

CHAPTER I

*The Unconditioned Goodness of the Good Will**Eric Watkins*

I INTRODUCTION

In the first sentence of the first section of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant famously claims that the good will alone is good without limitation (*ohne Einschränkung*). In the pages that follow, it then becomes clear that Kant also maintains that the good will alone is an unconditioned good.¹ Unfortunately, it is not immediately obvious exactly how these two claims are related.² But recently much attention has been devoted especially to understanding the second claim and to reconstructing Kant's arguments for the claim offered in support of it, namely that all other things we might naturally consider good, such as power, money, health, and happiness, are in fact only conditioned goods, since a good will is a condition of their goodness. Now Kant's characterization of the goodness of the good will as unconditioned is supposed to be expressive of the standpoint of "common rational moral cognition" (G 4:393), but it also displays striking parallels with claims he makes in his theoretical philosophy. For example, Kant characterizes the objects of traditional metaphysics – God, freedom, and the soul – as unconditioned and he places them at the center of the drama that then unfolds throughout the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

¹ Note that in the following, I speak of something being an unconditioned good, as opposed to it being unconditionally good for two reasons. First, Kant typically does not use "unbedingt" as an adverb, so I am simply retaining his own use of the term. Second, there is a philosophical difference between the property of being an unconditioned good and having the property of being good in an unconditional way, since being an unconditioned good entails having a specific kind of goodness, whereas being good in an unconditional way is a specific way in which one has a potentially ordinary kind of goodness. A similar distinction can be made with respect to intrinsicity. The property of being in the room with President Obama is a property that things can have either extrinsically, as I do when I visit the White House in his presence, or intrinsically, as President Obama has whenever he is in a room.

² Given what Kant explicitly says in the first few sentences of the *Groundwork*, one might think that they are equivalent. As will become clear below, I agree with Karl Ameriks (*Interpreting Kant's Critiques*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 198) that being good without limitation follows from being an unconditioned good (and not vice versa).

And these parallels are no accident. Instead, they are to be explained by the fact that Kant conceives of reason in general as a spontaneous faculty that seeks not only the conditions of whatever is conditioned but also the totality of such conditions and thus the unconditioned. It is this conception of reason that results in and provides unity to the uses that Kant makes of the notion of the unconditioned in both his theoretical and his practical philosophy.

Once one notices these parallels and the generic concept of reason that underlies them, one can see more clearly that in the context of his practical philosophy, Kant's interest in the notions of a condition and of the unconditioned extends beyond simply noting the unconditioned goodness of the good will. For example, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant argues that, in a manner analogous to theoretical reason, practical reason "seeks the unconditioned for the practically conditioned [...] it seeks the unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason, under the name of the *highest good*" (KpV 5:108). In determining the concept of the highest good as the proper object of practical reason, Kant identifies virtue as the "supreme condition of whatever can even seem to us desirable," that is, as "the condition which is itself unconditioned" (KpV 5:110). These passages from the second *Critique* help us to see that Kant's claim in the *Groundwork* about the unconditioned goodness of the good will is but one of many that involve the concepts of the condition and the unconditioned in his practical philosophy.

However, we find other uses of these notions in Kant's practical philosophy that do not fit into this larger picture quite as neatly, at least at first glance. For example, Kant refers to the Categorical Imperative as an "unconditioned command" (G 4:420), as being "limited by no condition" (G 4:416), and as containing "no condition to which it would be limited" (G 4:421).³ Kant is making a related point when he says that duty is the "unconditioned necessity of action; it must therefore hold for all rational beings" (G 4:425). At least part of what Kant means to be asserting by claiming that the Categorical Imperative is an unconditioned command is that it has normative force regardless of one's desires, independent of any contingent features of human nature, and in virtue of one's rationality, but these points are clearly distinct from his claims about the unconditioned goodness of the good will and the highest good.

³ In a similar vein, Kant claims that "only law brings with it the concept of an *unconditioned* and objective and hence universally valid *necessity*, and commands are laws that must be obeyed, that is, must be followed even against inclination" (G 4:416).

