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KANT'S SINGULARITY THESIS

by

ROBERT J. VANDERBEEK

Under the Direction of Eric Wilson, PhD

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I defend an interpretation of Kant's Singularity Thesis: the claim that the formulae of the Categorical Imperative are in fact representations of a single, underlying law. I proceed by answering two questions: (1) How should we state the underlying law? And (2) How can we best understand the relationship between the formulae and this law they supposedly represent? My account focuses on the concept of rational agency and how Kant develops it in the *Groundwork*. I will argue that the formulae are three ways of expressing, thinking about, or applying the Categorical Imperative — understood as Kant's statement of the *supreme principle of morality* — corresponding to three features of rational agency.

INDEX WORDS: Kant, Ethics, Singularity, Groundwork

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I. INTRODUCTION

Kant's task in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* is to explain the concept of moral obligation, which he defines as "the necessity of a free action under a categorical imperative" (*MS* 6:222). Obligation (*Verbindlichkeit*) expresses the "moral ought": the idea that a free, rational agent can be *bound* to act in a certain way.¹ For Kant, all obligation is grounded in duty: the representation of an action as necessary by virtue of its conformity to a rational law. In the *Groundwork*, Kant identifies and corroborates of the "supreme principle of morality": that rational law underlying all moral obligation, and the first principle of an *a priori* investigation of morality (what Kant calls a "metaphysics of morals") (*GMS* 4:392). What he arrives at, the Categorical Imperative, is the backbone of his ethics and one of the most important developments in moral philosophy. It expresses basic requirement for a principle to be obligating for a rational agent — for a principle to function as a moral law.

In the second section of the *Groundwork*, *Groundwork II*, Kant derives three further principles — what he calls the "formulae" of the Categorical Imperative: the Formula of Universal Law, FUL (*GMS* 4:421); the Formula of Humanity, FH (*GMS* 4:429); and the Formula of Autonomy, FA (*GMS* 4:434).² These three laws are supposedly only three ways of representing a single law. However, they seem to say fundamentally different things: crudely, "Have universalizable principles!"; "Respect human beings!"; and "Be autonomous!". It is a job of interpreters, then, to reconstruct Kant's answer to the question: *what is the relationship*

¹ *Binden* in German is literally "to bind".

² Kant's readers do not agree on the exact number of formulae, and my selection of three excludes at least two (the Formulae of the Law of Nature and the Formula of the Realm of Kingdom of Ends). My reasons for doing so are beyond the scope of this project. While restricting my analysis to these three formulae does sacrifice *thoroughness*, it should not sacrifice *accuracy* within its limited scope.

between these formulae and the Categorical Imperative they are supposed to express? I take up this task in this paper.

II. THE SINGULARITY THESIS

In this section, I will do three things: (1) present the claim I am analyzing, (2) discuss the problem I aim to address, and (3) forecast my solution.

A. TWO THESES

Kant's own statement of the relationship between the formulae is notoriously difficult to interpret.³ Later in *Groundwork II*, after deriving the formulae, he writes: "the above three ways of representing the principle of morality [the formulae given above] are at the bottom only so many formulae of the very same law, and any one of them of itself unites the other two in it" (*GMS* 4:436). This passage is notoriously opaque. First, Kant seems to describe the relationship between the formulae and the Categorical Imperative in two ways: as "representations" of the principle of morality, and as "only so many formulae" of the "very same law." Second, he introduces the concept of "unity" to describe what appears to be a different relationship — specifically, the relationship between the formulae themselves. Finally, and most problematically, he does not seem to substantiate the aforementioned concepts. We must, then, elucidate the claims he makes here.

We can begin by dissecting the sentence along its logical form — by considering each conjunct individually: "*the above three ways of representing the principle of morality are at the bottom only so many formulae of the very same law*" and "*any one of them of itself unites the*

³ The difficulty in interpreting this particular passage, and the related difficulty of explicating the relationship between the formulae and the categorical imperative, has noted by many scholars. Some statements of this and attempts at resolving it can be found in Timmermann (2007), pp. 109-110; Geiger (2015); Arvan (2013); and Nuyen (1993).

other two in it.” Following Henry Allison, I propose we proceed by considering these as two distinct theses:⁴

The Equivalence Thesis: “Any one of them [the formulae] unites the other two in it”

The Singularity Thesis: “The above three ways of representing the principle of morality are at the bottom only so many formulae of the very same law”

The Equivalence Thesis describes the relationship among the formulae themselves. Roughly, it is the claim that the various formulae determine our moral obligation in the same way — that the application of any one formula in moral appraisal will yield judgements which are replicable by the others (and, in this sense, “unite” them in it).⁵ The Singularity Thesis describes the relationship between the formulae and *the underlying law* (the Categorical Imperative, of which they are formulae). It claims, in brief, that the formulae are three ways of expressing what is really a single law. While three “singular” laws would inevitably produce the same results, the converse does not hold. Thus, while the Singularity Thesis would entail the Equivalence Thesis, the Equivalence Thesis would in no way entail the Singularity Thesis.

While there are many treatments of the Equivalence Thesis found in the literature, the Singularity Thesis is more often overlooked. There are several possible explanations for this. Some readers seem to take equivalence to be either identical to or explanatory of singularity.⁶ Other readers reject Allison’s contention that the passage makes two distinct claims.⁷ Allen

⁴ Allison 2011, 246.

⁵ The literature on the Equivalence Thesis is rich, and there are in fact many ways of interpreting it. A simple “convergence of duties” interpretation is presented, provisionally, for the purpose of this discussion.

⁶ Engstrom (2009) and O’Neil (2014) seem to endorse such a view.

⁷ Timmermann (2007) argues for this.

Wood acknowledges a fundamental difference between equivalence and singularity,⁸ yet still ultimately claims that the formulae form a system of “heterogeneous parts.”⁹ Still more readers seem to simply assume it without giving it critical attention. I do not propose, in this paper, to offer a defense of the Singularity Thesis. What I do propose, however, is that we work to understand what exactly the Singularity Thesis entails. How can we best interpret the claim that the formulae are singular — three ways of expressing one law? This project may be seen as subservient to a future defense of the Singularity Thesis; we cannot, after all, convincingly defend a position we have failed to understand. At the very least, however, this investigation can help us explain several potentially difficult (and crucially important) elements of Kant’s moral philosophy: the concept of a law’s “formula”, the tension between the multiplicity of formulae and his repeated insistence that there is only a *single* moral law, and the distinction he draws between “subjectively practical” and “objectively practical” differences in moral principles.

