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To cite this article: Joe Saunders (2021): Some hope for Kant's Groundwork III, Inquiry, DOI: [10.1080/0020174X.2021.1997798](https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2021.1997798)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2021.1997798>



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Published online: 06 Dec 2021.



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Some hope for Kant's Groundwork III

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ABSTRACT

Kant worries that if we are not free, morality will be nothing more than a phantasm for us. In the final section of the *Groundwork*, he attempts secure our freedom, and with it, morality. Here is a simplified version of his argument:

- (1) A rational will is a free will
- (2) A free will stands under the moral law
- (3) Therefore, a rational will stands under the moral law

In this paper, I attempt to defuse two prominent objections to this argument. Commentators often worry that Kant has not managed to establish that we are rational beings with wills in the first place, and that he equivocates in his use of 'free' between premise 1 and 2. I argue that both of these objections can be overcome, and thus seek to offer some hope for Kant's approach in *Groundwork* III.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 9 March 2021; Accepted 22 October 2021

KEYWORDS Kant; freedom; Groundwork

Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* is one of the most important works of philosophy.¹ And its task is relatively clear. In his own words, it is:

[...] nothing more than the identification [*Aufsuchung*] and establishment [*Festsetzung*] of the supreme principle of morality. (IV: 392. 3–4)²

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¹This paper draws upon research undertaken during my PhD at the University of Sheffield back in 2011–15. For this, I owe a big thanks to Bob Stern and Chris Bennett for many helpful conversations about *Groundwork* III. I also want to thank Charlotte Alderwick, Jochen Bojanowski, John Callanan, Stephen Engstrom, Irina Schumski, Martin Sticker, Jens Timmermann, and Owen Ware for various discussions we've had over the years on this most intriguing – and at times, infuriating – of texts.

²I quote Kant according to the standard *Academy Edition*. Translations from the *Groundwork* are from Timmermann (2011). Other works by Kant are quoted from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* edited by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood.

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In the first two sections of the *Groundwork*, Kant identifies and analyses the supreme principle of morality. This is part of the canon of western philosophy. His attempt to establish it is not. For this, we have to turn to the third and final section of the book – *Groundwork* III.

Paul Guyer sums up a common attitude towards the *Groundwork* when he writes the following:

[Kant's] analysis of the moral law and its several formulations is one of the masterpieces of western philosophy, and his attempt to provide a transcendental deduction of it is one of its most spectacular train wrecks. (Guyer 2007, 445)

Guyer is not alone in this diagnosis of *Groundwork* III. Karl Ameriks thinks it suffers 'shipwreck' (2000, 191), Henry Allison claims that 'there is virtual unanimity that the attempt fails' (1990, 214), and Jeanine Grenberg calls it 'the most beloved flawed argument in the history of philosophy' (2013, 106). Even Kant himself appears to abandon this approach only a few years later in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. So much for *Groundwork* III – the only question that seems to remain concerns which vehicular metaphor captures the catastrophe best.

I look to provide some hope for *Groundwork* III, and in particular Kant's argument for freedom in it. Kant appears to argue from our reason to freedom, and then from our freedom to morality. Here is a simplified version of this argument:

- (1) A rational will is a free will
- (2) A free will stands under the moral law
- (3) Therefore, a rational will stands under the moral law

In this paper, I want to address two major objections to this argument. Commentators often complain that Kant has not managed to establish that we are rational beings *with wills* in the first place,³ and that he equivocates in his use of 'free' between premises 1 and 2.⁴ I will argue that these objections can be overcome, and that perhaps *Groundwork* III is not such a wreck after all.

Before I turn to these two objections, however, I want to outline how I read Kant's argument for freedom, and *Groundwork* III in general. I begin by discussing Kant's claim that he seeks to *establish* the supreme principle

³See Allison (1990, 227–9, 2011, 309, 324–30, 2012, 91–2, 115), Ameriks (2000, 203–4, 2003, 171–4), Henrich (1975, 312–4), Korsgaard (1996a, 170), McLearn (forthcoming, 57–58), Timmermann (2007, 136–7, especially 137n38), and Tenenbaum (2012, 572–5).

⁴See Allison (1990, 227–8, 1996, 109–14; 129–42, 2012, 115–6), Ameriks (2000, 205, 2003, 173, 241–4), Darwall (2006, 216–7), Grenberg (2009, 348–52), Reath (1993, 424–5), and Tenenbaum (2012, 569–70).

of morality, and what this means (§1). I read *Groundwork* III as primarily attempting a *non-moral* argument for our freedom, and clarify what this amounts to (§2). In doing so, I distance myself from those who read *Groundwork* III as a proof or justification of the moral law itself (§3). Instead, I read *Groundwork* III as entitling us to something that we already take ourselves to possess, namely that we are entitled to regard ourselves as free, and standing under moral laws. This leads into a discussion of what Kant means by a ‘deduction’ (§4). Here, I offer some general epistemological remarks on the nature of doubt, and propose that a deduction is only required when there are reasonable grounds for doubt.

Having done this, I turn to the two objections. I draw upon my conception of a deduction to argue that we are entitled to think of ourselves as possessing free will (§5), such that we stand under the moral law (§6). In doing so, I offer a sympathetic reconstruction of Kant’s text, looking to defuse two prominent objections to it, and thereby offering some hope for *Groundwork* III.

1. Establishing the supreme principle of morality

The first two sections of the *Groundwork* leave something open. Kant analyses morality and identifies what he takes to be its supreme principle, but always postpones some ‘particular and arduous effort’ (IV: 420. 22–3) for the third and final section.⁵

What is this effort? In *Groundwork* III, Kant attempts a deduction of the supreme principle of morality. For Kant, a deduction concerns the securing of an entitlement to something that we take ourselves to possess.⁶ In the case at hand, we take ourselves to be subject to the supreme principle of morality, and in *Groundwork* III, Kant attempts to entitle us to this.

A question remains as to what exactly it is about the supreme principle of morality that Kant is attempting a deduction of. He uses the term ‘deduction’ three times in *Groundwork* III. In the first subsection, he writes of a ‘deduction of the concept of freedom’ (IV: 447. 22–3), which he has yet to ‘make comprehensible’ (IV. 447. 22). In the fourth subsection, he shows how a categorical imperative, qua imperative, is possible, and then writes of ‘the correctness of this deduction’ (IV: 454. 20–1). And finally, at the end of the book, he refers back to ‘our deduction of the

⁵See for instance: IV: 420. 21–3, IV: 428. 34–429. 9, IV: 429n, IV: 431. 32–4, and IV: 440. 20–8.

