Teleology and Dialectic: Further Thoughts

1. GMS | 394.32–396.37 (¶¶4–7)

1. In passing, I mentioned that the teleological passages in Section I look more like an interlude in the attempt to connect the good will with duty. But this seems not right: if Kant put these considerations there, there is a reason for it.

2. Stoicism. The passages engage Stoic ideas. The good life for a Stoic is to live according to nature—one’s own rational nature as a human being, and nature as the cosmic totality of things. Perfecting one’s alignment with nature is the aim of life, and this is where true eudaimonia is found. So, we have reason in order to achieve preservation, prosperity and happiness (cf. 395.8–9)—reason is central to achieve life’s fulfilment.

3. Strangeness. Kant’s point about the good will that is good independently of ‘its fitness to attain some intended aim’ (394.13), i.e. the idea of a will that has intrinsic value, or value that is not relative to some purpose or success, may seem ‘strange’ (befremdlich, 394.34): it is inconsistent with the Stoic view; and perhaps alien to the ‘common moral cognition’, which is the target here. So, he needs to show that his claim about the good will is more than some ‘high-flown fanstastication’ (394.36).

4. Potential Confusion. To eliminate the possibility that his own view involves a misunderstanding about the roles of reason and will with regard to nature’s purpose, Kant suggests to explore the absolute worth (Werth, 394.32) of the good will from a teleological perspective—a perspective that involves an end, purpose, or intention (Absicht, 394.36).

5. Facts. As a matter of fact, Kant suggests, reason is a bad guide for our ‘preservation, prosperity, and happiness’. The more reason ‘meddles’ with our natural instinct, to further we stray from ‘true contentment’ (wahre Zufriedenheit, 395.30). In Muthmasslicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte (1786), he suggests that a feature of reason is its tendency together with the imagination to concoct (erkünsteln) artificial desires that are either unrelated or in opposition to our natural drives (VIII 111). In Stoic terms: instinct alone aligns our lives to nature; reason does not. Hence reason stands in the way of happiness. The practical use of reason looks dysfunctional, and thus morally disastrous (395.20–7).

6. More facts. To think otherwise is dubious, implausible, and vainglorious (396.5–7). Yet, that reason is not advantage to contributing to our eudaimonia does not mean we should despair about reason, as e.g., Rousseau does. Rather, it means reason has a different purpose—reason’s aim is not our happiness. We have reason (396.18), and so, given the ‘wisdom of nature’ (Weisheit der Natur, 396.27), it has a purpose, which is (perhaps) also ‘far worthier’ (396.10).

7. Reason’s Real Purpose. Reason is required for the goodness of the will; and this purpose is unconditional, since the will’s goodness is unconditional (recall 393.5–7). If practical reason were central to achieving or satisfying some natural need, and thus conditioned by certain natural inclinations and aims, it
would not be ‘unlimited’ or conditional, and hence, unrestricted moral willing would become inconceivable. And thus, the metaphysics of morals would fail: we could not identify the principles that underwrite the possibility of morality (independently of certain empirical claims).

8. Freedom. If reason is not directly involved in attaining happiness (Kant allows for some indirect involvement), it is involved in attaining the determination of the will. Insofar as reason is detached from instinct, it is free. And thus it makes sense to think of pure practical reason as linked to the faculty of choice (but note: *Willkür ≠ Wille*), and this suggests that the prime function of pure practical reason is to determine the will. And this is achieved by binding the will to certain maxims. And in this sense, provisionally, we can say that autonomy is self-determination of the will.

9. Stoicism Again. We often act contrary to reason, or infringe the ‘ends of inclination’ (*Zwecke der Neigung*, 396.37). But in these conflicts we can stay true to ourselves, or remain attuned (or *homologoumenos*) to our nature, so to speak, insofar as we follow what reason prescribes, i.e. if we follow the laws of pure practical reason. We thus follow our nature insofar as we live according to our self-determining will—only such a will is unconditionally good.

10. Upshot. The nature of reason is teleological, just as the Stoics maintain; yet it paves *not* the way to happiness, but to the good will. And even under these teleological considerations, the will is the only thing that is unconditionally (non-instrumentally) good, and thus alone has absolute (intrinsic) value.

2. GMS I 403.34–405.35 (¶¶20–2)

1. In Plato, dialectic is the proper method of investigation leading to knowledge. In Kant, dialectic concerns the pseudo-truths produced by reason, the illusions that arise from the uncritical use of reason.

2. When *theoretical* reason takes leave from the senses, it (often) produces incomprehensible, incoherent, or just obscure, results (404.13–6). In contrast, *practical* reason becomes dialectical when it does not separate from the senses (404.17–9). In other words, *practical* reason works best if it is detached from concerns about ‘sensuous incentives’ (*sinnliche Triebfedern*, 404.19), and thus from irrelevant aspects of moral agency. Common moral cognition is torn between principles and maxims based on need and inclination. Philosophical moral cognition aims to defuse the ensuing natural dialectic (405.20–35).

3. Philosophy is partly to blame for these practical confusions: e.g., by insisting that the moral life is the flourishing or happy life. The role of philosophy as the purely formal investigation into principles: *not* to provide guidance or ‘instruction’ (*Belehrung*, 404.36) with regard to the good life, but in order to provide a complete, accessible, and thus convenient system of morality (404.30–6). From normative ethics to meta-ethics.