In this paper, I will propose an interpretation of the Singularity Thesis. This task involves several textual and philosophical challenges. The most obvious problem is that the formulae seem to express three disparate principles. Consider FUL and FH for example. FUL is a purely formal constraint on action; it determines only the minimum standard for what can count as a moral maxim (an action-guiding principle or policy of conduct). The maxim “I will make a promise without keeping it” is ruled out by FUL because the form of the principle is inadequate; it cannot be universalized without rendering its own concepts absurd.¹⁰ FUL does

⁸ Wood (2008) argues does *not* itself imply Equivalence. He writes, “That [the quote] implies that they are not inconsistent with one another, but it does not preclude differences in content between them. Two or more non-equivalent assertions might be taken as statements of the very same proposition” (pp. 81).

⁹ Wood (2008), 80.

¹⁰ This is normally couched in terms of contradiction. There are several accounts, however, of what precisely this contradiction entails. On one account, the universalized principle renders its concepts logically impossible. On

not, however, tell us anything about what should be valued or pursued in our actions. FH, on the other hand, places a substantive constraint on action; it sets a “supreme limiting condition” on the ends I pursue and the means by which I pursue them. The maxim “I will steal from my neighbor to benefit my family” is ruled out by FH because it proposes to use another human being for the furtherance of my interests; it uses a human as a “mere mean.” While FH seems to propose something we should aim to achieve — something that should have value for us — FUL tells us only what our principles should “look like.” Some, on the basis of this, argue that FUL is a merely *empty* principle; since it does not posit a thing to value, it cannot really determine us to act or set our moral obligations. This fundamental difference between FUL and FH is primarily responsible for the immediate impression that these laws cannot possibly be reducible to one. The Singularity Thesis, however, claims that this is the case — that despite their apparent incompatibility, FUL and FH (and FA) are really just expressions of a single law. The task of substantiating the Singularity Thesis is crucial to ameliorating this deep tension in Kant’s ethics and, by extension, to understanding the foundation of his moral system.

B. TWO ACCOUNTS

My account of the Singularity Thesis answers two questions: (1) What is the “very same law” the formulae supposedly represent? And (2) how can we best understand the relationship between it and the three aforementioned formulae? Given the claims Kant makes in the *Groundwork*, the underlying law must be the Categorical Imperative. What we need to identify, then, is a general formulation of the Categorical Imperative. Kant’s various statements of the moral law in *Groundwork II* all come as *formulae*: different ways of stating or representing it. But, according to the Singularity Thesis, these formulae are in fact undergirded by a single law.

another account, the universalized principle renders itself practically impossible — that, in the universalized scenario, the proposed means are necessarily unfit to serve their intended purpose.

This law, then, is the “unformulated” Categorical Imperative. I will argue, as an answer to (1), that we ought to identify the Categorical Imperative with the supreme principle of morality as Kant states it in *Groundwork I*: “I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (*GMS* 4:402). Attentive readers will notice that this principle is nearly identical to FUL; I will attempt to explain why this is the case and, by extension, why this should not be seen as a problem. I will approach the second question by analyzing the argumentative structure of *Groundwork II*. In particular, I will focus on the role played by the concept of rational agency in that argument. I will propose, as an answer to (2), that we can best understand the formulae as applications of the Categorical Imperative to three distinct aspects of rational agency. Having done this, I will propose an interpretation of the Singularity Thesis: an explanation of the sense in which these three seemingly disparate principles are, in fact, singular.

After presenting my account, I will consider Henry Allison’s Analogical Account of the Singularity Thesis. Allison claims that the singularity of the formulae is explained by their being representations of a selfsame law — the Categorical Imperative — through the employment of three different analogies. Like my own account, the Analogical Account is keenly sensitive to the structure of *Groundwork II* and emphasizes the role of rational agency in Kant’s derivation of the formula. I will identify two respects in which my account represents an improvement over Allison’s. First, my account clearly identifies the principle which serves as the underlying law; and second, my account provides a clear and textually-based description of the relationship between the formulae and the underlying law (essentially a characterization of the concept of a “formula”) while his does not.

III. THE “VERY SAME LAW”

Kant claims that the formulae all express the “very same law.” In this section, I will pose and answer question (1): What, exactly, is that law?

A. THE PROBLEM

The task of this section is to identify the “very same law” which the formulae represent. It may not be immediately obvious, however, why this is a problem at all. Kant begins this line of argument (his derivation of the formulae) by clearly setting his agenda: “in this task we want first to inquire whether the *mere concept of a categorical imperative* may not also provide *its formula* containing the proposition which alone can be a categorical imperative” (*GMS* 4:420, emphasis mine). One may argue, then, that the ground of the formulae is the *mere concept* of a categorical imperative. By this understanding, FUL, FH, and FA would be formulae of the same law in the sense that they each satisfy Kant’s criteria for a principle to be a law: universal applicability (*GMS* 4:421).

There are two significant problems with this account. First, this identification of the underlying law produces a woefully unsatisfying notion of singularity. On this account, the various formulae are singular because their form is consistent with Kant’s characterization of a law — not because they are three statements of one law. To help illustrate this notion of singularity, consider the following example. Any constitutional government is undergirded by a set of edicts which determine the minimum requirements for something to qualify as a law. Imagine one such society with the three following laws: *It is forbidden to steal from others*, *It is forbidden to do bodily harm to non-human animals*, and *It is forbidden drive any vehicle without orange tires*. All three laws conform to the state’s constitution, so they must fulfill the requirements (substantive and procedural) it deems necessary for lawhood. These laws, then, are singular in the same way that the aforementioned account takes Kant’s formulae to be singular.

