

Purposiveness, the Idea of God, and the Transition from Nature to Freedom in the *Critique of Judgment*

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Introduction

At the end of the published Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant announces that the power of judgment “provides the mediating concept between the concepts of nature and the concept of freedom, which makes possible the transition from the purely theoretical to the purely practical” (KU, AA 5: 196). This claim, apparently central to Kant’s systematic ambitions, raises many interpretive puzzles. In this paper, I focus on one of these puzzles: the connection that Kant subsequently draws between the transition and the power of judgment’s transcendental principle of purposiveness (TPP). The TPP instructs us to make an assumption for the sake of inquiry: that empirical laws of nature exhibit the systematic unity that “they would have if an understanding (even if not ours) had likewise given them for the sake of our faculty of cognition” (KU, AA 5: 180). This connection between the TPP and the transition is opaque, and most commentators have overlooked it.¹

I will argue that Kant maintains that the power of judgment contributes to the transition because the TPP instructs us to assume the existence of God for the sake of theoretical inquiry.² This assumption, in turn, aligns with the practical postulate of God’s existence.

¹ This is true of the accounts in Guyer (1990, 2005), Freudiger (1996), Düsing (1990), and Rolf (2008). Two exceptions are Kleingeld (1998) and Allison (2012). Kleingeld, like me, claims that according to the TPP, we must assume that God designed nature; however, her view is that the transition is established by *practical* reason (Kleingeld 1998, 326-333).

² I say “contributes” because I do not hold that my account is exhaustive of the transition; a full account would need to include the role played by both the aesthetic power of judgment and the teleological power of judgment. I develop a complementary interpretation of the role of the teleological power of judgment in Bowman, unpublished manuscript.

I first argue that the demand for a “transition” concerns the need to unify theoretical principles with the postulates of pure practical reason (§1). I then sketch Kant’s argument for the TPP (§2). Finally, I show how this principle contributes to the transition (§3).

1. The Transition Question

Kant leaves it unclear what the transition between the theoretical and the practical is meant to accomplish. I propose the following interpretation: Kant is concerned with establishing the unity of our theoretical and practical principles, and more specifically, the unity of theoretical principles with the postulates of pure practical reason.

As Kant presents it in its canonical form in the second *Critique*, pure practical reason gives us three postulates that concern the supersensible: the postulates of freedom, the existence of God, and the immortality of the soul, licensing us to take up *Glaube* (henceforth: “Belief”) in the postulates. Belief is a kind of assent that we are entitled—and moreover rationally required—to make, not on the basis of “objective” grounds or evidence, but rather because it is a condition on pursuing an end demanded of us by the moral law.³

For my purposes, the postulate of God’s existence is most important. Kant argues that we must postulate the existence of God to pursue the complete end of pure practical reason: the highest good, or “a whole in which the greatest happiness is represented as connected in the most exact proportion with the greatest degree of moral perfection” (KpV, AA 5: 129). Kant argues that we cannot conceive of the highest good obtaining merely in accord with nature’s laws, for natural causality would not guarantee that happiness is distributed in proportion to virtue. We must therefore postulate an author of the world who creates nature to ensure this proportionality. This argument licenses us to

³ Cf. KrV, A 822/B 851. I draw on Andrew Chignell’s account of Belief in Kant (Chignell 2007, 335ff).

take up Belief that God exists, because assenting to the proposition that God exists is a condition on pursuing the highest good. Kant further argues that the God in question—whom he often refers to as the “moral author of the world”—must be thought of as possessing a variety of the traditional divine attributes, including omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence (KpV, AA 5: 139). I will use the label “God_M” to refer to God as the moral author of the world.

In seeking a “transition” from the theoretical to the practical, it is plausible that Kant is concerned with the issue of theoretical principles being unified with the postulates of pure practical reason.⁴ Throughout his critical works, Kant expresses what is known as his “unity of reason” thesis, which—to gloss an opaque Kantian claim—states that it is in the nature of human reason to establish the unity of its theoretical and practical principles.⁵ In the second *Critique*, Kant connects this demand for unity with the specific need to unify theoretical principles with the postulates (KpV, AA 5: 121). Additionally, in the first *Critique*, Kant refers to a “transition from concepts of nature to the practical,” suggesting that theoretical reason’s transcendental ideas—including the idea of God—could make possible such a transition by providing “support” for the moral ideas, by which he presumably means God, the soul, and freedom (KrV, A329/B385).

