

Kant and Feder on the Will, Happiness, and the Aim of Moral Philosophy

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1. A tacit controversy

The relationship between Kant and Johann Georg Heinrich Feder is usually taken into consideration with regard to the controversy caused by the Göttingen review of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in which, mainly because of Feder's editorial changes, Kant's novel work was dismissively presented as merely another version of Berkeleyan idealism.¹ That was not a one-time incident, though, but only the most apparent manifestation of the clash between two profoundly diverging philosophical perspectives. After Kant's response to the unfavourable review in the *Prolegomena*, Feder took the discussion to the next level. He did not limit himself to publishing a series of articles and reviews on Kant's works, but also founded a journal whose main task was to counter the fortune of the Kantian philosophy. The *Philosophische Bibliothek* initiated by Feder along with his colleague Christoph Meiners was meant to be the unified voice of the anti-Kant empiricists.² Thereby Feder hoped to defend against Kant what he called "empirical philosophy", namely a philosophical approach "that is based exclusively on observations and the accordance [*Übereinstimmung*] of all, or most, human experiences [...], and in matters of nature refrains entirely from demonstrations based on concepts".³ Feder's entire career ultimately depended on his opposition to critical philosophy. As he recounts in his autobiography, eventually he felt that he had to resign from

¹ On the Göttingen review and the ensuing debate, see F.C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason. German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); J. Mensch, 'Kant and the Problem of Idealism: On the Significance of the Göttingen Review', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 44 (2006), 297–317.

² See Beiser, *The Fate of Reason* and, for selected relevant texts, B. Sassen (ed.), *Kant's Early Critics: The Empiricist Critique of the Theoretical Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³ J.G.H. Feder, *Ueber Raum und Caussalität zur Prüfung der Kantischen Philosophie* (Göttingen, 1787; reprint Brussels, Culture et Civilisation, 1968), p. ix f.

his position at the University of Göttingen because the philosophical landscape and the interest of the students had pronouncedly turned to Kantianism and its new agenda.⁴

Although that has often gone unnoticed, one main focus of the conflict between Kant's thought and Feder's "empirical philosophy" was morals.⁵ In the long-standing dispute between critical and empirical philosophy developed after 1781, Kant's views were carefully considered by Feder, as is witnessed by his rather accurate, even open-minded remarks in some reviews of writings of Kant and minor Kantians like Schmid and in an essay on Kant's moral theology.⁶ Kant himself once granted that, unlike other critics, Feder, "with all his limitations", was honest (11:47 f.). Feder eventually acknowledged that Kant's views had some impact on him, especially in theoretical philosophy.⁷ Although this does not hold true in morals to the same extent, significant traces of a dialogue with Kant's account are present in the last two volumes of the *Inquiries*.⁸ The third volume came out in 1786, and Feder must have had only a few months to look into the *Groundwork*. Nevertheless the volume includes polemical hints at some of Kant's claims. Especially the last volume of the *Inquiries*, published in 1793, however, displays numerous marks of Feder's confrontation with Kant's thought. One cause of the delayed publication of the last installment of the work might well have been Feder's urgency to accurately deal with Kant's philosophy, both in theoretical and in moral matters. Most of his reviews and critical discussions of works by Kant and Kantians were published in between the last two volumes of the *Inquiries*, so that the conclusion of this project was intertwined with the appraisal of Kant's works. On the other hand, no explicit indication in Kant's writings highlights the significance of that antagonism. In fact, Kant never even mentions Feder in his published work, either with regard to theoretical or to moral matters. If Feder's view had any

⁴ J.G.H. Feder's *Leben, Natur und Grundsätze. Zur Belehrung und Ermunterung seiner lieben Nachkommen*, ed. by Karl August Ludwig Feder (Leipzig, Schwickert 1825, reprint Brussels, Culture et Civilisation, 1970), p. 78 f. See on this K. Röttgers, 'J.G.H. Feder – Beitrag zu einer Verhinderungsgeschichte eines deutschen Empirismus', *Kant-Studien* 75 (1984), 420–41: 436 ff. On Feder's biography see the brief profiles of G. Naschert, 'Johann Georg Heinrich Feder (1740–1821)', *Aufklärung* 24 (2012), 345–48, and U. Thiel, 'Johann Georg Heinrich Feder', in H.F. Klemme, M. Kuehn (eds.), *Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century German Philosophers* (Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum, 2010).

⁵ See mainly Röttgers, 'J.G.H. Feder'.

⁶ See J.G.H. Feder, Review of Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, *Philosophische Bibliothek* 1 (1788), 182–218; 'Über die Kantische Moraltheologie', *Philosophische Bibliothek*, 3 (1790), p. 13–66; Review of C.C.E. Schmid, *Versuch einer Moralphilosophie* (1790), *Philosophische Bibliothek* 4 (1791), p. 138–55.

⁷ See Feder, *Leben*, 126 f., where Feder writes that his *Grundsätze der Logik und Metaphysik* of 1794 had been influenced by Kant.

⁸ See A. Vesper, 'Zwischen Hume und Kant: Moralbegründung in Feders Untersuchungen über den menschlichen Willen', in H.-P. Nowitzki, G. Stiening (eds.), *Johann Georg Heinrich Feder. Empirismus und Popularphilosophie zwischen Wolff und Kant* (Berlin/Boston, de Gruyter, forthcoming), § 3.2.

impact on Kant's thought, it was the impact of an adversary, whose observations prompt to focus more clearly the theses meant to oppose his perspective, which is deemed inadequate.⁹

At least three reasons suggest to look into the moral dimension of the conflict between critical and empirical philosophy: the importance of Feder's work on morals, the attack of Feder and his followers to Kant's moral thought, and the common background of Feder's and Kant's views on morals. Let me briefly explain these three points in turn.

