

# Stefano Bacin on Kristi Sweet's "Kant on Practical Life: From Duty to History"

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By Stefano Bacin

In the constant flood of literature on different aspects of Kant's philosophy the comprehensive framework of Kant's thought might get blurred. The interpretation of his practical philosophy often runs this risk. It is understandable, therefore, that, in reaction to a sometimes excessive focus on the details, some scholars aim at painting a synthetic picture of Kant's thought, bringing together its most significant specific features in a comprehensive profile. This is the very ambitious aim of Kristi Sweet's *Kant on Practical Life*. Sweet's reading centres on the striving of reason for the unconditioned as unifying the different aspects and levels of Kant's conception of the "practical life". She strives, as it were, for the unconditioned in the interpretation of Kant's practical philosophy herself, trying to bring the totality of the objects of his views on morality to full light.

Aiming at a comprehensive picture does not necessarily stand in contrast with a careful consideration of the relevant specific aspects of Kant's arguments. However, some tension is difficult to avoid, and the overall picture might thus remain unstable in significant aspects. One main risk is that of pointing out unity and homogeneity where Kant sees differences and the necessity of distinctions. As is probably inevitable in synthetic reconstructions of this kind, Kristi Sweet's account is on some points affected by a certain abstractness, which seems to bypass some structural features of Kant's conception. In the following, I shall briefly point out some of the aspects that appear to me more questionable or in need of some clarification, focusing on three main themes: the unconditioned, unity, and virtue.

## 1. The unconditioned

Sweet's main focus is on the unity of Kant's moral conception. She writes that "Kant, unfortunately, does not unfold his practical philosophy with the systematic presentation of someone like Hegel, whose *Philosophy of Right* is meant to demonstrate how the various aspects of practical life are the concrete development of the concept of freedom" (p. 3). In Sweet's view, although Kant's presentation does not bring it as clearly to light, such a unity is present also in his

conception and consists in the gradual development from the same seeds, as it were: Reason's demand for the unconditioned is what "animates, authors, governs, and organizes the various aspects" of Kant's practical philosophy (p. 8).

Sweet maintains that "Kant [...] clearly conceives of practical reason as governed and constituted by its striving for the unconditioned" (p. 16; cf. e.g., p. 8), starting from the moral law, which she understands as "a demand for the unconditioned" (p. 18). However, Sweet remarks that, in contrast with the attention he gives to reason's drive towards the unconditioned in the theoretical philosophy, Kant "does not thematize this drive explicitly throughout his practical philosophy" (p. 11). What, then, characterizes how reason relates to the unconditioned in the *practical* sphere? According to Sweet, "practical reason can bring about through its own activity what reason seeks in its striving for the unconditioned: an unconditioned totality" (p. 206). I find both parts of the statement problematic, that is, both that practical reason can *bring about the unconditioned*, and that this plainly corresponds to what reason's drive is about. I suspect that Sweet's interpretive proposal rests on two assumptions, which are problematic and at least not sufficiently justified: namely, that the unconditioned for which reason strives is the same in the theoretical and in the practical use of reason, and that the practical use is characterized by a genuinely causal relation to the unconditioned itself. In other words, two worries arise here, concerning what is precisely the meaning of the unconditioned, and which is the relationship between the unconditioned and the human practical faculty.

Sweet tries to strengthen her interpretive proposal to look at Kant's practical philosophy in light of reason's striving for the unconditioned by remarking that the "unconditioned was certainly a touchstone for much of post-Kantian German thought" (p. 16), especially for Hegel and the Romantics. However, this does not give any support to the thesis of the importance of the theme in Kant. One possible reply to such a suggestion would be that the prominence given to the unconditioned might simply express genuine philosophical differences between the later views and Kant's. Indeed, there are quite good reasons to argue that, especially with regard to practical philosophy, the main post-Kantians and the Romantics (Fichte, Reinhold, Schelling, Hegel, Novalis, the Schlegels) do not share many of the basic features of Kant's view, and that they also understand the unconditioned in quite a different way than Kant.