One should notice a problem: while the hypothetical laws all meet the baseline requirement for lawhood, their content is entirely disparate. Each law sets a particular obligation, and no two obligations are related; the laws form a system of obligations, but this system is derivable only by considering the set of token laws in its entirety. This cannot be how Kant intends the formulae to be singular. To see why, consider the explicit project of the *Groundwork*: to make possible a *metaphysics of morals* or, as Kant writes, a philosophical investigation “simply from a priori principles” (*GMS* 4:388). Kant’s goal in the *Groundwork* is to identify these foundational principles in preparation for a systematic and thorough investigation of morality. Early in the *Groundwork*, however, he narrows his search from a priori *principles* to “the *supreme principle of morality*” (*GMS* 4:392). Thus, what Kant is after is a single principle on which the mere concept of moral obligation can be grounded. This is the spirit in which he makes such claims as: “there is, therefore, only a single categorical imperative” (*GMS* 4:421). He means to say, in the strongest sense possible, that there is *one* foundational moral law; any additional law (the formulae, specifically) *must* be mere expressions of it. It is this robust notion of singularity that the consistency and success of Kant’s project depends on. The version supported by the account in question is incapable of meeting this requirement.

Second, the identification of “the very same law” with the concept *of* a law is textually inconsistent. The claim that the formulae are representations of the same law is distinct from the claim that the formulae are equally consistent with Kant’s characterization of a moral law. The former concept seems to obviously imply the latter; if the formulae can be shown to be expressions of a selfsame law, then they *must* also satisfy the conceptual requirement of a law. The latter concept, on the other hand, does not the former. Moreover, Kant defines a law as a *command* that carries universal necessity (*GMS* 4:416). “All citizens are forbidden from

engaging in unsanctioned boxing matches” is a law because it: (1) commands that people perform an action, (2) represents the action as necessary, and (3) applies equally to all people under the purview of law (this law applies to the citizens of a state, whereas the moral law would apply to all humans or rational beings). “A categorical imperative is a proposition which represents an action as necessary irrespective of agent-specific conditions” defines a law, but cannot itself be a law, since it clearly fails to meet conditions (1), (2), and (3). Thus, there is strong textual reason to reject the account in question.

B. THE SOLUTION

I move, now, to my identification of the underlying law. While this law must be “the Categorical Imperative,” my goal is to represent it as “unformulated” — as the law underlying its formulae. It may be helpful here to recall the place of the Categorical Imperative in the *Groundwork* and in Kant’s moral philosophy as a whole. The *Groundwork* is, first and foremost, a book about obligation. The Categorical Imperative expresses the most basic requirements for a principle to be obligating — to be *moral laws*. In its crudest form, it is simply the command that a person’s actions be universalizable. Since obligation refers in its definition to rational agency, any moral law must apply to *all* rational agents. Any moral law must be universally binding. It is important, when considering the formulae of the Categorical Imperative, to remember what it is the formulae are supposed to. If we take them, for instance, to precisely and thoroughly determine the set of “right actions,” then we risk misunderstanding Kant’s ethics at its most fundamental level.

To identify the general formulation of the Categorical Imperative, we must begin with the concept of a categorical imperative that Kant develops at the beginning of *Groundwork II*. He defines a categorical imperative as, “that which [represents] an action as objectively

necessary itself, without reference to another end” (*GMS* 4:414). The beginning clause, “that which represents an action as objectively necessary,” is Kant’s definition of an imperative: a principle which determines the will by “necessitating” it — imposing upon it a rule which *must* be followed. “Children ought to drink milk if they want to grow healthy bones” is an imperative; it represents an action, drinking milk, as something children must do if they fit a certain description (set “growing healthy bones” as an end — something they want to achieve). If we accept the antecedent end (growing healthy bones), then the means to it (drinking milk) are necessitating.¹¹ The second clause of the definition of a categorical imperative, “itself, without reference to an end,” distinguishes it from the general concept of an imperative. Specifically, it removes the reference to an *end* in the representation of the necessity of an action. In the previous example, the command was conditional; the principle only applied to those people who accept that healthy bone development is something of value. Categorical imperatives necessitate the will unconditionally, referencing only the lawfulness of the proposition itself. “One ought not lie,” a classic example of a categorical imperative, commands that we not lie; this does not depend on whether we want to lie or whether we accept honesty as something with intrinsic value.

The concept of a categorical imperative is inextricably linked to the concept of duty. Kant defines duty as, “the necessity of an action from respect for law” (*GMS* 4:400). Importantly, this specifically excludes actions whose necessity is attributable to agent-specific facts. As he writes in a later passage: “this duty — as duty in general — lies, prior to all experience, in the idea of a reason determining the will by means of a priori grounds” (*GMS*

¹¹ Kant claims that if we presuppose the pursuit of a certain end, then we *must* assume the pursuit of the means to that end. Thus, a principle which commands the *means* to an *end* is analytic, and its prescription is represented as *necessary*.

4:408). Thus, when we act from duty, we act according to and *from*¹² an a priori principle — one which makes no reference to empirical conditions. Categorical imperatives are “moral imperatives” because they ground our duties; since they make no reference to an end independent of the command itself, they are wholly a priori.

Duty connects the Categorical Imperative to the supreme principle of morality which Kant identifies in *Groundwork I*. In *Groundwork I*, Kant introduces the concept of “moral worth,” a qualitatively unique value an action has when it is done from the moral law. He describes the origin of moral worth thusly: “For, the will stands between its a priori principle, which is formal, and its a posteriori incentive, which is material, as at a crossroads: and since it must still be determined by something, it must be determined by the formal principle of volition as such when an action is done from duty” (*GMS* 4:400). The moral character of human action, then, is grounded in *principles of volition*: the maxims one sets oneself and acts upon. In particular, morality is grounded in *a priori* principles adopted from duty. And, since duty can only be expressed by categorical imperatives, morality must be grounded in *a priori* principles in the form of categorical imperatives (*GMS* 4:416). Recall, now, the goal of the *Groundwork*: to identify the *supreme principle of morality* for an a priori investigation of morality. If, as I have shown, morality is grounded in the *a priori* principles expressed by categorical imperatives, then the *supreme principle of morality* must itself be a categorical imperative. And, since “there is...only a single categorical imperative,” the *supreme principle of morality* must in fact be the Categorical Imperative (*GMS* 4:421). We can express the Categorical Imperative, then, as the

¹² To act *from duty* is to act with duty as the explicit motivating ground. When we eat to assuage hunger, we act *from* our desire to satiate ourselves.

statement Kant identifies as the *supreme principle*: “I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (*GMS* 4:402).