First, Feder's conception of morals is a prominent expression of the philosophical context in which Kant intervened. Feder, who also published widely on theoretical philosophy, devoted his main work — and the best of his life, as he confessed¹⁰ — to a highly ambitious, comprehensive account of morals, which is arguably the most remarkable German work in the area in the late eighteenth century.¹¹ Prepared by a successful academic textbook,¹² Feder's four-volume *Untersuchungen über den menschlichen Willen (Inquiries on the Human Will)*, published roughly in the same years as Kant's main writings on morals, intend to cover the entire foundations of the discipline from an empiricist standpoint.¹³ Although works comparable for dimension and scope had been published in Germany in the earlier decades, Feder's *Inquiries* are remarkable as they followed a decidedly eclectic approach that embodied very well the last trends in the debate. According to Feder himself, the main inspiration for the project of the *Inquiries on the Human Will* (though not the only one, as we shall see) was Locke's *Essay*, as the general aim was to provide a comprehensive empirical examination of the power of the will, analogous to what Locke had done with regard to human understanding.¹⁴ Thus Feder's view can be regarded as the most notable, and most extensively developed, position after the traditional Wolffian doctrine as well as the most important philosophical

⁹ For instance, L.H. Pietsch, *Topik der Kritik. Die Auseinandersetzung um die Kantische Philosophie (1781–1788) und ihre Metaphern* (Berlin–Boston: De Gruyter, 2010), p. 137, following Feder himself (*Leben*, p. 120) suggests that Feder might have had some influenced some of the changes in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

¹⁰ J.G.H. Feder, *Untersuchungen über den menschlichen Willen, Vierter Theil* (Göttingen and Lemgo, 1793; reprint Brussels, Culture et Civilisation, 1968), p. v.

¹¹ For overviews of Feder's thought see L. Marino, *Praeceptores Germaniae. Göttingen 1770–1820* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1995, p. 169–187, 343–346, 386f.; M. Albrecht, 'Johann Georg Heinrich Feder', in H. Holzhey, V. Mudroch (eds.), *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie: Die Philosophie des 18. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 5 (Basel, Schwabe, 2014), p. 249–55.

¹² J.G.H. Feder, *Lehrbuch der praktischen Philosophie*, 2 vols. (Hanau–Leipzig, 1775; 1st edition Göttingen, 1770). Feder revised the textbook while working on the *Inquiries* and published it as *Grundlehren zur Kenntniß des menschlichen Willens und der natürlichen Gesetze des Rechtsverhaltens* (Göttingen, 1783; 3rd edn 1789).

¹³ J.G.H. Feder, *Untersuchungen über den menschlichen Willen* (Göttingen and Lemgo, 1779–93; reprint Brussels, Culture et Civilisation, 1968).

¹⁴ Feder, *Leben*, p. 94.

alternative to Kant's novel approach in the German debates of their time. At least some of their contemporaries regarded the differences between Kant and Feder as representative of the matters at issue in the discussion of those decades: In 1794 the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* published a piece that aimed at providing a summary of the stand of the debates in moral philosophy under the title "Feder and Kant", after the foremost advocates of the competing views in play.¹⁵

Second, it was Feder's perspective that presented the first powerful opposition to Kant's. In fact, the most engaging early criticisms of Kant's moral theory came, if not from Feder directly, from followers of his, primarily from Gottlob August Tittel, in his *Ueber Herrn Kant's Moralreform. (On Mr. Kant's Reform of Morals)*.¹⁶ It was not that the conflict initiated by the Göttingen review soon extended to include a dispute in moral philosophy. In fact, the disagreement on morals was correspondingly deep, and would have probably provoked a controversy in itself, even without the impulse given by the discussion concerning the first *Critique*.

Finally, the contrast between Kant's and Feder's mature views is an especially remarkable development in the German philosophical debates of the late eighteenth century also because, before taking decidedly different paths, Kant and Feder could be considered rather close as to their philosophical outlook, as shows also Feder's praise for Kant's *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, welcomed as the manifestation of dissent against the "academic ton to do philosophy".¹⁷ Still in 1779, Feder confessed to Kant in the same spirit in a warm-hearted letter that he had "a big part" in his resolution "to do philosophy in the class in the same way as one philosophizes in life [*auf dem Katheder eben so zu philosophiren, wie man im Leben philosophirt*]" (Corr, 10:252). More specifically, Kant and Feder shared significant basic assumptions regarding how moral philosophy should be treated. They belonged to a new generation of thinkers who firmly believed in moving beyond the long-standing controversy between Wolffians and his adversaries. Already in the 1770s Feder suggested that "it would finally be time to stop praising or blaming Wolff one-sidedly",¹⁸ and Kant would have agreed that the philosophical

¹⁵ J.G.K. Werdermann, 'Feder und Kant: Versuch zur Aufhellung einiger streitigen Punkte in den Gründen der Moralphilosophie', *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 1794, 1, p. 309–38, cf. p. 313.

¹⁶ G.A. Tittel, *Ueber Herrn Kant's Moralreform* (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1786; reprint Brussels, Culture et Civilisation, 1969). Tittel had already published a philosophical compendium based on Feder: see G.A. Tittel, *Erläuterungen der theoretischen und praktischen Philosophie nach Herrn Feder's Ordnung*, 6 vols. (Frankfurt, 1783–86; reprint Brussels, Culture et Civilisation, 1973). On Tittel's polemic against the *Groundwork* in general see Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, p. 184 f.

¹⁷ Feder, Review of Kant, *Träume eines Geistersehers, Erlangische gelehrte Anmerkungen und Nachrichten* 21 (1766), p. 309. Cf. Feder, *Raum*, p. iv f. and *Leben*, p. 117.