In the context of his practical philosophy Kant refers to the unconditioned on at least two further occasions that do not seem to sit well with either of the above uses. First, when discussing the formula of autonomy, Kant remarks that “lawgiving itself, which determines all worth, must for that very reason have a dignity, that is, an unconditioned, incomparable worth [...]. Autonomy is therefore the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature” (G 4:436). This remark seems to suggest that lawgiving (rather than the good will or virtue) has unconditioned value, determines all worth, and is the basis for explaining all value by being the ground of the dignity of rational agents. The first of these points in particular is not simply distinct from, but also seems to run positively counter to, Kant’s claim that the good will alone is an unconditioned good.

A second passage that raises important questions about the practically unconditioned arises in the Concluding Remark of the *Groundwork*. Kant begins by noting that both in its theoretical and in its practical uses, reason seeks an absolute necessity, whether it be the necessity of some supreme cause of the world or of the laws of actions. He then immediately notes the following:

However, it is also an equally essential *limitation* of this same reason that it can see neither the *necessity* of what is and what happens nor the necessity of what ought to happen unless a *condition* under which it is and happens or ought to happen is put at its basis. In this way, however, by constant inquiry after the condition, the satisfaction of reason is only further and further postponed. For that reason, it restlessly seeks the unconditionally necessary [*das Unbedingt-Notwendige*] and sees itself constrained to assume it without any means of making it comprehensible [*begreiflich*] to itself. [...] And in this way we do not indeed comprehend the practical unconditioned necessity of the moral imperative, but we nevertheless comprehend its *incomprehensibility*; and this is all that can fairly be required of a philosophy that strives in its principles to the very boundary of human reason. (G 4:463)

If reason seeks not merely some of the conditions of what is conditioned, but rather the totality of conditions, it would be natural to think that as it finds ever more conditions, reason should be able to explain what is conditioned in a way that is ever more satisfying. Each time I find a further condition, my explanation is that much better than before. It is thus surprising to hear Kant say that the unconditioned totality of conditions is itself incomprehensible to us, that human reason has reached its limit here. To put the point in more contemporary terms, it is striking that Kant’s rationalist account of morality seems to ground out in something that is incomprehensible rather than in what is intelligible through and

through. Indeed, one might be concerned that this kind of incomprehensibility would compromise the rationalism at the heart of Kant's moral philosophy.

In the following, I investigate different roles that the unconditioned plays in Kant's practical philosophy. I do so by drawing a number of distinctions in kinds of goodness and exploring their interrelations in the hope of addressing three specific questions. First, what exactly does Kant mean to say in claiming that the good will is an unconditioned good? Second, how is Kant's explanation of the formula of autonomy's notion of universal lawgiving consistent with his claim that the good will alone is an unconditioned good? Third, how can something unconditioned render comprehensible those objects that it conditions, if it is itself incomprehensible? To anticipate the answers that emerge, in saying that the good will is an unconditioned good, Kant is asserting that the goodness of the good will does not depend on anything else and that nothing else can explain its goodness. The reason why its goodness does not depend on anything else is that what makes the will good or bad is nothing other than its very own willing, a point that is consistent with the value that attaches to the formula of autonomy's notion of universal lawgiving. What's more, the fact that there is no further explanation of the will's goodness is not problematic, for (1) the will has intrinsic features that can be the ground of the conditions that can be used to explain the conditioned goodness of other things we consider good, (2) the unconditioned goodness of the good will entails that it must also be good without limitation, and (3) it helps us to see the limits to what human reason can accomplish in morality.

2 UNCONDITIONED GOODNESS

To understand the precise sense in which the good will is, for Kant, an unconditioned good, one must be clear about a number of different distinctions concerning goodness.⁴ Rae Langton draws one important distinction by noting the difference between the way that things have value and the way that we value things. These are clearly different kinds of goodness, since the way that things have value involves things and their values, but not necessarily any relation to us, whereas the way we value things necessarily

⁴ In "Two Distinctions in Goodness" (*The Philosophical Review* 92 (1983): 169–95) Christine Korsgaard helpfully draws attention to the distinction between things being good as means or as ends and things being intrinsically or extrinsically good.

involves our acts of valuing, but not necessarily the values that things actually have, given that we can value things that in fact have no value.