The identification of the Categorical Imperative with the *supreme principle* is corroborated by strong textual evidence from the *Groundwork* and Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant analyzes pure practical reason: the rational faculty responsible for the representation of and motivation by principles of action. *Pure* practical reason is distinguishable from practical reason *simpliciter* by its exclusion of empirical conditions; it is the faculty determinable by the moral law alone (*KpV* 5:30). Just as he provides a *supreme principle* at the foundation of a metaphysics of morals, he identifies what he calls the *Fundamental Law of Pure Practical Reason*: the law which determines the activity of this “moral faculty”. He phrases the law thusly: “so act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal law” (*KpV* 5:30). This law, consistent with Kant’s characterization of categorical imperatives, is defined by its lack of reference to non-moral concerns. And, like the *supreme principle of morality*, it is meant to express the basic a priori principle governing the will. It should be no surprise, then, that these three principles (the *supreme principle of morality*, the *Fundamental Law of Pure Practical Reason*, and the Categorical Imperative) should be essentially identical. This equivalence is further supported by Kant’s characterization of the absolutely good will, about which he writes: “this principle is, accordingly, also its *supreme law*: act always on that maxim whose universality as a law you can at the same time will...and such an imperative is *categorical* [emphasis mine]” (*GMS* 4:437). One will notice that this is yet another presentation of the *supreme principle*. And, like the *Fundamental Law*, Kant proposes it as a law governing the practical rational faculty — the will. Finally, and most importantly for our present discussion, he explicitly identifies this principle as

categorical; if I am correct, this is meant not as merely an *instance* of a categorical imperative, but rather as a statement of *the* Categorical Imperative.

We have strong textual reasons, then, to identify the singular law — the law underlying the various formulae of the Categorical Imperative — as the *supreme principle of morality*: “I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (*GMS* 4:402). One pressing objection to this interpretation is that, on this reading, FUL seems to be identical with the law it is supposedly a formula of. Kant states FUL thusly: “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (*GMS* 4:421). If we accept the identification of the Categorical Imperative with the *supreme principle*, then FUL seems to be a mere restatement of the law it is supposed to be a formula *of*. To fend off this challenge, we must either *a*) deny that FUL is really a formula of itself, or *b*) accept that FUL is a formula of itself, and explain this in such a way as to make this unproblematic — or perhaps inevitable. I believe that the latter approach is appropriate. However, since my analysis in the next section will should provide the resources to answer this question, I will postpone addressing it until later.

IV. THE FORMULAE AND THEIR SINGULARITY

In this section, I will argue for an account of the relationship between the formulae and the Categorical Imperative — an answer to question (2). Having done so, I will present my best attempt at a clear and thorough statement of the Singularity Thesis. The best approach, I contend, to understanding this relationship is an analysis of Kant’s derivation of them; if we can come to a clear picture of *how* Kant comes to state the formulae, we should be able to construct a clear picture of *what* their place is in the developing system. Thus, my strategy in this section will be to carefully analyze the argumentation of *Groundwork II*.

A. KANT'S DERIVATION OF THE FORMULAE

The most logical place to begin is with the concept of a rational agent. Kant develops this concept across *Groundwork II*, and this development is centrally important to his development of the Categorical Imperative (the derivation of its formulae). Right at the outset of this line of argument, Kant announces: “we cannot dispute that its law is so extensive in its import that it must hold not only for human beings but for all *rational beings as such*, not merely under contingent conditions and with exceptions but with *absolute necessity*” (*GMS* 4:408). Since, as discussed, morality is to be grounded in a priori principles, they cannot make reference to or be derived from anything empirical; this includes, for Kant, any contingent feature of humanity (including, for instance, facts about desires or the conditions for any individual’s happiness). Any study of humanity, however, would classify not as *metaphysics* (a science beginning from “first principles” or, more simply, fundamental a priori principles), but as *anthropology* (an empirical study of humans and human nature as they appear in the world). For this reason, he sets rational nature as the object of his investigation and at the foundation of morality. To this effect, he writes: “it is of the greatest practical importance...just because moral laws are to hold for a rational being as such, to derive them from the universal concept of a rational being as such” (*GMS* 4:412). We have, therefore, *two* bases on which moral laws are to be derived: the concept of duty (and, as discussed earlier, the concept of a categorical imperative), and the concept of a “rational being as such” (which, from this point, I will refer to as simply “rational agency”). I will focus, then, on how the development of these two concepts in *Groundwork II* ultimately determines the principles Kant identifies as the formulae of the Categorical Imperative.

Kant first characterizes rational beings as beings with wills — specifically, beings with the capacity to act according to *principles*. The will is the capacity to represent a moral principle

and determine the subject to act as a consequence of this representation. To this effect, he writes: “only a rational being has the capacity to act *in accordance with the representation* of laws, that is, in accordance with principles, or has a *will*” (*GMS* 4:412). We can distil this claim to the following one: *rational agents act according to principles*. I, for instance, can consider the statement “I should compose a paper about Kant’s Singularity Thesis in order to satisfy a graduation requirement” and, on the basis of this consideration, compose said paper. A fish, on the other hand, presumably does not represent to itself a proposition affirming the value of pursuing food or avoiding hooks; these actions are unprincipled, and thus irrational.

Kant identifies two “parts” of any principle: its *object* and its *form*. Since this distinction plays an important role in his derivation of the formulae, it will be helpful to take a moment to explain it. Take, for example, my maxim to draft this paper. The object of the principle is easy to grasp; it is concerned primarily with my desire to graduate (and, by extension, my pursuit of happiness and my graduation’s role in it) and the means I propose to satisfy this: the objects in the world I aim to reify (*KpV* 5:21). Consider now a second maxim: “I should make only those promises I intend to keep.” This principle, like the last, represents an action as something I must do — it necessitates the will. However, in doing so, it makes no reference to any subjective (subject-specific and, consequently empirical) ground of determination. Thus, the determining ground of the maxim — what supplies it its obligating and ultimately motivating force — could not be its content, but rather its *form*: specifically, Kant will argue, its *universalizability*.

