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Formerly "Picture of the Month"

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The Rational, the Moral, and the General: An Exploration
Part 2: *Kant's Ideas of Reason*



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Rethinking the role of the general in the moral and rational Where can we find new inspiration and orientation towards a deeper understanding – deeper than our review of the tradition of practical philosophy has afforded it thus far – of general ideas such as the rational, the moral, and of the general (or universal) itself and of what they mean as applied to the quest for good practice? In the first, introductory part we considered the role of the general in the moral "in general" and then discussed some specific difficulties it raises in discourse ethics in particular. I suggest we now take a step back and distance ourselves a bit from our current main concern with discourse ethics. To begin with, it may be useful to briefly return to Kant and recall the way he sees the place of general ideas in human cognition. This is the topic of the present, second and relatively short essay in the series. Subsequently, as announced in the first part, we will attempt in Part 3 to pragmatize Kant's view of general ideas a bit, so as to come to terms with the crucial difficulty that we identified in the first part, the tension between the general (or universal) and the specific (or particular) in all moral reasoning. Thus prepared, we will then undertake the planned excursion into ancient Eastern thought, to help us in detaching ourselves for a while from our "Western" perspective of general ideas and in appreciating their role from an entirely different vantage point.

*Third intermediate reflection:
A Kantian perspective on general ideas*

The general, the moral, and the rational share this fate that all three are general ideas that human reason cannot dispense with but which it can never prove to have objective reality. We can imagine and *think* them but not encounter them, and thus cannot *know* them, as they have no empirical counterparts. There are basically two reasons why the human mind may need to conceive of something X as a meaningful idea (or object of cognition)

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Note: This is the second part of a series of exploratory essays on the role of general ideas, such as particularly the moral idea, in rational thought and action as seen from different vantage points. The first, introductory part appeared in the *Bimonthly* of September-October 2013.

although it does not and cannot possibly know it: either, because *X precedes* all possible experience yet is a necessary presupposition of knowledge; or else, because *X* stands for a totality of conditions that, although it furnishes a useful general idea or principle of thought and action, *exceeds* all possible experience. The concept of causality, according to which everything that happens has some cause, may illustrate the former case; the moral principle, the latter. Note that a totality of conditions is itself absolute, or unconditioned, as otherwise it would not include all the conditions in question (cf. Kant, 1787, B379, 444 and 445n). The former class of ideas is *prior* to knowledge, the second reaches *beyond* it. As the two examples also illustrate, the two classes are not mutually exclusive, in that presuppositions of cognition that precede *all* knowledge also are universal conditions (but conversely, not all principles of thought and action need to be presuppositions of all knowledge). The human eye may serve as a familiar metaphor. The eye cannot see itself, yet without it we can't see anything; it is thus *prior* to phenomenal experience. At the same time, the eye can always only see a limited section of phenomenal reality, yet without thinking *beyond* what we see, we can't make sense of that which we see. *Necessity* and *universality* are thus for Kant (1787, B4) the two hallmarks of what we have thus far called (and will continue to call) *general ideas*.

Kant's understanding of general ideas

Ideas are part of what Kant calls *a priori* concepts or also "pure" (i.e., non-empirical) concepts of reason, whereby he understands



"reason" in the wider sense that comprises all the skills involved in human cognition, as distinguished from reason in the narrower sense of reflective skills. For Kant, unlike for the "tabula rasa" empiricists of this epoch (Locke, Berkeley, but not Hume), non-empirical notions or concepts are involved in all cognitive skills, that is, in what he calls "intuition" (i.e., perception, = taking sense-experiences up into consciousness) as well as in "the understanding" (i.e., conceptualization, = bringing sense-experiences under concepts) and in "reason" in the narrower sense (i.e., reflection, = ensuring unity of thought). Corresponding to these three cognitive levels, Kant

distinguishes three kinds of "pure" notions or concepts, notions that both precede and exceed all possible experience and thought:

- *a priori* concepts of intuition (perception) = pure forms of intuition = mere forms of all appearances: space and time;
- *a priori* concepts of the understanding (conceptualization) = pure forms of thought = categories of all experience: of quantity (unity, plurality, totality), of quality (reality, negation, limitation), of relation (inherence and subsistence, cause and effect, reciprocity), and of modality (possibility /impossibility, existence/non-existence, necessity /contingency); and
- *a priori* concepts of *pure* reason (reflection) = pure ideas of reason = unavoidable problems of reason = ideas of pure reason: World, Man, God.

