

Angelica Nuzzo

How ideals are made: maximum, perfection, completeness

1. Plato's ideas, today's ideals

It is with great consistency that since the 1770 *Dissertatio* up to the *Critique of pure reason* (1781, 1787) Kant introduces his conception of ideas with a reflection on terminology and a historical reference to Plato¹. This may appear curious, as the term “idea” is so pervasive in the philosophical language of the ancient and modern times as to hardly seem in need of justification. And yet, Kant’s general intention in the terminological remark that opens the section “On ideas in general” of the first *Critique* is clear. Setting his appropriation of the ancient Platonic notion of idea against the early modern inflationary use of the term, Kant makes a strong philosophical point. He announces the intention of holding on to the ancient use – indeed, to the use of the term in a “dead and learned language” such as Greek (Kant 1787: B 369/A 312)² – as necessary in order to keep the attention focused on the only meaning of the word worth preserving. For, the risk is that such ancient core meaning will be lost among the scattered multitude of other, more recent uses (Kant 1787: B 369/A 313). With regard to the modern currency of the

¹ For the general topic of Plato’s presence in Kant’s philosophical development see Heimsoeth 1967.

² All translations are the author’s.

term – and here the empiricist tradition is the main target – Kant does not parse words, and simply expresses how “intolerable” it is “to hear the representation (*Vorstellung*) of the color red called an idea”. In fact, such representation is so far from being a concept of reason that it “ought not even be called a concept of understanding, a notion (*Notion*)” (Kant 1787: B 377/A 320).

At issue in Kant’s need to clearly position his own use of the term idea in relation to the tradition – the ancient, early modern, and scholastic metaphysical tradition – is the distinction between concepts of understanding and concepts of reason, and their different relation to sensibility (or, alternatively, lack thereof). But at issue is also the fragile demarcation separating a metaphysical and speculative from a properly critical employment of reason’s concepts on the basis of the very activity of reason itself, and separating the fictitious and illusory reality of ideas from their legitimate validity. The reference to Plato’s use of the expression “idea” (in contrast to Aristotle’s main concern with the understanding’s concepts or categories) serves precisely this broad critical purpose. Bringing Plato’s employment of the term to bear on his own critical terminology (or appropriating Plato critically, as it were) Kant observes, in a somewhat convoluted way, “Plato made use of the expression idea in such a way as quite evidently to have meant by it something which not only can never be borrowed from the senses but far surpasses even the concepts of the understanding”. Indeed, more directly, even without having to tease out what Plato quite evidently must have meant, for Plato ideas are “archetypes of things themselves (*Urbilder der Dinge selbst*)”. Their relation to “reason” – or rather to what Kant takes as the closest Platonic equivalent to *Vernunft* – is genetic: ideas “have flown (*fließen*) out of the highest reason” (i.e.,

the divine understanding) as their original source (Kant 1787: B 370/A 313).

Kant's appeal to Plato in the first *Critique* echoes a similar reference in the *Dissertatio* (§ 9). Herein Kant places the cognitive activity of the "pure understanding (*intellectus purus*)" within metaphysics, and distinguishes an "elenctic" or negative function of intellectual cognition from a "dogmatic" one. With a language that comes close to the one used in the *Critique* to describe Plato's ideas, Kant claims that the "general principles of the pure understanding" as exhibited in metaphysical disciplines such as ontology and rational psychology (hence the principles of the understanding's dogmatic cognition) "have flown (*exeunt*) out of some kind of model (*exemplar aliquod*)" that can only be intellectually conceived. Such model is "perfection as noumenon (*Perfectio Noumenon*)". At this point, taking up the terminology of scholastic metaphysics, Kant inserts Plato into the discussion: "the *maximum of perfection* is called today *ideal*, in Plato *idea* (as, for example, his idea of the state)". In striking contrast with his recurrent terminological remarks on the notion of idea, Kant generally employs the term "ideal" without caring or feeling the need for an explicit terminological discussion. In *Dissertatio* § 9, as in the passage of the first *Critique* cited above, the Platonic meaning of idea is connected to the contemporary currency of the term. In this connection, the earlier text provides us with Kant's first use of the term "ideal" as a philosophical concept although herein Kant does not specifically differentiate between idea and ideal. To be sure, as confirmed by Kant's remark, this term is not directly Platonic but of modern coinage: today's "ideal" stands for Plato's "idea". Thereby Kant hints, most likely, at the use of the term by writers such as Winckelmann (with regard to Greek art) and by contemporaries concerned with aesthetic themes more generally