While he does point out the drive pushing pure reason towards what is unconditioned, Kant usually understands the unconditioned with regard to a specific domain of conditioned items, that is, as "the absolute totality of conditions for a given conditioned" (AA 5:107). At one point, Sweet notes that "reason's demand for the unconditioned is inherently relational with and even

dependent upon what is conditioned" (p. 35), and this might be taken to mean that the demand for the unconditioned is in fact always relative to a specific domain. Yet, the emphasis in Sweet's reconstruction is much more on the continuity, or even the identity, between the unconditioned for which reason strives in its theoretical use and that for which it strives in its practical use. Any clear distinction between the two cases of this striving is ultimately put aside. What is repeatedly stressed, in Sweet's interpretation, is that "the use of human freedom through practical reason is what satisfies reason's demand for the unconditioned" (p. 15), as if that demand were unambiguous. Not only her formulations are always in the singular, but the emphasis on the ability of pure reason in its practical use to go beyond the boundaries limiting the reach of the theoretical use strongly suggests that, in Sweet's view, both uses of pure reason aim at the very same goal. Since practical reason "effects the *very thing* demanded in the 'absolutely unconditioned' (KrV A326/B382)", the practical is "*the* legitimate use of reason in attaining *the* unconditioned" (p. 16, italics mine).

On the contrary, Kant not only differentiates various concepts of the unconditioned, with regard to the theoretical use of pure reason (cf. A334–5/B391–2), but also qualifies his references to the 'unconditioned' in the practical realm as relative to a different domain. For instance, he writes that, "[a]s pure practical reason it likewise seeks *the unconditioned for the practically conditioned* (which rests on inclinations and natural needs)" (AA 5:108). The "unconditioned in the series of causal connection" mentioned already on the first page of the Preface to the second *Critique* (AA 5:3) is not simply the very same unconditioned for which pure reason strives in its practical use. Unlike the later Idealists, in other words, Kant seems to understand 'unconditioned' adjectivally rather than substantively.

"The *very thing* demanded in the 'absolutely unconditioned'" is thus not easy to be determined unambiguously. Sweet holds the unconditioned in the practical realm to be freedom. In her view, the unconditioned is "understood *in the practical context* as human freedom" (p. 8, italics mine; cf. p. 66). However, this does not fully correspond to the terms in which Kant puts it. He rather understands freedom as "the unconditioned in the series of causal connection" (AA 5:3) that the theoretical use of pure reason cannot know. Thanks to the practical use of pure reason, a different unconditioned, namely the moral law as determining ground of the will independently of any desire or interest, provides confirmation of the reality of freedom.[1] Kant's remarks on freedom as unconditional causality are thus not primarily about attaining or realizing the unconditioned, but about confirming the unconditional causality through freedom which grounds an unconditional obligation (cf. e.g., AA 5:15, 47). Indeed, when Kant speaks of the unconditioned in practical philosophy, in the vast majority of

cases he is discussing not freedom, but the unconditional character of moral demands. In fact, 'unconditional' means as much as 'categorical', as is particularly clear in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (cf. e.g., AA 6:222, 379, 385). The practical interest of reason, according to Kant, does not consist in attaining 'the' unconditioned as such, but in achieving a determination of the will merely founded on autonomy, where it is not the object that "gives the law" (cf. AA 4:441, 5:33).

Therefore, I find Sweet's distinction between the unconditioned and the "unconditional value" (p. 17) ultimately misleading. According to her, in some influential interpretations of Kant's practical philosophy (she mentions Korsgaard's as the only example), "the *unconditioned* proper—and its role in orienting reason—is not what is under review. Rather, it is already *unconditional* value that is being investigated" (p. 17). I would second this critical observation if it were primarily aimed at an understanding of Kant's moral theory that focuses on values instead of principles, but Sweet's main point seems to be a different one: "In contrast with illustrating what we seek in being oriented by the unconditioned and how that gives contour to Kant's moral theory more broadly, those who approach Kant with the question of value in hand examine the unconditioned as an unconditional—only as a kind of qualification, or modification, a particular kind of good" (p. 17). Sweet apparently assumes that, if we do not refer to the unconditioned, understood in substantial terms, we end up delineating a conception of some kind of good, which is not what Kant's theory is about. Yet, a case could be made for a third option, that is, that Kant's main concern in his practical philosophy is justifying an unconditional obligation.[2] In this perspective, his focus would be neither on an Absolute-like unconditioned, nor on a specific sort of value, but on the inescapable normative force that should be characteristic of moral demands.