⁶See A 84/B 116; Henrich (1989, 30–40, 1975, 322–9); Allison (2011, 274).

supreme principle of morality' (IV: 463. 21–2). The first two references set out two distinct tasks.⁷ Kant seeks to establish: (1) that we are free, and in particular, sufficiently free to stand under the moral law; (2) how the categorical imperative, as an *imperative*, is possible. These are the two major tasks of *Groundwork* III.⁸

The literature is divided on the respective importance of these tasks. For a while, freedom was seen as the main issue in *Groundwork* III, and accordingly the first two or three subsections received the most attention.⁹ In the first subsection (IV: 446. 7–447.25), Kant argues that a free will and a will under moral laws are the same, and in the second subsection (IV: 447. 28–448. 22), he argues that a rational will must act under the idea of freedom. This forms the two premises of Kant's basic argument from reason to freedom, and from freedom to the moral law. Recently, however, scholars have recognised the importance of Kant's claim that the moral law appears to us as an *imperative* and attention has shifted to the fourth subsection of *Groundwork* III.¹⁰

These are both important issues. However, in this paper, I confine my attention to freedom. The imperatival form that the categorical imperative takes for us is clearly important, but it has been dealt with excellently in the recent literature. Kant's deduction of freedom on the other hand is not in such good shape. As noted at the outset, even Kant himself seems to abandon this strategy only a few years later. Given that I am only focussing on *one* of Kant's attempted deductions in *Groundwork* III (his deduction of freedom and not his deduction of the categorical

⁷The third reference is ambiguous. It could refer to Kant's deduction of freedom, such that we are entitled to think of ourselves as standing under moral laws, or to the deduction of the categorical imperative, as an imperative, or both; see Allison (2011, 275). I should note that this reading is contested. Schönecker (2006), for instance, thinks that there is only *one* deduction in *Groundwork* III, namely a deduction of the supreme principle of morality; Santo (2011) also argues against Allison that Kant is only attempting to provide a deduction of the categorical imperative. I side with Allison (2011, 274) here, in thinking that, while establishing the supreme principle of morality is Kant's ultimate goal in *Groundwork* III, it is not the only thing that he provides a deduction of. Allison (2011, 275) refers to Schönecker's account as a "single deduction", and to his own as a "double deduction" (although he does also note that "Kant mentions the term "deduction" *three* times in GMS 3 and each time it seems to have a different referent" [emphasis mine]). For another recent defence of a double-deduction reading and discussion of why *Groundwork* III contains a double- rather than triple-deduction, see Hiller (2016, 78n32). See also Ludwig (2008, 454–58), who calls into question whether Kant did attempt to give a deduction of the categorical imperative.

⁸There is also a third concern. Kant is troubled by the interest that we take in morality. He wonders how it is that we – rational animals that we are – take an interest in the purely rational claims of morality (IV: 449. 11–32). I don't address this explicitly in this paper, but the discussion in §4 provides a way in which we need not be too troubled by this concern.

⁹See, for instance, Korsgaard (1996a, 160–71, 1996b, 92–8) and Hill (1998, 249–50).

¹⁰See Allison (2011, 331–47), Schönecker (1999, 2006), Stern (2012, 68–99, 2015, 17–19) and Timmermann (2007, 139–44).

imperative), I should note that, *even if* my argument succeeds, it might still not salvage the approach of *Groundwork* III. Nevertheless, it might offer some hope for those who would try, and for those interested in Kant's arguments for freedom.

2. Two types of argument for freedom in Kant

Over the years, Kant attempted many different arguments for freedom. In general, we can find two distinct types of argument: one moral, and the other non-moral. On the non-moral approach, it is usually something about reason or the self in general that proves we are free. On the moral approach, it is something about morality specifically that proves we are free. For a while, especially in the first half of the 1780s, Kant attempted a non-moral argument for freedom, based on the spontaneity involved in reason or judgement.¹¹ We can find this approach in the first edition of the first *Critique* (A 547–8/B 575–6), his lectures on metaphysics (XXVIII: 268–9),¹² his *Review of Schulz* (VIII: 13–4), and of course *Groundwork* III.

Immediately following the *Groundwork*, however, Kant appears to abandon this approach, to instead present a moral argument for freedom.¹³ Very roughly, we recognise the moral law and this reveals our freedom to us; we judge that we *ought* to do something, and this reveals that we *can*. This moral approach seems to end up as Kant's considered view. And we can find traces of this argument in his earlier texts, including *Groundwork* III itself.¹⁴ Some commentators claim that, even in *Groundwork* III, Kant is primarily offering a moral argument for freedom.¹⁵ I depart from this, opting for a non-moral reading of *Groundwork* III, on both textual and other grounds.

As far as the text is concerned, I think that a non-moral reading of *Groundwork* III is the most natural. For what it is worth, I find four

¹¹Henrich (1994, 72–82) contends that Kant attempts a *theoretical* proof of freedom and the moral law throughout the 1770s and the first half of the 1780s culminating in *Groundwork* III. I agree with much of his assessment of this period, but want to distance myself from the talk of a *theoretical* proof of the validity of the moral law, especially in *Groundwork* III. Ameriks (2003, 228) also finds this argument in *Groundwork* III.

¹²In these lectures, Kant attempts a non-moral a proof of the transcendental freedom of the soul on the basis of the I

¹³See the second *Critique* (V: 29. 28–30. 30) and the *Religion* (VI: 26n).

¹⁴See Kant's discussion of the scoundrel at IV: 454. 20–455. 7.

¹⁵See Bojanowski (2017, 74–5), Grenberg (2009, 335, 337, 344, 354n12), Henrich (1975, 330–5), Timmermann (2007, 127, 127–8n17, 130; 132, 137, 137n38, 139, 143–4), and Ware (2017).

different non-moral arguments for freedom in *Groundwork* III. In the order they appear in the text, they are:¹⁶

- (1) The claim that freedom must be presupposed as a property of the will of all rational beings (IV: 447. 26–448. 22).
- (2) An appeal to transcendental idealism and the activity involved in (discursive) cognition (IV: 451. 1–36).
- (3) The claim that reason's capacity for ideas reveals a 'spontaneity so pure' (IV: 452. 18) that it thereby takes us far beyond anything sensibility can afford us, and marks us out as members of an intelligible world (IV: 452. 6–22).
- (4) An appeal to the consciousness of the causality of our reason (IV: 457. 4–7, IV: 457. 22–4, IV 459. 9–14, IV: 461. 17–25).

Alongside these various non-moral arguments for freedom that Kant appears to give, the notorious circle passage also provides strong evidence in favour of this reading. In the third subsection of *Groundwork* III, Kant raises the objection that his approach might be circular.¹⁷ The worry is that:

[...] our inference from freedom to autonomy and from it to the moral law contained a covert circle, namely that perhaps we were presupposing the idea of freedom only for the sake of the moral law, in order afterwards in turn to infer it from freedom, and hence were unable to state any ground of it [...] (IV: 453. 4–8)

Here, I side with Allison (2011, 330n56) in taking Kant's claim at face value, namely that he is worried that he might be 'presupposing the idea of freedom only for the sake of the moral law' (IV: 453. 5–7).¹⁸

The non-moral reading also finds a potentially unique argument in *Groundwork* III, and not just a jumbled telling of the moral argument

¹⁶I take it that (1) and (3) are Kant's attempts to establish a link between reason and freedom, and so will say little about them in this paper. Instead, in the fifth section of this paper, I will attempt to bring together (2) and (4) to defend Kant's argument.

¹⁷IV: 450. 18–453. 15. For excellent treatment of the circle, see Allison (2011, 312–6), Quarfoot (2006), and Ware (2017).

¹⁸I also agree with Allison (2011, 315) that this is not strictly a *circle*, but rather a *petitio* – assuming something that has yet to be proven – where the thing that remains to be proven is the assumption that we have wills. I will return to address this in detail in section 5.

for freedom that Kant would later tell from the second *Critique* onwards.¹⁹

Alongside its textual merits, there are other good reasons to opt for a non-moral reading. Firstly, even if the reading of Kant's argument for freedom in *Groundwork* III as non-moral is mistaken on textual grounds, thanks to decades of work on this argument, it has now become a philosophical position in its own right (albeit one that most commentators think it is doomed). And independently of the textual merits of this position, I would like to attempt to provide some hope for the non-moral argument that people have attributed to *Groundwork* III.