His first task in this section is to identify a proposition which can rightly be called a categorical imperative. He begins by suggesting an access point: “we want to first inquire whether the mere concept of a categorical imperative may not also provides its formula containing the proposition which alone can be a categorical imperative” (*GMS* 4:420). If we can

derive a categorical imperative analytically from the concept of a categorical imperative, then, by extension, this principle would be wholly a priori and ultimately derivable from the mere idea of moral obligation itself. Recall, the concept of a categorical imperative includes three key elements: a necessitation of the will by law, the exclusion of subject-specific conditions (and, thus, the objectivity of law), and determination by the law itself. Thus, any proposition expressing a categorical imperative could only command an action on the grounds that it meet these criteria, “for, since the imperative contains, beyond the law, only the necessity that the maxim be in conformity with this law...nothing is left with which the maxim of action is to conform but the universality of a law as such” (*GMS* 4:421). A categorical imperative can only command that a maxim conform to the basic formal requirement for a principle to qualify as a law: universal applicability. The resulting imperative is FUL: “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (*GMS* 4:421).

It is a crucial to notice that the starting point for Kant’s derivation of FUL is not *only* the concept of a practical law; his argument requires the conception of rational agents as acting from principles: the representation of *laws* or *imperatives*. When Kant derives FUL, his conception of rational agency is limited to this particular feature of the will. Since Kant explicitly states that the starting point for any investigation of morality is the concept of a rational being (and, further, that the applicability of moral laws extends beyond human to *all* rational beings), the laws he derives must be informed by his development of this concept. If moral agents were in fact *only* beings which represented, and acted according to, imperatives, then the laws governing their activity would refer only to these imperatives (as opposed to, for instance, the intended

consequences of the action). Fittingly, then, FUL is a merely formal constraint on how a maxim ought to be formatted — what a moral *principle* should look like.

Soon after stating FUL, Kant introduces a new feature of rational agency: *end-setting*. He sets up his discussion of ends by re-focusing on the concept of rational agency: the will, and its capacity to determine action according to principles. To this, he adds: “now, what serves the will as the objective ground of its self-determination is an end, and this, if it is given by reason alone, must hold equally for all rational beings” (*GMS* 4:427). There are two things to unpack here: the concept of an *end*, and the concept of an *objective end* (that is, an end which “[holds] equally for all rational beings”). The end of a maxim is what Kant calls the “objective ground”: the thing we wish to achieve with our actions, or the state of the world we wish to bring about. There is good reason to distinguish between two types of ends: ends as *effects*, and ends as *interests*. Kant characterizes ends as *effects* as, “the ends that a rational being proposes at his discretion as *effects* of his actions (material ends)” (*GMS* 4:428). In the maxim “I will contribute to my retirement savings account in order to secure financial stability,” financial stability is an end as effect; I adopt the maxim in order to make my financial stability exist as an effect of my actions. This qualification of a type of end immediately suggests another type: one which is *not* posited as something I bring about in the world. The only sense in which something can function as an end for me but *not* be something I wish to bring about is if the thing already exists. To take such a thing as an end, then, is to represent it as something I should further, benefit, or contribute to.¹³ The vast majority of ends, particularly ends of the former type, rest on subject-specific conditions. I set “finishing this paper” as an end because I have a desire to earn an M.A. (and because I know that the existence of the paper is necessary for this to happen). The maxim I

¹³ I call this an *end of interest*, but this naming convention is my own.

adopt with this as my end cannot satisfy Kant's criteria of a law; since it rests on subjective empirical conditions, it cannot apply universally to all rational beings. Another type of end is *objectively* motivating. These ends are motivating because their object has intrinsic value — not because of the specific desires of any particular subject.

The Formula of Humanity, FH, rests on the concept of an objective end. If a categorical imperative were possible, it must (by definition) apply universally. But, as discussed, no maxim whose objective ground (end) is a subjective end is suitable for universal lawgiving. Thus, any categorical imperative must presuppose an objective end: an intrinsically valuable object which is universally motivating for all rational agents (*GMS* 4:428). Kant asserts that rational nature is the only thing suitable to play this role.¹⁴ From this, he derives FH: “so act 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” (*GMS* 4:429). While FUL is a law expressing the only type of *principle* suitable for giving universal law, FH is a law expressing the only *end* suitable for giving universal law. Kant employs the same strategy in deriving FH as he does FUL: he applies the concept of a categorical imperative to a feature of rational agency — a thing that rational agents do. The difference between his derivations for FUL and FH is, as I have shown, *what* feature of rational agency he considers. The difference between the formulate themselves is, fittingly, the aspect of rational agency for which it sets obligations: FUL, for the capacity to adopt principles; and FH, for the capacity to set ends. And, since Kant applies FUL and FH to the same set of four examples with the same set of results, we can clearly see that he intends

¹⁴ Whether Kant asserts or argues for this claim is debatable. I adopt the former interpretation provisionally, and this is ultimately inconsequential to the current investigation.

these principles to necessitate the same rational agent in the same way with respect to two different features of his rationality.¹⁵

Shortly after considering FH, he considers the two previously established features of rational agency as a synthetic unity: “the ground of all practical lawgiving lies (in accordance with the first principle) *objectively in the rule* and the form of universality which makes it fit to be a law...*subjectively*, however, it lies in the *end*” (GMS 4:431). This unity of *objective* and *subjective* grounds of action — principles and ends, respectively — is what Kant later calls “*a complete determination of all maxims*” (GMS 4:436). Kant’s derivation of FA is relatively straightforward: since the relevant conception of rational agency is a synthesis of the previous two conceptions, the principle determining its lawful activity is a synthesis of the previous two formulae. The principle which follows from this consideration is FA: “do no action on any other maxim than one such that it would be consistent with it to be a universal law, and hence to act only *so that the will could regard itself as at the same time giving universal law through its maxim*” (GMS 4:434). The universality requirement of FUL requires that a practical law be applicable for all agents, independent of their unique constitutions. The objectivity requirement of FH requires that a practical law represent rational nature as something of absolute value and avoid transgressing against the sanctity of human beings as ends in themselves — the “supreme limiting condition” of my willing, in the sense that my maxims are restricted to those that respect that which is unconditionally motivating. The only principle which can satisfy both, Kant concludes, is a principle derived *from the will itself* — self-legislated. As the above quote

¹⁵ While Kant is clear that examples are insufficient for establishing moral principles they are useful for demonstrating their application — how they work in practice, or what specific duties they prescribe. Kant considers the same application conditions for FUL and FH, then, to show his readers that FUL and FH are equivalent in practice — that they set the same duties for any and all rational agents. This also helps the reader to see more clearly that the differences between FUL and FH are attributable not to *a priori* grounding of the principles, but to their particular modes of expression.

shows, FA is ostensibly the result of a synthesis of two ideas: practical laws of the will in its *formal* (principled) and *substantive* (given by its ends) operation, relying (of course) on the idea of the will as determined completely — that is, in its synthetic unity.

