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## How does Kant think? An interpretive proposal from an ordonomic perspective

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Ingo Pies

# How does Kant think? – An interpretive proposal from an ordonomic perspective

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des Lehrstuhls für Wirtschaftsethik  
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*Abstract*

This article interprets Kant from an ordonomic perspective: *How* does Kant think, and *why* does he think the way he does? – Kant seeks to ground human dignity. To this end, he conceives the idea of thinking the supreme principle of morality as an end that is at the same time a duty. He thus identifies a specific *form* that enables *every* person to apply the categorical imperative as a moral criterion. Kant ties the universality of this form to the universality of *human dignity*. His rigorism—his strategy of purification—thus concerns thinking, not acting. He welcomed actions done from duty, even when they were accompanied by personal interests, by “pleasure and love.” For contemporary theory-building, two aspects are of particular interest: (a) Kant recognized the importance of institutional incentives for moral progress; (b) Kant’s theoretical architecture employs purposiveness as a regulative idea and aims to produce *theory for practice*—by formulating ideas that anticipate and prepare their own realization.

*Keywords:* Liberal philosophy of reason, moral and political autonomy, human dignity, priority of the right over the good, purposiveness as a regulative idea, conflict as a driver of progress

*Kurzfassung*

Dieser Aufsatz interpretiert Kant aus ordonomischer Sicht: *Wie* denkt Kant, und *warum* denkt er so, wie er denkt? – Kant will die Menschenwürde begründen. In dieser Absicht entwickelt er die Idee, den höchsten Grundsatz der Moral als Zweck zu denken, der zugleich Pflicht ist. So identifiziert er eine spezifische *Form*, mit der *jeder* Mensch den kategorischen Imperativ als moralisches Prüfkriterium anwenden kann. An die Allgemeinheit dieser Form knüpft Kant die Allgemeinheit der *Menschenwürde*. Kants Rigorismus, seine Purifizierungsstrategie, bezieht sich deshalb allein aufs Denken, nicht aufs Handeln. Er begrüßte es, wenn ein Handeln *aus Pflicht* von eigenen Interessen, von „Lust und Liebe“ begleitet wird. Für eine zeitgenössische Theoriebildung sind vor allem zwei Aspekte von besonderem Interesse: (a) Kant wusste um die Bedeutung institutioneller Anreize für moralischen Fortschritt; (b) Kants Theoriearchitektur verwendet Zweckmäßigkeit als regulative Idee und zielt darauf ab, Theorie für die Praxis zu betreiben, indem sie Ideen denkt, die ihrer eigenen Verwirklichung vor- und zuarbeiten.

*Schlüsselbegriffe:* Vernunftphilosophie der Freiheit, moralische und politische Autonomie, Menschenwürde, Vorrang des Rechten vor dem Guten, Zweckmäßigkeit als regulative Idee, Konflikt als Motor des Fortschritts



# How does Kant think? – An interpretive proposal from an ordonomic perspective

Ingo Pies\*

*Personal Preliminary Remark:* I do not consider myself a Kantian (let alone a Kant scholar). My intellectual roots (and areas of expertise) lie elsewhere. Over time, however, I have repeatedly found myself engaging in debates with Kantians. For this reason, it seemed necessary to me to become at least somewhat familiar with Kant's work. Out of this engagement emerged a particular interpretation that I would now like to present for discussion. The guiding questions of the following reflections are: *How does Kant think?* And: *Why does he think this way?*

(1) *Substantive background:* Since 1990, Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy has more often—and more forcefully—been invoked as the allegedly decisive counterargument to ordonomics and, more broadly, to order ethics in the tradition of Karl Homann than any other philosophical approach (see, e.g., Abländer & Nutzinger 2010; Pies' reply 2010).

More broadly, some philosophers—and in particular certain business and corporate ethicists who profess to follow a Kantian approach—contend that profit-oriented actions are, by their very nature, incapable of satisfying moral standards. As Svanberg and Svanberg (2021, p. 1746) put it:

„Conventional ethics demands unselfishness and is, therefore, incompatible with the self-interested essence of business: the profit motive.“

They ground this claim, among other things, in Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy. They distill the core idea of their interpretation in the following passage, where they refer to and quote Kant (p. 1737, emphasis in the original):

“The purpose of morality is to do our duty as an end in itself; we are to do our duty for duty's sake ... We may very well act in agreement with duty, but not *from* duty. However, acting »in accord with duty« because we want to do it, feel like doing it, believe that we will gain from doing so, has no »moral worth.«”

Here they draw on Kant's famous distinction between acting *in accordance with* duty and acting *from* duty. In their interpretation of Kant, they conclude—note well: this is *their* conclusion, even as they invoke Kant to support it—that the pursuit of one's own interest is incompatible with acting from duty.

Furthermore, they hold that, in particular, entrepreneurial self-interest in profit-making should be classified as selfish and, therefore, as immoral. They maintain that morality must hurt—that moral action must be accompanied by pain and sacrifice. On this point as well, they appeal to Kant. They write (pp. 1738 f.):

“Kant supplies examples showing that when it pains us to do our duties, our actions probably have »moral worth.« ... For Kant, ethics generally clashes with the wants, likings, preferences and inclinations of the self—the sum of which is »happiness.« Thus, there is a dichotomy between the duties of morality and the interests of our »beloved self.« For Kant, and duty ethics in general, there is no room for the wants, desires, preferences, interests, or happiness of »the beloved self.« That is, there is no room for egoism.”

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\* All quotations from Immanuel Kant were translated from the German originals (Academy Edition) into English with the aid of artificial intelligence; any inaccuracies remain the responsibility of Ingo Pies.

Strictly speaking, there are two distinct claims for which Kant is invoked here. They can be stated as follows:

1. The pursuit of self-interest is incompatible with acting *from* duty and, as a result, lacks moral worth.
2. Only actions involving the *renunciation of self-interest* possess moral worth.

(2) In what follows, I seek to respond to this interpretation of Kant. My argument is based on my reading of Kant's original writings as well as on John Rawls's excellent interpretation of Kant's moral philosophy (2000). For my approach to Kant's aesthetics, I wish to acknowledge my great debt of gratitude to Renate Homann (1977), (1986), (1999). I first encountered the interpretation that Kant's aesthetics serves as a hinge to the philosophy of history in Odo Marquard (1962a) and (1962b). My views and attitudes toward the problem of normativity have been profoundly shaped by my academic teacher Karl Homann (2004), and—through his influence—also by the liberal Hegel interpretation of Odo Marquard (1964/1973) and Joachim Ritter (2003).

My line of reasoning proceeds in three steps, each of which is addressed in a separate section:

1. First, I outline the fundamental problem that Immanuel Kant addresses across his three Critiques.
2. Second, I argue that Kant's moral philosophy can only be adequately understood when placed in the context of this fundamental problem. On this basis, I reject the allegedly Kantian claims about self-interest and profit cited above as clear-cut misinterpretations.
3. Third, I maintain that ordonomics is not merely compatible with Kant's moral and legal philosophy but that it programmatically builds upon and further develops two key insights from his political philosophy and, in particular, his philosophy of history. The first concerns Kant's reflections on *how normativity is implemented* through processes of societal learning. The second concerns his methodological ambition to pursue philosophy as a *theory for practice*—precisely in the sense of presenting a mode of thinking that, in its very act of thinking, is directed toward having an impact on the world and contributing to its improvement.

(3) By way of introduction, let me add one more substantive remark: Immanuel Kant was not just one thinker of the Enlightenment, but arguably *the* thinker of the Enlightenment—a philosopher who, through his very thinking, sought to encourage and enable people to think for themselves.

In this respect, Kantian scholars in particular should refrain from treating Kant as an intellectual authority whose views must never be questioned. What I mean is this: If a modern theory happens to conflict with certain views of Kant, this should not automatically be taken as a decisive objection. After all, Kant could be mistaken. He was by no means infallible—nor would he ever have claimed to be. This implies that, whenever contradictory views are at stake, one must carefully examine which position has the stronger arguments on its side.

That Kant should not be treated as an authority also means that being in agreement with Kant on certain views is by no means a proof of quality. To be in agreement with Kant is no badge of honor for one's own theory. Such agreement does not guarantee that the theory is good; nor does it in any way preclude the possibility that entirely different

theories might be superior. Once again, all of this must be carefully examined and cannot be settled merely by appealing to one's proximity to Kant.

When I say that Kant would never have claimed infallibility for himself, and that it contradicts Kant's own spirit to treat him as an authority—whether pro or contra—I do *not* mean that it is wrong to treat Kant as an authority simply because he himself would have rejected that status. If one wishes to be consistent, that observation cannot be decisive here, for it would amount to invoking Kant as an authority on questions of truth—precisely what my argument warns against.

My thesis, therefore, is this: agreement or disagreement with Kant is not proof but at best an *indication* of a position's correctness. Whether a position is true must ultimately be judged by substantive criteria—not by whether it aligns with Kant.

Against this backdrop, I wish to emphasize that the following reflections only superficially address the question of how Kant should be properly interpreted. To be sure, I seek to demonstrate that certain authors who invoke Kant have fundamentally misunderstood him, and I also aim to show that my own research program coincides with Kant's thought on several important points and is, in fact, inspired by him.

Ultimately, however—at a deeper level—this essay is concerned with the much more fundamental question of how *good theory* is to be developed today and to what extent it is worthwhile to learn from Kant in tackling this question. What is at stake are considerations about the *expediency of theoretical design*. Kant's writings provide ample illustrative material for this purpose—precisely when, in contemporary academic discourse, he is not enthroned as a decisive authority but is instead taken seriously, from an ordonomic perspective, as a *classic thinker* to be studied in light of his own, distinctive set of questions. For it then becomes apparent that Kant was a master at reflecting—publicly and transparently—on the expediency of his theoretical design.

### 1. Kant's Fundamental Problem and the Three Critiques

To borrow the title of one of Kant's own essays, his main purpose is to “orient oneself in thinking” (Kant 1786)—and, more profoundly, to orient thinking itself. He is concerned with achieving a coherent worldview. He seeks to engage in the “conflict of the faculties” (Kant 1798) in order ultimately to resolve it. Using a modern term, one might say that what drives him is *consilience*. Kant's fundamental question is: How do things fit together? Or, more precisely: How must we think about things so that they do fit together? His thinking is a mode of sorting and ordering—of rearranging, classifying, and organizing the elements to be ordered in such a way that they cohere, like the pieces of a puzzle, into a unified whole. Instead of speaking of Enlightenment, one might just as well speak of tidying up or systematic classification to characterize the basic thrust of Kant's thought. In any case, I read Kant as being primarily concerned with clearing up and eliminating intellectual disorder.