Secondly, and more importantly, a non-moral argument for freedom addresses a challenge that a moral argument does not. The worry at hand is whether we are sufficiently free to comply with moral demands. The moral argument begins with our consciousness of standing under the moral law (or capacity for *pure* practical reason), and infers our freedom from that. In this way, it runs afoul of Kant's circle – 'presupposing the idea of freedom only for the sake of the moral law' (IV: 453. 5–7). Of course, this might not be so problematic. But, as we have just seen, the circle passage suggests that, at least at one time, Kant was interested in finding a non-circular response to this challenge. And a non-moral argument for freedom attempts just this.

This does raise a question as to *why* Kant abandoned this argument, and whether the argument of *Groundwork* III came to conflict with other commitments that Kant held. I think that Ameriks (2000, 191) is correct when he claims that:

[I]n the second *Critique* (1788) Kant had to recast his treatment of freedom radically so as to be in line with the more severe limits on self-knowledge that he had come to stress in the second edition revisions of the first *Critique* (1787).

However, just because Kant abandoned an argument does not mean that we have to.²⁰ And in this paper, I look to salvage some hope for an abandoned argument of *Groundwork* III.

¹⁹Choi (2019) contends that *Groundwork* III is continuous with Kant's discussion of spontaneity and self-consciousness in the B-deduction of the first *Critique*. I agree with Choi on this, but I don't think it counts decisively against the thought that there is also a great reversal between the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*, like Choi (2019, 937–8) thinks it does.

²⁰For what it is worth, I believe, as I attempt to show in this paper, that the non-moral argument for freedom that Kant offers in *Groundwork* III is in better shape than most commentators think. At the same time though, I think that the problem that transcendental idealism poses for our knowledge of freedom is even starker than Ameriks makes out; in Saunders (2016), I argue that while transcendental idealism makes it hard for us to have knowledge of our own freedom, it makes it even harder to have knowledge of other's freedom.

That being said, I do accept that the text itself pulls in both directions, giving glimpses of both moral and non-moral arguments for freedom.²¹ The literature is thus understandably split on this issue, and I do not pretend to adjudicate or settle this debate here. Instead, I will attempt to reconstruct a single coherent argument for freedom from *Groundwork* III. In doing so, I draw upon various parts of the text and downplay others.²² I do not seek to provide a complete clarification of the text of *Groundwork* III, such that it provides a single coherent non-moral argument for freedom, with no loose ends.²³ I think that might be impossible. In this respect, *Groundwork* III is like an old piece of Tupperware: If you struggle away at it, you can pin three corners down, but in attempting to pin down the fourth, one of the other corners inevitably pops up.

3. What *Groundwork* III is not

It is important though, to emphasise one thing that *Groundwork* III is *not*. It is not an attempted proof or justification of *the moral law*.²⁴ I think *Groundwork* III does offer a deduction of the moral law, in that it entitles us to our understanding of ourselves as free, and thereby as capable of standing under moral laws, but is not a non-moral proof or justification of the normative authority of the moral law itself. *Groundwork* III does deal with sceptical challenges, but not this one.

²¹Bojanowski (2017, 65–67) offers an alternative reading of the circle, where Kant “presupposes our capacity of pure practical reason” [emphasis mine], and “since we only get to know this capacity through its moral use, Kant has not really given us a non-question begging account” (Bojanowski 2017, 66). This alternative, in part, draws from a reading of IV: 452. 7–22. I read this passage as attempting to appeal to features of reason in its theoretical, capacity, namely the pure spontaneity involved in forming *ideas* (IV: 452. 17–19; cf. A 313–20/ B 369–77. However, I should note that I do agree with Bojanowski (2017, 66n25), that “Kant’s argument here *does not need* to be read as a move from theoretical to practical freedom” [emphasis mine].

²²One key piece of text that I have to downplay in order to advance a non-moral reading of Kant’s argument for freedom in *Groundwork* III is his reference at IV: 447. 22–3 to “the deduction of the concept of freedom from pure practical reason”; cf. Bojanowski (2006, 215). For what it is worth, I think that, at the time of writing *Groundwork* III, Kant was still eager to provide a non-moral argument for freedom (to avoid any circularity), but that nevertheless, he does slip in elements of a moral argument for freedom as well; as noted above, I think that Kant’s discussion of the scoundrel at IV: 454. 20–455. 7 comes close to making the moral argument for freedom that he will go on to make in the second *Critique*.

²³Cf. Velkley on Henrich’s work on Kant (1994, 10: “Many of Henrich’s studies of Kant locate within his principal arguments areas of tension, or “fractures”, which are revelatory not of Kant’s logical negligence but of his penetration into the fundamental and necessarily problematic sources of human questioning. [...] The most central passages of a philosopher’s thought, Henrich avers, are necessarily the most difficult and resistant to interpretation. They are also the passages that the most fertile soil for future philosophical developments.” By these standards, Kant’s deduction of freedom in *Groundwork* III is soil as fertile as any.

²⁴I should note that certain parts of the *Groundwork* do suggest such a reading (see, for instance, IV: 449. 11–3; 24–31). Allison (1998, 273) and Ameriks (2010a, 2003, 170) used to read the text this way, but have since changed their minds; see Ameriks (2010b, 46) and Allison (2011, 309–10).

If Kant were to provide non-moral reasons for acting morally, it would seem to renounce the idea of duty for duty's sake, and reduce morality to hypothetical imperatives²⁵ – if you want certain non-moral things, *then* you ought to act morally.²⁶ This point has recently gained traction: Timmermann (2007, 129–30) has argued that Kant is not addressing a (radical) moral sceptic; Stern (2015, 81) has noted that Kant is not addressing a sceptic who stands outside morality, but instead one who is inside the moral life, but finds it problematic or puzzling from within; and Allison (2011, 309) sees Kant as addressing a 'curious and sympathetic meta-ethicist'.²⁷

I agree with these accounts.²⁸ The *Groundwork* takes common rational cognition as its starting point, and analyses that.²⁹ In *Groundwork* III, Kant is addressing someone who has followed him through the book, but is unsure of whether *we* are capable of standing under the moral law. And this worry stems from our constitution. We are rational, but we are also animals (sensibly affected finite beings). Unless we are free, the moral law will be a phantasm, or mere figment of the mind for us. And here I think that Kant is offering a non-moral argument, to the effect that we are entitled to regard ourselves as free and thereby entitled to think of ourselves as standing under the moral law. This is the sceptical challenge that *Groundwork* III addresses (alongside the issue of the imperatival force of the moral law).

4. Deduction and doubt

Getting Kant's deduction of freedom into focus is not easy. Allow me to attempt to bring it into view. For this, it helps to set out Kant's target. As noted earlier, a 'deduction' has a specific meaning for Kant: it is an attempt to entitle us to something that we take ourselves to possess, in this case, freedom. Now, a deduction is only needed when our claim to possession is put in doubt. In this case, we take ourselves to be free and something puts this into question.

²⁵Cf. Allison (2011, 310–11).

²⁶If Kant did attempt to address that sceptical challenge, he would fall prey to Prichardian worries; see Stern (2015, 74–89) for a treatment of *Groundwork* III, Prichard and Korsgaard.