There are important developments from Kant’s treatment of the “unity of reason” in the first two *Critiques* to the demand for a transition in the third *Critique*. In particular, in the third *Critique*, Kant ascribes the power of judgment the role of establishing the transition. But it is plausible that Kant continues to hold that a “transition” from the theoretical to the practical is needed because it is an interest of human reason that our theoretical principles be unified with the postulates.

⁴ Henceforth: “the postulates.”

⁵ See e.g. KpV, AA 5:91; GMS, AA 4:391; KrV, A 480/B 868. See Kleingeld (1998) for discussion of various formulations of this thesis throughout Kant’s work.

However, according to the critical restrictions established in the first *Critique*, neither the understanding nor theoretical reason can give us principles that license claims of knowledge (*Wissen*) that the supersensible objects of the postulates exist. This raises the question of what kind of theoretical principles could establish the transition. To anticipate, I will argue that Kant's account of the power of judgment will illuminate the kind of unity that theoretical considerations can establish. As I will now show, the needs of theoretical inquiry lead the power of judgment to take up the TPP: a regulative principle that tells us to view nature as if designed by God for the sake of theoretical inquiry.⁶

2. The TPP

Kant presents the TPP as part of his account of the reflecting power of judgment, whose main role is to seek empirical concepts and laws. I will focus, as Kant does in the published Introduction, on the role of judgment in seeking laws. Kant explains this role for the reflecting power of judgment against the background of his account of the understanding in the first *Critique*. While the understanding gives us pure concepts and corresponding transcendental principles, it does not in its pure use determine specific empirical laws, leaving the reflecting power of judgment to find them (KU, AA 5: 179–180, 20: 211–213).

We can take the following quotation as our guiding formulation of the TPP:

Since universal laws of nature have their ground in our understanding, which prescribes them to nature (although only in accordance with the universal concept of it as nature), the particular empirical laws, in regard to that which is left undetermined in them by the former, must be considered in terms of the sort of unity they would have if an understanding (even if not ours) had likewise given them for the sake of our faculty of cognition, in order to make possible a system of experience in accordance with particular laws of nature. (KU, AA 5: 180)

⁶ I leave open whether the transition also involves theoretical principles that posit the freedom of the will and the immortality of the soul.

By referring to “what is left undetermined,” Kant recapitulates the claim that the understanding does not on its own determine empirical laws. He then states the TPP, which we can summarize as follows:

The transcendental principle of purposiveness (TPP): in order to seek new empirical laws, we must think of nature as if:

- a) Empirical laws are unified into a system.
- b) This unity is such as an understanding would have designed it for the sake of our faculty of cognition.

The TPP is an example of what Kant calls a “regulative” principle or maxim. Such principles instruct us to make certain “assumptions” (*Annahmen*) or “presuppositions” (*Voraussetzungen*) about the world—to view the world *as if* it is a certain way—for the sake of conducting theoretical inquiry.⁷ I will now sketch Kant’s argument for the principle.

To see the argument for the need to assume a), we must begin with the observation that, according to Kant’s account of laws of nature, a regularity qualifies as a law only if it lays claim to necessity.⁸ Kant suggests that the only way that we could know that a lawlike regularity is necessary would be to show that it belongs to a system of laws (KU, AA 5: 180). I cannot here examine the nature of such a system of laws, but I follow Michael Friedman in thinking that the system would be anchored by the transcendental principles of the understanding (Friedman 1992, 185-186).

However, Kant maintains that the “particular rules” of nature “can only be known to it [the understanding] empirically” (KU, AA 5: 184). The suggestion is that the understanding is not in the position to ground empirical regularities in a system anchored by the transcendental principles of the understanding (KU, AA 5:184).

⁷ See e.g. KU, AA 5: 184 and 5: 413. Moving forward, I will use “assume that ϕ ” to be synonymous with “think *as if* ϕ .”

⁸ See e.g. KrV, A 91/B 124.

Consequently, Kant maintains of empirical regularities that the understanding “never can cognize their necessity” (KU, AA 5:184).

Kant concludes that the power of judgment must therefore assume, for the sake of inquiry, that empirical laws are unifiable into a system—one that is “not fathomable by us but still thinkable” (KU, AA 5:183). This assumption allows us to regard regularities as laws, even though we cannot know that they are laws. As Angela Breitenbach argues, this assumption, while it does not yield knowledge whose “certainty is apodictic” (MAN, AA 4:468), is useful for constructing theories, making predictions, and progressing toward the regulative ideal of a complete system (Breitenbach 2018, 118-119).