We can thus say that "ideas" are those *a priori* concepts that reason in the narrower sense finds indispensable. **Table 1** gives an overview.

Table 1: Kant's framework of indispensable ideas of pure reason
(in the realm of theoretical reason, as worked out in the first *Critique* [1787])

Cognitive skills or levels	Basic <i>a priori</i> elements of cognition	Related concepts of <i>pure</i> (theoretical) reason
<i>Intuition</i> : "Faculty of representation" (= perception)	"Pure forms of intuition": <i>a priori</i> representations	Forms of all appearances (space and time)
<i>Understanding</i> : "Faculty of concepts" (= conceptualization)	"Pure forms of thought": <i>a priori</i> concepts of the understanding	Categories of experience (of quantity, quality, relation, and modality)
<i>Reason</i> (in the narrower sense): "Faculty of principles" (= reflection, integrative reasoning)	"Pure ideas of reason" (= "unavoidable problems of reason"): <i>a priori</i> concepts of pure reason	Ideas of pure reason (World, Man, and God) (cf. Table 3)

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Similar notions are characteristic of Kant's practical philosophy, although he does not outline them as systematically as in his theoretical philosophy (which is why I can only "reconstruct" rather than "summarize" them in **Table 2**). In the realm of practical reason, there are three crucial ideas around which Kant organizes his account of morality: the idea of *freedom*, without which no practical philosophy is conceivable; the idea of *autonomy* (or self-determination), which characterizes the moral stance of a rational agent; and the idea of the *moral law* (or of a universal principle of morality), which defines the standard of all moral reasoning (compare Kant, 1786, B70f,

B77-79, B87f and 97-119, esp. B109f).

Table 2: Kant's framework of indispensable ideas of practical reason
(as reconstructed from the *Groundwork* [1786])

Levels of moral judgment	Basic moral notions (of rational agents)	Related concepts of (pure) <i>practical</i> reason
<i>Moral intuition:</i> (= moral experience)	"I can experience my will as being free to choose"	The idea of freedom (free will as presupposition of all moral accountability)
<i>Moral understanding:</i> (= moral thought and volition)	"I can think of my will as having causality"	The idea of autonomy (self-legislation and causality of the will as presuppositions of all rational practice)
	"I can think of others as ends in themselves"	The idea of human dignity (autonomy of others as ends in themselves)
	"I can think of myself as a universal legislator"	The idea of a universally good will (principle of moral universalization)
<i>Moral reasoning</i> (= moral reflection)	"I can reflect on the moral implications of my maxims of action"	The idea of the moral law (moral practice as regulated by the idea of a kingdom of ends)

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For a discussion of the key concepts of Kant's practical philosophy, among them the concepts of pure practical reason mentioned in the right-hand column of Table 2, see Ulrich (2009b); I outline Table 2 here for the sake of completeness rather than with the intent of repeating that earlier, detailed discussion. Lest I create confusion, three brief remarks may be useful.

(1) It is obvious that in comparison with Table 1, Table 2 defines a more specific kind of general ideas, in the double sense that it represents a specific application of Kant's understanding of general ideas to the field of moral reasoning and that this application is highly specified, despite its universal intent. One might similarly try to specify Kant's understanding of general ideas for the realms of science, politics, economics, and so on. Despite this specific character, however, Kant's moral ideas represent a very important and characteristic part of his thought, as they are to help us in defining our role as rational agents in this world.

(2) The three levels of moral judgment suggested in Table 2 also differ from the three cognitive levels of Table 1 in a second sense. There is an element of freedom and self-determination (or, as Kant says, of self-legislation) in practical reasoning that points beyond the limits of theoretical reasoning.