These doubts concerning the ambiguity of the idea of the unconditioned lead me to point out a further issue. If, on the one hand, Sweet underscores a continuity between the unconditioned throughout the theoretical and the practical uses of reason, she insists that the significant advantage in the practical domain is that the practical relation to the unconditioned is to be understood as a strictly causal relation. According to the fruitful separation of labour within the use of reason, what (pure) practical reason has to do is to realize the unconditioned. On Sweet's reading, "Kant explicitly introduces practical reason as the legitimate use of reason *in attaining the unconditioned*" (p. 16). I see at least two issues, here.

First, when Kant stresses the positive role of the practical use of pure reason with regard to the territory which its theoretical use cannot conquer, this capacity has great importance for the general theory of reason and the Critical system (as

is underscored from the very first page of the second *Critique*), but is nevertheless not immediately relevant for the foundation of morality (see e.g., AA 5:104–5.). Second, Kant emphasises much less than Sweet does that the characteristic purpose of the practical use of pure reason is the “production” (p. 206) of the unconditioned (or of anything else). Indeed, he repeatedly stresses that moral demands “determine only the will, whether or not it is sufficient for the effect” (AA 5:20). Quite differently, Sweet maintains that practical reason “effects the very thing demanded in the ‘absolutely unconditioned’” (p. 16). For instance, Sweet contends that “the good will [...] stands as the unconditioned causality that must give rise to the whole of the unconditioned” (p. 48). In general, in Sweet’s view “[p]ractical reason can attain the unconditioned through its own activity” (p. 14). To support this claim, Sweet gives some prominence to a passage that she quotes twice in these terms: “Practical reason even has the causality to bring forth what its concept [of absolute completeness] contains” (p. 14; cf. p. 34–5.). The passage does not sound as positive, though, since Kant somehow qualifies the statement writing: “*In it [in ihr]* pure reason even has the causality to bring forth what its concept contains” (A328/B385; italics mine).[3] “In it” should be taken to refer to the ‘practical idea’ that is the main topic of Kant’s remarks in those lines. It would appear, thus, that Kant is saying that pure reason has causality *in the practical idea*, which does sound as a significant qualification and makes the statement less strong than in Sweet’s formulation.

Yet, the impact of free action on reality is a theme pervading Sweet’s interpretation. At one point she even argues that “the problem at the heart of the practical works” of Kant is “*the causality of freedom in the world, or more narrowly, the cause of objects in the world by us*” (p. 18, italics mine). A more careful clarification of what is meant by production, here, might have been helpful, to this reader at least, since Sweet’s understanding does not always correspond to Kant’s. In fact, Kant remarks that in its practical use reason “always has objective reality *insofar as volition alone is at issue*” (AA 5:15, italics mine). The task of (pure) practical reason is, namely, not the production of some effects, but the determination of the will. This distinction plays a crucial role also in Kant’s treatment of the concept of the ‘practical’. Unfortunately, Sweet does not devote to it any remark, although some attention to this might have been expected in a book on Kant’s views on “practical life”. In some specific contexts, and in particular with regard to the highest good, Kant does hold that practical demands have to do with what we have to make real through our will (cf. AA 5:113, 120, 133). But he is explicit to the effect that the important advantage of the practical use of (pure) reason that provides it objective reality—which is the aspect that Sweet focuses on—is grounded on its capacity to determine the will

independently of external considerations, "whether the physical power is sufficient or not" (AA 5:15). In fact, "any proposition that asserts the connection of a cause with an effect" is "theoretical" (AA 5:26n.).

By insisting on the importance of the efficacy of pure practical reason in the world, Sweet gives a Fichtean or Hegelian slant to her reconstruction of Kant's view. Again, this seems problematic to me, as it bypasses a fundamental difference between Kant's conception of morality and that of Fichte and Hegel. In spite of all further contrasts, both their views display a very strong interest in how the subject is able to concretely determine, or even transform, the world, while Kant's main focus is not on the efficacy of the power of the will, but primarily on reason's efficacy in determining the will. On Sweet's reading, however, Kant's views acquire a more teleological tendency, as the crucial point seems to be "to make the world better" (p. 8), or that "the necessary unity of all possible ends" is *made* real.