(Piché 1984: 9). For them, the idea or rather ideal is alternatively an artwork functioning as a model for further imitation, or the mental sketch formed by the artist's imagination. In addition, in that early passage, Kant also hints at the negative and dismissive employment of the term "ideal" whereby something like the utopian idea of the state (of which Plato offers a well-known paradigmatic example) is a mere fiction or an *ens rationis*, i.e., a *mere* ideal. Relevant in this connection – unlike the one at issue in the first *Critique* – is the notion that the ideal, being brought back to the work of the artist, is connected to a human activity and to the human imagination; it is not a creation of the divine understanding. And yet, the genetic connection whereby the cited passage of the *Critique* refers the idea to the divine mind is also anticipated in the *Dissertatio* (§ 25). Herein Kant identifies the Platonic "idea" with "the pure intellectual intuition exempt from the laws of sensibility such as the divine intuition".

In this essay, I place Kant's conception of the "ideal" as a special determination of the idea – i.e., as the individualized idea or the idea not only *in concreto* but *in individuo* – within the terminological and conceptual constellation in which Kant's critical and transcendental concerns intersect with the reference to Plato and scholastic metaphysics. This is the topic of the first section of the essay. In the argument that follows, I bring the discussion of Kant's ideas and ideals to bear on a point that is often overshadowed by his unequivocal insistence on the fact that ideas, although no mere *entia rationis*, are never (completely) instantiated in reality, have no (cognitive) relation to possible experience (i.e., have no "objective reality" the way the understanding's concepts do), cannot be exhaustively exhibited or presented in a *Darstellung* in the sensible world, and the like. In fact, while the notion of a "regulative" use of ideas

hints at the possibility of somehow bridging the gap opened by claims such as these, my present concern is a different, although connected, one. My suggestion is that there is yet another aspect whereby ideas, and in particular ideals, are brought in a sort of relation – albeit, it may seem, a merely negative one – to the reality of experience. This aspect is twofold. It concerns, first, the way in which ideas and ideals are *generated* or *made* by the human mind. But on this basis it also concerns, second, the way in which they are employed *in relation to experience*. To be sure, since its early mention in the *Dissertatio*, the term “ideal” in particular seems to capture a sort of relation between the noumenal world in its completeness and perfection and the sensible world, and it seems to capture it by endorsing the always insufficient perspective of the sensible world, as it were. What, then, is this relation, and does it have something to do with the way in which ideals are generated? Going back to Kant’s reference to Plato in the *Critique*, one should notice his wording: “Plato *found* his ideas” chiefly in the practical realm (Kant 1787: B 371/A 315, my emphasis); but with regard to their *source*, for him ideas “have *flowed out* of the highest reason”, through which then human reason partakes in them (Kant 1787: B 370/A 313, my emphasis). As noticed above, the latter, genetic claim, although confirmed by Plato’s use, seems to run counter to the reference to the ideal according to contemporary language made in *Dissertatio* (§ 9), whereby artistic ideals are original products of the human mind, not the creation of the divine understanding. What I am now interested in exploring is the connection between the two claims when at stake, this time, is Kant’s own conception of ideas and ideals: how are the ideas and ideals *made*? In whose possession reason *finds* itself?

In the *Dissertatio*, long before getting to the transcendental position of the *Critique*, in an attempt to define the status of metaphysical concepts and principles, Kant observes that they are obviously “not to be searched for in the senses but in the nature of the pure understanding”, yet not as “*innate* concepts (*conceptus connate*) but rather as concepts abstracted from the laws inherent in the mind [...] hence as acquired concepts (*acquisiti*)”. Moreover, offering a suggestion that is not properly worked out here, Kant maintains that such concepts are acquired “by attending to the actions of the mind on the occasion of experience” (§ 8). These concepts of the “pure understanding”, although explicitly metaphysical, do not seem to overlap with what Kant later calls ideas. In fact, they seem closer to the later categories of the understanding: Kant mentions possibility, existence, necessity, substance, cause as examples. But how does reason or the pure intellect “acquire” its concepts³? The early passage has a parallel in Kant’s interpretation of Plato’s ideas quoted above⁴ and is echoed at the beginning of the presentation of the “Concepts of pure reason” in the transcendental dialectic: “The title concept of reason already gives a preliminary indication that we are dealing with something that cannot be limited within experi-

³ With regard to *conceptus acquisiti* see *Reflexion* 4172 and 4851. The latter *Reflexion* draws the distinction between concepts *acquisiti* a priori and a posteriori and specifies, in line with the position of the *Critique* in explicitly countering both Plato and Leibniz, that the former are not exclusively intellectual but can be sensible as well (i.e., space and time).