Unlike the latter, which depends heavily on the passive or receptive level of cognition to which Kant refers as "intuition" (the lowest level in Table 1), the valid employment of practical reasoning is not restricted by the limits of possible experience. Apart perhaps from the experience of moral sentiments and conscience, in which we intuitively experience a moment of free choice and accountability in our individual conduct, morality as Kant understands it always involves active *moral judgment*.³⁾ Moral judgment essentially moves at the level of general concepts and ideas that Kant has in view when he speaks of (pure) practical reason – the levels of "thought" and "reflection" suggested in Tables 1 and 2.⁴⁾

(3) The three levels of Table 2 may also be seen to stand for a certain progression of moral awareness and reflectiveness in the sense of Kohlberg (1968, 1976, and 1981; cf. Ulrich, 2009b, Table 1), ranging from a rather intuitive level at which we first experience moral conscience (i.e., consciousness of our being free and able to choose the ways we act, and of consequently being accountable for them), via a higher level of conceptualization at which emerge concepts such as moral autonomy (in the sense of both self-determination or self-responsibility) and responsibility towards others (i.e., respect for *their* individual autonomy), to most general and abstract postulates such as those of a universal principle or "law" of morality (the categorical imperative) and of a "kingdom of ends" (a global moral community). In this respect, too, the parallels between the three levels of Tables 1 and 2 are limited.

However, the cognitive level that interests us most in the present context is the level of *reflective skills*. Such skills are equally relevant in the realms of theoretical and of practical reason. At this reflective level, Kant variously refers to the *a priori* concepts involved as *concepts of pure reason* or "pure concepts of reason," or as "*ideas* of pure reason" or "*transcendental ideas*," whereby both theoretical and practical reason are examined with respect to their "pure" (non-empirical) employment. We may understand the first two designations as the most general ones in that no essential differentiation is intended, whereas the other two designations may be understood to emphasize more specific aspects (although Kant also uses them as general designations).

"Ideas" of pure reason Kant specifically speaks of concepts of pure reason as *ideas* when he discusses their problematic character, their being *only ideas* and hence, their posing a dilemma to reason in as much as it can neither establish their "reality" (i.e., their validity as empirical concepts) nor do without them to ensure the *intelligibility* of the world:

I understand by idea a necessary concept of reason to which no corresponding object can be given in sense-experience.... [Ideas] are concepts of pure reason, in that they view all knowledge gained in experience as being determined through an absolute totality of conditions. They are not arbitrarily invented; they are imposed by the very nature of reason itself, and therefore stand in necessary relation to the whole employment of understanding. (Kant, 1787, B383f)

That is to say, the ideas of reason, although problematic, are *rational* conceptions. Reason cannot help but infer them from experience, as for anything that is given empirically there must be a *series of conditions* that would explain it: "For a given conditioned, the whole series of conditions subordinated to each other is likewise given." (1787, B444) Only a complete notion of this series of conditions can in principle explain that which is given, so as to make it fully intelligible to the human mind. But since, as we have already noted, the *totality of conditions* is always itself unconditioned, it goes beyond the experiential world of conditioned phenomena and therefore can never be an object of experience. This is why the ideas, as pure concepts of reason, are for Kant both unavoidable and problematic: "Concepts of reason contain the unconditioned." (1787, B367). Thanks to this quality they make reality intelligible in the first place. But due to this same quality, it must remain open whether or not they have any objective reality. Hence, if not handled carefully, they risk becoming sources of illusion.

"Transcendental" concepts By contrast, Kant emphasizes the *transcendental* character of general ideas when he is interested in their epistemological importance, that is, their positive contribution to knowledge rather than their problematic character. What role can they legitimately play, and on what basis can such ideas be identified and justified?

I entitle *transcendental* all knowledge which is occupied not so much with objects as with the mode of our knowledge of objects in so far as this mode of knowledge is to be possible *a priori*. A system of such concepts might be entitled transcendental philosophy. (Kant, 1787, B25)

In Kant's precise but complex terminology, a "transcendental" as distinguished from a merely "transcendent" (= metaphysical) employment of reason means reflection on the *conditions of possible knowledge* inasmuch as these conditions involve "pure" or *a priori* concepts of reason. *A priori* concepts that can be shown to play a role in the constitution of knowledge are transcendental concepts of reason. In a complex "transcendental deduction," an account of which would go beyond the scope of the present discussion, Kant identifies and specifies the three classes of *a priori* concepts listed in the right-hand columns of Table 1 above.