The backdrop to this fundamental problem is the stunning success of the modern sciences, particularly physics. These successes unsettled the traditional worldview grounded in ecclesiastical authority. The newly emerging questions literally concern God and the world—and above all the place of human beings in the universe, understood here as both the physical and the social world, as the natural *and* the social order.



- On the one hand, God is being pushed out of scientific explanations. He no longer functions as an explanans. This raises questions that Kant assigns to *theoretical reason*.
- On the other hand, a social dynamic emerges that must be steered—through ideas suitable for such guidance. The steering media are law and morality. These are the kinds of questions that Kant assigns to *practical reason*.
- This separation between theoretical and practical reason in turn renders a third question pressing, namely how to mediate between the two and how to think the idea of reason as one. Kant assigns this question to the *power of judgment*.

(1) In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant develops the project of transcendental philosophy—a form of reflection on the very framework within which thinking takes place. Its guiding question is strikingly self-referential: *How is thinking conducted when it is conducted in the way it is here?* Could there be alternative ways of thinking? And if so, what would be their respective advantages and disadvantages? Kant's enterprise is thus a form of thinking that always already factors in the consequences of its own mode of thought—economically speaking, that performs an opportunity-cost analysis of thinking itself.

With this heuristic guide to self-reflection, transcendental philosophy investigates the *conditions of the possibility of knowledge*. Kant thereby addresses the problem that reason, in its drive toward knowledge of nature, is—so to speak—too powerful: it tends to transgress its own boundaries. The aim of Kant's critique is to confine pure theoretical reason within its proper limits. In effect, this amounts to secularizing the traditionally religious understanding of the world and to acknowledging that there can be no scientific knowledge beyond the bounds of possible experience. Kant himself put it succinctly: "I had to abolish knowledge in order to make room for faith" (1781/1787; AA III, p. 19, emphasis in the original). What, then, is at stake here?

Kant conceptualizes the natural sciences as the rational cognition of the physical world. He envisions it as follows (Kant 1781/1787; AA III, p. 10):

"Reason must approach nature holding in one hand its principles, according to which alone concordant appearances can count as laws, and in the other hand the experiment it has devised in accordance with these principles—though it must do so in order to be taught by nature, not in the capacity of a pupil who allows himself to be told whatever the teacher wants, but rather as an appointed judge who compels witnesses to answer the questions he puts to them."

Following this metaphor, science consists in summoning nature before the court of reason and, as it were, putting it under cross-examination. This method proves to be extraordinarily powerful, yielding insights into data and into the causal relations among data. The phenomena of the physical world turn out to be determined by natural laws. In this way, humanity learns to read in the book of nature.

If this method is now applied to human beings and to the forms of their social coexistence, the immediate impression arises that they too are determined by natural laws. Consequently, it appears as though theoretical reason progressively constricts the domain of practical reason: the better the natural order can be explained, the less (residual) space seems to remain for the order of freedom. For if human beings, as natural creatures, are subject to natural laws and causality, they would seemingly no longer be free to act according to their own will—or, more precisely, their own arbitrary will—so that the very phenomenon of moral conduct would lose its footing.

This is the problem context that makes it understandable why, and with what strategic thrust, Kant undertakes to set limits to theoretical knowledge of nature: *The critique of pure theoretical reason clears space for the unfolding of pure practical reason.*

From an ordonomic perspective, what Kant is doing here can be described as a “re-compartmentalization,” that is, a categorical re-ordering of thought. Kant takes concepts such as *God* and *freedom* and reassigns them by removing them from the domain of theoretical reason (that is, active cognition of nature) and placing them instead within the domain of practical reason (that is, active setting of ends).<sup>1</sup>

(2) In this “re-compartmentalization,” it is important to note a crucial asymmetry. Kant’s first Critique is called the *Critique of Pure Reason* because it aims to set limits to the overly strong and transgressive pure theoretical reason. Kant’s second Critique is called the *Critique of Practical Reason* because it is meant to help the overly weak pure practical reason, as it were, get back on its feet. At the same time, Kant also seeks to confine within its limits the “non-pure” practical reason—one that is not fixated on pure self-thinking (*a priori*) but instead takes up empirical motives. What, then, is at stake here?

Kant holds that human beings are subject not only to the laws of nature but also to the moral law. This fact, in his view, raises the question of how human beings can nonetheless be conceived as free, since for him it is clear that morality necessarily presupposes freedom. Put differently: for Kant, animals—being creatures of mere instinct—are not capable of morality. Human beings, by contrast, are morally capable because they are not determined by instinct but are endowed with reason. This gives rise to the following problem: how can the (external or internal) compulsion to comply with the moral law be reconciled, without logical contradiction, with the freedom of a rational being?

Kant’s solution to this problem consists in conceptualizing, from the standpoint of transcendental philosophy, the idea of a morality of reason. He assigns to pure practical reason the task of formulating the highest principle of morality, thereby making available the insight that it is human beings themselves whose reason thinks this principle. In following the moral law, they thus become conscious that this law does not restrict their freedom but, on the contrary, expresses it—precisely because, as rational beings, they ultimately give this moral law to themselves. Kant argues as follows: As a moral being, the reasonable human being is not other-determined but *self-determined*. He acts *autonomously*, not heteronomously. He is not a servant but the *author* of the moral law, whose binding force need not be imposed from without because he can assent to it inwardly. Kant closely connects this with the *dignity* of the human being.

With this elaboration of a pure practical reason that—*a priori*, out of itself and by sheer thinking—presents the moral law as constitutive and expansive of individual freedom, and with his prior delimitation of pure theoretical reason, which he reminds cannot, for lack of an empirical basis, cognize God (and other metaphysical ideas such as freedom), Kant can now turn to the third question: how the order of nature and the order of

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<sup>1</sup> Delving a bit deeper, Kant’s concept of “synthetic a priori judgments” can be seen as an *orthogonal positioning* to the longstanding debate between empiricists and rationalists. Kant does not simply reject the two conflicting positions. Instead, he reconstructs them and grants them their due: Both positions contain exaggerations that require correction, yet both also contain a core of truth. From Kant’s perspective, the two are not only compatible but interdependent. He frames their relationship as a productive interplay between form and content—between rational categories of knowledge and empirical objects of experience—ultimately envisioning a kind of win-win constellation.

freedom can fit together. He develops the answer in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

(3) Kant defines the power of judgment as the capacity to recognize the particular in the universal and, conversely, to abstract the universal from the particular. He then assigns to the power of judgment the task of mediating between the theoretical and practical parts of philosophy. The issue at stake is how one should conceive of the relation between theoretical reason, which aims at knowledge of nature, and practical reason, which is concerned with end-setting action. More concretely: *How can human beings realize moral ends in the physical world? How can they bring the order of freedom to bear within the order of nature?*

Kant develops his answer in a consistently transcendental-philosophical fashion. He examines whether the power of judgment has its own *a priori* principle that enables it to bridge the gap between the laws of nature and the laws of freedom.

Once again, Kant's effort to bring order to thought can be described as a "re-compartmentalization," namely as a schematic expansion from two to now three categories. The new drawer system then looks as follows (cf. Kant 1790; AA V, p. 198):

- The *a priori* principle of theoretical reason is to cognize *lawful regularities* in the realm of natural phenomena.
- The *a priori* principle of practical reason is to conceive, in the realm of freedom, an *ultimate final end* that possesses both lawfulness and thus binding force.
- The *a priori* principle of the power of judgment is to present the idea of *purposiveness*.

For Kant, purposiveness thus functions as a kind of bridge by which one can pass from the realm of freedom to the realm of necessity. He conceives of it as a mediating "middle term" (Kant 1790; AA V, p. 168), situated between the (theoretical) legislation for the faculty of cognition and the (practical) legislation for the faculty of desire.

At another point, Kant (1790; AA V, p. 294, emphasis in the original) describes—reversing both the order and the direction of emphasis—how he envisions the rational interplay of theory, judgment, and practice in thought. He names three

"Maxims of common human understanding...: 1. Think for oneself; 2. Think in the place of everyone else; 3. Always think consistently with oneself. The first is the maxim of a *prejudice-free* way of thinking, the second of an *enlarged* way of thinking, the third of a *consistent* way of thinking."

He then makes the following assignment (1790; AA V, p. 294):

"One may say that the first of these maxims is that of understanding, the second of judgment, the third of reason."

The first maxim, according to Kant, concerns active autonomy: reason must think for itself rather than rely on other authorities and simply adopt their prejudices. The greatest prejudice, in his view, is superstition. Kant then formulates it succinctly (1790; AA V, p. 294, emphasis in the original): "Liberation from superstition is called Enlightenment."

The second maxim, according to Kant, concerns a purposive use of the faculty of cognition through *cognitive empathy*. Kant (1790; AA V, p. 295, emphasis in the original) speaks of an "enlarged way of thinking" when a person "sets himself above the subjective private conditions of judgment—among which many others are, as it were, bracketed—and reflects on his own judgment from a *universal standpoint* (which he can determine only by putting himself in the standpoint of others)."

The third maxim, in Kant's view (1790; AA V, p. 295), "is the hardest to attain and can only be achieved through the combination of the first two, and after their frequent observance has become a habit." It is thus demanding in its preconditions and requires sustained practice. One reaches it, as it were, only as the end point of a ladder. Here the power of judgment appears as the middle rung of that ladder, by which one ascends—through repeated exercise—from (theoretical) understanding to (practical) reason.

(4) In the overall consideration of the three Critiques (see Fig. 1), a pattern of theoretical architecture becomes apparent, knowledge of which significantly facilitates the interpretation of controversial questions of detail.