## 2. Unity

Sweet's reconstruction aims at pointing out the unity in Kant's practical conception, so that we can see "a coherence to moral life in Kant's work" (p. 2). We might ask, though, what kind of unity is precisely at issue? As I understand her reconstruction, Sweet's concern with the unity of Kant's moral conception apparently has to be taken as regarding both the unity of practical life (as in the title of the book) and the unity of Kant's practical philosophy (the question to be answered is also, in Sweet's formulation on p. 2, "Is Kant a unified thinker?"). Still, why should we insist as much on the unity of his conception of morality as Sweet does? Was that unity ever at issue? Or has Kant failed to make it manifest?

An important part of her aim apparently is to bring to light the whole range of demands which, in Kant's view, govern moral life. In her words, Sweet means to show "the ever-expanding domain of duties Kant believes that are required of us in order to attain moral goodness" (p. 208). On her account, the demand of achieving a good will is in fact not to be detached from the demands to acquire virtue and contribute to the realization of the highest good, thereby pointing to a commitment in history and in the social-political sphere. Now, if this is the main point of the unity around which Sweet's reconstruction revolves, the main focus is supposed to be on the unity of the normative force going through the whole practical domain, in spite of the variety of its aspects. Yet, the picture painted by Sweet is significantly different. She holds that the unity is provided by reason's striving for the unconditioned, which results in the different specific ways of "aiming at goodness". Sweet writes that her reconstruction intends to "treat the varied aspects of Kant's practical philosophy from the perspective of asking 'what

ought I to do?" (p. 9). Yet, she in fact seeks the unity rather in the 'what', that is, in the congruence of the various contents that specify the general moral demand. As she observes, "while the practical philosophy can be said to be guided by the question of 'what ought I to do?', this is no less the question, 'what ought the object of my will be?'" (p. 32). The greater part of her reconstruction, accordingly, focuses on the different ways in which that object can be determined. In looking for a unity in Kant's view of moral life, Sweet's reconstruction accentuates a teleological perspective, which, I suggest, does not fully correspond to Kant's view. (Sweet does point out what she calls a teleological element in Kant's view of virtue. I shall come to her reading of it in the next section.)

A unity of moral life is provided, in Kant's view, by the principles that govern it. If the goal of the search for unity is to connect moral demands in the individual sphere and the collective sphere of social life, this connection should be simply provided by the moral law itself. Kant understands moral philosophy as a "doctrine of duties" (AA 6:379) or a "doctrine of the laws of freedom" (AA 4:387). Accordingly, its unity is given by the fundamental principle of obligation that makes those laws and duties real grounds of the determination of the will. What Sweet calls 'practical life' roughly corresponds to the *Sitten*, the moral practices, in Kant's vocabulary. In his perspective, the *Sitten* are unified insofar as they share the same kind of normativity pervading all their aspects, which goes back to the one moral law. Why should Kant give much thought to their unity if not with regard to their being subjected to the same moral law? His main aim in developing a new position is to provide the fundamental justification for that and, consequently, the justification of specific moral demands that the common moral reflection is already able to acknowledge.

Here a further peculiar aspect of Sweet's reconstruction comes to light, that is, the fact that it significantly underplays the demanding nature of morality and the features connected to it. She barely discusses the issue of obligation, which often seems to be the crucial one, in Kant's eyes. Analogously, the idea of autonomy, which one expects to play an important role in an attempt to reveal the underlying unity in Kant's conception of morality, remains oddly underrepresented. Now, a possible response to this remark might be that Sweet's reconstruction does not focus on autonomy itself, but on what *grounds* autonomy and the moral lawgiving. Indeed, she maintains that reason's striving for the unconditioned "is the source of the 'ought' that reason places on us to be good" (p. 8). However, this possible defence does not strike me as persuasive. If the moral law is to be understood as a "demand for the unconditioned", as Sweet repeatedly claims, either the demand is justified in virtue of the reference to the unconditioned (which stands in some tension with the core of Kant's project, as I observed), or the unconditional character of the demand is to be distinguished

from the unconditioned as object of the demand, which would require a specific analysis of the foundation of an unconditional obligation, much like the one presented by Kant.