Reflective skills of reason Let us now return to our focus on the reflective skills involved in human cognition, that is, in the terms of Table 1 above, on reason in the narrower sense, which has as its only objects the previous cognitive level of the understanding and, within Kant's work, also itself, namely, inasmuch as it engages in a self-reflective *critique* of pure reason. Transcendental concepts or ideas serve reason in its core task of ensuring the *integrity of thought* or, using Kant's (1787, B383) preferred term, the "unity of understanding" on the one hand and the "unity of reason" on the other hand. Transcendental ideas achieve this by defining what we might call ideal reference points or, perhaps a more helpful way to put it, *limiting concepts* towards which reason can orient itself.⁵⁾ The most general of these limiting concepts, as we have already understood, is the idea of a totality (and unity) of all the conditions that constitute any object of thought or experience in general:

The principle peculiar to reason in general ... is to find for the conditioned knowledge obtained through the understanding the unconditioned whereby its unity is brought to completion. (Kant, 1787, B364)

This quest for completion amounts to what is probably the most basic *general principle of reason* – to always look for sufficient reasons for any of its claims (cf. Ulrich, 1983, p. 219). It would run against this principle to arbitrarily leave out any reasons of which one is aware just because one finds them difficult to explain, share, and justify, for whatever reasons. Sufficient reasons are, in principle, complete reasons. This is why Kant requires reason to look for "unity" and "totality" of its considerations. This quest (and therein lies its crucial difficulty) involves what Kant calls "synthetic" *a priori* concepts and judgments,⁶⁾ that is, what in our "Reflections on reflective

practice" series we have called "substantial" (information-adding) rather than just analytical (tautological) statements or arguments and what in contemporary language-analytical terms is also commonly described as (non-tautological) "predication." Such judgments entail the assumption of a series of conditions that is complete, so as to be sufficient to explain or justify their claim to validity. But as we have noted above, a totality of conditions is never given by any empirical judgment or concept; in fact, it is never given empirically at all. It therefore needs to be imagined or postulated, anticipated, projected, or in short, *assumed*:

[This maxim of completing the series of conditions] can only become a principle of pure reason through *assuming* that if the conditioned is given, the whole series of conditions, subordinated to one another – a series which is therefore itself unconditioned – is likewise given.... Such a principle of pure reason is obviously synthetic; the conditioned is analytically related to some condition but not to the unconditioned. (Kant, 1787, B364, my italics)

Without assuming such an unconditioned totality of conditions, there is no end to the chain of *causes* that would explain an object of knowledge (e.g., the existence of some phenomenon of nature), nor is there an end to the chain of *reasons* that would justify an object of thought (e.g., a theoretical statement or a moral claim). Reason would be caught in an infinite regress without ever being able to arrive at some definitive result. Transcendental concepts of reason, then, are ideas that *project* such a totality (and unity) of conditions into our notions of an object of cognition; conditions that in principle we would need to know in raising claims related to it but which of course we will never fully know. As Kant sums up the importance of this transcendental notion of a *projected* totality of conditions for the reflective skills of reason:

The transcendental concept of reason is, therefore, none other than the concept of the totality of the conditions for any given conditioned. Now since it is the unconditioned alone which makes possible the totality of conditions, and conversely, the totality of conditions is always itself unconditioned, *a pure concept of reason can in general be explained by the concept of the unconditioned*, conceived as containing a ground of the synthesis of the conditioned. (Kant, 1787, B379, added emphasis)

The human mind, if only it thinks things through to the end, is bound to arrive at such ultimate, general ideas. The major examples of Kant's epoch were the notions of a universe whose boundaries in space and time were unknown; of man's freedom of will and the immortality of his soul; and of the existence of an omnipotent God. For each of these notions, reason saw

itself confronted with a question that it could not answer: the "cosmological" question of whether the *World* had a beginning in time and limits in space; the "psychological" questions of whether *Man* had indeed an immortal soul and a free will that could exert causality in the world of nature; and the "theological" question of whether an omnipotent *God* existed. Reason could not help arriving at such questions, but whenever it tried to answer them, it could find good grounds for giving both a positive and a negative answer – Kant's famous *antinomies of pure reason* (1787, B432-489). Whatever answer reason took for granted, it risked succumbing to a *transcendental illusion* (B352), as the contrary answer could be argued just as well and it had no means of deciding the matter.⁷⁾