⁴ “Plato made use of the expression idea in such a way as quite evidently to have meant by it something which not only can never be borrowed from the senses but far surpasses even the concepts of the understanding” (Kant 1787: B 370/A 313).

ence”, since its source is instead pure reason and this alone⁵. And yet, importantly, Kant does not simply deny all connection of such concepts to experience. He rather establishes a relation of whole and part (or a relation of entailment, as it were) by claiming that reason’s concepts concern a type of cognition “of which any empirical knowledge (perhaps even the whole of possible experience [...]) is part; no actual experience has ever been *completely* adequate to it, *yet to it every actual experience belongs*”. Indeed, since ideas “contain the unconditioned”, they “regard something under which all experience is subordinate but which is never itself an object of experience” (Kant 1787: B 367/A 310 f.). The transcendental dialectic shows what is the illusion that necessarily arises as the object and the synthesis of experience are hypostatized to constitute the alleged object (impossibly) fully congruent to reason’s concept. But what about the possibility of a point of partial or imperfect overlap between experience and ideas adumbrated in the quoted passage (no actual experience has ever been “completely” adequate to the idea)? Is there such a point or is the “gulf” (*Kluft*) separating “the idea and its execution/realization (*Ausführung*)” (Kant 1787: B 374/A 317) such that it defies all possible (even negative or partial) relation? Isn’t perhaps a partial overlap constitutive of what even common language calls an “ideal”? Furthermore, does the mode of their generation have something to say about the way in which ideas and ideals are employed by different mental faculties – not just the theoretical, cognitive one – in regard to the different realms of our hu-

⁵ See also *Reflexion* 4862 (AA 18, 13), in which the reference to Plato is used to make a similar point, i.e., that “true perfection” cannot be found or reached empirically.

man experience so as to function (at least) as a rule, an ideal measure, and a model within experience?

In fact, at stake in the problematic connection I am presently considering is not reason alone. Other mental faculties are involved as well, first and foremost the imagination, but also judgment. Paradoxically, in the first *Critique*, as Kant underscores the distance separating the ideal from sensibility – a distance that is claimed even more unbridgeable than the one between ideas and sensibility – Kant recognizes that there are such mental entities as “ideals of sensibility” (Kant 1787: B 598/A 570). Indeed, sensibility has its own ideals. Hence the question: what is, for Kant, the mental process or activity that produces ideas and ideals? To be sure, this seems to be precisely Kant’s central concern in the chapter on the transcendental ideal in the dialectic of the first *Critique* where the process whereby reason’s (natural and legitimate) thought of the ideal in general becomes “transcendental” is investigated and is then famously converted into the theological idea of God as the highest being. As Kant sums it up, the process implies the successive realization, hypostatization, and personification of a “mere representation” (Kant 1787: B 611/A 583 f.). But what about ideas and ideals in general? For, reason produces a unique transcendental ideal but has a plurality of ideals that it then employs in different realms; sensibility has ideals as well, the imagination produces them, and judgment employs them as criteria. How are *these* made, i.e., on the basis of what actions and what needs, alternatively, of reason and other mental faculties? There is obviously a sense in which this question constitutes the very center of Kant’s transcendental dialectic as a transcendental inquiry, and can be seen as a question concerning the “metaphysical deduction” of reason’s ideas (see Piché 1984: 14–24). However, since it is a question that leads away from the more

strictly cognitive concerns of the first *Critique* and expands significantly the focus on speculative reason alone, I have chosen to address it from a different angle than the derivation of reason's ideas from the syllogistic of formal logic. I shall concentrate instead on the connection between the ideal and the logical task of *completing the determination of concepts*. What is the completeness of a concept, why do we need it, and how, i.e., through which mental faculties and procedures, do we pursue it?