I hope to have shown two things in this section: (1) that the formulae are each expressions of the Categorical Imperative, since they are derived from the concept of it and express the fundamental conditions of lawful determination of action; (2) that the differences between the formulae are attributable to the various conceptions of rational agency Kant considers in his derivation of them (and, by extension, the aspects of rational agency they are supposed to determine).

B. THE SINGULARITY OF THE FORMULAE

Now, having explicated Kant's derivation of the formulae, I will offer my best attempt at a clear and convincing statement of the Singularity Thesis. The formulae are each derivable from the concept of a categorical imperative — a proposition which expresses the necessity of an action from duty. When we consider this concept as it relates to three concepts of rational agency — the *subjective*, *objective*, and *completely determined* grounds of action — we can derive three principles which appear *substantially different*. However, these principles are ultimately three expressions of a single law: specifically, the principle Kant identifies as the *supreme principle of morality*, "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law" (*GMS* 4:402). The underlying law — a general formulation of the Categorical Imperative — expresses merely the formal requirement that a moral law be universally applicable. We can think about universality, however, in several different ways. I can, for example, consider my principles themselves and determine whether or not they are suitable (by virtue of their form) to be universal laws. Additionally, I can consider

the end of my action and determine whether or not this could possibly serve as a *universal* ground for action. The maxim I adopt in order to attain an M.A in philosophy, for example, could not; since this end has value for me only insofar as I have the particular desire to attain an M.A in philosophy, it would not be sufficient for determining a universal law. Finally, I can consider whether the “formulation” or source of my maxim (whether I conceive of it as externally given or self-given) is consistent with the giving of universal law. Since the difference between the formulae is merely the access point for our cognition of a single, underlying law — whether we proceed in moral appraisal by considering the form, end, or source of our maxim — the formulae are truly singular.

It may help to illustrate the notion of singularity with an example. Consider, for example, a Kindergarten class with three rules: *all students must lie down for a nap at 10 AM; all students must cease playing and learning at 10 AM; and all students must be silent at 10 AM*. We can see that, in Kant’s own language, the first rule “unites the other two in it;” the demand to nap cannot be satisfied while playing or while speaking, so the duties it delimits converge with the latter two rules.¹⁶ This set of rules, however, can be contrasted with another: *no hoarding classroom materials all to oneself for any extended period of time, no toys or food may be brought from home unless they can be made available to the class, and always do your best to ensure that classmates are not left without materials*. Clearly, these three rules are merely three forms — three ways of expressing — a single one: namely, *share*. Like the first set, these rules will fix the same set of duties. Also like the first set, they share a common end — that is, they each serve to bring about the same thing in the world (napping and sharing, respectively). Unlike the first set, however, they all share a clear relationship to a common underlying rule: specifically, one

¹⁶ This should hold, given a small amount of explanatory legwork, between any one rule and the remaining two.

demanding that the students share. These three rules set prohibitions against the hoarding of in-class and from-home items, and an obligation to distribute these items equitably. All of these represent injunctions to share, each with respect to a different aspect of being a Kindergarten student: participating independently in class, transitioning from home to class, and engaging with others in class. A student who shares with his classmates helps to ensure equal access to materials in class. However, we can express an injunction to share in several different ways, corresponding to the several things that students *do*. What it means to share with respect to independent play is to abstain from monopolizing public resources; what it means to share with respect to coming to class is to abstain from bringing private materials which other students cannot use; and what it means to share with respect to cooperative play is to avoid situations where any student or group of student has disproportionate access to materials (we can imagine, for instance, the unfortunate case of a student forced to work with broken pencils and dried fingerprints). Thus, while each rule is different in a certain respect — and, of course, sound like substantially different rules — we can see how each is simply a way of saying “Share!” It is this way in which Kant intends the formulae to be singular. Each formula is a way of saying “Act according only to maxims which are suitable for universal law!” We can think about this command — with respect to both our moral motivation and our moral appraisal — in three different ways: as commanding the kind of principles we can adopt (the *adoption* of our maxims), as commanding the kind of ends we can set (the *objective ground* of our maxims), or as commanding the complete determination of our maxims (the “formulation” of our maxims — either autonomous or heteronomous). The difference between the three laws is merely in the perspective from which we consider the underlying law.

Let me return now to the concern we ended the previous section with. What we must sort out is how FUL can be a *formula* of a practical principle which, by all appearances, is precisely the same principle. To understand this, consider one last time the concept underlying the derivation of FUL: the idea of rational agents as acting from the representation of principles. Given that the Categorical Imperative expresses a formal constraint — the unconditional requirement that any moral principle be universally valid — it follows that the expression of the Categorical Imperative in solely formal terms (that is, in the application of the Categorical Imperative to the formal part of rational agency) would be equivalent. Since FUL is the expression of the Categorical Imperative insofar as it relates to *only* the capacity of the will to represent principles, and since *only* the form of these principles is suitable to determine their status as moral laws, FUL must in fact state the basic, formal requirements for a moral law. The latter two formulae (FH and FA), then, express this law in substantive and complete terms (respectively) if we accept the reading of Kant’s strategy I present above.

One might object that all I have really shown is that what we have called the *Formula* of Universal Law is not in fact a formula at all. It makes sense to contend that any two intensionally identical principles cannot be distinguished in any meaningful way. Thus, one may claim, my distinction between FUL and the Categorical Imperative is ultimately meaningless (and perhaps absurd). This objection, however, misrepresents the sense in which I take the formulae to relate to their underlying law. As discussed, I take each formula to express the Categorical Imperative as it relates to a difference aspect of rational agency. One way we can think about this is to rephrase “Formula of...” as “Way of representing the Categorical Imperative as...” FUL is a way of representing the Categorical Imperative as a law governing the form of my maxims. When I assess the moral status of my actions — when I hold them up to

the standard for moral obligation — by considering whether their principles were universalizable, I have applied the Categorical Imperative through FUL. When I assess the moral status of my actions by considering whether the objective ground — the end — of my actions respects unconditionally valuable objects (rational nature, specifically), I have applied the Categorical Imperative through FH. So, my claim that the Categorical Imperative and FUL are ultimately identical is ultimately unproblematic. The Categorical Imperative expresses the fundamental requirements for moral obligation. FUL provides one way of accessing, representing, or applying this principle. It is no more a “distinct” or “separate” law than FH or FA. This is precisely what I take Kant to say in the Singularity Thesis.