¹⁸ Feder, *Lehrbuch*, vol. 2, p. 250.

agenda did not revolve around the question whether to be a Wolffian or an anti-Wolffian. Both Kant and Feder held that philosophy required an eclectic attitude, which should be willing to combine different perspectives in order to achieve better results.¹⁹ In moral philosophy the eclectic approach led them, along with others, to believe that the philosophical framework provided by the Wolffian conception should be developed by bringing in crucial insights owed to the newest British debates. Kant repeatedly suggested in the early 1760s that the compelling new insights by writers like Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Hume had to be further elaborated. They had “penetrated furthest in the search for the fundamental principles of all morality”, but they still needed to “be given [...] precision and completeness” (Pr, 311). That should happen within the framework of universal practical philosophy, which would thereby be improved as it urgently needed to be. In the first part of moral philosophy the Wolffian systematic outlook should join forces with the observation of human nature along the lines of the Scottish moralists, to implement a “moral physiology” that “explains actual appearances” (MoH, 12), even “a natural doctrine of willing [*eine Naturlehre des Wollens*]” (MH, 883).²⁰ Kant was not the only one in Germany to propose such a combination as a crucial methodological advancement in moral philosophy. Feder advocated a closely similar project not less strongly. If Wolff had been a model “in the analysis and organization [*Ordnung*] of given concepts”, he was surpassed in the observation by British writers like Hutcheson, Shaftesbury, Hume.²¹ In fact, Feder was the one who ultimately carried out the project more thoroughly than any other, besides Kant.

However, their developments diverged. Kant’s and Feder’s different takes on moral philosophy represent, thus, deeply contrasting outcomes of initially close positions. Kant’s path from the debates in the 1760s to his mature view can be examined more clearly if we contrast it with the paradigmatic and influent example of Feder’s moral philosophy, which was characterized by an altogether different perspective on fundamental issues. By taking Feder’s view into account, it will become clear that, if Feder critically followed the development of Kant’s thought, Kant also addressed Feder’s positions in turn, albeit tacitly. As I shall suggest, some crucial points made by Kant are arguably aimed at Feder, whose view must have been, for him, exemplary of a widespread conception that he radically opposed. Here I shall

¹⁹ On the debate on eclecticism in the Aufklärung see M. Albrecht, *Eklektik. Eine Begriffsgeschichte mit Hinweisen auf die Philosophie- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (Stuttgart–Bad Cannstatt, Frommann–Holzboog, 1994).

²⁰ See C. Schwaiger, *Kategorische und andere Imperative. Zur Entwicklung von Kants praktischer Philosophie bis 1785* (Stuttgart–Bad Cannstatt, Frommann–Holzboog, 1999), p. 75 ff.; S. Bacin, *Il senso dell’etica. Kant e la costruzione di una teoria morale*, Bologna–Napoli, il Mulino, 2006, p. 51 ff.

²¹ Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 1, p. 21 ff.

especially focus on their contrasting views on the will and happiness, to conclude with a look at their conception of the aim of moral philosophy.

2. Against universal practical philosophy

An examination of the conflict between Kant's and Feder's views on morality must begin from their different developments of the shared basic thoughts that I have mentioned in the previous section. The project of a revision of moral philosophy through a combination of the Wolffian framework with the observational approach championed by British writers like Hutcheson, Hume and Smith might sound odd to modern ears, but was in fact understood, both by Feder and Kant, as a perfectly reasonable development of Wolff's concept of universal practical philosophy. Nothing in Wolff forbade an empiricist implementation of the project. Feder expressed a comparatively uncontroversial thought by observing that Wolff's chief merit for the advancement of practical philosophy, that is, his original development of universal practical philosophy, amounted to the "clarification [*Aufklärung*] of some concepts and [...] the effort to trace all back to human nature".²² An improvement of that new discipline would require that the study of human nature be conducted more thoroughly, drawing on the latest insights. Since this inquiry should proceed empirically following the "observational method", the combination between Wolff's concept and empiricist approach was not only possible, but quite natural.

Accordingly, Feder's conception of the *Inquiries on the Human Will*, if inspired by Locke, unfolds from an unequivocal acknowledgment of Wolff's great merit. Feder had claimed already in the preface to the first edition of the *Lehrbuch* that the universal practical philosophy was the one philosophical discipline to which he would have devoted his main interest in the next years.²³ When the first volume of the *Inquiries* came out, a few years later, it was presented as the beginning of the fulfillment of that plan.²⁴ At the same time, universal practical philosophy represented for Feder the main ground of disagreement with Kant's views on morals. In the third edition of Feder's *Grundlehren* (1789) Kant's name is added to those of the writers who had done significant work on universal practical philosophy.²⁵ Feder thereby identified the domain where his incompatibility with Kant had its grounds. How to

²² Feder, *Lehrbuch*, vol. 2, p. 249; cf. p. 251 f.

²³ Feder, *Lehrbuch*, Preface to the first edition, [7].

²⁴ Feder, *Untersuchungen*, p. 19. See also *Lehrbuch*, Preface, [2].

²⁵ The list — representative of Feder's eclecticism — includes "Cicero, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, Home, Smith, Helvetius [sic], Wolf [sic], Garve, Plattner [sic], Kant" (Feder, *Grundlehren*, 3rd edn., 1789, p. 5).

understand and carry out the project of universal practical philosophy was a fundamental issue.