A related example from today's scientific discourse illustrates the continuing relevance of Kant's "transcendental" conjectures, I mean the *big-bang model* of the origin and early development of the universe, supposedly some 14 billion years ago. A little less long ago, in 2006, the Nobel prize was awarded to two scientists, John Mather and George Smoot, who in the form of the 3K cosmic background radiation phenomenon supposedly discovered a proof and explanation of the origin of the universe, well, yes, in a "big bang." As the *laudatio* proclaimed, this scientific breakthrough marked "the inception of cosmology as a precise science" (Nobel Committee, 2006). How innocent science can be, from a Kantian point of view! Of course the question of the origin of the universe and, related to it, its finite or infinite character, remains unanswered by the big-bang model and will remain so for ever. The question asks for the totality of conditions that would explain the ultimate origin of the universe; but, as Kant would point out, a totality of conditions is (by definition) itself unconditioned and thus cannot be a possible object of science. The notion of an ultimate beginning and end of the universe is bound to remain an unavoidable but problematic idea. Any claims to such knowledge risk succumbing to a transcendental illusion. In this case, it was perhaps less the distinguished scientists than the Nobel Prize Committee who risked falling victim to an illusion.

Reason must ask such questions, but science cannot answer them. Science can only explain empirical phenomena in terms of preceding conditions, so any empirical evidence of a "big bang" raises the question of what preceded it and how it came about. But again, by definition, science cannot reach

behind the "big bang," for inasmuch as it really occurred, it left no empirical trace of whatever was before and caused (or conditioned) it. Science cannot postulate ultimate conditions and at the same time claim to reach beyond them. This, I suppose, is what Edmund Husserl meant (or at least, one fundamental aspect of what he had in mind) when he once remarked that

"No objective science, no matter how exact, explains or ever can explain anything in a serious sense." (Husserl, 1970, p. 189)

Be that as it may – whatever limitations there are to human knowledge, and likewise, whatever progress there is in science, the critical skills of reason will not become redundant so quickly, quite the contrary. Despite being possible sources of error, the general ideas and related questions of reason are also sources and tools of its major contribution to human cognition – the ability to think things through to their end so as to understand them as (however imperfect) manifestations of general principles. As Kant's explains, reason is the "faculty of principles" (B356) that alone is able to "apprehend the particular in the universal" (B357, cf. B359).

Provisional summary and conclusion: ideas of reason and the human condition The picture that emerges is one of a deep-seated dialectic of the universal and the particular; of the ideal and the real; of that which we can think and that which we can experience and do, and thus know. The important point is, we are dealing here with an integrative, two-dimensional conception of the *human condition* or, as Kant (1786, B105-110 and B115-119) famously puts it, with "two standpoints" (rather than alternatives) from which we can see the world, namely, as the phenomenal (or sensible) world of experience and as the intelligible (or moral) world of thought and action. I cannot help but think in this context of Hannah Arendt's (1958) beautiful study of the *Human Condition*, in which she has made us aware, once again, of how much even in a modern world ruled by science and theoretical reason, the *vita activa* – self-determined practice – remains an essential aspect of who and what we are. We are what we are doing, and we are doing what we think. Human practice (including the practice of thought and reflection) conditions the "human condition," as it were. We therefore need to *re-think what we are doing* and why, that is, with what kind of a world-to-be in mind, we are doing it (cf. 1958, pp. 5 and 9). Even in an age that has apparently made systematic action the prerogative of science and

expertise, "the capacity for action ... is still with us" and "thought ... is still possible." (1958, p. 323f)

But of course, the issue of what conditions the human condition is not a prerogative of our epoch. The basic questions involved are age-old preoccupations of humanity. Accordingly, it hardly comes as a surprise that Kant's general ideas, and the questions to which they lead us, are reminiscent of similar notions and questions in all epochs and cultures since the dawn of philosophical reflection, some 3,000 years ago, in ancient India and later in Greece and other parts of the world. Perhaps even before, and certainly ever since, they have also been objects of artistic expression, mediation and spirituality, and religious faith and practice. What Kant added to these age-old ideas and their often merely metaphysical and esoteric treatment is a critical epistemological analysis that shows both their rational and their precarious role in the quest for enlightened knowledge and understanding. He assigned to them, in his own terms, a *transcendental* function as unifying ideas of systematic thought and reflection.