Still, even if the search for a unity of practical life can be properly understood in the terms suggested by Sweet, the reasons for taking up such a task are not clear enough. More specifically, a reconstruction of Kant's view should take into account that he does not seem to have a deep interest in establishing a strong, explicit unity of the different aspects of morality, but first and foremost in founding the obligation characterizing moral demands. If we consider again Sweet's comparison of Kant with Hegel at the beginning of her book, I would suggest that, if Kant did not provide a picture like that which we find in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (whether we believe this to be unfortunate or not), it is simply because his philosophical project and its aims are different. By insisting on the systematic unity of Kant's practical (or moral) conception in a way that underplays the foundational role of the moral law and the general focus on the obligating character of moral demands, independently from their contents, we might eventually neglect the defining features of Kant's projects. On the contrary, from Kant's perspective, a reconstruction of the material unity of the aims characterizing the different aspects of moral life would be of primarily theoretical interest. Presenting the unity connecting the contents of moral demands other than by referring back to the one moral law would not correspond to the practical purpose of the philosophical analysis, and would be contrary to Kant's aims. The very idea of giving so much importance to the possibility of combining deontological and teleological elements seems to me to 'overtheorise', unduly concentrating on distinctions that, in Kant's view, are immaterial to moral life. In this light, the fact that the reference to the unconditioned, as understood by Sweet, does not play any specific role in the ethics of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, seems to me a further significant indication that such a perspective is different from Kant's.

### 3. Virtue

Virtue must play a central role in any account of Kant's view of moral life. It is thus understandable that an important part of Sweet's reconstruction focuses on it. She maintains that what she calls "the turn to virtue in Kant's practical thought can be seen [...] as born from reason's striving for the unconditioned" (p. 80). On her reading, while "the good will enacted in individual acts is still, in some sense, constituted by contingency" (p. 80), the virtuous subject reaches a higher level of moral life insofar as he, or she, realizes morality in a fuller sense. Thus, "in the case of virtue the will seeks not only to realize freedom as an unconditioned causality of specific acts but to make freedom a necessity" (p. 18). In this reading, however, some aspects remain problematic.

On Sweet's reading, virtue is about making moral choice a necessity, in analogy with natural necessity. "Virtue aims at necessity in our actions" (p. 81). Sweet thereby accentuates the opposition between virtue and duty and, at the same, downplays the opposition between virtue and holiness that Kant puts at the centre of his view. In fact, she maintains that "Kant understands the human pursuit of virtue with reference to the practical idea of holiness" (p. 83). Sweet repeatedly writes that the content of moral demands is holiness: "Reason requires that we aim at holiness" (p. 75), and "we must aim at attaining a holy will" (p. 207). Accordingly, "virtue aims at holiness, or the complete dissolution of the influence of nature over us" (p. 86). This account of virtue seems to make morality too demanding and, at the same time, stands in tension with Kant's position.

Kant writes indeed that "holiness of will is [...] a practical idea, which must necessarily serve as a model" (AA 5:32), and that "[t]he moral law is holy (inflexible) and demands holiness of morals" (AA 5:128). Yet, such statements are always followed by significant qualifications. The holiness of will is distinctive of a perfectly rational being and serves as a model "to which all finite rational beings can only approximate" (AA 5:32). Holiness is thus the content of the supreme moral demand insofar as it is considered irrespective of the addressee and his, or her, moral faculties. As soon as Kant specifies how the demand applies to finite beings, holiness goes out of the picture. Accordingly, the passage I just quoted continues as follows: "[...] although all the moral perfection that a human being can attain is still only virtue" (AA 5:128; cf. AA 5:122, 123n.). Virtue must play a central role in any reconstruction of Kant's view of moral life primarily because he holds that "human morality in its highest stage can still be nothing more than virtue, even if it be entirely pure" (AA 6:383). While Sweet insists on holiness as playing a positive role in practical life, Kant emphasizes rather the opposite, namely, that the moral life of finite rational beings only reaches up to virtue, as opposed to holiness. If the moral law were to "cease to be a command, [...] morality, having passed subjectively into holiness, *would cease to be virtue*" (AA 5:84, italics mine). Virtue and holiness are thus mutually exclusive. In his work more dedicated to concrete practical life, that is, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant even goes as far as to write: "Virtue so shines as an ideal that it seems, by human standards, to eclipse holiness itself, which is never tempted to break the law" (AA 6:396–7).[4] Already in the second *Critique*, he observes that, if one "strains one's calling as well as one's expectation to an unattainable vocation, namely to a hoped-for full acquisition of holiness", one "gets lost in enthusiastic theosophical dreams that quite contradict self-knowledge" (AA 5:122–3). A convincing interpretation of Kant's view of virtue should be capable of making sense also of such passages. I suspect that this becomes harder

