ethical paradigm.

Allison's analysis of the concept of holy will serves as a linchpin for any comprehensive inquiry into Kantian ethics. He persuasively argues that the quest for a holy will is neither a discretionary appendage nor a marginal theoretical consideration but an indispensable element within Kantian ethical thought. According to Allison, the duty to strive for holiness is not a removable component but an inherent aspect of Kant's moral theory. This imperative serves as a philosophically rigorous countermeasure to our inherent propensity for evil, a key concern articulated in Kant's doctrine of radical evil (Allison, 1990, pp. 175-178).

In light of this, Kant's observation in the GMS (AA IV, 407), emphasizing the intricate inaccessibility of *covert incentives* in human volition, serves to deepen our understanding of Kantian ethics. More than that, it accentuates a pivotal facet of the thesis advanced herein. Kant admonishes: "so we would gladly flatter ourselves with a false presumption of a nobler motive, while in fact even through the most strenuous testing, we can never fully get behind the covert incentives, because when we are talking about moral worth, it does not depend on the actions, which one sees, but on the inner principles, which one does not see" (AA IV, 407)[7]. This counsel functions as a salutary caveat against moral self-complacency and ethical presumption.

The dialectic between aspiration and humility operates as an essential axis in the conceptual framework of Kantian moral understanding we advocate. This dual orientation serves not merely as a pursuit of lofty moral ideals but also as a perpetual acknowledgment of inherent human limitations and fallibility. It renders the endeavor towards moral perfection not simply as an ascendant trajectory aimed at high moral standards, but concurrently as a rigorous exercise in self-awareness and introspective scrutiny. This approach offers a nuanced paradigm that acknowledges the intrinsic tension between the limitless scope of moral ideals and the finite capacities of human rationality and will.

7 See also: GMS, IV, 439; *KpV*, V, 33, 47; MS, VI, 393, 447.

To conclude this line of argumentation, it is pertinent to address the critical question raised by Bojanowski concerning the feasibility of actualizing the archetype of a holy will: Can we at least see "a human being according to this archetype?" (2011, p. 99). The issue subtly raises the need for empirical evidence to substantiate the objective reality of the moral ideal represented by the holy will. An empirical foundation would significantly strengthen the conceptual coherence of the holy will. However, Kant categorically rejects the idea of grounding the ideal's objective reality in empirical or historical data, including the moral exemplarity of figures such as Jesus. He argues that seeking empirical justification conflates practical concepts with natural concepts, thus compromising the distinctively normative function of the ideal within his ethical system. Consequently, the lack of empirical exemplars neither undermines nor detracts from the moral imperatives embodied by the holy will, which continues to serve as a guiding principle within Kant's framework of morality.

For Kant, the holy will represents an ideal guiding moral behavior, inherently rational and transcendent, thus beyond full grasp by empirical means or finite reasoning. The use of analogy serves as an epistemic method to make these transcendental ideas more comprehensible, without implying a direct logical inference or substantial similarity between human and holy wills. This approach warns against the pitfalls of metaphysical anthropomorphism, emphasizing the distinctness of categories in Kant's philosophical framework. Rather, analogy functions as a *Schematism der Analogie*, a schema that renders the transcendental concept *faßlich* (comprehensible) through analogy with something sensible or empirical (*KrV*, AA III, B 180). It does not bring us closer to the *an sich* nature of the holy will but provides a point of departure for aligning our moral actions with the transcendental ideal.

Such an approach carries significant implications for ethical theory. While we cannot comprehend the holy will in its complete metaphysical dimension, we can, via the schema of analogy, discern how to act so as to align our own will with this regulative ideal. Therefore, the utility of these analogous schematizations does not reside in expanding our theoretical understanding of the transcendent, but rather in functioning as practical models that guide our moral conduct (Bojanowski, 2011, pp. 99-103).