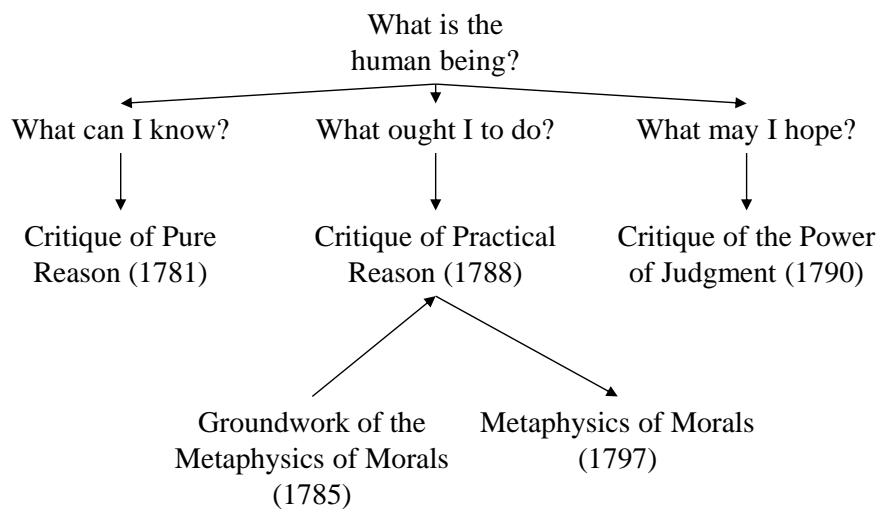


Figure 1: Overview of Kant's Three Critiques – Source: Author's illustration

Kant divides his fundamental question, "What is the human being?", into three subquestions (1781/1787; AA III, p. 522):

1. What can I know?
2. What ought I to do?
3. What may I hope?"

He addresses the first subquestion in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, first published in 1781. This concerns *knowledge*. He treats the second subquestion in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, first published in 1788. This concerns obligation (duty) and volition (will). He addresses the third subquestion in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, first published in 1790. This concerns *ability*—that is, the possibility of realizing freedom in the world.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Kant's question "What may I hope?" pertains not only to the *afterlife* but, above all, to *this* life—life *before* death. In this context, his aesthetics and teleology offer a hope-inspiring perspective: namely, that nature might, in broad terms, be hospitable to humanity's moral aspirations. Nature presents itself as a kind of resonant medium—a space in which the impulses of practical reason can find amplification and sustenance, rather than being condemned to fade into perpetual silence. Kant (1790; AA V, p. 443) links this idea to the radical conclusion that "man can be an ultimate end of creation only as a moral being." In this sense, one can say that the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* not only serves to mediate between the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, but also functions as a confirmation of both. All three critiques form a coherent and mutually reinforcing whole.

The first Critique examines the cognition of the law of nature, the second the cognition of the moral law, and the third mediates between the two by determining the idea of purposiveness as the a priori principle of the power of judgment.

All three Critiques deal with *legislation by reason* in the sense of rational *self*-legislation: understanding gives lawfulness to nature; practical reason gives to individual choice, through the idea of duty and the good will, a moral law and thereby moral necessity; and the power of judgment postulates, as a regulative idea, a principle of purposiveness that mediates between nature and freedom.

Ultimately, Kant's project of the three Critiques aims to situate the human being as a rational and free subject both in the physical world (as a subject of cognition) and in the moral world (as a subject of action). The first Critique restricts pure reason in its theoretical use to the realm of experience in order to make room for morality. The second Critique encourages and enables practical reason to cross the boundary to the supersensible and to think the idea of moral freedom radically as moral self-legislation—that is, as self-obligation. The third Critique closes the circle by demonstrating the compatibility of nature and morality and by justifying the hope that the world is so constituted as to make the progressive realization of human ends possible. In this way, the initial tension—law of nature versus law of freedom—is resolved in a higher synthesis: *Nature is conceived as being compatible with the ends set by reason*.

Kant's philosophy is thus a *philosophy of freedom* that systematically orders the realms of *being* and of *obligation* by means of a heuristic of purposiveness and constructively relates them to one another. Kant's critical philosophy presents a coherent worldview in which the human being can act and affirm himself as a rational agent—a line of thought that, when consistently pursued, ultimately leads to the mutual recognition of human dignity.

## 2. Kant's Moral Philosophy – A Warning against Misunderstandings

(1) Kant assigns to pure practical reason the task of determining the supreme moral principle of the moral law. He develops his moral philosophy in three major works (see again Fig. 1):

- Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals (published 1785)
- Critique of Practical Reason (published 1788)
- Metaphysics of Morals (published 1797)

The Groundwork (1785) specifies the *form* of the supreme moral principle. Here Kant introduces the categorical imperative in three formulations:

- Formula of Universal Law (AA IV, p. 421): “Act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.”
- Formula of Humanity as an End in Itself (AA IV, p. 429): “Act so that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.”
- Formula of Autonomy (AA IV, p. 430): Here Kant specifies the principle of the will by which every rational being is capable of moral legislation. This principle states “to act on no other maxim than such as can also have as its object itself as

a universal law, and consequently to regard the will as itself giving universal law through its maxims.”

All three formulations have—quite rightly, in my view—become world-famous, and yet it is easy to fundamentally misunderstand them. Contrary to what a superficial reading might suggest, Kant is not here concerned with acting but with thinking. *The categorical imperative is not a guide to action but a guide to thinking.* It provides a criterion not for action itself but for the *maxim* of action—that is, for *thinking* as the starting point of action-guiding willing. Kant ascribed only *weak* motivational force for action to this kind of thinking. For him it was always clear that everyday human action requires far more than this maxim alone—namely, *strong* motivational forces as well as *judgment* trained by experience (see explicitly Kant 1785; AA IV, p. 390).

In the second Critique (1788), Kant sets out to demonstrate that the categorical imperative is both possible and necessary. His concern here is with the *existence* of the supreme moral principle. In this work, Kant examines, from the standpoint of transcendental philosophy, the structure, scope, and limits of practical reason. Methodologically speaking, it thus constitutes the analogous counterpart to the first Critique (1781). Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason and his Critique of Practical Reason can therefore be seen as operating on the same level.

Finally, in the Metaphysics of Morals (1797), Kant turns to the application of the theory. Here he specifies the concrete *substantive* articulations of the supreme moral principle. He develops a systematized doctrine of duties that encompasses both the doctrine of right and the doctrine of virtue.

For a solid understanding of Immanuel Kant’s moral philosophy, it is essential to be clear about which question he addresses with which work—and which he does *not*.

- In the first work (1785), the task is to present a criterion—or, more precisely, a process of rational testing—by which any person can ascertain for herself what is morally right.
- In the second work (1788), the task is to demonstrate that pure practical reason can in fact fulfill the task that Kant assigns to it.
- In the third work (1797), the task is to map the moral world by providing a systematization—one might even say a “compartmentalization”—of duties of right and duties of virtue.

Interestingly, in *none* of these three works is Kant concerned with persuading his fellow human beings to behave in a more moral manner. Rather, he takes this conviction for granted—as the “fact of reason” (1788; AA V, p. 31). Human beings, Kant argues, already know that they are obliged to distinguish between good and evil. They do not need to be taught this by philosophy. For Kant, the task of philosophy lies elsewhere: it consists in grounding *human dignity*—by arguing that, for the human being as *legislator* of the moral law and thus as an *autonomous* rational agent, morality is to be conceived not as coercion but as *self-obligation*, and hence as *freedom*.

The central achievement of Kant’s moral philosophy lies in reconceptualizing morality, which appears to the individual as a normative “*ought*,” as arising from the individual’s own rational *willing*—such that *each and every* person, as a rational being, possesses dignity precisely because she is not subordinated to heteronomous ends but to an autonomous, self-legislated end. Kant’s key point is that his moral philosophy elevates the human being from being the *object* of moral obligation to being its *subject*. The human being

is not the servant of morality but its author. Put plainly, Kant ties human *dignity* to the intellectual deciphering of moral *obligation* as self-determined *willing*. What presents itself as heteronomous morality (“Thou shalt”) is traced back by him to autonomy (“I will”). Freedom and constraint are thus reconciled in the idea of rational self-legislation, which conceives moral *obligation* as self-determined *self-obligation*.

*This* argument—the close substantive link between moral obligation, that is, duty, and freedom, autonomy, and dignity—is the pivotal point of Kant’s moral philosophy. I will now attempt to offer some textual evidence in support of this interpretation.

Already in the Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals, Kant raises the question of why a free rational being should subject itself to the moral law. His answer is: “for this ‘ought’ is actually a ‘will’” (1785; AA IV, p. 449). In the Critique of Practical Reason (1788; AA V, p. 33), he formulates this idea by saying that “the autonomy of pure practical reason, that is, freedom, finds its expression in the moral law.” He continues there: “The autonomy of the will is the sole principle of all moral laws and of the duties in accordance with them.” Kant maintains this thought also in the Metaphysics of Morals—but here he illuminates it from the opposite side as well. The argument runs as follows: Every action requires an end. Normally, one end can again serve another end, which leads thinking into an infinite regress of ends. The *categorical imperative* offers the way out by determining the highest end as duty. Accordingly, Kant (1797; AA VI, p. 385) emphasizes that “the moral doctrine of ends, which treats of duties, is based on principles given a priori in pure practical reason.”

Viewed from this perspective, the categorical imperative—needed by human beings precisely because they are not pure rational beings—reveals how Kant (1785; AA IV, p. 421) brings willing and obligation into close connection, particularly in the Formula of Universal Law:

“The categorical imperative is therefore only a single one and indeed this: act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.”

Kant here makes it explicit: What one *ought* must be something that one can *will*. And this point—something that cannot be stressed and repeated often enough—concerns *not* action but *thought*.

Within this line of argument, it is important for Kant to be able to point out that pure practical reason—which identifies the categorical imperative as the supreme principle of morality—acts upon the human faculty of choice as a good will and can thereby motivate moral action, even though Kant readily concedes that this motivational effect will ordinarily be weak and in need of supplementation. Here Kant is truly concerned with the principle. His entire argument in favor of human dignity stands or falls with the claim that pure practical reason alone (albeit only weakly) can motivate action—even in the absence of any further empirical motivations, such as instincts or inclinations.

To put it as clearly as possible: Kant here addresses an extremely complex and highly nuanced question. Even his contemporaries found it enormously difficult to understand this question and to contextualize Kant’s specific attempts to answer it. The result—even in his own time—was profound misunderstanding.