I will now present Kant’s argument that we must assume b), that the laws exhibit the unity that they would have “if an understanding (even if not ours) had likewise given them for the sake of our faculty of cognition.” There are two components of this assumption: that an understanding designed the systematic unity of laws, and that the understanding did so for the sake of our cognition. I will present only the argument for the first, because it is most important to the transition.

We can understand Kant’s argument by considering his more expansive argument in the Critique of Teleological Judgment (CTJ) that to seek explanations of organisms, we must assume that God exists. Kant argues that organisms display a special kind of systematic unity that poses a problem to the reflecting power of judgment in its search for biological laws. We cannot account for the systematic unity of an organism’s parts merely by postulating an accidental convergence of efficient causes that explain why each part functions the way it does and how the parts work in tandem (KU, AA 5:360). Rather, the whole organism has explanatory priority over its parts.

However, Kant also maintains that due to the nature of our understanding, “a real whole of nature is to be regarded only as the effect of the concurrent moving forces of the parts” (KU, AA 5: 407).⁹ Accordingly, the only way to appeal to the whole organism in an explanation of its parts is for us to think of the *concept* of the whole organism in the mind of a designer as prior to its parts. This allows us to explain the organism on analogy with how we explain an artifact: for example, we explain the systematic unity of a watch’s parts by appealing to the concept of the watch in the watchmaker’s mind.¹⁰ Finally, apparently motivated by the claim that theoretical reason seeks a unity of explanations, Kant concludes that we must think of all organisms as if they were produced by a single designer: God (KU, AA 5: 400).

Kant makes a similar argument in the Introduction: that due to the systematic unity displayed by the laws, the whole system of laws seems explanatorily prior to each individual law, which can be thought of as parts of this system. But because we cannot think of a whole as prior to its parts, we must think of the *concept* of the whole system in the mind of a designer as grounding the arrangement of the laws.

This line of thought is presented after the formulation of the TPP that we have been considering. Here, Kant explains why accepting the principle amounts to accepting the presupposition that an understanding is the ground of the unity of the laws. To present Kant’s explanation, I must first explain his definition of “end” or “purpose” (*Zweck*) and “purposiveness” (*Zweckmäßigkeit*). An end, according to Kant, is “the concept of an object insofar as it [the concept] at the same time contains the ground of the reality of this object” (KU, AA 5:180). An object is “purposive” when it corresponds “with that constitution of things that is possible only in accordance with ends” (KU, AA 5:

⁹I follow Angela Breitenbach in holding that this claim is founded on Kant’s argument in the *Metaphysical Foundations* that all alterations in matter must have external causes, which are further understood in terms of the interaction between material parts through attractive and repulsive forces (Breitenbach 2006, 707–708).

¹⁰ Cf 5: 407-408.

181). In other words, an object is purposive when its possibility is grounded by a concept of the object. According to this definition, a watch is purposive because it is explained by appeal to the concept of the watch in the watchmaker's mind.

Kant then makes the following claim about the TPP:

Thus the principle of the power of judgment in regard to the form of things in nature under empirical laws in general is the purposiveness of nature in its multiplicity. I.e. nature is represented through this concept as if an understanding contained the ground of the unity of the manifold of its empirical laws. (KU, AA 5: 181)

According to this passage, we deem the “form of things in nature under empirical laws” to be purposive because it seems as if a concept of the whole of nature is the explanatory ground of this unity. The final sentence tells us that assuming that the concept of nature is the ground of its unity amounts to representing nature as if an understanding contained the relevant ground.

The passage thus suggests that, to assume the unity of the laws, we must think of a concept of the whole system of laws in the mind of an “understanding” as the ground of the system. While Kant does not explicitly refer to God, it is plausible that the “understanding” must be God, since the relevant understanding designs all of nature and so must stand outside of it. Thus, Kant argues that the reflecting power of judgment's search for empirical laws of nature requires us to take up the assumption that God exists.

Importantly, the conception of God invoked in this maxim is not the same as that of God_M. The argument, as I have presented it, requires that we assume only that God possesses an understanding and a will, and has the power to design all of nature. It doesn't imply, however, that we must think of God as omnipotent, omniscient, or benevolent, and it does not imply that we must think of God as concerned with the

realization of the highest good.¹¹ I will use “God_A” to refer to God as the intelligent author of the world.

3. The TPP and the Transition

I will now explain the relevance of the TPP to the transition from the theoretical to the practical. As I explained in §1, Kant’s call for a transition concerns the unity of theoretical principles and the postulates. The power of judgment’s TPP contributes to the transition because it tells us to assume that God_A exists, which aligns with the postulate of God_M’s existence.