Wolff's exposition of universal practical philosophy had a quite broad scope, reaching from a general account of free action to a treatment of conscience and the statement of the fundamental law of nature.²⁶ Although Wolff's version dealt with many other topics, for later writers, like Feder and Kant, the core of universal practical philosophy was an investigation into the power of will. Feder first explained that Wolff's innovative propaedeutic to moral philosophy encompassed "a doctrine of the nature of the human will, the principles of the various kinds of goods and the essence of happiness, and finally the fundamental doctrine of laws and right".²⁷ Then, he equated universal practical philosophy with a theory of will.²⁸ The main aim of an improved universal practical philosophy should be, accordingly, to provide a descriptive examination of human nature and the human will. Feder once claimed that Hume's second *Enquiry*, had had the greatest impact on him.²⁹ Nevertheless, Feder's *Inquiries* provide not so much an investigation of the dynamics of moral approbation, in the wake of the Scottish sentimentalists, but rather an examination of the various elements of appetition and desire, closer to Wolff than to Hume.³⁰

Like Feder, Kant also understood the theory of the will as the core of universal practical philosophy. At the same time, though, he rejected the way that project had been carried out, thereby dismissing an attempt like Feder's as well as Wolff's original elaboration. In fact, a comparison with Feder allows to clarify the actual scope of Kant's dissatisfaction with universal practical philosophy. When Kant observed in the preface to the *Groundwork* that the project he was presenting was not to be confused with that known under the Wolffian name of universal practical philosophy (cf. G, 390), his target was not merely Wolff. Kant's criticisms are stated in rather generic terms, but are to be understood as addressing both Wolff's original version of universal practical philosophy (along with the variants of his followers, first and foremost Baumgarten's *philosophia practica prima*) and more recent attempts at renewing that

²⁶ On Wolff's conception of universal practical philosophy see C. Schwaiger, 'Christian Wolffs Philosophia practica universalis. Zu ursprünglichem Gehalt und späterer Gestalt einer neuen Grundlagendisziplin,' in L. Cataldi Madonna (ed.), *Macht und Bescheidenheit der Vernunft. Beiträge zur Philosophie Christian Wolffs* (Hildesheim – Zürich – New York: Olms, 2005), p. 219–33.

²⁷ Feder, *Lehrbuch*, § 1, p. 4.

²⁸ See e.g. Feder, 'Review Schmid', p. 153.

²⁹ Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 1, p. 23.

³⁰ Vesper, 'Zwischen Hume und Kant', strongly stresses Feder's closeness to Hume. While this happens for good reasons, this emphasis underplays too much not only the differences between their perspectives, but also the importance of many other influences on Feder's views.

project, even in partially different terms.³¹ The “authors of universal practical philosophy” (G, 391) to whom Kant refers in that paragraph also included writers who were still adhering to that Wolffian project, just like Feder was doing in the same years with the *Inquiries on the Human Will*. Indeed, Kant’s remarks match precisely the features of Feder’s work.

In Kant’s objections against universal practical philosophy, at least two critical remarks are here especially relevant: (a) Universal practical philosophy “took into consideration [...] willing generally, with all actions and conditions that belong to it in this general sense” (G, 390; cf. *Moral Mrongovius II*, 29:598). (b) Since universal practical philosophy examines “the actions and conditions of human willing in general, which are largely drawn from psychology” (G, 390), it can only be an empirical investigation (cf. *Moral Mrongovius II*, 29:597). Both criticisms apply to Feder as well as to Wolff and the Wolffians. In fact, Feder’s *Inquiries* were the closest and most comprehensive example of the kind of investigation that Kant was dismissing through these observations. The first volume of that work presented exactly a descriptive account of willing in general, which analyzed “the most evident laws” governing the functioning of the will and devoted a lengthy examination to the various impulses determining the action of the will. Feder devoted his attention precisely to “willing in general”, of which he aimed to provide the most exhaustive picture.³² A important part of Feder’s exposition was, then, a methodological point against Wolff. While a central aim of the inventor of universal practical philosophy was to bring mathematical method into moral philosophy, for Feder the necessary investigation of the human will in general was to be carried out through an empirical approach that should essential draw on observations of the behavior, character and passions of one’s own and others.³³ In this respect Kant’s criticism against the empirical character applies to Feder even more exactly than to Wolff. From Kant’s standpoint, Feder’s empirical inquiry on the human will had made the weaknesses of Wolff’s project even clearer. Among these, Feder’s example showed that an investigation into “willing

³¹ On Kant’s observations against Wolff see S. Bacin, ‘Kant’s Criticisms of Rationalist Moral Theories’, in S. Bacin, O. Sensen (eds.), *The Emergence of Autonomy in Kant’s Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). On Baumgarten as addressee of the critical comments against universal practical philosophy see ‘Kant’s Lectures on Ethics and Baumgarten’s Moral Philosophy’, in L. Denis, O. Sensen (eds.), *Kant’s Lectures on Ethics. A Critical Guide* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 15–33. H. E. Allison, *Kant’s Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals. A Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 37–52, devotes great attention to Kant’s criticisms of universal practical philosophy, but he ultimately follows the German exposition given in Georg Friedrich Meier’s *Allgemeine praktische Weltweisheit* (1764), without considering either the differences between Wolff’s own treatment and later expositions nor an eclectic version of the project like Feder’s.

³² Cf. e.g. Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 1, § 1, p. 27; Feder, *Lehrbuch*, § 2, p. 5 f.

³³ See Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 1, p. 11 ff. P.R. Anstey and A. Vanzo, ‘Early Modern Experimental Philosophy’, in J. Sytsma and W. Buckwalter (eds.), *A Companion to Experimental Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2016), p. 87–102, mention these methodological claims of Feder as an example of application of the experimental method to moral philosophy.

in general” could not be but an empirical inquiry, even if Wolff had insisted on mathematical method.

It is thus more than likely that Kant’s remarks are to be taken to address Feder’s view as well as the Wolffian variants of universal practical philosophy. Furthermore, if we assume that Kant could be aiming at Feder too, this would also explain why he restricted his criticisms at the theory of the will, which is but one of the many topics covered by Wolff in his two-volume *Philosophia practica universalis*, as I mentioned before. Feder’s empirical investigation into the human will as the most extended development of the Wolffian project highlighted that that was its real core and that the whole idea of a universal practical philosophy had its unity in a certain conception of the will. If they also target Feder, Kant’s remarks against universal practical philosophy must be understood not simply as a conceptual clarification with regard to the model given by works published half a century earlier. Feder’s insistence on further developing Wolff’s idea had made the concept of universal practical philosophy especially present in the latest debate. The project was thereby not just a distinguished proposal in the recent history of moral philosophy, but an essential point of current, trend-setting work in the area. Therefore addressing it in 1785 was crucial, in order to properly clarify the distinctive features of Kant’s own project of a pure moral philosophy.