(2) One particular misunderstanding will now be examined in greater detail. It became famous because the historian, literary theorist, and poet Friedrich Schiller gave it brilliant expression. In the *Xenien*, which he published together with Goethe in 1796, Schiller wrote under the heading “Gewissensskrupel” (scruples of conscience) (1796/1962, p. 299):

“Gladly do I serve my friends, but unfortunately I do it with inclination,  
And thus it often troubles me that I am not virtuous.”

Here Kant is interpreted, with a critical undertone, as if he held the rigoristic view that moral action is diminished in its morality whenever, in addition to the categorical imperative of pure practical reason, empirical motives also come into play. But nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, Kant assumes that in the vast majority of cases, additional motives will indeed operate to render the good will effective in action. And Kant explicitly welcomes this fact, for their role is not to determine the direction of the good will but to strengthen the agent’s motivation and thereby support the good will in bringing about action.

Fortunately, this point can be read explicitly in Kant. In an important footnote in his 1793 work *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*—published three years before Schiller’s *Xenien* and thus apparently as a reaction to the misunderstandings of other contemporaries (such as Christian Garve)—Kant offers the following clarification (1793a; AA VI, p. 23):

“That human beings should, from the incentive of duty, do what is in itself good with pleasure and love is not only possible but also necessary, namely for the perfection of virtue. Yet this pleasure and love is not the incentive of the action, but duty itself; and the pleasure and love is only the accompaniment of virtue.”

Kant’s reasoning is very clear here: His concern is not to exclude instincts or inclinations from the sphere of moral action but solely to secure for pure practical reason the *status* of being the sole *motivating spring* or driving mechanism—and thus the *decisive ground*—of moral action through the self-obligation that it conceives. This status is in no way undermined if additional motives complement it—serving merely as an accompaniment but not as the supreme principle of moral action.

This point can already be found, upon close reading, in Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. There, he states with apodictic brevity (Kant 1783; IV, p. 399): “To secure one’s own happiness is a duty.” Equally illuminating—and of systematic importance—is how, in the preface, Kant articulates his claim to originality, as well as the role he assigns to the categorical imperative in everyday life. This, in turn, grounds the significance he attributes to the *pure* moral philosophy he invented—one that shows *pure* practical reason how it must conceive of the *categorical* imperative. On this, we read (Kant 1783; IV, p. 389 f., emphasis in original):

“[A]ll moral philosophy entirely rests on its pure part; and, when applied to human beings, it borrows not the least from knowledge of them (anthropology), but, as rational beings, gives them laws *a priori* which, to be sure, still require judgment sharpened by experience—partly in order to distinguish in which cases they are applicable, partly in order to gain access to the human will and provide motivation for execution, since the human being, affected as he is by so many inclinations, is indeed capable of the idea of a pure practical reason but not so easily able to make it effective in his conduct of life *in concreto*. A metaphysics of morals is therefore indispensably necessary—not merely from a motive of speculation, in order to investigate the source of the practical principles lying *a priori* in our reason, but also because morals themselves remain subject to all kinds of corruption so long as that guide and supreme norm of their correct judgment is lacking. For in what is to be morally good, it is not enough that it be in accordance with the moral law; it must also be done *for the sake of* that law. Otherwise such conformity is only very contingent and precarious, because an immoral ground will sometimes indeed produce lawful actions, but far more often unlawful ones. Now the moral law in its purity and genuineness (which is precisely what matters most in practice) is to be sought nowhere else than in a pure philosophy; thus this (metaphysics) must precede, and without it there can be no moral philosophy at all. Indeed, any so-called moral philosophy that mixes those pure principles with empirical ones does not even deserve the name of philosophy (for philosophy distinguishes itself from ordinary rational cognition precisely by presenting in a separate science what the latter comprehends only in a



mixed way)—and even less the name of a moral philosophy, because through such mixing it undermines the very purity of morals and thereby acts contrary to its own end.”

Kant is concerned with a “clue,” a *guiding thread*—one that is meant to facilitate the task of acting morally. The categorical imperative is thus intended to serve as a principle of order by which *every* self-thinking person can orient herself *in* her thinking, and *through* her thinking, in a way relevant to action. This orientation, however, does not consist in suppressing or eradicating one’s instincts and inclinations. Its sole purpose is rather to provide a criterion or process of testing that directs self-thinking toward self-correction in action.

This idea of a *guiding thread* can also be illustrated with another metaphor: Kant seeks to provide agents with a *moral compass* as an aid to orientation—a compass that, through the cognitive achievement of his “pure” moral philosophy, is set “correctly,” and indeed reliably correctly, that is, “in accordance with law.” This *calibration* refers solely to thinking, not to acting. And it is crucial to note that action itself requires far more than just this compass.

The misunderstanding to be corrected here is best identified as a categorical misunderstanding—a confusion of levels: a conflation of moral action with the *maxim* of moral action, as if one did not have to clearly distinguish between doing and thinking. Because of this confusion, Kant’s statements about the supreme moral maxim are (mis)interpreted as statements about action and the permissible motivation for action. This results in a confusion of form and content.

This categorical confusion can be resolved as follows: Kant’s concern is that the categorical imperative should guarantee human dignity. For this reason, he conceptualizes this imperative as *self*-legislation and thus as an achievement of reason of which one can be proud. This achievement of reason must have the form of law—and such a form cannot consist in being tied to empirical contingencies. For this reason, instincts, inclinations, and empirical ends such as subjective self-interest are, in Kant’s view, inherently unsuitable for taking on the required form of law. They are therefore unfit to serve as the supreme maxim. And it is precisely for this reason that Kant sees himself compelled to explore—indeed, to invent—the category of a *pure* practical reason. Only this faculty can accomplish what Kant intends with his moral philosophy: to provide *all* human beings with a guiding thread that enables them, through self-thinking, self-assurance, and self-correction of moral action, to think of and experience themselves not as servants of heteronomous constraint but as autonomous subjects of morality, to develop a corresponding sense of self-worth, and ultimately to mutually recognize this self-esteem. Such mutual recognition, for Kant, constitutes *human dignity*. And here the following holds: Human dignity is universal only to the extent that moral thinking is universal—which is precisely why it is constructed as pure practical reason.

To put it metaphorically once again: Kant constructs a hook on which he can hang the cloak of human dignity. This hook is *pure* practical reason. Its suitability as a reliable hook consists in the fact that, with the categorical imperative, it presents a mode of moral thinking of which *every* human being is capable—and which, consequently, *all* human beings must grant to one another. Behind Kant’s universality stands a mutuality to which rational thinking *compels itself*.

One can clearly see the distinctive construction principle Kant employs for his argument on human dignity in the peculiar formulation of the Formula of Humanity as an End

in Itself in his *Groundwork* (AA IV, p. 429). There he states the injunction “to treat humanity, whether in ... [one’s own; IP] person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.” For Kant, the individual does not possess a primary *right* to human dignity, but rather bears a primary *duty* toward human dignity. Constructed in the most *general* form possible—and therefore tied to the capacity for moral *reasoning*—*human dignity* pertains directly to *humanity as a species* as such and only indirectly to individuals, insofar as they are members of that species. If one follows Kant’s line of reasoning, the individual *participates* as a species-being (*Gattungsmensch*) in the dignity of humankind (*Menschengattung*).<sup>3</sup>

Pointing in the same direction are three further peculiarities in Kant’s thought: First, his idea that human beings have duties to themselves, because as members of the human species they are obliged to show respect for humanity as such (Kant 1797, AA VI, pp. 417 ff.). Second, his claim that the moral law is binding not only for human beings but for all rational beings (for example, even for angels)—though not as an “ought,” but as a pure “will,” since such beings already possess a holy will (Kant 1785, AA IV, p. 414). Third, his idea that humans are not obliged to obey God, but only to follow what their own reason commands them to do. Kant traces the traditional, opposing view of religious thought back to a conceptual ambiguity (“amphiboly”), which leads to the categorical confusion of “mistaking one’s duty in relation to other beings for a duty toward those beings” (Kant 1797, AA VI, p. 442, emphasis in the original). See also Kant (1781/1787, AA IV, pp. 214 ff.) for further discussion.

(3) On the basis of these clarifications, we can now proceed to correct a second misinterpretation: it is a profound misunderstanding of Kant’s moral philosophy to assume that it is *per se* incompatible with self-interest and that it always demands from a moral person painful sacrifices or even the renunciation of self-interest.

I refer here to the following statements by Svanberg and Svanberg (2021):

- “According to Kant, morality is not to help us become happy; our happiness is incompatible with morality” (p. 1736).
- “How do we know whether we are acting from duty? How do we know that we are doing the right thing for the right (self-denying) reason? The best clue is the experience of pain” (p. 1738).
- “Kant supplies examples showing that when it pains us to do our duties, our actions probably have ‘moral worth.’ ... For Kant, ethics generally clashes with the wants, likings, preferences and inclinations of the self—the sum of which is ‘happiness.’ Thus, there is a dichotomy between the duties of morality and the interests of our ‘beloved self.’ For Kant, and duty ethics in general,

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<sup>3</sup> Human dignity is both a right and a duty. The standard conception of recognition reciprocity typically starts with the individual and universalizes from there. This can be observed in the various forms of the Golden Rule, which—whether in its positive or negative formulations—follow the logic: as you do unto me, so I will do unto you. Here, the duty is derived from the right. In contrast, Kant proceeds in the opposite direction. He derives the right from the duty. It is only because I am—by reason—obligated to recognize the dignity of other human beings in general (that is, as the dignity of the human species), that I myself can claim a right to human dignity. Kant does not proceed from the individual to the collective, but from the collective to the individual—not from the particular to the universal, but from the universal to the particular. Put differently, for Kant, the *universality* of human rights does not rest on a process of *universalization* from the individual, but rather on a process of *individualization* from the species as a whole. The right to recognition results from the primacy of the duty to recognize.

there is no room for the wants, desires, preferences, interests, or happiness of 'the beloved self.' That is, there is no room for egoism." (pp. 1738 f.)

In my view, these statements are based on misunderstandings. An important source of these misunderstandings lies in miscontextualizing certain statements by Kant. Yet the matter can easily be clarified once one considers the problem Kant intended to address.