As for the way things have value, something can, Langton notes, have either intrinsic or extrinsic value.⁵ Now something can be said to have intrinsic value or to be an intrinsic good if it has that value in itself, e.g., if its goodness is an intrinsic property. Kant himself seems to be committed to the good will being an intrinsic good when he refers to it as “good in itself” (G 4:394). Unfortunately, Kant does not clarify how to determine whether something is an intrinsic good, e.g., whether it would be good even if it were isolated from all else, as Moore thought, or in some other way. To say that something is an extrinsic good can, for our purposes, be understood as a good whose goodness involves something distinct from its intrinsic properties. Further, it is possible for one thing to instantiate both of these ways in which things have value at the same time, since it could be both an intrinsic and an extrinsic good. Some things are just that good.

As for the way we value things, we value something either for the sake of something else, e.g., as a means to an end, or for its own sake, e.g., not as a means to anything else, but simply as an end. Though I have illustrated this distinction with means–ends relations, instrumental relations are not the only kind of relations that could be relevant here. Langton’s example of a wedding ring that is valued not because it is a means to an end, but rather because of what it signifies, illustrates this point nicely.⁶ Again, it is possible for one thing to instantiate both of the ways in which we value things, since it could be valued both for its own sake and for the sake of something else. Some things we just value that much.

But note that these two distinctions of goodness are distinct in the following sense as well. Whether something is either an intrinsic or an extrinsic good does not immediately entail how we value it and vice versa. For I can value an intrinsic good (such as the good will) either for its own sake or for the sake of some other end that it makes possible. Similarly, I can value an extrinsic good either for its own sake or for the sake of something that it brings about. Happiness, as Kant understands it, illustrates how an extrinsic good could be valued for its own sake, for in normal

⁵ As noted above (note 1), I am disregarding the distinction between having a property intrinsically and having an intrinsic property.

⁶ See Rae Langton, “Objective and Unconditioned Value,” *The Philosophical Review* 116 (2007): 157–85, p. 163.

circumstances, I value happiness for its own sake, despite the fact that its goodness involves the goodness of something else, namely that of the will.⁷

Having thus distinguished between the ways things have value and the ways in which we value them, it is important to distinguish further between the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic goodness, on the one hand, and that between conditioned and unconditioned goodness, on the other. Though both concern the way things have value (rather than the way we value them), they have different meanings.⁸ For the intrinsic–extrinsic distinction does not involve the notion of a condition, which is at the heart of the conditioned–unconditioned goodness distinction.⁹ We shall have reason to return to Kant’s notion of a condition shortly.

Further, one might argue that the conditioned need not be coextensive with the extrinsic and that the unconditioned need not be coextensive with the intrinsic. Langton has the first case in mind when she argues that equating the unconditioned–conditioned goodness distinction with the intrinsic–extrinsic goodness distinction “creates a tangle when we confront the prospect of something that might *confer value on itself*.”¹⁰ That is, Langton argues that if something can confer value on itself (in such a way that it is a condition of its goodness), then it would be an intrinsic good (since its goodness does not require anything else), but its goodness would be conditioned (since the conferral of value is a condition of its goodness). If such a case is possible, then a conditioned good need not be an extrinsic good (as one might have thought), but could be an intrinsic good instead.

But one might also construct an argument in favor of the second kind of case, that is, one might doubt whether an unconditioned good must also be an intrinsic good. For from the fact that something’s goodness is not *conditioned* by anything else, it does not immediately follow that its goodness does not *involve* anything else (in some way that does not amount to conditioning). Perhaps an altruistic benefactor is an example of an unconditioned, but extrinsic, good. For such a benevolent benefactor necessarily

⁷ Matters may well be considerably more complicated. In “On the Usefulness of Final Ends” (*Necessity, Volition, and Love*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 82–94), Harry Frankfurt argues that the relationship between means and ends is not uni-directional since pursuing a desirable end may be valuable not solely because of the value of the end desired, but also because of the importance and value of the pursuit to the person engaged in it.

⁸ One can imagine applying the conditioned–unconditioned distinction to the way that we value things as well. Thus, we might value some things (such as happiness) unconditionally regardless of whether they are intrinsic or extrinsic goods or, for that matter, even conditioned or unconditioned goods.

⁹ It is useful to draw a further distinction between x being a condition of y and x being a source of y, for not all conditions are sources. Kant does sometimes use the term “*Quelle*” in the *Groundwork*. Typically, it is with respect to principles or actions, not goodness.