²⁷See also Bojanowski (2017, 69), who argues that "Kant's argument does not give an externalist justification of morality. He does not have an argument against someone who takes up a standpoint deliberately beyond good and evil (morality). It would be hopeless to look for an argument here that could convince a moral sceptic of this sort that she ought to adopt a moral standpoint."

²⁸For an alternative account of scepticism in the *Groundwork*, see Ware (2016, 2021, 16–43).

²⁹For discussion of common rational cognition in *Groundwork* III, see Sticker (2014).

There are two worries here. The first concerns the general threat of causal determinism. If our behaviour is completely causally determined, it will not be up to us how we act.³⁰ Whether or not we follow the supreme principle of morality would not be up to us, and morality would be a ‘figment of the mind’ (IV: 445. 9) for creatures like us. At one point, Kant expresses this in the legal terminology of a deduction:³¹

[...] it is not left to the philosopher’s discretion whether he wants to remove the seeming conflict [between freedom and natural necessity], or leave it untouched; for in the latter case the theory about this is a *bonum vacans* [or vacant good], of which the fatalist can with good reason seize possession and chase all moral science from its supposed property as possessing it without title. (IV: 456. 29–33)

The second issue concerns the type of freedom that we possess. We might have some form of (libertarian) freedom, but it could be limited. We might still be ultimately governed by instincts and desires – in total, the sensuous part of human nature. If this were the case, our limited freedom might allow us to follow hypothetical imperatives, but we would be incapable of following a categorical imperative, or acting for the sake of the supreme principle of morality.³²

These two worries about freedom threaten that morality (as Kant analyses it in *Groundwork* I and II) might be a figment of the mind for us. In *Groundwork* III, Kant seeks to overcome this. He hopes to secure our right to think of ourselves as (suitably) free, and thereby as standing under the moral law.

Before I attempt to overcome these objections, it will help to say a little more about what a deduction is. Above, I characterised a deduction as an attempt to secure an entitlement to something we take ourselves to possess. Here is Henrich on this:

A deduction is called for, whether in cognition or in court, when the title to a right is in dispute. If the doubt is not explicit there is no basis for the deduction. (Henrich 1975, 324)

I want to add something to this. I think that a deduction is called for, only when doubt is grounded. If there are no reasonable grounds for doubt, a

³⁰Kant derides what we would call a compatibilist conception of freedom as the “freedom of a turnspit” (V: 97. 19), and a “wretched subterfuge” (V: 96. 1). I am sympathetic to Kant on this, but will not make that case here. Instead, I follow Kant in his attempt to provide a deduction of a libertarian conception of freedom.

³¹See Timmermann (2007, 146n55).

³²We can find a hint of this worry at the start of *Groundwork* II (IV: 406. 14–22).

deduction is not required. To give a simple example, I currently believe that there is a fridge in the kitchen. Of course, it is possible that the fridge is somehow no longer in the kitchen. But as it stands, this possibility need not trouble me, as there are no reasonable grounds for me to doubt that there is a fridge in the kitchen. What would constitute reasonable grounds for doubt? Perhaps a recent spate of fridge thefts, and a suspicious looking van outside my kitchen. Returning to Kant, one might think that Hume provided reasonable grounds for doubting that every event has a cause, through his argument that (in Kant's terms) synthetic a priori claims are not possible. In attempting to show that these claims are possible, Kant attempted to remove this ground for doubting that every event has a cause.

In claiming that one needs grounds for doubt, I align myself with Classical Pragmatism. Peirce wants to distance philosophy from Cartesian doubt:

A person may, it is true, in the course of his studies, find reason to doubt what he began by believing; but in that case he doubts because he has a positive reason for it, and not on account of the Cartesian maxim. Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts. (Peirce 1868, 29)

At one point, Stern brings out this point, by discussing a remark of Wittgenstein's:

'But what about such a proposition as "I know I have a brain"? Can I doubt it? Grounds for *doubt* are lacking! Everything speaks in its favour, nothing against it' [... §4, 2.] Wittgenstein is clearly saying here that I cannot doubt 'I have a brain' not because there are some things that must be presupposed in thinking and this is one of them, but because the Cartesian does not give us sufficient *grounds* for questioning this belief, even though it could turn out to be false (Stern 2009, 235–6 n74)

I think Peirce and Wittgenstein are spot on here, and I also think that we can find traces of this line of thought in Kant.

With a deduction, we take ourselves to possess something, and then something else puts this into doubt. This is not an attempt to answer a Cartesian sceptic.³³ And that is a good thing – once you start playing that game, you are unlikely to emerge.³⁴ Moreover, such scepticism lacks grounds. Consider, for example, Kant's deduction of the categories.

³³See Ameriks (2003, 10–12). One place where Kant is sometimes thought to address the Cartesian sceptic is the Refutation of Idealism. I follow Ameriks (2003, 17–20) and Stern (2000, 142–64) in thinking that this is not the best way to read Kant's argument.

³⁴See Hookway (1999, 175).

Kant is not trying to establish that these are immune to any possible doubt. Instead, he starts with our conception of experience, and attempts to show how this is possible. In doing so, he takes himself to have vindicated the claim that the categories have objective validity.

Here, I position Kant alongside Peirce, such that he can circumvent some of the prominent early objections to his project. Maimon (1790, 42–3), for instance, accuses Kant of not providing an adequate response to the (Humean) sceptic, in that Kant presupposes a rich conception of experience – which involves, for example, objects standing in causal relations – that a sceptic could deny. I think Maimon is right that a sceptic *could* deny this, but more importantly, I think he is wrong to think that this is what an adequate response to a sceptic requires, or that Kant was attempting such a response.³⁵

We can see this by looking at Kant's argument for freedom in the second *Critique* in a little more detail.³⁶ Kant argues that we are aware that we ought to do the right thing, and therefore judge that we can do it; so conceived, the moral law reveals to us our freedom (V: 30. 27–35). Kant call this 'a fact of reason' (V: 31. 24), and claims that it is 'undeniable [*unleugbar*]' (V: 32. 2).

Of course though, this fact is not strictly *undeniable*.³⁷ It is just that Kant is not interested in that kind of moral scepticism.³⁸ He wants to take our moral experience at face value, and then provide a system that can vindicate it. In doing so, he offers a response to the Humean sceptic, who in this case, contends that (in Kant's terms) pure reason cannot be practical.

I should note that I am not drawing upon the fact of reason specifically to buttress the argument of *Groundwork* III. In the second *Critique*, Kant gives up on his non-moral arguments for freedom, whereas here I am trying to make them work. In thinking about his treatment of scepticism in the fact of reason case, though I think we can arrive at an understanding of doubt and scepticism, which can help buttress the argument of *Groundwork* III. Let us turn to this now.

³⁵I think that Kant does address the Humean sceptic, but not in the way Maimon wants. Kant addresses the Humean sceptic in showing how, for instance, synthetic a priori judgements are possible. In doing so, he takes himself to have vindicated important aspects of our everyday common experience.

³⁶For more detail on the fact of reason, see Ware (2014, 2021, 44–70).

³⁷See Allison (2012, 118).

³⁸In a forthcoming paper, McLear (forthcoming, 57) remarks that: "It's not clear then that Kant's argument in *Groundwork* III provides any traction against a committed skeptical naturalist. Indeed, acknowledgement of this fact all on its own, without requiring a change to Kant's underlying commitments, could have prompted him to change his approach in the second *Critique*, where his appeal to a "fact of reason" seems to be deliberately indifferent to skeptical worries."