After specifying the *form* of pure practical reason by means of the categorical imperative in the Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals, Kant's concern in the Critique of Practical Reason was to demonstrate the *existence* of this form—in other words, to counter the objection that, with the categorical imperative, he had merely posited a utopian standard. If this objection were correct, it would inevitably follow that Kant's moral philosophy would not lead to self-liberation but to self-overburdening. It would thereby deprive the idea of human dignity of its argumentative basis and, in turn, amount to an active impairment of that dignity, because the normative overburdening of human beings would subject them to a new heteronomy. Instead of strengthening human autonomy, it would weaken it. Kant thus addresses here a problem that, from his point of view, is of the utmost importance.

In attempting to solve this problem, Kant—as a shrewd psychologist—finds himself confronted with enormous difficulties. He is well aware of the human tendency to deceive not only others but also oneself. For this reason, Kant is skeptical as to whether individual self-reports about moral motivation can be trusted at face value. Even authentic self-reports could be mistaken. This undermines any *empirical* proof of the *existence* of the categorical imperative. Consequently, in the Critique of Practical Reason Kant feels compelled to develop complex transcendental-philosophical considerations in order to render the existence of the categorical imperative at least *plausible*—that is, to show that it is not *impossible to think*. The *substantive* determinations of morality on which Svanberg and Svanberg (2021) rely, however, occur only later in the Metaphysics of Morals.

If one looks here, one quickly finds evidence. At the very beginning of the Doctrine of Virtue, for example, Kant identifies two ends that are at the same time duties—and thus satisfy the form of the categorical imperative. These are one's own perfection and the happiness of others. Kant (1797; AA VI, p. 385, emphasis in the original) writes about them:

"One cannot exchange these for one another and make one's own happiness, on the one hand, and the perfection of others, on the other hand, into ends that, in themselves, would be duties of the same person."

He justifies this as follows (p. 386, emphasis in the original):

"For one's own happiness is an end that indeed all human beings (by virtue of the impulse of their nature) have; yet this end can never be regarded as a duty without contradicting itself. What everyone unavoidably already wills of his own accord does not fall under the concept of duty; for duty is a necessitation to an end that is taken up reluctantly. It is thus self-contradictory to say that one is obligated to promote one's own happiness with all one's powers."

The point is clear: Kant fully acknowledges that all human beings are imbued with the pursuit of their own interest and thereby strive for individual happiness. His only point is that this empirically given striving is not suitable to serve as the supreme principle of morality, because that principle depends on the achievement of reason in conceiving the *highest end* as *duty*. Kant (1797; AA VI, p. 387) states this explicitly:

"Happiness—that is, contentment with one's state insofar as one is certain of its continuation—is something that it is unavoidable for human nature to wish for and to seek; but for precisely this reason it is also not an end that is at the same time a duty."

Kant does not conceptualize the relationship between the *maxim* of moral action and the *natural drive* for the pursuit of happiness simply as an opposition—as if the task of morality were to make human beings unhappy, to eradicate their self-interest, or to oblige them to endless sacrifices. Such rigorism is utterly foreign to Kant. Nor, on the other hand, does Kant simply postulate a harmony, as if the task of morality were to make human beings happy. Rather, Kant introduces the following differentiation: the task of morality is to make human beings *worthy* of happiness.

Interestingly, this conceptualization was already clear to Kant even before he elaborated his moral-philosophical writings. Toward the end of the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant writes (1781/1787; AA III, pp. 527 f., emphasis in the original):

“Happiness is the satisfaction of all our inclinations ... The practical law that takes its determining ground from happiness I call pragmatic (a rule of prudence); but that law which, if there is such a thing, has nothing as its determining ground except the worthiness to be happy, I call moral (the moral law). The former advises what one is to do if one wishes to partake of happiness; the latter commands how one is to behave in order to become worthy of happiness. The former is based on empirical principles ... The latter abstracts from inclinations and the natural means of satisfying them, and considers only the freedom of a rational being in general and the necessary conditions under which it alone can be consistent with the distribution of happiness in accordance with principles, and it can therefore rest, at least, on mere ideas of pure reason and be cognized a priori.”

Here one also finds a highly revealing formulation in which Kant describes how he envisions the ideal. He speaks of a “system of morality rewarding itself” (1781/1787; AA III, p. 525). Such a system can be conceived only if one abstracts from the inclinations that stand in the way of morality as obstacles. Under real-world conditions, however, it cannot be assumed that it would be possible actually to realize “such a system of happiness proportionately connected with morality” (1781/1787; AA III, p. 525). Under real-world conditions, therefore, morality cannot guarantee to make human beings *happy*. It can only aim to make them *worthy* of happiness.

Svanberg and Svanberg (2021) base their interpretation of Kant on other passages. They draw on examples that Kant discusses in the Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals. Yet in these examples Kant’s concern is not primarily with the *content* of the categorical imperative but solely with its *form* and its plausible *existence*.

Kant deliberately *constructs* his examples so as to illustrate the distinction between acting *in accordance with* duty and acting *from* duty. For this purpose, he adopts the methodological procedure of stepwise subtracting self-interested motivational factors. In this way he arrives at extreme cases that suggest the conclusion that the action was performed *from* duty and not merely *in accordance with* duty, because—*by design*—it is connected with individual disadvantages.

Svanberg and Svanberg (2021), however, confuse the construction of extreme examples—meant to illustrate a distinction—with Kant’s substantive account of morality. In short, they conflate the constructed *exceptional case* with the empirically prevailing *regular case*. For as the regular case, Kant fully assumes that moral action involves instincts and inclinations that are present simultaneously with the maxim of morality. What ultimately matters is that self-obligation retains its *status* as the *sole cause of moral action*, even though additional motives may contribute to motivating the agent to carry it out.

Perhaps the clarification at stake can best be put as follows: In his examples, Kant *subtracts* self-interested motives in order to highlight the *form* of the maxim. But with regard to the *substantive* determination of moral action, he in fact adopts an *additive*

model: It does no harm if self-interested motives accompany the maxim and support moral action.

The interpretation put forward by Svanberg and Svanberg (2021) amounts to viewing morality and prudence as incompatible opposites. This, however, runs directly counter to Kant's theoretical intention. Kant's concern is rather to think both together in a coherentist way. For him, the two are mutually dependent on each other—yet with a certain hierarchy in thought. Kant (1781/1787; AA III, pp. 527 f., emphasis in the original) explains this as follows:

“Happiness alone is by far not the complete good for our reason. ... Morality alone, along with the mere *worthiness* to be happy, is also still far from the complete good. ... [I]n the practical idea, both elements [namely, happiness and the mere worthiness to be happy; IP] are essentially connected—though in such a way that the moral disposition, as the condition, makes the share in happiness possible, and not conversely that the prospect of happiness first makes the moral disposition possible.”

As for the question raised by Svanberg and Svanberg (2021) of whether, according to Kant, it is immoral to pursue one's own interest, to engage successfully in business, and to earn money, two quotations may suffice in conclusion to provide a well-founded reply: namely, that Kant in fact held almost exactly the opposite view.

The first quotation is taken from the *Metaphysics of Morals*. There Kant writes (1797; AA VI, p. 388, emphasis in the original):

“Hardship, pain, and deprivation are great temptations to the transgression of one's duty. Prosperity, strength, health, and well-being in general, which counteract that influence, can therefore also, it seems, be regarded as ends that are at the same time duties—namely, to promote one's own happiness and not to direct it solely to others. Yet in that case happiness is not the end; rather, it is the morality of the subject that is the end, from which obstacles are to be removed, while happiness is merely the permitted means. No one else has a right to demand of me the sacrifice of my non-immoral ends. To seek prosperity for its own sake is not directly a duty, but indirectly it can very well be one—namely, to avert poverty as a great temptation to vice. In that case, however, it is not my happiness but my morality whose integrity I am to preserve as my end and at the same time as my duty.”

The second quotation is taken from his essay *On the Common Saying*. It is Kant's rebuttal of the accusations made by his contemporary, the philosopher Christian Garve—accusations that in substance correspond exactly to the interpretation which Svanberg and Svanberg (2021), interestingly enough, do not reproach Kant with, but rather ascribe to him approvingly. How times change! In any case, Kant writes (1793b; AA VIII, pp. 278 f.):

“I had initially presented morality as an introduction to a science that teaches not how we are to become happy but how we are to become worthy of happiness. In doing so I had not neglected to note that this does not imply that a human being, when it comes to the fulfillment of duty, should renounce his natural end, happiness—for he cannot do that. ... Garve now expresses my thesis as follows: ‘I had claimed that the observance of the moral law, entirely without regard to happiness, is the sole ultimate end for human beings, since it must be regarded as the sole end of the Creator.’ (According to my theory, neither the morality of human beings by itself nor happiness by itself, but rather the highest possible good in the world—which consists in the union and harmony of both—is the sole end of the Creator.)”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A further observation may be permitted here. Even the pre-critical Kant already had a high regard for self-interest. In his 1764 work *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* one finds a passage so interesting that it deserves to be quoted here (Kant 1764; AA II, p. 227, emphasis in the original): “Those who steadfastly keep their dearest self before their eyes as the sole point of reference for their endeavors, and who seek to make *self-interest* the great axis around which everything turns, are the *most numerous*—and nothing could be more advantageous. For these are the most industrious, orderly, and prudent; they give structure and stability to the whole, and even without intending it they become beneficial to the community, providing for necessary needs and laying the foundation upon which more refined souls can spread

To summarize my argument, I conclude that parts of the literature fundamentally misunderstand Kant. Certainly, Kant was a rigorous thinker. But his rigorism is theoretical, not practical: it concerns thinking, not acting. This crucial distinction is occasionally overlooked.

I would like briefly to explain the reason for this confusion and to identify the resulting misunderstanding as a category mistake. Kant's philosophy—his mode of ordering thought—can be described not only as a form of “compartmentalization” but also as a form of “purification.” After all, he is concerned with “pure” reason. Yet Kant's purification applies solely to thinking, not to acting. The point of *thinking*, for him, is to ground morality—which appears to us as duty, as obligation—in a law that reason gives to itself and that *every* rational being can will, at any time and in any place. Kant ties human dignity precisely to this *form* of thinking, which can be justified as universal only if the thinking on which it rests is itself universal. And it is for this very reason that Kant *purifies* practical reason of everything empirical, so that as pure reason it can achieve the intellectual accomplishment Kant intends: to think the supreme principle of morality as a moral law in an *absolutely general way*—independent of time, place, and all associated contingencies. Kant's purification thus amounts to the idea that pure practical reason generates the supreme principle of morality as the moral law *entirely from within itself*—and from *nothing else*, because any “something else” would stand in the way of precisely that universality of thought to which Kant ties human dignity.