¹⁰ Langton, “Objective and Unconditioned Value,” p. 178.

involves someone else, namely the recipient of a gift, but without the goodness of the benefactor actually *depending* on that person. Regardless of the plausibility of this particular example, the point is that whether something can occupy this logical space at all – that of not being conditioned by something else, but nonetheless involving something else – turns, at least in part, on what it means for something to be a condition. For if a conditioning relation is only one particular kind of relation among many, then there is, at least in principle, room for such a position.

But if these two cases show that the intrinsic–extrinsic distinction need not be either the same as or coextensive with the unconditioned–conditioned distinction, then the intrinsic–extrinsic distinction is not an immediate source of clarification for our question of what it means to say of the good will that it is an unconditioned good. So what can we turn to for help with this question?

At this point it can be useful to draw on some of what Kant says about conditions in his theoretical philosophy, for although much remains unclear there, it can provide us with a basic orientation for thinking about how to understand unconditioned goodness. Kant introduces the notion of the logical use of reason in his account of syllogisms, where the premises function as logical conditions of the conclusion, which is thereby conditioned, but it is his understanding of the “pure” or real use of reason that offers us the clearest guidance (A305/B362). For Kant thinks of causal relations and part–whole relations, among others, as clear cases of real conditioning relations. Specifically, he thinks of a cause as a condition of its effect and of the parts as conditions of the whole that they compose. Since an effect depends on its cause for its existence and a whole depends on its parts for its properties (and not vice versa), one can generalize that a real conditioning relation involves an asymmetrical relation of metaphysical dependence.¹¹ Moreover, one can invoke a cause to *explain* (i.e., make sense of or render intelligible) the existence of an effect just as one can invoke the parts to explain (i.e., make sense of or render intelligible) the existence of the whole.¹² So a real condition is a certain kind of metaphysical dependence relation that also functions as an explanatory principle.¹³

¹¹ See my “Kant on Real Conditions,” in *Akten des 12. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses, ‘Natur und Freiheit’ in Wien vom 21.–25. September 2015*, ed. Violetta Waibel and Margit Ruffing (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018) (in press).

¹² Kant notes that these real conditions are represented through the relational categories, which, as discursive concepts, allow us to understand objects.

¹³ In the contemporary literature on grounding, some equate this kind of metaphysical dependence relation and explanation. Since there are many different kinds of explanations, explanation would seem to be broader than metaphysical dependence. For that reason, I treat them as distinct notions.

Even if it turns out to be difficult to clarify Kant's conception of a condition in any simple way (e.g., in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions),¹⁴ we can still draw some useful inferences about what it would mean to say that something is *unconditioned*. For example, to say that a cause is itself uncaused and in that respect unconditioned is to say (1) that the cause does not depend metaphysically on anything else to bring about its effect and (2) that it cannot be further explained. Similarly, to say that the parts of a whole are not composed of yet further parts and are in that respect unconditioned is to say (1) that they do not depend on any other parts in composing a whole and (2) that their compositional contribution to a whole cannot be further explained.

If we return now to goodness, our analysis of Kant's notion of a real condition and of what it means to be unconditioned suggests that his claim that the good will is an unconditioned good can be understood as follows. In saying that the good will is an unconditioned good, he is committed both to it not depending on anything for its goodness and to there being no further explanation of its goodness. So Kant's claim is that, unlike happiness, whose goodness does depend on and is in some way explained by a good will, the goodness of the good will neither depends on nor is explained by anything else. Accordingly, whether a good will causes good effects does not affect its own goodness.¹⁵

It is crucial to note here that Kant is claiming only that the good will is unconditioned *with respect to its goodness* and not in any other respect. That is, there are different respects in which an object can be conditioned or unconditioned, and these respects are independent of one other, since an object can be conditioned in one respect and unconditioned in another. For example, causality and composition are different kinds of conditioning relations that can be used to explain different kinds of conditioned features, and one can imagine an object being both simple and caused, that is, unconditioned with respect to its composition, while conditioned with respect to the origin of its existence. The same is true with respect to goodness. The good will may well be conditioned with respect to its existence in that something may cause a good will to exist, but still be unconditioned

¹⁴ For discussion of this point, see Marcus Willaschek, "Kant and the Necessity of Metaphysics," in *Recht und Frieden in der Philosophie Kants. Akten des X. Internationalen Kant Kongresses*, ed. Valerio Rodhen, Ricardo R. Terra, Guido A. de Almeida, and Margit Ruffing (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), vol. 1, pp. 285–307.