2. *Ideas and ideals: maximum and perfectio*

Long before Kant's critical and transcendental theory has crystallized into its specific form, the passages of the *Dissertatio* commented above present us with the constellation of crucial meanings and uses that the notion of ideal will successively display in the three *Critiques*. At this early time, however, the ideal is conflated with the Platonic idea and does not seem to have an independent meaning of its own. Indeed, what Kant offers in 1770 are hints connected to the examples and historical references through which he introduces the notion of idea – *nunc temporis* called "ideal" – rather than clearly formulated doctrinal points. Ideals – just as ideas – have a metaphysical and a cognitive, purely intellectual use but also, and chiefly, a fundamental practical validity. As I have argued above, to these realms in which ideas and ideals along with their respective objects and uses can be found, one must add, even though perhaps as a mere terminological suggestion, the aesthetic sphere, and this at a time in which Kant is still entirely unclear as to the status (and even the possibility) of a philosophical aesthetics. In fact, given that at this time Kant denies both that ideas and ideals have any relation to sensibility, and that a theory of taste can have any other basis than an empirical one, this line of argument does not seem very

promising when at stake is a peculiarly aesthetic meaning of the ideal within Kant's doctrine. Moreover, from early on, the term "ideal" refers to the theological idea of God, but also maintains, quite at the opposite extreme of the spectrum, the common sense meaning, ambiguously negative, attached to the expression: being "only an ideal" which is generally referred to more mundane representations. The situation changes in some important respects in the first *Critique*. And yet, the metaphysical language of the *Dissertatio* remains crucial in Kant's critical conception of both ideas and ideals even though now the emphasis may not be placed so strongly – or so apparently – on it as in 1770. Taking § 9 of the *Dissertatio* as my guiding thread, I shall now outline some of the crucial characters of the ideal – both those that the ideal shares with the idea, and those that characterize the ideal in its specificity as the idea *in individuo*.

The *Dissertatio* introduces the contemporary notion of ideal (i.e., Plato's idea) as yet another expression for the metaphysical notion of *perfectio* or *Vollkommenheit* when such perfection allows for and is brought to a *maximum*: "*Maximum perfectionis* vocatur nunc temporis Ideale, Platoni Idea" (§ 9). Thereby Kant articulates a current Leibnizian and, more generally, scholastic concept. That which the pure intellect recognizes as "exemplar" or model is endowed with perfection – is *perfectio noumenon*. As such, namely, as a perfect exemplar or model, it is the "common measure" of "all other realities". To be sure, it is common measure both in the theoretical and in the practical sense. As theoretical perfection, it is the idea of God as *ens summum*, which is the topic of theology; as practical perfection, it is the idea of moral perfection, which is the topic of a "pure" moral philosophy. Now, as Leibniz had already argued, not

all perfection allows for a *maximum* or a highest degree; but all perfection in the highest degree belongs to God⁶. Since what is at stake here is the perfection that functions as the “common measure”, and since “in that kind of things whose quantity is variable, the *maximum* is the common measure”, the overlap of the two concepts (i.e., perfection as common measure and maximum) yields the notion of a *maximum perfectionis* (for the kind of reality whose quantity is variable). Now, the *maximum perfectionis*, which is both (ontological) “common measure” and “principle of cognition”, is the ideal. As *maximum perfectionis*, the ideal is the “principle of everything that is contained under the concept of a general perfection insofar as the lower degrees cannot be determined in any other way than by limiting the *maximum* (*limitando maximum*)” (§ 9). To be sure, the notion that the unique *maximum perfectionis* yields the progressive determination of a manifold of lower degrees differing in a continuum once it is subject to “limitation” (*Einschränkung*) remains a central procedure in Kant’s conception of the ideal of pure reason in the first *Critique*. Importantly, the notion of limitation requires a conception of the totality *within which* limitation takes place as the unique totality of an *intuitive whole*.

Kant’s reference to Plato’s idea underscores that the *maximum perfectionis* is unique and individual. Indeed, Plato’s idea is recognized as the individual model of a noumenal reality. In *Dissertatio* § 10, Kant draws the distinction between intuition and intellectual cognition connecting it to the distinction between the immediate

⁶ See for example *Discourse on metaphysics*, § 1; different is A.G. Baumgarten’s Wolffian definition of perfection as agreement of many things into one, in *Metaphysics* § 94, 141 (see his discussion in the preface to the second edition *Metaphysica*, XIX f.).