Metaphorically speaking, in Kant the purity of pure practical reason plays a role in grounding human dignity similar to the role that the purity of Maria's Immaculate Conception plays in Christianity for recognizing the Son of God. In both cases, purity serves to mark a very special difference in status.

If, however, transcendental-philosophical purification is—contrary to Kant—applied to action, as if it were not the thinking of pure practical reason but the everyday actions of human beings that had to be cleansed of all empirical motives, this inevitably results in norms of action whose absurdity lies in being both *utopian* and *rigoristic* at the same time, with extremely inhumane *consequences*. This was the reason why contemporaries of Kant such as Christian Garve and Friedrich Schiller believed they had to criticize his moral philosophy—prompting Kant to clarify that the utopianism and rigorism attributed to him were, in fact, foreign to his thinking.

Against this background, one can only be *doubly* astonished when contemporary scholars promote an interpretation of Kant that Kant himself had already rejected: *first*, astonished that this easily avoidable misunderstanding is not in fact avoided—which suggests that at least parts of today's academic world have lost the ability to read classical texts with understanding; and *second*, astonished that this absurd interpretation of Kant is not used as an argument against him but, on the contrary, that Kant's authority is invoked as an argument in favor of this absurdity—which suggests that at least parts of today's academic world have lost their practical judgment.

(4) We are now well prepared to take a closer look at the two main points made by Svanberg and Svanberg (2021). They are as follows:

1. The pursuit of self-interest is incompatible with acting *from* duty and, as a result, lacks moral worth.

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beauty and harmony.” This ‘invisible-hand’ line of argument is of *striking* importance for Kant's *entire* body of work.

2. Only actions involving the *renunciation of self-interest* possess moral worth.

From an ordonomic perspective, the following clarifications can now be made:

1. It is correct that:
  - a. The pursuit of self-interest as such can indeed be very valuable in Kant's view, but it does not have *moral* worth for him, because he ties this concept categorically and rigorously to the maxim of the good will.
  - b. However, the pursuit of self-interest is by no means incompatible with acting *from* duty; rather, it is quite permissible as an admixture and—explicitly stated by Kant himself—even desirable.
2. It is also correct that:
  - a. Actions involving the *renunciation of self-interest* can, according to Kant, have moral worth if they are oriented toward the maxim of the good will.
  - b. Yet the renunciation of self-interest is, for Kant, neither *sufficient* nor *necessary* for the moral worth of an action.

Properly understood, the misunderstandings to be corrected here result from the fact that Svanberg and Svanberg (2021) have misinterpreted Kant's construction of extreme examples. They take these examples as substantive determinations of moral action, even though Kant intended them merely to illustrate the *form* of what he regarded as the decisive *maxim* of morality and to make its *existence* plausible.

Looking at the history of reception, one might say that Kant would perhaps have done better not to introduce his formulations of the categorical imperative with "Act so," but rather with "Think so."

(5) By way of conclusion, I would like to add one further observation. It concerns the significance of Immanuel Kant for the literature on business ethics. For more than fifty years, this literature has been preoccupied with a newspaper article that Milton Friedman wrote for the *New York Times Magazine*. What is often overlooked is that Friedman's argument against arbitrary management decisions to assume social responsibility closely parallels the argument Kant developed in his famous essay on Enlightenment—perhaps the best-known of his shorter writings—where he introduced the distinction between the private and the public use of reason.<sup>5</sup>

Kant's terminology requires some explanation. For him, the private use of reason refers to thinking and acting, whereas the public use of reason refers to thinking and communicating (Pies 2023, pp. 1–5). Kant's argument is as follows: when one is bound by contractual relationships that entail fiduciary duties, concern for the common good does not entitle one arbitrarily to violate these duties, since doing so would ultimately lead to social disorder and thereby undermine the very common good one seeks to promote. However, if it is possible to address the public "without thereby interfering with the conduct of business" (Kant 1784a; AA VIII, p. 37), then one must not be denied the right to

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<sup>5</sup> See Friedman (1970). It is also often overlooked that Friedman (1962/1982, pp. 112 ff.) applies his argument about the fiduciary duty of agents toward their principals not only to managers, who are accountable to the owners of the company, but also to union leaders, who are accountable to their members. For both alike, it cannot be demanded that they forgo price increases or wage increases for the sake of the common good—for instance, to combat inflation. From Friedman's perspective, because inflation is a systemic problem, it is the task of the state to combat it by means of monetary policy. Against this background, Friedman allows for only *one* form of social responsibility: that of *all* citizens for a functional framework of rules.

express one's own opinion. Kant's bottom line is this: freedom of action (= private use of reason) is limited, whereas freedom of speech (= public use of reason) is unlimited.

Thus, in this respect too, it is not order ethics or ordonomics that stand in contradiction to Kant, but rather all those who issue moral appeals without taking into account the functional principles of modern society.

### 3. *Ordonomics Builds on Two Inspirations by Immanuel Kant*

I consider Immanuel Kant to be one of the greatest philosophers of all time. Yet my esteem for him relates less to his moral philosophy than to his political philosophy and, in connection with that, to his philosophy of history and his methodological understanding of theory, his thought architecture. With regard to his moral philosophy, I am inclined to agree with Friedrich Nietzsche's aphoristic verdict. In *The Gay Science* (1888/1954; Book III, Aphorism 193, emphasis in the original), Nietzsche writes:

"Kant's joke. — Kant wanted, in a way that would shock 'everybody,' to prove that 'everybody' was right — that was the hidden joke of this soul. He wrote against the scholars in favor of the popular prejudice, but for scholars and not for the people."

My high regard for Kant's political philosophy is in very broad agreement with Hannah Arendt. She contrasts Kant with Plato and Heidegger, whom she accused of having an affinity for tyranny—something utterly foreign to Kant. Toward the end of her speech on the occasion of Heidegger's 80th birthday (1969/1971), Arendt writes:

„We who wish to honor the thinkers ... can hardly help finding it striking and perhaps exasperating that Plato and Heidegger, when they entered into human affairs, turned to tyrants and Führers. This should be imputed not just to the circumstances of the times and even less to preformed character, but rather to what the French call a *déformation professionnelle*. For the attraction to the tyrannical can be demonstrated theoretically in many of the great thinkers (Kant is the great exception).“<sup>6</sup>

I would now like to identify two sources of inspiration that the ordonomic research program owes to Kant's political philosophy in the broader sense.

(1) Much as in Thomas Hobbes, one also finds in Immanuel Kant a highly illuminating conception of how normative ideas can be realized in processes of societal learning through institutional implementation. Illustrative material for this can be found in his 1795 essay *Toward Perpetual Peace*.

There we find a famous passage that strongly recalls Hobbes's idea of how human beings emerge from a state of anarchy in which they encounter one another like wolves (see Hobbes 1642/1651 [1841]: p. ii). Kant uses a somewhat different image, but the logic remains the same: The point is a constitution that transforms conflicting private interests into a public order and precisely thereby pacifies the conflict of interests. The underlying idea is that of a constitutionally achieved equilibrium. Kant writes (1795; AA VIII, pp. 366 f.):

"The problem of establishing a state is, hard as it may sound, solvable even for a nation of devils (if only they have understanding), and it can be stated as follows: 'To order a multitude of rational beings, all of whom demand universal laws for their preservation yet each of whom is secretly inclined to exempt himself from them, in such a way and to organize their constitution so that, although in their

<sup>6</sup> It is a testament to Kant's philosophical discernment that he explicitly distanced himself from Plato on precisely this contested point. Kant (1795; AA VIII, p. 369): "That kings should philosophize, or that philosophers should become kings, is not to be expected, and indeed not to be wished for; for the possession of power inevitably corrupts the free judgment of reason." – For a broader perspective on Kant, see Arendt (1982/1998). For a broader perspective on Arendt, see Pies (2011/2022).



private attitudes they oppose one another, they nevertheless so check each other that in their public conduct the result is the same as if they had no such evil dispositions.’ Such a problem must be soluble. For what is at issue is not the moral improvement of human beings, but only the mechanism of nature—namely, how one can make use of it in human beings in order to direct the conflict of their antagonistic dispositions in such a way that they compel one another to submit to coercive laws and thereby must bring about a condition of peace in which laws have force. One can see this even in the actually existing, still very imperfectly organized states, which in their outward conduct already approximate very closely to what the idea of right prescribes, even though their inner morality is certainly not the cause of this (for it is also not from inner morality that a good constitution is to be expected, but rather conversely from the latter that a good moral formation of a people is first to be hoped for). Thus the mechanism of nature, through self-interested inclinations that naturally also oppose one another externally, can be used by reason as a means to give scope to its own end, the legal prescription, and thereby—so far as depends on the state itself—to promote and secure both internal and external peace.”<sup>7</sup>

Reflecting on Kant’s theory architecture, three points are of particular interest from an ordonomic perspective.

First, Kant’s political philosophy duplicates the dialectic of freedom and coercion familiar from his moral philosophy. Consequently, in Kant there is an *analogy* between moral autonomy and political autonomy. *Moral* autonomy is based on the idea of an *individual self-legislation* of pure practical reason, while *political* autonomy is based on the idea of a *collective self-legislation* of a community of free citizens who mutually impose upon themselves a constitutional order.

Second, Kant’s political philosophy duplicates the familiar prioritization—found also in his moral philosophy—of the concept of the law over the concept of the good. I will briefly explain this point with reference to a longer passage from his Critique of Practical Reason (1788; AA V, pp. 62–65).

Here Kant draws attention to the “paradox of method in a critique of practical reason” (p. 62). The issue is as follows: In Kant’s view, there are two ways of doing moral philosophy—one obvious and one that at first seems paradoxical. The obvious way is to start from a concept of the good and add the concept of law afterward. The way that initially seems paradoxical, or at least strange, is to proceed in precisely the opposite manner: to begin with the concept of law and add the idea of the good only afterward. According to Kant, all moral philosophy prior to him had taken the first path, thereby incurring serious disadvantages.

His argument is this: If, as seems natural for a philosophy of morals, one begins with the concept of the good, one thereby reduces morality to “sensibility” (p. 62). This subordinates practical reason to “heteronomy” (pp. 64–65). In Kant’s view, this constitutes the fundamental error of all moral philosophy before him. It is precisely at this strategic theoretical juncture that he locates the methodological source of “all aberrations of philosophers with regard to the supreme principle of morality” (p. 64).