In this context, Kant's approach to the holy will, when situated within the dynamics of analogy, offers a vital bridge between the moral ideal and its application in the human realm. Kant assures that moral perfection, represented by the holy will, can be conceived autonomously, unlinked from any divine authority: "Morality can be understood by itself" (P, AA XXVII, 151). This postulate reinforces the autonomy of practical reason and positions the holy will

as a paradigm of moral freedom under the law, rather than a direct prescription for action. The utility of analogy, in this sense, is not to establish a substantial identity between the human and the divine will, but to suggest that orienting our actions in accordance with the categorical imperative analogously brings us closer to the moral perfection of the holy will. Thus, the exemplarity of the holy will does not reside in its direct imitability but in its role as a beacon that illuminates the moral path, offering an archetype to which finite rational beings can aspire. This establishes a normative model that, through analogy, informs moral practice by illustrating the possibility of genuine freedom aligned with the moral law.

Final considerations

To begin this concluding section, it is important to emphasize that an initial reading of the concept of the holy will within Kant's ethical framework could give the impression that a divine entity, in perfect adherence to the moral law, lacks the freedom to act in opposition to it. However, this perspective would miss the essential point that the so-called *lack of choice* in the holy will—its inability to opt for evil—is not a limitation of its freedom but rather its ultimate expression. Rather than constraining the holy will, this condition elevates it to a state of pure, unconditioned freedom.

With this established, we have explored the multifaceted role of the "holy will" within Kant's moral philosophy. I wish to articulate two central theses grounded in the foregoing analysis. First, I argue that the holy will, rather than serving as a concrete mechanism for moral action, functions as a normative archetype that refines and broadens our self-understanding. It serves as a guidepost, shedding light on the range of human potentialities and limitations in ethical considerations. Within this framework, the holy will does not act as a causal determinant in our ethical life; rather, it operates as an ideal reference point that allows us to assess our own moral trajectory and ethical aspirations. Specifically, it is an ideal that may inspire but crucially does not compel; that elevates, but does not subordinate; that challenges, but does not penalize.

Secondly, and more significantly, we argue that from the vantage point of transcendental idealism, the holy will provides compelling evidence that reconciliation with our fundamental nature is possible as we move beyond the sensible inclinations and interests that frequently divert us from ethical conduct. In this respect, the holy will serves as the normative archetype that renders tangible our aspiration toward a state of freedom and virtue, enabling us to overcome the constraints imposed by empirical determination. To put it

differently, when we act morally, we are, in a sense, engaging in a form of holy action, embodying a will that is both free and guided by ethical imperatives.

Here, the holy will acts as a vivid illustration of what it means to function under the auspices of reason. It demonstrates that genuine freedom is not encapsulated in the arbitrary choice between good and evil but lies in the ability to transcend the uncertainties of sensibility and to act in harmony with rational principles. This ascendance serves as a form of reconciliation with reason, indicating that our true nature, in its most unadulterated form, is not confined by sensible limitations but is capable of transcending them in pursuit of a greater ethical end.

Moreover, Kant, in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, introduces the holy will as an ideal that, although we cannot fully achieve due to our sensible nature, serves as a guide for moral action by illustrating the possibility of a will perfectly aligned with the moral law. This alignment is precisely the process of reconciliation alluded to: a continuous aspiration towards the conformity of our imperfect will with the universal moral law, guided by pure reason. It is in this attempt at alignment, mediated by the function of practical reason, that the reconciliation with our own rational nature is manifested. Therefore, the holy will not only illustrates what it would be like to act under no conflict of interests or inclinations contrary to morality but also demonstrates that true freedom – and, consequently, reconciliation with our rational essence – lies in the voluntary submission to these universal and necessary principles. This process does not eliminate the tension between inclination and duty but teaches us that overcoming this duality through reason is the path to the realization of morality and genuine freedom. In summary, the holy will in Kant's ethical system is not merely an abstract idealization but functions as an invitation to moral and rational self-realization.

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