when, as on Sweet's reading, we maintain that holiness is "a way of life", and specifically "the kind of life we attempt to lead when we adopt the moral law as our 'supreme determining ground of choice'" (p. 83).

Sweet connects virtue with holiness so closely probably because she intends to interpret virtue in terms of necessity. Understanding virtue as the way to establish necessity in the life of moral subjects leads Sweet also to emphasize Kant's characterization of virtue as a commitment:

We achieve the consistency and necessity in acting from duty that reason requires when we commit ourselves to being good, when we are **virtuous**. Virtue, in this regard, is a kind of prior commitment we have made to acting from the good such that in every individual instance that the moral law makes its demand, we already predisposed to heeding and to responding to its call. (p. 79–80)

In Sweet's view, virtue is thus "the condition for the possibility of realizing a good will (p. 85), or even "the condition for the possibility of acting from duty at all" (p. 86; cf. p. 18). Accordingly, Sweet stresses that Kant characterizes virtue also as a "readiness to determine oneself through the determination of the law in action" (AA 6:407).[5] However, a readiness is not necessarily a prior commitment. In particular, it sounds quite demanding that such a commitment should be understood as "the condition for the possibility of acting from duty". I understand the purpose of bringing Kant closer to virtue ethics, but Sweet's conclusions seem to push too far in that direction. This outcome would suggest a picture of the relationship between virtue and duty quite different from the one which we find in Kant, and rather problematic. Would it, for instance, ultimately mean that a subject needs to be virtuous in order to act from duty? Furthermore, if virtue, "considered objectively, [...] is an ideal and unattainable" (6:409, cf. p. 84), how should that enabling condition ever be met? And, if virtue is such a prior commitment, how are we to make sense of the plurality of specific virtues that Kant associates with different ethical duties (see e.g., AA 6:420)? Of course, Sweet devotes attention also to Kant's other characterization of virtue, in terms of "moral strength", but it is not really clear to me how this idea qualifies her understanding of virtue as a prior commitment. On a more traditional reading, Kant understands virtue as an accomplishment always in need of being confirmed and further strengthened. In fact, he does not claim that virtue should be understood in terms of necessity in the way suggested by Sweet. On the contrary, on his view, virtue is the continuous effort in determining one's will out of respect for the moral law. If virtue is "a moral constraint through his own lawgiving reason" (AA 6:405), the necessity that provides the normative guidance

of virtuous choice, according to Kant, does not come from the aim of achieving a natural-like necessity in moral life, but from ethical duties and their fundamental principle, that is, from a specifically *moral* necessity (or, more precisely, from necessitation).

The relationship between virtue and duty is a significant aspect of Sweet's reconstruction. On her reading, virtue should provide Kant's conception with an element that balances the supposedly purely 'deontological' element of duty. Now, one might think that, if she feels an especially urgent need to re-connect duty and virtue in the unity of practical life, it is probably because she tends to separate them too much. In Kant's view, on the contrary, they are neither two different moral dimensions, nor two different aspects of the same domain (there is no "turn to virtue", in other words). If Kant speaks of duties of virtue and understands ethics as a doctrine of virtue (also before writing the *Metaphysics of Morals*, in fact), it is because the moral world of finite rational beings is governed by prescriptive demands which are to be met within the dimension of virtue as a constant strength required to satisfy those demands. A clue for the grounds of Sweet's separation between duty and virtue emerges when she writes that "the good will [...] is for Kant only realized in individual acts performed from duty to the moral law" (p. 78). This would imply that Kant understands free agency and, more specifically, what he calls the "determination of the will" as happening on a case-by-case basis, while on Kant's account of agency the will can only be determined through principles, and this applies most prominently to the moral determination of the will.