¹⁵ To avoid misunderstanding these claims, one should note that Kant has in mind here *moral* goodness rather than other kinds of goodness.

with respect to its goodness.¹⁶ For whatever it is that causes the existence of the good will is not therefore also the condition of its goodness, because the good will is an unconditioned good whose goodness does not depend on anything else.

But does this interpretation of Kant's claim fit the argument that he gives in support of it in the first three paragraphs of *Groundwork I*? Though Kant's argument is complex and involves several distinct strands, it is useful to focus on one specific line of thought it advances. Kant's general claim that the good will alone is an unconditioned good is composed of two distinct claims: first, that the goodness of the good will is not conditioned in its goodness, and second, that every other good is conditioned by the good will with respect to its goodness. But how can Kant *show* that something is or is not conditioned in its goodness?

Now I noted above that in these initial paragraphs, Kant does not immediately equate 'good without limitation' and 'unconditioned goodness.' The former seems to mean one of two things: either that something has an unlimited amount of goodness – there is no limit to how good something is such that its value is "incomparably higher" than anything else – or that there are no circumstances in which that very thing is not good – it is what one might think of as a ubiquitous good, which is consistent with it being a low-level good.¹⁷ The first of these meanings concerns the quantity of goodness, while the second concerns the accompaniment relations something good stands in to other things. By contrast, attributing 'unconditioned goodness' to something means that its goodness is independent of all else and cannot be explained. Note, in particular, the crucial difference between the second meaning of good without limitation and unconditioned goodness. The second meaning of good without limitation is, in effect, relevant to whether goodness is *constantly conjoined* with other things in various contexts, whereas unconditioned goodness pertains to whether the goodness of one thing *depends* on and is *explained* by that of another.

Kant is, I think, attentive to this kind of difference in the course of his argument for the second claim by insisting that what makes conditioned

¹⁶ In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant explicitly distinguishes between the origin of something "according to reason" and "according to time" (Rel 6:39), and remarks that to look for the temporal origin of free actions as free is a contradiction (Rel 6:40). See also Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 130.

¹⁷ Karl Ameriks expresses this second meaning in asserting that good without limitation should be taken to mean, for Kant, "good in all morally relevant contexts" (*Interpreting Kant's Critiques*, p. 194). A closely related question, which may have been of interest to Kant, is "What is necessarily good?"

goods good is not simply that they are always in fact accompanied by the good will, but rather that they *depend* on the good will to be good and that the goodness of the good will is relevant to explaining *why* they have whatever goodness they have. And his way of making this point clear is that he maintains that it is the good will that *makes* these good things good. As he notes, without a good will, “moderation in affects and passions, self-control, and calm reflection [...] *become* extremely evil” (G 4:394, emphasis added). So it is not that the good will always accompanies good things, as a reliable partner might, or even causes good effects, a feat that it might or might not always accomplish. Rather it is that the good will is *responsible* for the goodness of whatever good effects it happens to bring about and can be appealed to in *explaining* why they are good.

Kant’s argument for the first claim, that the good will is an unconditioned good, draws on similar considerations. For he considers several different ways in which the good will might be thought to be good *because of* something else – because of what it effects, because of its fitness in attaining some end, etc. – and shows that the good will is not in fact good in virtue of any of these relations. Kant repeatedly uses the phrase “the good will is not good because of” something else to emphasize this point (G 4:394). Again, it is precisely the lack of dependence relations and the lack of any explanation of the goodness of the good will that Kant appeals to in supporting the claim that the good will is an unconditioned good.

It might seem that we have now arrived at a more satisfying understanding of Kant’s claim that the good will is an unconditioned good. For we have distinguished between different ways things can be good so that we could focus more clearly on what unconditioned goodness might involve and, more specifically, on just what kind of conditioning relation is present in the case of conditioned goods and absent in the case of the good will. By drawing on parallels with Kant’s notion of a real condition in his theoretical philosophy, we were able to see that the goodness conditioning relation could be viewed as involving an asymmetrical dependence relation that also has an explanatory aspect. And at least one strand of the argument that Kant provides for his claim could be read in a way that confirms such an understanding.

However, the further course of Kant’s argument reveals a slightly more complicated picture. For immediately after denying that the good will is good because of what it effects, he suggests that “the good will is good [...] only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself” (*ibid.*). That is, this passage seems to suggest that the goodness of the good will does depend