Further, Kant added the conception of a *practical* (i.e., normative) dimension of reason in which three theoretically unprovable, but practically indispensable and strong *ideas of (pure) practical reason* take the place of the corresponding theoretical ideas. The "practical" equivalents of the theoretical ideas of speculative reason are all manifestations of the moral idea – the World envisioned as a *moral world* (1787, B836 and B843) or "kingdom of ends," as distinguished from the kingdom of nature (1786, B74f); Man's *freedom of will* (or autonomy) and the related notion of a "causality of the will" (1786, B109) as distinguished from the causality of nature; and finally, the idea of an almost God-like, unconditional good, a universally *good will* (1786, B1) or "universal principle of morality" that Kant sees as indispensable qualities of a rational being (1786, B109). They are "strong" ideas (my term) in that, as we found, practical reason has a "manifest advantage" (1788, A115) over theoretical reason: it is free to establish its own principles of a world of good practice, whereas theoretical reason is bound to "observe" the phenomenal world in the double sense of recognizing and obeying the principles of nature.

For although reason does indeed have causality in respect of freedom in general, it does not have causality in respect of nature as a whole; and although moral principles of reason can indeed give rise to free actions, they cannot give rise to

laws of nature. Accordingly it is in their practical, meaning thereby their moral, employment, that the principles of pure reasons have objective reality. (Kant, 1787, B835f, cf. B385f; cf. 1788, A115f).

Table 3 provides a tentative integration of what are perhaps the most fundamental "ideas of pure reason" in Kant's critical philosophy, by aligning them with the two "standpoints" of theoretical and practical reason as developed in the *Groundwork*, as well as with the famous three questions with which ends the first *Critique*. As Kant sums up his exploration into the "utmost limits of all knowledge" (1787, B825):

Reason ... conducted us through the field of experience, and since it could not find complete satisfaction there, from thence to speculative ideas, which, however, in the end brought us back to experience [and to the practical employment of reason, making us wonder] whether pure reason ... may not be able to supply to us from the standpoint of its practical interest what it altogether refuses to supply in respect of its speculative interest.

All the interests of my reason, speculative as well as practical, combine in the three following questions: 1. What can I know? 2. What ought I to do? 3. What may I hope? (Kant, 1787, B832f)

These, I suggest, are Kant's most fundamental ideas of pure reason for reflecting on the *conditio humana*:

Table 3: Kant's two standpoints and related ideas of reason
(integrating theoretical and practical reason in reflection on the human condition)

Core question (of the human condition)	Theoretical ideas of pure reason	Practical ideas of pure reason
Universe: <i>What can I know?</i>	<i>World:</i> unity of nature (kingdom of nature)	<i>Moral world:</i> global moral community (kingdom of ends)
Human thought and agency: <i>What ought I to do?</i>	<i>Man:</i> unity of the thinking and acting subject (unity of theoretical reason)	<i>Freedom of will:</i> unity of human and natural causality (unity of practical reason)
Critique of reason: <i>What may I hope?</i>	<i>God:</i> unity of (universally legislating) reason (supreme reason)	<i>Good will:</i> unity of (universally good) will (supreme good)

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Outlook Given that Kant belongs to the very tradition of rational ethics to which we aim to gain some distance, and also considering that this tradition is thoroughly rooted in "Western" thought patterns, the planned excursion into "Eastern" thought will hopefully allow us to see Kant's notion of rational ideas in a new light. Likewise, it might allow us to see the crucial tension of which I have spoken, between the general and the specific in both rationality

and morality, in a different or complementary light. But of course, coming from the traditions of "Western" practical philosophy, such an excursion finds us ill prepared. A certain effort of familiarizing ourselves with this totally different tradition will be in order. The next, third part of our exploration will therefore still stay in the "West" and will explore some basic, pragmatic ways to "approximate" the intent of Kant's ideas, given their nature as limiting concepts of thought and reflection. We will also consider some ways to handle the tension between the general and the particular in practice. After that, in a fourth and possibly a fifth part, we will then be headed East.