The fundamental difference between Kant’s and Feder’s conceptions of an investigation into the will extends, correspondingly, to how they understand the will itself. Feder stated as the most fundamental descriptive law of the will that “the power of the will [*Willenskraft*] is dependent on the power of representation [*Vorstellungskraft*]”.³⁴ Since the will “becomes efficient [*wirksam*] through representations”, its actions depend on “intension and quantity of the representations that have an effect [*wirken*] on it”. Feder repeatedly stressed the essential dependence of the will from representations of the faculty of knowing, also making clear that ‘representations’ was meant in the broadest sense, including “sensations and any sort of perceptions [*Empfindungen und jedwede Art von Gewahrnehmungen*]”.³⁵

Now, not only Kant’s view was quite opposite to Feder’s, but the very terms in which he presents it seem aiming at highlighting that opposition. The constructive part of the second section of the *Groundwork* begins by Kant’s explanation of the concept of the will as “the capacity to act according to the representation of laws” (G, 412). Kant thereby contrasts the will as a rational capacity to the causal powers of “every thing in nature”, which simply follow laws. If we take Feder’s view into consideration, though, Kant’s main claim on the will in the

³⁴ Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 1, p. 28.

³⁵ Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 1, p. 34 fn. Cf. *Lehrbuch*, § 4, p. 7. See the important developments in *Untersuchungen*, vol. 3, p. 111 f.

second section of the *Groundwork* appears in a partially different light, as a formulation suitable also for polemic reasons, since it is apt to reject the very core of an empiricist account like Feder's by phrasing the opposite view in similar terms. By stating that the will is to be understood as following "the representation of laws", Kant argued against the thought that the activity of the will draws on *epistemic* representations. The contrast with Feder underscores that, if Kant talks of representations too, he in fact refers to representations of *laws*. Kant's main explanation of the concept of the will in the *Groundwork*, thus, could be taken as a response to, or a reversal of, Feder's thesis of the dependence of the will on knowledge. In fact, the reviewer of Feder's *Inquiries* for the Kantian *Allgemeine Litteratur-Zeitung* suggested precisely that, observing that Feder had not showed that willing necessarily requires representations given by feelings and sensations, as he did not consider whether the will could be determined "by the mere idea of lawfulness [*Gesetzmäßigkeit*]".³⁶ From Kant's standpoint, the failure of considering the pure dimension of the power of the will in inquiries like Feder's had inevitably led to miss exactly the source of normative contrasts which moral philosophy is all about.

3. Happiness and self-contentment

Kant's and Feder's thoroughly opposed conceptions of the will lead to consider a further point of disagreement, to which Feder and his followers called particular attention. In their view, the fundamental mistake of Kant's moral thought did not concern the origin of moral norms or the source of moral cognition. Unlike Kant, who distinguished between ancient and modern moral theories because the former regarded the nature of the highest good as their main concern, while the latter track moral cognition back to different faculties,³⁷ for Feder moral epistemology does not present divisive issues.³⁸ Feder held that philosophical conceptions of morality chiefly differ with regard to their account of "what is absolutely good".³⁹ The fundamental disagreement, thus, concerned the conception of value as object of moral striving.

³⁶ Review of J.G.H. Feder, *Untersuchungen über den menschlichen Willen*, Erster Theil. Zweite Auflage (Göttingen and Lemgo, 1785), *Allgemeine Litteratur-Zeitung*, 16th Jan 1787, p. 124.

³⁷ See e.g. MoP, 106; Refl. 6760, 19:151.

³⁸ Feder does not follow Hutcheson and Hume in considering the alternative between sentimentalism and rationalism fundamental. Like most of his German contemporaries, Feder argues for a combination of traditional rationalism with elements of sentimentalism. On this see especially Feder's 'Ueber das moralische Gefühl'. Tittel analogously observes that "moral feeling cannot be regarded as principle of morality independently of reason nor of self-love" (*Moralreform*, 60).

³⁹ Feder, 'Review Schmid', p. 139.

According to Feder's empiricist account of the will, actions derive, with the crucial mediation of representations, from desires and impulses, which are determined by a natural striving for the good. For Feder, there is simply no difference between the good and the useful. He even affirmed that his "main claim [*Hauptsatz*]" on morals was: "every well-being [*alles Wohlseyn*] is good in and for itself".⁴⁰ In this respect, his view constitutes an example of the propensity of several German writers in the late eighteenth century towards proto-utilitarian positions, arguably in the wake of Leibniz, whose suggestions could effortlessly be combined with Hutcheson's and Hume's views.⁴¹ The centre of Feder's view is thus an eudaemonist account of morality. Accordingly, the main reason for opposing Kant's view was, for Feder and his followers, to defend eudaemonism.⁴² Tittel stated this perspective in especially pointed terms in the preface to his book against Kant's *Groundwork*: "the cause for which I stand is the cause of happiness as principle of morality".⁴³

How to conceive of happiness was therefore a particularly crucial issue, even more so because Feder's view is characterized by a marked emphasis on one specific aspect. Kant had observed in the *Groundwork* that "the concept of happiness is so indeterminate a concept that, even though every human being wishes to achieve it, yet he can never say determinately and in agreement with himself what he actually wishes and wants" (G, 418). By contrast, Feder begins the third volume of the *Untersuchungen* with an opposite claim, which sounds as a response to Kant:

"One would hardly deem it possible that with regard to something for which every human being relentlessly strive [...], the basic concepts can be changeable and controversial. Yet, this seems to be the case with happiness. However, it seems more so than how it actually is."⁴⁴

The distinctive element in Feder's view is the centrality of the intrinsic connection between happiness and contentment (*Zufriedenheit*). Feder did not merely argue that moral happiness is to be regarded as equally important as 'external' happiness, as many others had

⁴⁰ Feder, 'Review Schmid', p. 140.