5. Practical reason

The starting point of Kant's argument in *Groundwork* III is a rational will. From here, he attempts to move to freedom to our standing under the moral law. One important objection to this whole approach concerns whether we are entitled to think of ourselves as having wills in the first place.

Over the course of this section, I will argue that we are entitled to think of ourselves as rational beings with wills. There are two main parts to this. We need to show that free will is possible, and that there are grounds for thinking we are free. Kant thinks that transcendental idealism (and only transcendental idealism) makes free will possible. As for what shows that we are free, in the second *Critique*, the moral law plays this role. I find Kant's answer in the *Groundwork* in the fifth subsection of *Groundwork* III, where he appeals to our consciousness of the causality of reason. This evidence for our free will is relatively simple – we are conscious of our agency. I claim that this entitles us to think of ourselves as rational beings with wills.

The section falls into four parts. I begin by laying out the problem, detailing Kant's worry that we might not have wills (§5.1). I then draw upon the previous chapter's discussion of deductions and doubt (§5.2) to argue that the phenomenology of our agency reveals to us that we have free wills (§5.3), and that transcendental idealism makes this possible (§5.4).

5.1. The possibility that reason is not practical

The topic of this section is whether we are rational beings *with wills*. A good place to start is with what Kant means by a 'will'. Unfortunately, we are not helped by an ambiguity in his use of the term. He famously introduces the will in *Groundwork* II as follows:

Every thing in nature works according to laws. Only a rational being has the capacity to *act according to the representation* of laws, i.e. according to principles, or a *will*. Since *reason* is required for deriving actions from laws, the will is nothing other than practical reason (IV: 412. 26–30).

Here, a will looks like the capacity to act according to principles. Elsewhere though, Kant claims that a will is the capacity 'so to act that the principle of actions conforms with the essential constitution of a rational cause, that is, with the condition of universal validity of a

maxim as a law' (IV: 458. 12–6). This ambiguity permeates the text (and the surrounding literature), and gives us two basic options as to what Kant means by a rational being with a will: (1) a rational agent, who can act on principles (or maxims); (2) a moral agent, who is not just instrumentally rational, but has the capacity to conform their principles to the moral law. Otherwise expressed, the two options are: (1) a being for whom reason is practical; (2) a being for whom *pure* reason is practical.³⁹ Here, I understand 'will' in the first sense, and thus take the question at hand to be whether reason is practical.⁴⁰ Of course, there is the further question of whether *pure* reason is practical, but that is the topic of the next section.

The *Groundwork* is a book about rational beings with wills, beings whose reason is practical. That Kant talks about rational beings *with* wills suggests that he was open to the possibility of rational beings *without* wills.⁴¹ Furthermore, we might be such beings. At the start of the third section of *Groundwork* III, he raises this very worry:⁴²

We last traced the determinate concept of morality back to the idea of freedom; which we could not, however, prove as something actual even in ourselves or in human nature; we saw only that we must presuppose it if we want to think of a being as rational and endowed with consciousness of its causality with regard to its actions, i.e. with a will (IV: 448. 25–449. 3)

Henrich has argued that this is pivotal to understanding Kant's project in *Groundwork* III, and its failure. He insists that, for Kant, there is a crucial difference between a rational being and a rational being with a will (1975, 312–4).⁴³ Considered as such, *Groundwork* III seems to beg the question at hand. Its starting point is a rational will, where the first

³⁹Cf. IV: 427. 19–20. Ameriks (2012, 185–6) draws attention to a similar ambiguity.

⁴⁰For a fuller treatment of this, see Willaschek (2006, 123–9). I understand 'will' in the first sense, in part to allow us to clearly separate the two objections to *Groundwork* III that I am considering. For if we read 'will' as pure practical reason, then the two objections merge. But there do seem to be two distinct and important objections here: (1) whether our reason is practical, and (2) whether the freedom involved in practical reason is the type of freedom the moral law requires. If we read 'will' a pure practical reason, then the first question would be (1*) whether pure reason is practical, and an affirmative answer to this would seem to circumvent the second question, as reason would already be purely practical. I should also note that reading 'will' in this way allows me to construct a non-moral argument from *Groundwork* III. I do accept though, that there are passages that count against this reading.

⁴¹At one point in *Groundwork* I, Kant mentions the possibility that reason might not "break forth into practical use" (IV: 395. 22–3).

⁴²This is one reason why the second subsection of *Groundwork* III is sometimes called the 'preparatory argument', as it leaves open the question of whether we are rational beings with will. See IV: 447. 25 and Allison (1990, 216–7), who coined this phrase.

⁴³Henrich does not make this point lightly: "It is one of his most fundamental premises that the faculty of desire has an independent origin from that of cognition, so that reason does not imply will" (1975, 313).

premise states that ‘A rational will is a free will’. From here, we move through freedom to the moral law. Henrich is relatively comfortable with this move, but insists that the crucial issue of whether or not we are the type of rational beings that have wills still remains (1975, 329). This critique has been very influential, and this issue is often taken to count decisively against *Groundwork* III.⁴⁴

I take Allison to have provided the most comprehensive treatment of this problem. At one point, he characterises it as follows:

[...] the problem is that, whereas the consciousness of possessing reason as a theoretical capacity is arguably self-certifying, on the familiar Cartesian grounds that any doubt concerning the possession of this capacity already presupposes it, [...] this immunity to doubt does not extend to reason as a *practical* capacity. (Allison 2011, 329)

I think that this is a fascinating characterisation of the problem, and will attempt to unpack it in the next section. In doing so, I will offer some general reflections upon doubt, such that my solution falls out of the problem.

5.2. Grounds for doubt

What the grounds are for doubting that we have wills? Allison remarks that:⁴⁵

Although one might think that Kant could dismiss such a worry as idle, on the grounds that we are conscious of our agency and it can have no effect from the practical point of view, the fact is that he did not. (Allison 2012, 115)

Allison himself follows Henrich to think that this worry counts against the approach of *Groundwork* III.⁴⁶

It is important, however, to get clear what the grounds for doubt here are. I think the answer is simple: Kant is worried that everything is determined by natural necessity. If this were the case, there would be no room

⁴⁴Allison (1990, 227–9, 2011, 309, 324–30, 2012, 91–2, 115), Ameriks (2000, 203–4, 2003, 171–4), Korsgaard (1996a, 170), Timmermann (2007, 136–7, especially 137n38), and Tenenbaum (2012, 572–5) all seem strongly influenced by Henrich here; see also McLearn (forthcoming, 57–58).

⁴⁵Elsewhere, Allison refers to the claim that we have wills as a “seemingly innocuous proposition” (2011, 309).

⁴⁶At one point, he does attempt an answer on Kant’s behalf (Allison 2011, 329–30). This involves a complicated appeal to reason’s capacity to form ideas and our membership in the intelligible world. In a previous paper, I argued something similar, attempting to establish that the standpoint of practical reason is self-certifying (see Saunders 2014, 125–28). I have come to think that neither of these arguments work, as they both assume what is under question, namely that we are *entitled* to take ourselves as occupying the practical point of view in the first place.

for rational agency, as Kant conceives it.⁴⁷ Kant thinks that reason involves a libertarian spontaneity, and argues for this in *Groundwork* III. I find Kant's argument in the following passage:

Now, one cannot possibly think of a reason that would self-consciously receive guidance from any other quarter with regard to its judgements, since the subject would not then attribute the determination of judgement to his reason, but to an impulse. (IV: 448. 13–7)

This seems to be a conceptual claim about the nature of reason, namely that reason has to take itself to be the author of its own judgements, and thus independent from determination by anything external.⁴⁸ This is why Kant thinks that: (1) A rational will is a free will.⁴⁹

The threat that everything is determined by natural necessity provides reasons to doubt that we might have wills. And that seems like a reasonable doubt to have. If the world was entirely determined by natural necessity, then it is hard to see how we could be rational agents.⁵⁰ These reasonable grounds for doubt call for a deduction.