To further motivate my epistemological reading of the formulae, consider once again Kant’s own characterization of the formulae. He writes: “it is very useful to bring one and the same action under the three concepts mentioned above [the formulae] and thereby, as far as possible, bring it closer to intuition” (GMS 4:437). This passage strongly suggests an epistemic account of singularity — that the formulae are ways of representing, rather than distinct instantiations of, the underlying law. Intuition is a mode of epistemic access. Kant’s claim is that applying all three formulae brings our cognition of the moral law closer to intuition; that is, that incorporating all three perspectives (where each perspective corresponds to a different feature of rational agency) into moral appraisal gives us the fullest picture of the moral law and our conformity or nonconformity to it. Since all three aspects of rational agency are, by definition,¹⁷ united in any rational action, all three perspectives are always available to us; we can always appraise our actions with any and all of the formulae, and doing so will always lead to the same moral conclusions.

¹⁷ Kant’s development of the concept of rational agency.

V. THE ANALOGICAL ACCOUNT

In this final section, I will consider my account of the Singularity Thesis alongside Henry Allison's Analogical Account. As discussed earlier, Allison makes a uniquely clear statement of the Singularity Thesis. His analysis of it is perhaps the most thorough attempt at developing an account of singularity — what I have done in the two preceding sections. It makes sense, then, to compare his account to my own. While acknowledging the debt I owe to this account, I will remark on several ways in which I see mine as an improvement.

In his commentary on the *Groundwork*, Allison specifically addresses the Singularity Thesis and explains the relationship between the formulae and the Categorical Imperative in terms of an analogy. To this effect, he writes, “a similar line of thought is at work in Kant’s account of the relationship between the categorical imperative and its distinct formulas. The essential point is that each formula represents the single categorical imperative on the basis of a different analogy, which supposedly ensures that their differences are subjectively rather than objectively practical.”¹⁸ We should think of “analogy” here, as consistent with Kant’s use of the term: as, “the manner in which we can legitimately think about supersensible objects, which, *ex hypothesi*, cannot be directly cognized.”¹⁹ Cognition by analogy is necessary, Kant thinks, when we lack sensible access to our object of knowledge of investigation. I do not require any analogy, for instance, to cognize the computer I am typing on; I can experience in space and time. Since moral laws do not, according to Kant, have empirical content (the Categorical Imperative determines the *form*, as opposed to the *content*, of a possible law), they cannot be cognized, and thus we have no grounds for making judgements thereon. Rather, reason thinks of

¹⁸ Allison 2011, 248.

¹⁹ Allison 2011, 247.

these laws through the cognition of something else — that is, by analogy.²⁰ According to this account, then, each formula is a different way of indirectly cognizing the Categorical Imperative. Consider, for example, FUL. The Categorical Imperative determines the *form* of a law, but this by itself provides no determinate law. If, by Allison’s suggestion, we apply this form to some *particular* basis for comparison, we can derive the claim that all morally worthy maxims must have such a form that they can be made into universal laws. This principle is a way of indirectly cognizing or representing the Categorical Imperative, and its lawgiving authority is derived therefrom. FH and FA, then, would be two different ways of thinking about the Categorical Imperative, grounded in two different analogies. Since the formulae, under this interpretation, represent merely three ways of bringing the Categorical Imperative into experience, the difference between them would be “merely subjective.”

Another crucial element of Allison’s account, and an intellectual debt I owe to him, is that which he identifies as the basis for comparison: namely, the three distinct conceptions of rational agency Kant develops throughout *Groundwork II*. Each formula, he suggests, represents the Categorical Imperative on the basis of an analogy with a different aspect of the rational agent: FUL, with the ability to act from principle; FH, with the ability to set ends; and FA, with a “complete” view, incorporating the former two capacities. This represents a distinct and important virtue of Allison’s *Analogical Account*, since it is sensitive to the context in which the formulae are derived and to Kant’s strategy in the *Groundwork*.

²⁰ The comparative relationship (characteristic of common uses of “analogy”) in play here is less than clear. Kant is operating with a technical use of the term, and Allison seems to follow him. The sense of analogy that Allison seems to be working with is that of a *typic*, a concept Kant develops in the second *Critique*. I will discuss this briefly later.

While this account makes several critical interpretive points (including, especially, its emphasis on rational agency), it has two significant drawbacks: *first*, Allison does not give a satisfactory or properly fleshed out account of what precisely it means for a principle to represent a law *by analogy*; and *second*, he does not identify the law which the formulae are united under.

The basic idea of the *Analogical Account* is that the formulae represent the Categorical Imperative by three different analogies. Thus, to understand the Singularity Thesis under this interpretation, we must have a firm grip on the operative meaning of “analogy.” While Allison does suggest the proper reading of “analogy” in the quote above, he also characterizes it (quoting Kant) as, “perfect similarity between two relations in wholly dissimilar things.”²¹ This concept of analogy (and any concept of analogy) requires a relationship with which to compare that between the formulae and the law under which they are united. No such analogue, however, can be found in either Kant’s or Allison’s writing. What Allison does suggest about the nature of this analogy (that between the formulae and the Categorical Imperative), however, is that “we have already seen this at work in connection with FUL and FLN (the Formula of Natural Law).”²² Thus, we are to assume that the sense in which FLN is analogous to FUL is the same as the sense in which FUL is analogous to the Categorical Imperative. But how, then, does he characterize *this* relationship?

Fundamentally, Allison understands the relationship between FUL and FLN as a *typic* (or, more precisely, that FLN is a *typic* of FUL), which Kant himself defines as, “such a law, however, as can be presented *in concreto* in objects of the senses and hence a law of nature...this law is what the understanding can put under an idea of reason on behalf of judgement” (*KpV*

²¹ Kant, in Allison 2011, 248.

²² Allison 2011, 248.