⁴¹ Feder acknowledged that Leibniz had a great influence on his whole philosophical outlook: see *Leben*, p. 80. On Leibniz' contribution to the origin of utilitarianism see J. Hruschka, 'The Greatest Happiness Principle and Other Early German Anticipations of Utilitarian Theory', *Utilitas* 3 (1991), p. 165–77.

⁴² Note, incidentally, that the word 'eudaemonism' was coined exactly to denote Feder's view. The term was first used by C.G. Rapp, *Ueber die Untauglichkeit des Prinzips der allgemeinen und eigenen Glückseligkeit zum Grundgesetze der Sittlichkeit* (Jena, 1791), p. 3. See D. Tafani, *Virtù e felicità in Kant*, Firenze, Olschki, 2006, p. 34 ff.

⁴³ Tittel, *Moralreform*, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Feder, *Untersuchungen* 3, § 2, p. 3. See also Feder's comment on Kant's statement in his review in *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen*, 29th Oct 1785, p. 232.

already done before. He argues for a more specific claim, namely that happiness only has internal grounds. Most of his contemporaries understood happiness in terms of durable pleasure. Wolff had defined happiness as “the condition of continuous pleasure [*Freude*]”,⁴⁵ and later writers followed him also in this respect.⁴⁶ This is the background for the clarification in Kant’s first *Critique*, where happiness is understood as “the satisfaction of all of our inclinations (*extensive*, with regard to their manifoldness, as well as *intensive*, with regard to degree, and also *protensive*, with regard to duration).” (CPR, A806/B834; cf. e.g. MM, 387). Unlike them, Feder stressed the inner, moral nature of happiness by defining it as consisting of “pleasure, contentment and duration [*Vergnügen, Zufriedenheit und Dauer*] of those states of mind”.⁴⁷ Thus, Feder maintained that “the most important goods and evils on which the happiness of human beings depends for the most part, are those that he preserves in himself and has in his power the most”.⁴⁸ Since its basic elements “rest chiefly on inner grounds”, happiness necessarily requires self-knowledge.⁴⁹ More specifically, a vital condition for happiness is a “good conscience”, without which, for Feder, happiness is but “a dream that can expire or be altered by any external impact [*Anstoß*]”.⁵⁰ Conversely, “nothing is as much cause of the discontentment and misery [*Unzufriedenheit und Unglückseligkeit*] of human beings as their moral imperfection”, as “experience and the testimony of wise men of all times” teach.⁵¹ Conversely, a virtuous man cannot be unhappy, on Feder’s view. [See e.g. Feder, *Lehrbuch*, p. 298, § 51]

Kant’s converse insistence on rejecting the idea of “*moral happiness*” (MM, 387) was probably motivated also by its prominence in Feder’s view. The close connection between happiness and self-contentment was not a new thesis, to be sure. Kant had discussed it in his lectures with regard to Stoicism and Epicureanism.⁵² In eighteenth-century Germany Wolff and Baumgarten, for instance, had also pointed out that self-contentment belonged to

⁴⁵ C. Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen zur Beförderung ihrer Glückseligkeit (Deutsche Ethik)*, 4th edn (Franckfurt u. Leipzig, 1733; reprint Hildesheim et al., Olms, 1996), § 52.

⁴⁶ See, for instance, J.A. Eberhard, *Sittenlehre der Vernunft* (Berlin 1781, reprint Hildesheim et al., Olms, 2011), § 3: “By happiness everyone understands a condition in which he enjoys true pleasure continuously.”

⁴⁷ Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 3, p. 3. Cf. Feder, *Abhandlung über die allgemeinsten Grundsätze der praktischen Philosophie zum dritten Theil der Untersuchungen über den menschlichen Willen* (Lemgo, 1793), p. xxxv.

⁴⁸ Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 3, § 4, p. 14.

⁴⁹ Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 3, § 13, p. 74.

⁵⁰ Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 3, § 11, p. 71.

⁵¹ Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 3, p. 206.

⁵² See e.g. *Moral Mrongovius II*, 29:601 ff.

happiness.⁵³ Neither of them, though, had been so resolute as Feder in essentially equating the two notions. More importantly, Feder presented that equation as one central claim of his eudaemonism. Kant had thus good reasons to devote particular attention to the issue. Feder was not only a prominent moral philosopher, but also the leading figure in the most vigorous group of opponents of Kant's moral thought, who were targeting Kant's account of morality primarily because of its anti-eudaemonism. Rejecting the view that revolved around the thought that happiness essentially consisted in the agent's inner contentment for his, or her, behavior was therefore, for Kant, of strategic importance. Dismissing its very conception of happiness was an essential move against the most pugnacious variant of eudaemonism.

Already in the *Groundwork* Kant had observed that "the more a cultivated reason engages with the purpose of enjoying life and with happiness, so much the further does a human being stray from true contentment" (G, 393), thus arguing for a view opposite to Feder's.⁵⁴ However, Kant explicitly criticizes in published writings a conception of happiness characterized by the primacy of self-contentment only after 1785. He had already expressed his position on the matter before. Still, one might suggest that Feder's insistence helped Kant to see that this point needed to be addressed more specifically. In fact he regarded it as one central claim of "the eudaemonist" (MM, 377). Now, Kant observes, the contentment provided by "good conscience" is especially comforting in disgrace, to be sure. Still, "[t]his consolation is not happiness, not even the smallest part of it"; it is "inner tranquility" that is in fact "merely negative with respect to everything that can make life pleasant" (CpV, 88). Kant had clarified already before the second *Critique* wherein the main difference lies: Self-contentment is not happiness because "[n]o matter how much inner self-contentment a human being may have, he will still always feel his external condition – the deity is independent of all external circumstances, but a human being is not" (*Moral Mrongovius II*, 29:624).⁵⁵ This makes of self-contentment merely "an analogue of happiness" (CpV, 117). Thereby Kant fully reversed the very picture of happiness painted by Feder and Tittel, using their same words.⁵⁶ The importance of Kant's position in this respect was quite clear to his contemporaries, who saw in

⁵³ See C. Wolff, *Psychologia empirica, methodo scientifica pertractata*, 2nd edn (Francofurti et Lipsiae, 1738; reprint Hildesheim–New York, Olms, 1968), § 752; A.G. Baumgarten, *Ethica philosophica*, 3rd edition (Halle, 1763), § 191.