Setting things up this way changes the target though. Recall Allison's characterisation of the problem:

[...] the problem is that, whereas the consciousness of possessing reason as a theoretical capacity is arguably self-certifying, on the familiar Cartesian grounds that any doubt concerning the possession of this capacity already presupposes it, [...] this immunity to doubt does not extend to reason as a practical capacity. (Allison 2011, 329)

Let us grant Allison that the consciousness of possessing reason as a theoretical capacity is immune to doubt. Let us also leave aside the issue of whether immunity to doubt helps with justification.⁵¹ What I want to look at here is the significance of the claim that the possession

⁴⁷Cf. Allison (2011, 317).

⁴⁸Bojanowski (2017, 63n17) notes that this "claim is more plausible if one assumes that Kant speaks here of a reason that has the capacity to act from *pure* practical cognition." I agree that this makes Kant's argument more straightforward, but nevertheless, think that Kant is attempting to argue that reason in general involves such spontaneity here. For a defence of the claim that reason in Kant involves spontaneity, see Allison's (1990, 37–8, 1996, 59–64; 94–5, 2012, 113–4) discussion of *taking as*, and the Incorporation Thesis; cf. Sussman (2008). And for an alternative reading and analysis of Kant's argument at IV: 448. 13–7, see Esteves (2012, 309–16).

⁴⁹One additional complication here is that, in this passage, Kant talks about how reason *must conceive itself*, rather than straightforwardly making a claim that reason involves freedom. For what it is worth, I do not think that this is helpful. After all, the fact that one must believe something, or act as if something is true neither makes that thing true, nor provides a justification for it. I take it that the key issue is whether we have grounds for thinking that we are free, not whether we must act as if we are. I have explored this issue at length elsewhere – see Saunders (2018).

⁵⁰In the fifth subsection of *Groundwork* III, Kant talks of a "seeming contradiction" (IV: 456. 7) between freedom and natural necessity, which needs to be "convincingly eliminated" (IV: 456. 7–8)

⁵¹See Stern (2000, 85–6, 2015, 221).

of reason as a practical capacity is not immune to doubt. By itself, this is of no great significance. For the mere *possibility* of error does not make doubt *reasonable*.

Allison appears to employ something close to a Cartesian conception of doubt. We can see this clearly in one of his earlier treatments of the issue:

[...] the practical necessity of acting under the idea of freedom leaves in place the epistemic possibility that I am deluded in believing that I am acting, or as Kant sometimes puts it, that my "reason has causality." Here the Cartesian demon is more difficult to dislodge. In fact, it cannot be exorcized by any theoretical means, although it can be safely ignored from the practical point of view. (Allison 1996, 134)

As a general epistemic point, we do not need to dislodge Cartesian demons. It is possible that our reason does not have causality, just as it is possible that you are not really reading this paper right now, but instead suffering a bizarre hallucination. However, the mere possibility of error does not provide grounds for doubt.

In the case at hand, we do have grounds for doubt though, namely the threat of a world that operates (solely) according to natural necessity. We need to dispel this threat, and thereby remove the grounds for doubt, which will help entitle us to the claim that we are rational agents. For this, Kant turns to Transcendental idealism.

I think it is worth considering why Henrich (and those who follow him) take the issue of whether we have wills so seriously. I admit it is *possible* that we lack wills, but these commentators seem to think that this mere possibility renders the approach of *Groundwork* III hopeless.

Part of the problem stems from how one conceives Kant's project in *Groundwork* III. If one thinks that Kant is attempting to somehow establish the moral law through considerations of reason and the freedom involved in reason, then any possible gaps between these concepts would be very problematic. If we read Kant as trying to move from the freedom involved in theoretical reason to our possessing free wills to somehow then establish the moral law, then the possibility of possessing theoretical reason without also possessing practical reason becomes pivotal. This is what troubles Henrich (1975, 312–4) and Allison. But, as I have noted, this is not how I read *Groundwork* III. I do not read Kant as attempting to somehow prove the moral law through water-tight moves from reason to freedom to morality. Instead, I take it he is attempting to vindicate our conception of ourselves as free, such that morality is not a figment of the mind for us.

5.3. The phenomenology of reason

Moving on from the general epistemological discussion, we can now consider whether we have wills. There are two distinct tasks at hand: we need to show that free will is possible; and that we have grounds for taking ourselves as free. Kant himself says as much in the fifth subsection of *Groundwork* III:⁵²

To presuppose this freedom of the will, moreover, is not only [...] quite easily possible (as speculative philosophy can show), in the case of a rational being conscious of its causality through reason, and hence of a will (which is distinct from desires) it is also without any further condition *necessary* to presuppose it practically, i.e. in the idea in all the actions he chooses, as their condition. (IV: 461. 17–25)

This is an important passage. Speculative philosophy shows that free will is possible. This is accomplished by transcendental idealism in the first *Critique*. Free will, however, is not only possible, but also necessary, and specifically, necessary for ‘a rational being conscious of its causality through reason, and hence of a will’ (IV: 461. 22–4). I contend that this talk of our *consciousness of the causality of our reason* is crucial. Consider for example, the following related passages from the fifth section of *Groundwork* III:

[...] the legitimate claim even of common human reason to freedom of the will is founded on the consciousness and the granted presupposition of the independence of reason from merely subjective determining causes (IV: 457. 4–7)

[Freedom ...] holds only as a necessary presupposition of reason in a being that believes itself to be conscious of a will (IV: 459. 9–14)

Of course, what exactly Kant means in these claims is complicated. But there is a simple thought here that I want to appeal to, namely that we are rational agents, and are conscious of our reason being practical.⁵³ We can be conscious of our own reasoning, and its efficacy in the world (in both moral and non-moral matters). Indeed, what better source of evidence could there be for our being rational agents, than the robust phenomenology of reason and agency? If this appears unsatisfactory, then

⁵²There are two different modalities in this claim: Kant is claiming that freedom is *speculatively* possible, and *practically* necessary. Elsewhere, I argue that we should not make too much of Kant’s claim that freedom is *necessary*. The key point is that we have grounds for taking ourselves to be free; see Saunders (2018).

⁵³Similar passages can be found elsewhere in *Groundwork* III (IV: 451. 28–36), in his lectures on rational psychology (XXVIII: 268–9), and the first *Critique* (A 546–7/B 574–5). Ameriks (2000, 211–20) argues that Kant came to realise that consciousness of our agency violates the epistemological limits of transcendental idealism. I think that this is an important objection, but want to leave it aside for the purposes of this paper; see Saunders (2016) for further discussion.

there will have to be reasons to doubt this robust phenomenology.⁵⁴ And in this case, there is, namely the threat of natural necessity.⁵⁵ To disarm this, we need to turn to the next section.