(To be continued)

Notes (numbered consecutively)

3) As Kant (1793, Bxxv) defines it, judgment is "the faculty of thinking the particular as contained in the general" or, a bit more specifically defined, "the faculty of subsuming under rules; that is, of distinguishing whether something does or does not stand under a given rule" (1787, B171). Accordingly, moral judgment is the faculty of subsuming moral issues under concepts and principles of practical reason. On Kant's concept of judgment in general, see also note 6. [\[BACK\]](#)

4) The more specific character of Kant's ideas of practical reason as compared to those of theoretical reason should not have us overlook their equally universal character as general ideas of reason. This holds of course true particularly in what Kant calls the "pure" employment of practical reason, or what in the terms of Table 2 we may call that specifically moral use of reflective judgment which consists in assessing and justifying one's maxims of action with a view to ensuring their conformity to the categorical imperative. The underlying general idea is that of a kingdom of ends in which rational agents mutually respect one another as autonomous (i.e., free and self-legislating) members of a moral community (1786, B74f and 82-88).

Again we see here that generality (or universality) of ideas and specificity of their application can go hand in hand. Compare the earlier comment on Hare's (1981) opposition of generality and specificity in moral reasoning in the first part of this essay (Ulrich, 2013c, note 1) [\[BACK\]](#)

5) There is only one occasion, as far as I am aware, where Kant actually uses the term "limiting concept" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, namely, to describe the concept of a "noumenal" reality lying behind all phenomenal reality (see Kant, 1787, B310f). Similarly, in the *Groundwork* I find a singular reference to the "limiting" function of the moral law as "a condition limiting our action" (1786, B103). Despite this rare occurrence I take the notion of limiting concepts to be quite important to Kant's understanding of the role of general ideas. [\[BACK\]](#)

6) "Judgments" is Kant's preferred term for those cognitive acts by which we assign something to a class (cf. note 3 above) or, in the terms of contemporary language-analytical philosophy, "predicate" it. In the terms of Tables 1 and 2, judgments are essential at the levels of both thought (the understanding) and reason (reflection). Thought brings intuitions under concepts (example: "what I see is an apple"), while reason brings concepts under more general ideas or principles (example: "apples are healthy food"). In our Table 1, we might thus have characterized the "pure" forms of cognition involved at both levels – of the understanding and of reason in the narrower sense – as "pure forms of judgment." That would properly describe (or "predicate") them but would not serve to distinguish them, which is why I have preferred to characterize the crucial issues at the two levels in terms of "pure forms of thought" vs. "unavoidable problems of reason." -- For a full introduction to, and application of, Kant's transcendental framework of reflection on

knowledge, see Part II of my *Critical Heuristics* (Ulrich, 1983, pp. 175-314, especially the introductory Chapter 3, pp. 175-214). [\[BACK\]](#)

7) A slightly more detailed account may be helpful to readers not familiar with Kant's guiding ideas. The human "soul," to begin with, stands for the totality of psychological, spiritual, and intellectual conditions that define the human personality. It is the incorporeal (and for many people also immortal) essence of a living being as a "subject" rather than just an object of experience and thought. Without such a notion it is quite difficult to conceive of a person's cognition, as well as that person's character and conduct, as a coherent whole, regardless of whether we speak of the human "soul" or "spirit," "mind," or "psyche" or perhaps, to avoid any one-sidedly religious or psychological undertones, simply of individual "subject" or "personality." Similarly, the notion of the "universe" stands not for an object of experience but for the totality of conditions that in principle we would need to consider (but cannot all know) to explain the state and events of the phenomenal world. And the notion of God, of course, although it transcends all experience, refers again to the ultimate origin of the universe, its phenomenal side as well as what may lie behind it – that "all-sufficient cause" (B647) which lies beyond and before all "big bangs" or whatever scientific explanations the human mind can come up with to explain the beginning and end of the world in space and time. Together, these three ideas for Kant represent the unavoidable, transcendental ideas of *theoretical* reason.

In the realm of *practical* reason, perhaps the most fundamental and remarkably foresighted idea of Kant as seen from today's vantage point is the "cosmopolitan" idea of a global community of good-willed agents acting as responsible citizens – the "idea of a moral world" (B836) as a world of human agency that would be characterized by individual freedom and by the use of such freedom for good practice and mutual respect at a global level. In any case, as Kant sees it, we cannot reasonably conceive of "good" practice without the notions of freedom of will and of action moved by a good will, that is, action oriented toward the unconditionally good; yet these notions refer to a totality of conditions of good and rational practice that we can never demonstrate to obtain in reality. In this sense such guiding ideas are "only ideas." But they are nevertheless rational ideas, in that they gain objective, practical reality through a moral person's conduct. A person of good will acts *as if* a moral world existed, rather than first asking for a proof that it actually exists. We encounter here the core of Kant's practical philosophy, we might say, its critically-pragmatic core (cf. Ulrich, 2006b, p. 58f): rational agency involves assuming a moral standpoint that is quite independent of what we can know. [\[BACK\]](#)