⁵⁴ Tittel rejected Kant's view in turn: see *Moralreform*, p. 22 f.

⁵⁵ I thank Jens Timmermann for making his revised text and translation of *Moral Mrongovius II* available to me ahead of its publication.

⁵⁶ Compare, for instance, Tittel, *Erläuterungen*, vol. 3, 157: "Here we find consolation and tranquillity in disgrace [*Unglück*]. In the hardest circumstances that we or our loved ones experience the consciousness of rightful and virtuous dispositions comforts us".

it his response to eudaemonism.⁵⁷ Feder himself highlighted precisely this point as one main distinctive feature of Kant's view regarding the principle of morality. What sets Kant's account apart from others is, according to Feder, that he "does not count self-contentment and self-respect to happiness".⁵⁸

Notably, Kant's main argument against a view like Feder's focuses on moral phenomenology. An intrinsic connection between happiness and self-contentment must ultimately be rejected as it offers an inadequate description of a distinctive feature of the standpoint of a human agent. If we do recognize a tension between the call of duty and the natural desire to be happy, we are not even in the position to account for the fact, belonging to the experience of everyone as a moral subject, that obligations do clash with at least some natural inclinations, to which they set boundaries. It simply is necessary to explain that striving for happiness constitutes "a powerful counterweight to all the commands of duty" (G, 405). If this aspect of moral experience is not taken into account, it is impossible to justify the satisfaction that complying with obligations should entail. A view like Feder's involves that "one *cannot feel* such satisfaction or mental unease prior to cognition of obligation and cannot make it the basis of the latter" (CpV, 38; my emphasis). Kant accordingly calls the thought of "moral happiness" a "sophistry [*Vernünftelei*]" (MM, 377),⁵⁹ since it tacitly diverges from the common experience of the actual feelings involved in those circumstances. This descriptive inadequacy entails a contradictory conception, according to which happiness would rely on the virtuous disposition, which would, in turn, depend on how much the action contributes to the happiness of the agent (cf. CpV, 38; MM, 377 f.).

4. "Only a new formula": Moral philosophy and virtuous life

The conflicting perspectives on the project of a universal practical philosophy and the opposite views of happiness amounted, finally, to a further divergence. At the beginning of the third volume of the *Inquiries*, published in 1786, Feder maintained that philosophers kept on questioning "with sophisms and prejudices" basic moral truths, long acknowledged by all reasonable men, such as that happiness and virtue are intrinsically connected.⁶⁰ Only a few months earlier, Kant's *Groundwork* had forcefully argued against that view (cf. G, 395 f.). Feder repeatedly raised the suspicion that the dispute occasioned by Kant's moral thought

⁵⁷ See Rapp, *Über die Untauglichkeit*, p. 2.

⁵⁸ Feder, 'Review CpV', p. 216.

⁵⁹ I change here the Cambridge Edition translation, which renders the pejorative *Vernünftelei* with the too mild, ambiguous phrase 'subtle reasoning'.

⁶⁰ Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 3, p. viii ff.

were of merely verbal nature, since he believed that the “misunderstandings on part of the critical philosophy” were primarily caused by “alteration of the concepts of happiness, inclination, agreeable, prudence, etc.”⁶¹ Was then Kant’s moral thought a product of misguided philosophical *hybris* that pretended to rectify the most deeply rooted convictions of human beings? This was, in fact, the point raised by Tittel, who talked of Kant’s *reform* of morals to stress that the main claims in the *Groundwork* amounted to urging a deep change not only in the common understanding of all basic ideas of morality, but also in the practice of virtue itself, in a way that would have been in contrast with human nature. The criticism is particularly serious because Kant himself had insisted that his view centers on an unfolding of “common moral cognition”, as the very title of the first section of the *Groundwork* highlights.

This is the background for a critical remark that Kant famously touches upon in the preface to the second *Critique*. According to a rival commentator, the *Groundwork* had provided not a new moral principle, but “only a new formula” (CpR, 8). In light of the broader controversy between Kant and Feder on morals, I suggest that that remark went back not just to Tittel, as is commonly acknowledged, but to Feder as well. That observation, in fact, entailed more than what Kant seems to address in the preface to the second *Critique*. Kant limited himself to respond that there can be nothing but new formulas of the same fundamental principle of morality, since “the world” neither has “ignorant of what duty is” nor “in thoroughgoing error about it” (cf. CpR, 8 fn.). But Tittel had in fact made a partially different point. The most serious weakness of Kant’s view was not that he had not succeeded in identifying a *new* principle. Like Feder, Tittel held that “the world” did not need anything of that sort. On the contrary, the main issue was that Kant’s “new formula” was bound to be an “empty formula”. The categorical imperative was nothing but an artificially devised normative expression that had no footing in human nature.⁶² Feder had already pointed out in his review of the *Groundwork* that Kant’s view would find the greatest difficulties “in the application”.⁶³ Missing a natural ground, Kant’s principle could not have any motivational power, which is only determined by desires and impulses. In Tittel’s words, Kant’s moral philosophy could not have any “instructive force [*belehrende Kraft*] and impact on the heart”.⁶⁴

This original version of the traditional emptiness objection revealed a significant difference of views concerning the nature and aims of moral philosophy in general. Tittel followed Feder’s assumption that morals did not need a new principle, but only a careful

⁶¹ Feder, ‘Review Schmid’, p. 153. Cf. Feder, ‘Review CpV’, p. 185 f.