The decisive feature of his critical moral philosophy now consists in reversing the customary procedure—so to speak, putting it on its feet rather than leaving it on its head: Kant begins with the concept of law and then infers from the *moral law* to the concept of the good. By interpreting *legislation* as *self-legislation*, he secures the moral *autonomy* of

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<sup>7</sup> Kant’s resolution of the tension between a moral politician and a political moralist also echoes Hobbes. In Hobbes (1651/1839; p. 145), there is a duty to peace—but not in action (in foro externo), rather in thought (in foro interno). Literally translated, Hobbes is concerned with *peacefulness*, that is, the publically communicated *willingness* to pursue peace. Analogously, Kant posits a duty for the moral politician to remedy constitutional deficits, but again not through direct action, rather in thought—as a *maxim*. See explicitly Kant (1795; AA VIII, p. 372).

*pure* practical reason—a feature that, in his view, all traditional moral philosophies before him had failed to achieve.

Why this is of such paramount importance from his perspective can already be gleaned—albeit only in hints—from the closing pages of the Critique of Pure Reason, written under the conditions of Prussian censorship. There Kant writes (1781/1787; A III, p. 531):

“So far as practical reason has the right to guide us, we shall not regard actions as obligatory because they are commands of God; rather, we shall regard them as divine commands because we are inwardly obligated to them.”

The strategic theoretical point is thus as follows: By giving priority to the concept of law over the concept of the good, Kant opens up the option of inferring *autonomy* from *legislation* understood as rational *self-legislation*—and of thereby closely linking the ideas of individual *freedom* and human *dignity*.

The same prioritization of the concept of law over the concept of the good can also be found in Kant’s political philosophy, where he does not—though this would seem obvious—make better people a precondition for better laws, but rather, paradoxically and at least seemingly counter-intuitively, ascribes to better laws the effect of producing better people.

That this has an affinity with ordonomics, which likewise seeks to advance processes of societal learning not by way of individual ethics but by way of *order ethics*—that is, through innovative ideas for the implementation of functional governance structures (see Pies 2025)—should be obvious and needs no further elaboration here. What should by now be clear, however, is why I am reluctant to accept Kant as an objection to ordonomic theory building without reply, and why I believe I can in fact counter such an objection with very good reasons.

The third point of interest from an ordonomic perspective is perhaps less obvious, yet it is by no means unimportant. What is at issue?

One should ask not only, as Kant himself does, about the relationship between morality and politics, but also about the relationship between moral philosophy and political philosophy in Kant. My view is as follows: the chronology of his writings is misleading. It is far easier to understand Kant’s moral philosophy from the vantage point of his political philosophy than vice versa. This, I believe, explains the immense difficulties of reception that have accumulated in the secondary and tertiary literature—difficulties to which essays such as that of Svanberg and Svanberg (2021) bear eloquent, if unintended, witness.

To state the point as a thesis: The prioritization of law over morality—that which John Rawls (1971, p. 31 n. 16; 1988), adapting Kant, refers to as “the priority of the right over the good”—is found not only within Kant’s moral philosophy, especially in his Critique of Practical Reason, and not only within his political philosophy, especially in Toward Perpetual Peace, but, above all, in his oeuvre as a whole: as the priority of political philosophy over moral philosophy.

(2) To at least begin to substantiate this thesis, I now turn to the second source of inspiration that ordonomics draws from Immanuel Kant. This inspiration concerns the transcendental-philosophical method—that is, in short, the guiding research motto: *How must I conceive of a problem in order to make it solvable?*

My approach is as follows: Rather than examining Kant's entire oeuvre, I focus on a single essay, namely his 1784 published *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (Kant 1784b; AA VIII, pp. 15–32). Here Kant applies *teleology* as a *regulative idea* in exemplary fashion—just as he would later make explicit, a few years on, in his (in this respect often misunderstood) *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. There, he classifies the doctrine of purposiveness or *teleology* that he defends as a “*regulative principle*” (1790; AA V, p. 361), explicitly assigning it the status of a *heuristic* rather than that of an empirical assumption.

Having published his *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, Kant in 1784 was anything but lacking in self-confidence. On the contrary, he ascribes truly epoch-making significance to the public emergence of his transcendental philosophy, which he develops as a *philosophy of freedom*. This extraordinary self-confidence is evident already in the way he opens the essay with a veritable drumroll, claiming that with this brief, highly condensed contribution to social theory—Kant uses the expression “a universal history with a cosmopolitan purpose”—he aims to achieve for social theory what Kepler and Newton *together* had achieved for the natural sciences: namely, to discern an empirical pattern and then to explain this lawful pattern causally, that is, by tracing it back to natural causes (see Kant 1784b; AA VIII, p. 18).

Kant fulfills this striking announcement with nine annotated propositions. These answer a question that is methodologically clearly transcendental-philosophical and teleological in nature: How must we conceive of human history so that this way of thinking, first, imparts *meaning* to human history and, second, as thinking within the very history thus conceived, can itself contribute to *supporting* this meaning? His answer is this: human history is to be conceived as a *political learning process* that inherently tends toward a constitutionalized world society—peacefully and federatively organized through law.

Kant's concern here is with the reflectively self-referential purposiveness of a theoretical strategy of thinking that is deliberately designed to have constructivist—and thereby even constructive—practical effects: a form of thinking worked through with utmost consistency, examining how it affects its own subject matter and how, precisely thereby, it can best promote it intellectually. It is for this reason that Kant quite deliberately publishes his *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*—which is completely transparent about its own *purposiveness*. This form of teleology is about *making meaning* in a way that both makes *sense* and knows that it *makes sense*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> As a side note: Niklas Luhmann—referring to George Spencer-Brown's calculus of forms—would speak here of a *re-entry*: How must a theory of society be conceived in order for it to become practically effective *within* the very society *for which* it is formulated? This is analogous to Thomas Hobbes, whose question was: How must a *theory of concluding peace* be conceived in order for its public reception actually to promote the *practice of concluding peace*? And it is, of course, analogous to John Rawls, whose question was: How must a theory of justice be conceived so that its reception assists common sense in making the *categorical shift* from everyday judgments of justice—focused on individual actions and acting individuals—to judgments of justice that concern the *basic structure of societal institutions*? In addition, there is an analogy to ordonomics, whose analyses of the relation between social structure and semantics ultimately culminate in the question of ideative ethics: How must a scientific theory of discourse failure be methodologically designed so that—precisely as *science*, i.e., without controversial value judgments—it can help to constructively (or constructivistically) advance *societal learning processes*, not only by providing public arguments for *anamnesis* and *diagnosis* but also for *therapy*? In this sense, ordonomics understands itself as a societally relevant *grammar of argumentation*, that is, as a methodological approach to the heuristic guidance of *orthogonal positionings*.

I will now briefly go through the nine sentences in order to reconstruct Kant's line of argument, both in content and in method.

Sentence 1: Kant begins with the transcendental-philosophical idea that the "guiding thread of reason" for human history, which he announced at the outset, *presupposes* attributing an intention to nature.

Sentence 2: Kant does not, however, relate this intention of nature to the individual human being but rather to humanity as a species. He defines it as follows: Nature's purpose is that humankind gradually bring to full development, over time, its natural disposition for the use of reason.

Sentence 3: Considered as a species, the human being is a deficient creature that can survive only through the exercise of its own rational capacities—in contrast to animals, which can survive on the basis of their instincts alone.

Sentence 4: Nature employs a process of antagonistic cooperation to realize its intention. In this context, Kant coins his famous phrase "the unsocial sociability of men." Human history thus appears as a process of ever-new conflicts and their resolutions.

Sentence 5: The telos of this process—"the highest purpose of nature for the human race"—Kant defines as a society constituted in freedom.

Sentence 6: This goal, set for humankind by nature, can never be fully achieved under real-world conditions but only approximated, for "from such crooked timber as humankind is made, nothing entirely straight can be built."

Sentence 7: Making matters more difficult, a society constituted in freedom depends not only on a legal and peaceful order within (among individual citizens) but also on such an order without (among states).

Sentence 8: Kant summarizes his argument so far by succinctly stating that it is indeed *possible* to think as he has just been thinking. He writes: "One can regard the history of the human race ... as the realization of a hidden plan of nature," a plan defined as nature's intention to establish a *constitutional legal order* both *internally* and *externally*—an order that in turn makes it possible for human beings living under it to develop ever more fully, over time, their natural capacity for the use of reason, thereby continually perfecting themselves as world citizens within a world society. Kant's teleology thus envisions a moderate, non-rigorous, non-perfectionist, and ultimately processual form of self-improvement, conceived as a regulative idea of an open-ended, categorically infinite process of human self-perfection. Put differently: For Kant there can be no end of history. He conceives human history as an open-ended process of ever-better realization of reason and freedom.

Given this background, Sentence 9 no longer requires a separate interpretation but only needs to be quoted. It reads (Kant 1784b; AA VIII, p. 29, emphasis added):

"A philosophical attempt to work out a universal history of the world in accordance with a plan of nature aimed at the perfect civic union of the human race must be regarded as possible and *as itself conducive to this intention of nature*."

From an ordonomic point of view, two aspects of Kant's line of argument are of particular importance: one substantive and one methodological.

Substantively, what is first of interest is how Kant—ultimately with truly epoch-making impact, as one may note by thinking of the philosophers Hegel and Marx who followed him—changes the perspective on conflicts.

Conflicts no longer appear *merely* as *evils* to be overcome. Rather, they are now *also* cast in a *positive* light: they are, as it were, the driving force that propels the historical process forward. The improvements that Kant's progress narrative invites us to welcome—both those already achieved and those yet to be realized—are in fact inconceivable without the *conflicts* that underlie them and that call forth their resolution.

This revaluation—indeed, almost elevation—of conflict as the *movens* of history extends, in Kant, even to the *causes* of conflict: to the human *vices* that render human beings, who are dependent on sociability, nonetheless unsociable. One almost gets the impression that Kant is singing a hymn of praise to ambition, the lust for power, and avarice. As he writes (1784b; AA VIII, p. 21):

“Thanks, then, to nature for discord, for envious rivalry, for the insatiable desire to possess or to rule! Without them all excellent natural predispositions in humankind would forever lie dormant and undeveloped.”