Sweet's negative view of duty and obligation might be the cause of further misunderstandings, which do not make her reconstruction more convincing. For instance, in the sentence "Duty and what is owed [*Schuldigkeit*] are the only names that we must give to our relation to the moral law" (AA 5:82), the term *Schuldigkeit* cannot be taken to mean that "we owe something to the moral law", as Sweet suggests (p. 56); rather, it simply expresses that moral obligations are inescapable.[6] Analogously, it is surprising to read that imperfect duties "are imperfect insofar as they are never completed. The task of fulfilling these duties, like virtue itself, is unending" (p. 99). This statement is given without considering not only the various different interpretations of Kant's usage of the term, but also, most importantly, his remarks on the matter in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant's observations on this kind of obligation can be (and have been) read differently, but one thing is quite clear: the 'unending' nature of the content of the demand is not what makes some duties imperfect. Does this imply, by contrast, that perfect duties can ever be "completed"? When would it become clear, for instance, that a subject has already completed the duty not to lie? It is not simply that such a demand

remains valid, but also that, strictly speaking, it is even impossible to tell whether or not it has already been met. This point would surely require some clarification, especially because it is relevant to the relationship between duty and virtue, on which Sweet focuses.

Finally, Sweet's underplaying of the idea of autonomy has also direct consequences for the understanding of virtue. In Sweet's reconstruction, there is no sign of Kant's idea of autocracy, through which he characterizes virtue (cf. AA 6:383, 23:515). (If I am not mistaken, the very word 'autocracy' only occurs as part of the title of A.M. Baxley's book,[7] which is mentioned a couple of times.) Would that not be a further indication of a less problematic continuity between autonomy as the foundation of obligation and virtue? Furthermore, would autocracy not be the proper way in which Kant's view displays a kind of connection between freedom and 'real' (moral) necessity? The autocracy of practical reason consists in "the capacity to master one's inclinations when they rebel against the law" (AA 6:383), which is not understood in analogy with a natural necessity, but as a moral power that must be exercised in the proper forms, according to the law. Kant's use of a term coming from the political vocabulary implies that the relevant analogy, here, is with the legitimate control by a political authority, and not with the uniformity of natural events. Significantly, in connection with the idea of autocracy of practical reason, Kant emphasizes once more that human beings as finite rational beings can attain virtue at best, even if their morality "be entirely pure" (AA 6:383).



### Notes:

[1] Note that, oddly enough, Sweet never speaks of pure practical reason, but always only of "practical reason", and never mentions Kant's distinction between pure and empirically conditioned practical reason (cf. e.g., AA 5:15). The point of that distinction is precisely to highlight the crucial difference between two sorts of determination of the will: either based on particular desires and interests, or based only on non-contingent determining grounds, as Kant states in explaining the title of the second *Critique*.

[2] Sweet here insists on differentiating between unconditioned and unconditional, thereby stressing again her substantial understanding of the unconditioned. Such an emphasis does not sound quite appropriate to me, however, since it suggests a terminological distinction that is absent from Kant's texts (the German has simply *unbedingt*).

[3] The small error consisting in having “practical reason” instead of “pure reason” (*reine Vernunft*) is in the Cambridge Edition translation.

[4] Such remarks thus suggest a qualification of a passage concerning the end of moral perfection that Sweet quotes: “the command is ‘be holy’” (AA 6:446; cf. Sweet, p. 79).

[5] Sweet presents the sentence as an interpretive suggestion of Steve Engstrom’s (cf. his ‘The Inner Freedom of Virtue’, in M. Timmons (ed.), *Kant’s Metaphysics of Morals: Interpretative Essays* [Oxford University Press, 2002], pp. 289–315), while it is in fact a quote from the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

[6] Pluhar translates *Schuldigkeit* with ‘obligation’.

[7] A. M. Baxley, *Kant’s Theory of Virtue: The Value of Autocracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).



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