⁶² See Tittel, *Moralreform*, p. 35.

⁶³ ‘Review G’, p. 232.

⁶⁴ Tittel, *Moralreform*, p. 42; cf. p. 80.

explanation of its natural grounds. In morals, “empirical philosophy” gives an account “based on observation” that supports a “moral that follows the natural feelings”.⁶⁵ The search for a fundamental principle is less important, and can even be detrimental to morality: “Nothing is more dangerous for the understanding than a general principle established [*festgesetzt*] too soon”.⁶⁶ Feder’s main criticism of Wolff’s universal practical philosophy was, in fact, that the love of simplicity had led him to draw on a too small number of explicative principles.⁶⁷ For Feder, Kant’s view was a case in point.⁶⁸ His attempt was thus doubly wrong, from the empiricist’s perspective. Kant had missed the essential link with human nature and had focused, instead, on the search for a fundamental principle. Therefore Feder held that Kant had disparaged “empirical philosophy” in the *Groundwork* even more than in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁶⁹

In Feder’s view a philosophical account of morals should not aim at providing a new moral law or a list of obligations, but observations, which can rectify the misleading accounts of moral truths. Notably, Feder did not devote as much attention to the doctrine of moral duties. He did briefly treat it in the two versions of his textbook (the *Lehrbuch* and the *Grundlehren*), but his work in moral philosophy only concentrated on re-shaping universal practical philosophy. At the same time, though, his take on the Wolffian project gave it a more Thomasian twist, as the empirical knowledge of the faculty of desire provided the tools for controlling passions and strengthening the favourable natural affects and impulses. Accordingly, Feder presented the *Inquiries* as including the “basic rules of knowing and governing human minds [*die Grundregeln, die menschlichen Gemüther zu erkennen und zu regieren*]”, as the title of the first volume goes. Thus Feder’s *Inquiries* are often closer to Kant’s anthropology more than his moral philosophy, as to the content.⁷⁰ Nevertheless Feder did intend to provide a treatment of morals, which, unlike Kant’s anthropology, led to an extended investigation on happiness and virtue and to a critical appraisal of moral theories

⁶⁵ Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 3, p. 205 fn.

⁶⁶ Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 3, 225; cf. p. 193 ff., and *Abhandlung*, p. xi. Note that the *Festsetzung* of the moral principle belonged to the main task of the *Groundwork* (G, 393).

⁶⁷ Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 1, 21.

⁶⁸ Feder was closer to the common sense philosophers, in this respect. See M. Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense in Germany, 1768–1800* (Kingston–Montreal, McGill–Queen’s University Press, 1987), p. 74 ff.

⁶⁹ Feder, *Raum*, p. x and xii. Cf. ‘Review G’, 230f.; Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 3, p. 205 fn.

⁷⁰ Thus R. Brandt, ‘Feder und Kant’, *Kant-Studien* 80 (1989), p. 249–64: 254.

against the evidence provided by observation.⁷¹ The deeper difference with Kant, thus, regarded the very conception of the role of moral philosophy for a virtuous life.

In this light the critical remark that Kant would have merely presented a new formula appears as more significant than it might seem. It was not just the point of an obscure critic, but another manifestation of a broader conflict between empirical philosophy and critical philosophy regarding the conception of moral philosophy itself. Kant and Feder held that the “healthy reason” has all the resources needed for a virtuous life (cf. e.g. G, 402). They diverged on the implications of this assumption for the role of philosophy. Feder thought that the improved Wolffian project could rectify the dangerous errors of philosophers referring to an accurate examination of the elements of human nature.⁷² Contrarily to Feder, Kant held that there is tension within human nature, the enemy of morality is not primarily an incorrect account, but the deeply rooted tendencies in the agents that result in a dialectic that, if dangerous, is nevertheless natural. Because of them “common human reason is impelled to leave its sphere not by some need of speculation [...], but rather on practical grounds” (G, 405). Philosophy needs therefore to identify a principle in the practical use of reason, which can counter the inclinations opposing the demands of morality.⁷³ While Feder argued for a naturalist development of universal practical philosophy that did not aim at any real foundation, Kant insisted on the necessity of a proper justification of moral demands. He granted that no new principle was needed, but a formula was, nevertheless.

When we consider the long-standing, mostly implicit conflict between Kant and Feder in moral philosophy, a genuine clash of philosophical paradigms becomes apparent. In Feder we find an extended empirical investigation into the will and an eudaemonist account centered on a strongly moralized view of happiness, joined with a common-sense conception of the aim of philosophical analysis of morals. In reaction to the same assumptions from which Feder started, Kant powerfully opposed all the three points, orienting the debate in new directions. The comparison with Feder’s view highlights some of the features that more strongly singled out Kant’s moral philosophy in its context: The project of a pure moral philosophy as new orientation in the analysis of the will, the anti-eudaemonism characterized by the contrast between happiness and self-contentment, and the general thought that moral

⁷¹ See Röttgers, ‘J.G.H. Feder’, p. 425 f.

⁷² See e.g. Feder, *Untersuchungen*, vol. 4, p. vi.

⁷³ Kant’s and Feder’s way to develop the practical part of morals diverged accordingly. Note that Feder had presented a philosophical ascetics (cf. *Lehrbuch*, p. 256) before Kant (cf. MM, 484 f.). Not only their developments are remarkably different, though. Feder cannot be regarded as the only possible source of Kant’s usage either, since the word, originally from the theological vocabulary, may have come to Kant’s attention from many other writers. See Bacin, *Il senso dell’etica*, p. 256 f.

philosophy should contribute to virtue neither by changing the common understanding of morality, nor by registering alleged natural grounds of virtue, but by strengthening its basic principles.