5:69).²³ In brief, FLN is a *typic* of FUL in the sense that it provides a concrete means of cognizing and applying a *law of freedom* in a world governed by *laws of nature*. FLN, by incorporating empirical content into the principle expressed by FUL (that is, by exchanging “universal law” for “universal law of *nature*”), brings it under the “rules” of experience and allows us to make judgements thereon. A *typic* functions similarly to a translation dictionary. A moral law — the Categorical Imperative, in particular — does not provide any content to be cognized directly; in this was, it is similar to a proposition stated in an unknown language. Thus, when agents wish to think about and, most importantly, apply these laws in the world, they require a way to make the laws accessible and available to use — to translate the law into a language we can understand and put in practice. A *typic*, like a translation dictionary, gives us the means to understand these laws by expressing them in empirical language: to understand a law about the “universal, lawgiving form” of a practical principle as a law about the suitability of the law as a law of *nature* .

It is less than clear how FUL, FH, and FA could be analogies of a single law in this sense. If we are to understand the formulae’s relationship to the Categorical Imperative as that between a *typic* and a law of freedom, we commit ourselves to several things. Most importantly, we must see the formulae as providing concrete access to the law expressed in the Categorical Imperative. There is, however, a significant problem with this interpretation. Recall, Allison’s own example of this relationship is that between FUL and FLN. FLN is a *typic* of FUL because it provides the empirical content necessary for incorporating FUL into our judgements; embedded in this claim, however, is the assumption that FUL *does not* provide its own empirical content — that it

²³ A *typic* is a species of analogy, which Kant defines as, “this type of cognition is cognition according to analogy, which surely does not signify, as the word is usually taken, an imperfect similarity between two things, but rather a perfect similarity between two relations in wholly dissimilar things” (*Prolegomena*, 146).

requires a typic. Thus, if FUL requires a typic — if it is not itself available to us — it cannot itself *be* a typic.

One route available to Allison would be to resist this criticism on the grounds that the relevant formulae here are not FUL, FH, and FA, but rather FLN, FH, and FRE (the Kingdom or Realm of Ends Formula). These former three can all be seen as typics (Allison himself is unsure as to how exactly to fit FH into this picture, but let's grant him this provisionally), so to this extent the account evades my argument above. However, even *if* we accept Allison's claim that these are the relevant formulae, and thus that we can appropriately describe the formulae as typics, this would only punt the problem back one level. On this reading, we accept that the formulae Kant is describing as singular are typics of three laws of freedom: FUL, FH, and FA. However, since Allison is attempting to explain how the formulae are analogical expressions of a *single* law (he is, after all, addressing the Singularity Thesis), he must provide an account on which *these* laws are themselves united. If this were not the case, then the formulae could not properly be described as singular, since they would not be under any single law. This would render the Singularity Thesis nonsensical. As such, this does not seem to be a viable way of characterizing the relationship between the formulae and the Categorical Imperative.

The second problem with the *Analogical Account* is, more basically, that Allison does not identify that single law which the formulae are united under. It can be assumed, I think, that absent an explicit answer to this question, we are to take it as simply "the Categorical Imperative". However, as I argued above, this is not sufficient for a law in the determinate sense.

My account, while owing much to Allison's, represents a significant improvement. Like the Analogical Account, my account focuses on the role of the concept of rational agency in the

derivation and content of the formulae. Since the development of this concept is central to the argumentation of *Groundwork II*, and since Kant explicitly announces the importance of this concept to the identification of a possible moral law, it is a shared virtue of our accounts that both are informed by its central role in Kant's argument. Because of this, moreover, our accounts elucidate Kant's claim about the *difference* between the formulae: "There is nevertheless a difference among them], which is indeed subjectively rather than objectively practical, intended namely to bring an idea of reason closer to intuition (by a certain analogy) and thereby to feeling" (*GMS* 4:436). This is a crucially important point, since it is this difference which must account for the apparent incompatibility between three principles which are, *ex hypothesi*, expressions of the same law. On both of our accounts, the differences between the formulae are attributable to the relevant conception of rational agency considered in its derivation and obligated by its imperative; the formulae are all statements of the same law (and are thus *objectively* identical), but each is thought relative to a different feature of the will (and are thus *subjectively* different).

My account, however, is aimed at addressing the problems I identify with the Analogical Account. The questions I use to organize my argument (what I have labeled (1) and (2)) are chosen to correspond to the two specific objections I press against Allison. First, my account offers an argument for an identification of the selfsame law (the law undergirding the formulae) (*GMS* 4:436) with the *supreme principle of morality* (*GMS* 4:392). Second, my approach to the relationship between the formulae and the selfsame law — relying (like Allison) on the concept of rational agency while abandoning the concept of analogy — ameliorates the deep tension in Allison's use and understanding of "analogy". To help illustrate this briefly, recall that Allison's account dealt only provisionally with FH because of an incompatibility between it and the notion

of a *typic*. Since my account is not reliant on this idea, and instead focuses only on the feature of the will considered when we cognize the moral law, I avoid this problem.

VI. CONCLUSION

To this point, there is a dearth of literature dealing specifically with The Singularity Thesis. In many places, it is either assumed, overlooked, or conflated with another idea (most commonly the Equivalence Thesis). In this paper, I brought this idea to the forefront and attempted to provide a convincing interpretation which is consistent with Kant's arguments in the *Groundwork*. The Singularity Thesis is, I believe, central to the goal of the *Groundwork*. The formulae express three distinct principles which determine duty — specifically prohibitive duties — in subjectively different ways. In addition, competent moral appraisal seems to require mastery of *each* formula — including, importantly, an appreciation of their subjective difference. Thus, it is crucial that we retain the distinction between them. However, it is equally crucial for the internal consistency of Kant's project that the three formulae can in fact be singularly identified with *the* Categorical Imperative. As such, it is an important task to provide an account of the Singularity Thesis which is intelligible and consistent with his presentation and derivation of it. In doing so, we preserve the aforementioned elements of Kant's moral philosophy while remaining faithful to his intentions. I hope to have provided such an account, and to have demonstrated two things: 1) that the formulae can be said to be singular in the sense that they each express the *supreme principle of morality* (roughly equivalent to the *Fundamental Law of Pure Practical Reason*) insofar as it is applied to and determining of/necessitating for three distinct aspects of rational agency, and 2) that, although my account is in some respects a development of the ideas Allison presents in the Analogical Account, it ultimately represents an improvement in terms of clarity and precision.

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