I will first explain the claim that the TPP “aligns” with the postulate of God_M’s existence. By this, I mean to capture the fact that both the TPP and the postulate of God_M’s existence concern the existence of God, and—while they invoke different conceptions of God—these conceptions of God are importantly related to each other. All attributes of God_A are features of God_M, and several features shared by God_A and God_M—namely, that God possesses an understanding and a will—are conditions on distinctive features of God_M. An understanding and a will are conditions on God’s omniscience and omnipotence, respectively, and both are conditions on God’s ability to ensure the distribution of happiness in proportion with virtue.¹² Thus, the TPP aligns with the postulate of God_M’s existence because it tells us to assume the existence of God_A, whom we conceive as possessing features that are preconditions for distinctive features of God_M.

The resulting picture is that according to the power of judgment’s TPP, we must take up a view of nature and God that is harmonious with the view that pure practical reason

¹¹ I argue in Bowman, unpublished manuscript that Kant’s discussion of the limitations of “physicotheology” in the Appendix to the CTJ demonstrates that on his view, the theoretical activities of the power of judgment cannot by themselves establish the need to assume that God_M exists.

¹² Evidence that Kant is concerned with this relationship between the concepts of God_A and God_M can be found in the Pölitz transcripts from his lectures on philosophical theology, which I discuss in Bowman, unpublished manuscript. See V-Th/Pölitz, AA 8: 999.

demands. This harmony is significant in virtue of Kant's unity of reason thesis, which tells us that it is in the nature of reason to seek unity between its theoretical and practical principles.

I will now substantiate this interpretation by examining the presentation of the transition claim in the Introduction, where Kant specifically connects the transition to the judging of nature's laws.¹³ Kant states that the power of judgment

provides the mediating concept between the concepts of nature and the concept of freedom, which makes possible the transition from the purely theoretical to the purely practical, from lawfulness in accordance with the former to the final end in accordance with the latter, in the concept of a purposiveness of nature; for thereby is the possibility of the final end, which can become actual only in nature and in accord with its laws, cognized. (KU, AA 5: 196)

After claiming that the power of judgment enables the transition between the "purely theoretical" and the "purely practical," Kant offers an explanation: that the power of judgment makes the transition possible through the concept of the purposiveness of nature, because through the concept of purposiveness, judgment allows for the cognition of "the possibility of the final end."

By mentioning "purposiveness," Kant refers back to the idea that we must view nature as if it were grounded by a concept of nature in the mind of a designer: God_A. In the next paragraph, Kant mentions the power of judgment's "*a priori* principle for judging nature in accordance with possible particular laws for it," which confirms that he is referring to the idea that that we must view nature as if designed in order to assume a system of laws.¹⁴ By "final end" (*Endzweck*), Kant most plausibly refers to the highest

¹³ Passages in the Appendix to the CTJ provide further evidence for my interpretation, including Kant's claim that once humans began attending to the apparent purposiveness of nature, this "would then have served admirably to strengthen" the idea of God_M (KU, AA 5: 459). See also KU, AA 5:456. For discussion see Bowman, unpublished manuscript.

¹⁴ This reference to the TPP occurs in a difficult paragraph in which Kant refers to the "supersensible"; I offer a full interpretation in Bowman, unpublished manuscript.

good, for in the Appendix to the CTJ, Kant defines the “final end” as the complete aim of human action, and identifies the highest good as the final end (KU, AA 5: 450).¹⁵

We can now consider the full claim that the concept of a purposiveness of nature allows us to cognize the possibility of the final end. Kant most plausibly describes the idea that viewing nature as if it were designed by God helps us to see the possibility of the highest good. The most perspicuous way of spelling out this imprecisely presented thought follows the interpretation of the transition that I have put forward: viewing nature as if designed by God_A is important because it aligns with our moral Belief that God_M exists.

The full picture suggested by this passage thus confirms the reading that I have been advancing: through the TPP, the reflecting power of judgment makes possible the transition from the theoretical to the practical by requiring us to assume that an author of the world exists. The principle thereby more closely aligns the view of the world that theoretical considerations warrant with the view that pure practical reason demands.¹⁶

¹⁵ Kant relatedly speaks of a “final end” of *creation*, which he identifies with human beings as moral agents, together with the highest good. It is more plausible that in the Introduction, Kant refers specifically to the highest good.

¹⁶ I thank Anja Jauernig, Béatrice Longuenesse, Jim Kreines, Eric Watkins, Banafsheh Beizaei, Annette Martin, Rosalind Chaplin, Karen Koch, Clara Lingle, participants at an NYU works-in-progress presentation, and audience members at the 13th International Kant Congress for their feedback.

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