5.4. *Transcendental Idealism and the possibility of freedom*

Kant takes up the issue of the possibility of freedom in the fifth subsection of *Groundwork* III. One general threat is that everything is determined by natural necessity; another concerns Kant's claim that 'experience shows the opposite of those demands that are represented as necessary under this presupposition [of freedom]' (IV: 455. 15–6). Despite these threats, Kant claims that to presuppose freedom of the will is 'quite easily *possible* (as speculative philosophy can show)' (IV: 461. 20–1), 'without falling into contradiction with the principle of natural necessity in the connection of appearances in the world of sense' (IV: 461. 18–20).

Transcendental Idealism does this, by making possible a 'different order of things' (IV: 457. 10). The world of sense is subject to the laws of nature, but it is not the only order of things. There is also a world of understanding, which is independent of such laws (IV: 457. 9–15).⁵⁶ And we must represent and think of ourselves in both of these ways, because we are conscious of ourselves as an object affected through the senses, and also conscious of ourselves as intelligence, that is, 'independent of sensuous impressions in the use of reason' (IV: 457. 23–4).

Kant begins the next paragraph: 'That is why a human being presumes for himself a will' (IV: 457. 25). We now have Kant's answer to the main question of this section: What entitles us to think of ourselves as having wills? Transcendental Idealism makes it possible that there are two orders of things: one determined by natural necessity, and one not. And our consciousness of the causality of our reason entitles us to think of ourselves as belonging to the latter.

⁵⁴One possible source of doubt here is the body of emerging psychological evidence about how our decision processes are often irrational. However, this does not show that rational agency is *impossible*, but rather that it is difficult. And Kant would be fine with this. He is not trying to establish that rational agency is easy and prevalent, but only that it is possible.

⁵⁵One might worry that this all seems too easy, in that I am claiming that all we need to do is: (1) have grounds for taking ourselves to be free; (2) dismiss non-Cartesian grounds for doubting this. For what it is worth, I do think that (1) is easy, but that (2) is more difficult. And this is where transcendental idealism plays an important role – it allows us to circumvent doubts about the possibility of freedom.

⁵⁶Cf. The third antinomy (A 444–51/B 472–9). For the purposes of this paper, I want to circumvent the interpretative debate about how to best understand transcendental idealism. I also want to leave aside the issue of whether transcendental idealism provides an adequate account of freedom. For a recent suggestion of how this might work, see Allais (2015, 303–8).

Kant's argument for freedom in *Groundwork* III is that Transcendental Idealism makes freedom possible, and the consciousness of the causality of our reason entitles us to think of ourselves as free.

At this point, one might worry that the ticket price is too high, if one has to accept the edifice of Transcendental Idealism in order to make the argument of *Groundwork* III work. What can we say here? For one, *Groundwork* III is often thought to be a disaster, even for those who accept Transcendental Idealism. And so, perhaps my interpretation and defence of the text aims for a limited result, offering some hope for those who are sympathetic to Kant's project. A second option involves moving beyond Kant's own account of what makes freedom possible. Kant thinks that only Transcendental Idealism can make freedom possible, but this seems unduly restrictive. After all, there are other conceptions of causality and determinism that attempt to show how a libertarian conception of freedom is possible.⁵⁷ Now one might worry that the ticket price is still too high here; whether libertarian free will is possible is a contested and difficult metaphysical issue. But what Kant's argument in *Groundwork* III requires is some way of showing that such freedom is possible, and Transcendental Idealism is not the only way of doing that. I accept that the ticket price remains high, but the reward is worth working towards. Kant's practical philosophy requires this freedom, and so it is of the utmost importance to find some way to show that it is possible.

6. Rational agency and the moral law

In this final section, I turn to the second objection to Kant's argument for freedom in *Groundwork* III. So far, I have followed Kant in assuming that reason involves freedom, and have just argued that we are entitled to think of our reason as practical. The objection at hand grants all of this, but insists that the freedom involved in rational agency is not the same as the freedom required for the moral law.

Kant is thus thought to equivocate in his use of the term 'free' between the two premises.

- (1) A rational will is a free will
- (2) A free will stands under the moral law
- (3) Therefore, a rational will stands under the moral law

⁵⁷See, for instance, Steward (2012).

The worry is that we could be free rational agents, but still unable to act for the sake of the moral law, which would render the above argument invalid.

This objection is perhaps most prominently pushed by Allison, who accepts both of our premises, but rejects the argument.⁵⁸ Allison's critique has been influential, and this issue is often taken to count decisively against the approach of *Groundwork* III.⁵⁹ I think we can overcome this objection. Indeed, I contend that with the ground we have laid in the previous sections, the objection drops away. For this, I need to lay out the objection in a little more detail.

6.1. A gap

Allison thinks that there is a gap in *Groundwork* III.⁶⁰ The issue is motivational, and Allison expresses it through the simple claim that: *spontaneity does not entail autonomy*. He glosses spontaneity as causal independence from our desires, and autonomy as motivational independence from our desires.⁶¹ So conceived, to be spontaneous is to be not causally determined by one's desires, whereas to be autonomous is to be able to determine oneself independently of one's desires.⁶² Allison's claim is then that:⁶³

Given this distinction, it follows that we must allow at least conceptual space for the notion of an agent that possesses genuine spontaneity but not autonomy, that is, one that is both free in an indeterminist sense and heteronomous. (Allison 1996, 111)

[...] it seems perfectly possible that a will might be free in the contra-causal sense of not being causally necessitated by antecedent conditions and yet ineluctably heteronomous in the sense that its menu of incentives (or motives) all stem from its sensuous nature. (Allison 2012, 116)

The problem is that we could be spontaneous rational agents, yet incapable of acting for the sake of the moral law; otherwise expressed, it is possible that we are heteronomous rational agents, rather than the

⁵⁸Allison (1990, 227–8, 1996, 109–14; 129–42, 2012, 115–6).

⁵⁹Grenberg (2009, 348–52) and Reath (1993, 424–5) follow Allison fairly closely here. For other accounts of this objection, see: Ameriks (2000, 205, 2003, 173, 241–4), Darwall (2006, 216–7), and Tenenbaum (2012, 569–70).

⁶⁰In his earlier work, Allison considered this in terms of a gap between *practical* and *transcendental* freedom; see Allison (1990, 227–8), Engstrom (1993) and Saunders (2014, 131–134) for a response to this characterisation of the problem.

⁶¹Hill (1998, 257) offers a similar objection.

⁶²In other Kantian terms, practical reason would involve spontaneity, whereas *pure* practical reason would require more than just spontaneity, it would also require autonomy.

⁶³Cf. Allison (1996, 137).

autonomous beings that the moral law requires.⁶⁴ I want to now attempt to defuse this threat to Kant's argument.

6.2. Reason and motivation

What is in question is whether we are capable of acting for the sake of the moral law. Once more, it is important to ask what the grounds for doubt are here. I think, for Allison at least, the threat is that we might need desires to motivate us. If this were the case, we might be able to act in conformity with the moral law when it coincided with our desires, but would be incapable of acting for the sake of the moral law itself. In this section, I offer one way of removing these grounds for doubt.

It is crucial to pull apart the claim that we need desires to motivate us to. This can be understood in either a weak or substantial sense. In the weak sense, it is merely a conceptual claim, where anytime one acts, there is a trivial sense in which one desired to perform the action in question. In the substantial sense, it is not merely a conceptual claim, but instead a claim about what motivates us to action; the idea is that reason alone cannot motivate us, only desires can. How does this distinction help with the issue at hand? If we understand the claim that we need desires to motivate us in the weak sense, this claim is claim compatible with the thought that reasons can motivate us. And if we understand it in the substantial sense, I contend that this claim is less plausible.