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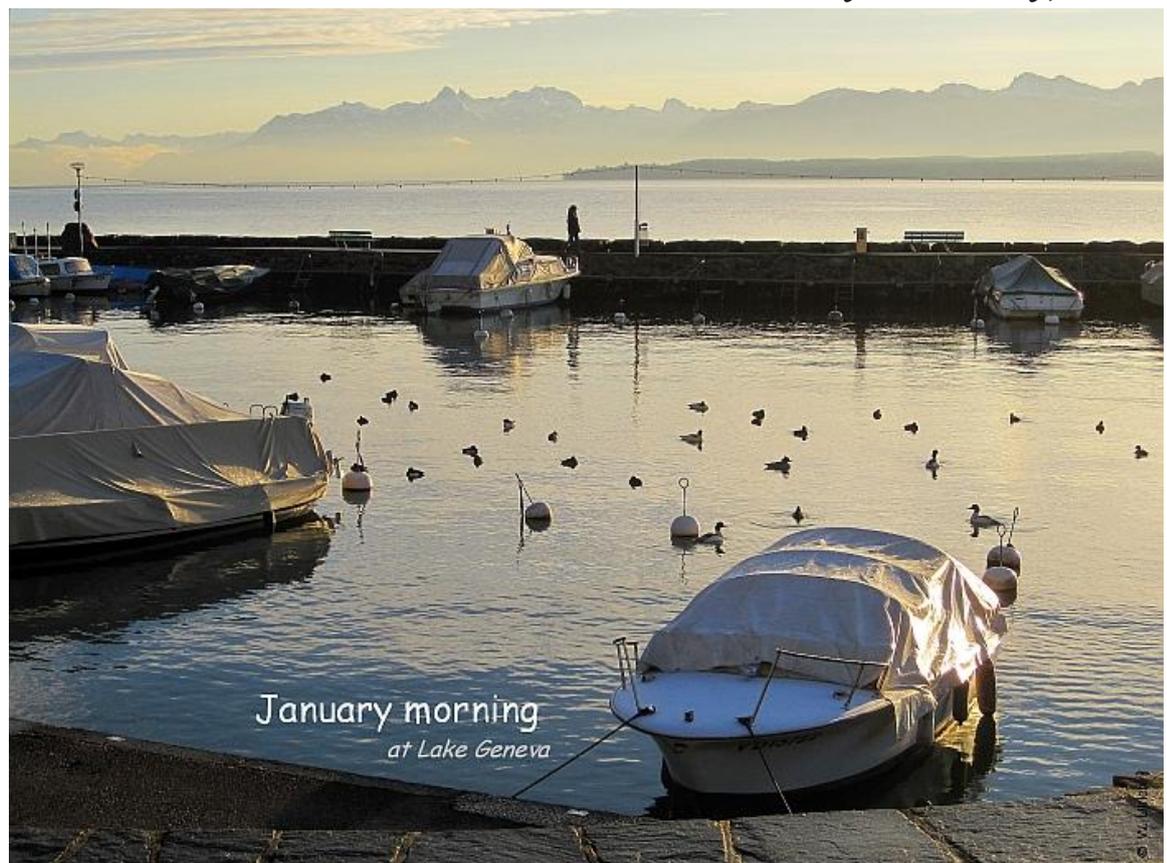
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Picture data Digital photograph taken on 3 January 2012, around 10 a.m., at the shore of Lake Geneva in Vevey, Switzerland. ISO 80, exposure mode program shift with aperture f/4.5, exposure time 1/640 seconds, exposure bias -0.33, metering mode multi-segment, contrast normal, saturation normal, sharpness normal. Focal length 10.55 mm (equivalent to 60 mm with a conventional 35 mm camera). Original resolution 4000 x 3000 pixels; current resolution 700 x 525 pixels, compressed to 201 KB.

January-February, 2014



Lucid views on general ideas: Kant

„The principle peculiar to reason in general ... is to find for the

conditioned knowledge obtained through the understanding the
unconditioned whereby its unity is brought to completion.”

(Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1787, B364)

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