In reality, however, Kant's aim here is simply to mark a change of perspective: The vices are normatively ambivalent because the “qualities of unsociability, which in themselves are certainly not lovable” (p. 21), set in motion—and keep in motion—a process in the course of which “the crude natural predisposition to moral discrimination” (ultimately Kant's categorical imperative) can “finally transform society into a *moral* whole” (p. 21, emphasis in the original).

To me one thing is certain: Ordonomics need not accept *this* Kant as a counter-model. Such reproaches should not remain unanswered, because they rest on a fundamental misunderstanding of Kant's approach and direction of thought.

Ordonomics, therefore, needs not accept Kant as a counter-model. Such objections rest on a fundamental misunderstanding of his approach. Kant was not the rigoristic individual ethicist he is often made out to be, but a profound social theorist who understood that morality depends on law and that societal learning processes are needed to develop both legal and moral order as rational self-legislation. For Kant, thinking in incentives and institutional equilibria was self-evident—unlike for some moralists who, ironically, invoke Kant to reject precisely the institutional mechanisms he saw as essential to channel self-interest toward the common good. Anyone who invokes Kant as an authority against institutional incentive structures thereby misunderstands not only ordonomics but also Kant himself—whose philosophy of freedom was, at its core, a theory of constitutional order.

From a methodological perspective, what is of particular interest to ordonomics is that Kant proves to be an excellent constitutional theorist not only with regard to the *constitution of action* but also with regard to the *constitution of thought*. In ordonomic terminology, Kant is an expert on *social structure* and *semantics*. He is concerned not only with the *institutional constitution* but also, and especially, with the *ideational constitution* of humanity and its public use of reason—more precisely, with the *intellectual constitution(alization) of thinking itself*. For Kant, this takes the form of a thoroughly reflected *purposiveness*. His *teleology* is therefore not a naïve ontology of nature, as is sometimes assumed, but rather the *regulative idea of constructivist theory building*—one that subjects its own purposiveness, as a philosophical contribution to the progressive development of cosmopolitanism, to renewed methodological self-reflection.

Kant thinks *as* he does *because* he believes that his way of thinking—more than *any* alternative mode of thought—shows humanity how it can continue its history as a process of emancipation and, in this sense, take its fate into its own hands. Kant's philosophy of

reason conceives of the moral and political autonomy of human beings as *freedom*—and aims, precisely by publicly thinking this very thought, to contribute modestly yet meaningfully to human *liberation*. His theory of Enlightenment actively practices enlightenment and *is* thus already a part of the very practice whose theory it is.

To substantiate this interpretation—which has been an important source of inspiration for the ordonomic research program—two quotations from Kant may serve in conclusion.

The first quotation comes from Kant’s commentary on the eighth proposition, where he writes (p. 27, emphasis in the original):

“One sees that philosophy too may have its *chiliasm*—but such a chiliasm whose realization its very idea, however remotely, can itself promote, and which is therefore anything but enthusiastic delusion.”

The second quotation comes from Kant’s commentary on the ninth proposition, where he rejects alternative conceptions of human history that ultimately defer all hope to the *here-after*. He stresses that his own narrative of progress justifies hopes for *this* world and at the very least “opens up a comforting prospect for the future” (p. 30). He then adds a passage that, as I would suggest, deserves the most careful consideration—especially the word which I have deliberately italicized (p. 30, emphasis added):

“Such a justification of nature—or better, of providence—is no insignificant ground for *choosing* a particular standpoint for viewing the world.”

To summarize this final point in my own words: Kant knows exactly what he is doing here. His concern is to orient himself—and us—in thinking. But such orientation *in* thought can be achieved only *through* thinking itself, which requires self-reflection. By reflecting on his own thinking, Kant formulates an idea of history that becomes part of the very history it envisions—and thereby aims to have epochal impact. Kant’s teleology consists in positing a “plan of nature” as a heuristic fiction in order to craft a narrative of progress that can, within the very historical process it depicts, help shape both the direction and the pace of a rational development toward law and, ultimately, toward morality. It is precisely this carefully designed strategy that makes Kant a profound source of methodological inspiration for ordonomics.

### *Summary: Ten Key Propositions*

I have sought to take Immanuel Kant seriously as a classic by examining the fundamental problem his theory addresses. My interpretation: Kant develops his philosophy as an original meta-theory. His key question is: *How must a problem be formulated so that it can be addressed theoretically with a prospect of success?*

I read Kant’s philosophy as a theory of *purposive theory-building*. Or, in Kant’s own terminology: His transcendental philosophy is designed to employ *teleology as a regulative idea*. His writings revolve in a kind of continuous loop around the systematic self-reflection of the question: *How expedient is it if I think in the way I am thinking?*

This perspective on Kant’s work leads to ten substantive interpretative propositions.

1. *Primacy of human dignity*: Kant’s moral philosophy aims to ground the dignity of human beings. To this end, Kant develops the idea of pure practical reason. Its intellectual achievement consists in casting the highest end of morality into the form of law. In this way, the notion of duty—linked to the demand of obligation—

is traced back to *willing*, because the rational person, through pure practical reason, gives herself the moral law. Kant interprets this *self*-legislation as *autonomy* and then derives the universality of human dignity from the universality of pure practical reason.

2. *Primacy of thinking*: Kant's moral philosophy concerns not primarily action but thinking. The purification of practical reason aims for it to determine the categorical imperative *purely from itself*—just via *thinking*, free from all sensory and empirical factors. The categorical imperative itself refers not to acting but to the *maxim* of action—that is, to thinking.
3. *Complementarity of the faculties of reason*: To act morally requires more than pure practical reason. Understanding (knowledge of circumstances) and judgment (weighing ends and means) are also necessary to ensure the expediency of action.
4. *The role of sensibility*: Kant's position as a moral philosopher is as follows: when pure practical reason determines the categorical imperative, empirical considerations play no role and indeed *must* not play any role. Instincts, inclinations, interests, and all contingent factors of time and place are deliberately excluded from the determination of the supreme moral maxim because they would undermine Kant's argument for human dignity, which is supposed to be *universal* rather than contingent. In concrete moral action, however, these empirical factors do play a role—yet only as an accompaniment to the melody set by the categorical imperative. In thinking, sensibility would contaminate morality; action, however, is impossible without sensibility. According to Kant, non-moral motivations—such as self-interest—may accompany moral action, provided that—and this is the decisive point—they do not challenge the *status* of the moral maxim as the *decisive motive*.
5. *Moral philosophy versus political philosophy*: Kant's moral philosophy gains clarity and depth when viewed not in isolation but in systematic connection with his political philosophy. This reading offers several advantages. One sees structural analogies—for example, that *moral* autonomy as the *individual* self-legislation of a person parallels *political* autonomy as the *collective* self-legislation of a people. One also sees Kant's conception of normative learning processes. For him, there is a priority of the right over the good and thus a priority of order ethics over individual ethics—precisely in the sense that better people are not the precondition for better institutions; rather, better institutions open the prospect of moral improvement for people.
6. *Priority of the right over the good*: This priority appears in Kant at several levels, even within pure moral philosophy. He calls this the “paradox of method in a critique of practical reason.” Here Kant explains why he deliberately does not proceed from the good to the law but instead from the law to the good. The rejected procedure would lead to heteronomy. The preferred procedure, by contrast, guarantees autonomy and thus human dignity.
7. *Theme*: In terms of content, Kant pursues a *coherence*-oriented philosophy of constitutional thought. The aim is always orientation in thinking: World society must be constituted so that states can coexist peacefully; states must be constituted so that individual spheres of freedom fit together; law and morality must be ordered

so that they are compatible. The faculties of reason—understanding, practical reason, and judgment—must be defined and combined in such a way that, despite their distinction, they represent the unity of reason.

8. *Method*: In terms of approach, Kant engages in *transcendental* philosophy. For the constitutional problems of his order-thinking, this method is consistently appropriate. His quest for coherence always raises the question: How must I think a problem so that it becomes solvable? One might say that Kant's key to success is to solve problems of order transcendental-philosophically by first ordering the order of thought.
9. *Regulative idea*: Teleologically considered, Kant develops *theory for the sake of practice*. His theory of order genuinely seeks to order; his philosophy of enlightenment genuinely seeks to enlighten; his philosophy of freedom genuinely seeks to liberate. His philosophy of the public use of reason already *exemplifies* public reasoning.
10. *Theory design*: From a research-programmatic perspective, these three aspects—content, method, and regulative idea—are systematically connected in Kant's philosophy. They are conceived coherently as follows: Kant wants his philosophy to have social effects. For this purpose, he deliberately tailors it to the intended effects. And then, in repeated self-reflection, he asks how purposively he has conceived the problem of orientation in thought. In this way, Kant's work offers a thoroughly considered and teleologically empowered theory design: Kant thinks practice—but in such a way that his theory finds a place in that practice, even assigning itself that place, and thus can itself become practical. Kant's philosophy of freedom situates itself within a process of public self-enlightenment that it both conceives and influences by conceiving it. His *theory* of orienting oneself in thought not only culminates in the *practice* of orienting oneself in thought; it is already that practice.

These ten key propositions show that Kant is not to be read as a rigid moral utopian but as a systematic thinker concerned with advancing law and morality through processes of public self-enlightenment and with programming them for progress. Kant was no moralist and no friend of mere exhortation; rather, he was an advocate of *order-thinking* and—remarkably early and impressively—the architect of a sophisticated *theory of order* and even a *meta-theory of ordering*. He would have wholeheartedly agreed with the ordonomic maxim: “*Do not blame the players—change the game!*”

Looking forward rather than backward, there are two points—concerning both content and form—that make Kant's work still highly relevant for contemporary theory-building. One is content-related: his idea of the priority of the right over the good assigns institutional incentives a systematic role in moral progress and thus offers constructive points of connection for an order-ethics perspective, as his theory engages with societal learning processes to influence their direction and speed. The other is formal: the way Kant reflects on and deliberately designs his theory so as to think the ideas of moral autonomy, political autonomy, and especially progress advanced through institutionalization in a way that intellectually anticipates and prepares their own realization in reality.

Kant knew exactly what he was doing when he thought, and he had excellent reasons for thinking the way he did. For anyone interested in theory-building—especially in the *construction* of theory—there is much to learn here.



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