Allow me to share two classical treatments of this point:

[...] it may be admitted as trivial that, for example, considerations about my future welfare or about the interests of others cannot motivate me to act without a desire being present at the time of action. That I have the appropriate desire simply follows from the fact that these considerations motivate me; if the

⁶⁴There is a question about whether Kant himself was concerned by this. In a famous footnote in the *Religion*, he does seem to affirm the possibility of heteronomous rational agents: "[...] from the fact that a being has reason does not at all follow that, simply by virtue of representing its maxims as suited to universal legislation, this reason contains a faculty of determining the power of choice unconditionally, and hence to be "practical" on its own; at least, not so far as we can see." (VI: 26n). Elsewhere though, including in *Groundwork* III, he suggests that negative and positive freedom are co-extensive (IV: 446 .6–447. 9), and attempts to argue for this. An additional complexity here is that it is not entirely clear that negative freedom and positive freedom match up exactly with spontaneity and autonomy. At times, Allison (2011, 286–8) equates negative freedom with transcendental freedom and positive freedom with autonomy; but as Bojanowski (2017, 62n15) points out, this does not seem quite right, for transcendental freedom itself involves both negative and positive capabilities, namely an independence from necessitating causes, but also the capacity to begin "a series of occurrences *entirely from itself*" (B 562).

likelihood that an act will promote my future happiness motivates me to perform it now, then it is appropriate to ascribe to me a desire for my own future happiness. But nothing follows about the role of the desire as a condition contributing to the motivational efficacy of those considerations. It is a necessary condition of their efficacy to be sure, but only a logically necessary condition. It is not necessary either as a contributing influence, or as a causal condition. (Nagel 1970, 29–30)

Why should it not be the case [...] that the agent's conception of the situation, properly understood, suffices to show us the favourable light in which his action appeared to him? If we credit him with a suitable desire, then, [...] that need be no more than a consequence of the fact that we take his conception of the circumstances to have been his reason for acting as he did; the desire need not function as an independent component in the explanation, needed in order to account for the capacity of the cited reason to influence the agent's will. (McDowell 1998, 79)

Nagel and McDowell show the weak claim to be innocuous. They both also follow Aristotle to deny the strong claim, with Nagel for instance, pointing out that 'many desires, like many beliefs, are *arrived at* by decision and after deliberation' (1970, 29).⁶⁵ I agree with them here. This is how we talk about our motivation. Hume claims that reason alone cannot motivate us, but I view Humean scepticism about practical reason as under motivated.

Would Kant agree? We saw that he performed a similar anti-sceptical move in the discussion of doubt and moral motivation (in §3.2). In the second *Critique*, he claims that we experience an unconditional obligation, which tells us that we ought to act independently of our inclinations, thus revealing that we can. He calls this the fact of reason, and claims that it is 'undeniable' (V: 31. 24). As I noted previously though, this is not undeniable. A sceptic about pure practical reason would claim that the obligation is not really unconditional, but that we are led to think so due to whatever their favourite debunking story is. Kant however is uninterested in this type of scepticism. He takes our experiences of moral obligation at face-value, and attempts to provide a system that can vindicate them.

I want to do something similar for practical reason in general. Timmermann, for instance, insists that Kant is best thought of as entirely Humean about non-moral motivation.⁶⁶ And perhaps Timmermann is right that this is Kant's considered view. But I want to resist this general scepticism

⁶⁵See the *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk. III, ch.3.

⁶⁶See, for instance, Timmermann (2006, 91n37). Timmermann (2007, 182) thinks that the feeling of respect [*Achtung*] plays a unique role, in that it is a feeling (and thus can motivate us), but one caused by recognition of the moral law. In resisting the substantial claim that we need desires to motivate us, I do not need the feeling of respect to play this role.

about practical reason. In the second *Critique*, Kant resists it in the moral case, and I think we can resist it in the case of action generally. We can be motivated by reasons in non-moral matters. But I will not belabour this point here. Instead, I want to show how this approach can overcome the objection at hand, and offer some hope for *Groundwork* III.

The objection we are considering in this section is that humans cannot be motivated by reason alone, which would mean that, even if we are spontaneous, we are still incapable of acting for the sake of the moral law. However, we have good reasons to reject that picture of motivation, even in the non-moral case.

Of course, it is *possible* that we are the type of rational agents who cannot be motivated by reasons, and can thus never act for the sake of the moral law. And it is this possibility that worries Allison (1996, 111, 2012, 116). However, this mere possibility need not trouble us. We are rational agents, and can be motivated by reasons. That is a perfectly plausible description of our motivation, in both moral and non-moral cases.

My claim here is not that rational agency entails moral agency; I think it is still possible that one could be a rational agent, but not a moral agent. Otherwise, expressed, I accept that the conceptions of freedom in premise 1 and 2 of our argument might differ.

- (1) A rational will is a free will
- (2) A free will stands under the moral law
- (3) Therefore, a rational will stands under the moral law

It could be that the freedom involved in rational agency (1) is not the same as the freedom the moral law requires (2). So conceived, the above argument still appears to contain an equivocation. However, I want to suggest that we should not read *Groundwork* III as a strictly deductive argument in this way. Instead, Instead, we can ask what are the grounds for doubting that we are moral agents, and in particular, what puts the claim that we can act for the sake of the moral law into question? In Allison, it is the possibility that we cannot act from reason alone, but instead need desires to motivate us. My thought is that we can reject this picture, even in the case of non-moral rational agency. And if I'm right on this, then thinking about non-moral rational agency can disarm this as a source of grounds for doubt.

Allison seems excessively concerned about a mere possibility. And this, once again, ties into the important issue of how one conceives the project of *Groundwork* III. If one thinks that Kant is trying to

move from the bare idea of reason to rational agency to the moral law, then any possible gaps are very problematic. But I don't think this is the best way to understand *Groundwork* III. As I have argued, Kant is trying to vindicate our standing under the moral law through appealing to a non-moral conception of rational agency. And, in the case of non-moral action, I think we are entitled to think of ourselves as capable of being motivated by reasons. The threat of a gap between rational agency and the moral law then drops away. Of course, it is possible that such a gap still exists. But this possibility need not trouble us. On my reading, we only need a deduction if there are reasonable ground for doubt. One way of motivating this doubt would be by subscribing to a substantial theory about desires and motivation. But, as I have argued, we do not have to do that.

I take this to be a virtue of my approach. If we read *Groundwork* III in the way I suggest, and reject the substantial reading of the claim that we need desires to motivate us, then we can disarm the threat of a gap between rational agency and the moral law. We thereby defend Kant's argument against the objection at hand.

7. Conclusion

Here is Kant's argument for freedom in *Groundwork* III, one last time:

- (1) A rational will is a free will
- (2) A free will stands under the moral law
- (3) Therefore, a rational will stands under the moral law

In this paper, I have argued that we should not read this argument as an attempted proof or justification of the moral law, but instead as an attempt to vindicate our conception of ourselves as free, such that morality is not a figment of the mind for us. I also proposed that a deduction is only required when there are reasonable grounds for doubt. I then attempted to remove two important grounds for doubting that we are suitably free to follow the moral law. In doing so, I look to have provided some hope for Kant's approach in *Groundwork* III.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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