apprehension of individuals, *in concreto*, which is intuition, and the discursive cognition through universal concepts, *in abstracto*, which is intellectual cognition. The claim is that there is no intuition of the intellectual, noumenal reality for the human mind (there is only “symbolic cognition”), since the human mind cannot grasp such reality “*per singularem in concreto*” but only “*per conceptus universales in abstracto*”. Human intuition, being always and necessarily passive (hence never creative of the reality it intuits), is limited to a “form” under which things are apprehended “immediately, or as individuals”. This form is the condition under which alone something can be the object of our senses (hence is not itself intellectual). Although quite in line with Kant’s thinking in the first *Critique*, this view poses a problem with regard to the *maximum perfectionis*, which is the ideal-idea. For, this is at once a purely intellectual object allegedly connected to the metaphysical activity of the *intellectus purus* (§ 8), but also individual, hence not graspable by a universal concept *in abstracto* but rather, one should assume, requiring some kind of (necessarily non-human) intuition. In fact, it is here that Kant appeals to the “*intuitum purum intellectualem*” exempt from the laws of sensibility which is the “divine intuition” called by Plato “idea” (§ 25). Indeed, the notion of a progressive limitation through which the determination of the lower degrees of perfection contained in the maximum takes place, while not directly compatible with Plato’s theory of ideas (sounding, instead, rather Neoplatonic), is perfectly aligned with the notion of the intuitive whole – such as, paradigmatically, the whole of space and time – the parts of which are obtained by the progressive act of an internal *Einschränkung* (they are parts within the whole).

Consistently with the general view of the *Dissertatio*, yet down-playing, this time, the language of scholastic metaphysics, the *Critique*

presents reason's ideas as systematic, complete wholes. The notions of perfection and maximum seem to play a lesser role, yet they are not entirely absent. They are rather integrated in the presentation of ideas as "concepts of reason". Perfection (*Vollkommenheit*) is closely connected to completeness of determination (*Vollständigkeit*) – the completeness that makes ideas into systematic unities or totalities. Moreover, as (Platonic) models or archetypes, in particular in the practical realm (as "*Muster der Tugend*", for example Kant 1787: B 372/A 315), ideas retain their character of "common measure". Although this line of thought is less evident and less explicit in the first *Critique* than in the *Dissertatio*, it is the line of investigation that, consistently underlying Kant's conception of ideas and ideals, I am interested in following here.

Taking his cue, yet again, from the idea of "the Platonic republic", a proverbial example "of visionary perfection (*erträumte Vollkommenheit*)" (Kant 1787: B 372/A 316), Kant stresses that although such idea will never adequately display its reality in the world of experience, the notion of a perfect state still maintains its validity as a "Maximum" that attended to as a "model" (*Urbild*) fulfills the function of advancing the organization of mankind through different degrees approximating ever greater perfection. It is true, Kant acknowledges, that the "highest degree (*der höchste Grad*)" reached by mankind will never adequately match that "*maximum*" (Kant 1787: B 373/A 317). For, as the "concept of a *maximum*", the idea "can never correspondingly be given *in concreto*" (Kant 1787: B 384/A 327). However, it is precisely the distance separating the "highest degree" expressed by the *maximum* from the different lower degrees that makes the *maximum* into a practically indispensable "ideal". That which separates them also conjoins them. This is, to be sure, the same argument that the *Dissertatio* articulates in metaphysical

terms: entities that display a variable quantity allow for a *maximum* which is, in turn, both the “common measure” of the perfection of these entities’ reality and a “principle of cognition”. In the practical realm, Plato’s republic is – and functions as – an ideal. On this point, the *Critique* and the *Dissertatio* seem to be in full agreement. Importantly, in this connection, the ideality of the *maximum* expresses the relation of the lower degrees of the whole to the highest point (namely, perfection) in two apparently incompatible ways. On the one hand, it expresses the inexorable mismatch or inadequacy that reveals the gash of a *Kluft* separating the idea from its sensible *Ausführung* (Kant 1787: B 374/A 317) thereby making the idea somehow transcendent with regard to all its sensible imperfect realizations. On the other hand, instead, the ideality of the *maximum* presents the constitutive entailment that places the part within the whole by way of its limitation⁷.

To be sure, there are two different mental procedures that connect the perfection of the ideal to the “lower degrees” (the *minors gradus* of *Dissertatio* § 9) in relation to which it functions as common measure, thereby establishing a relation that has two opposite directions. While the process of internal limitation of the *maximum* describes the top-down movement, as it were, through which the manifold of its sensible instantiations obtains (within it), it is the movement in the opposite direction, namely, the bottom-up progression toward the *maximum* – hence the widest “extension” (*Erweiterung*) of the concept in the quest for its “completion”

⁷ Recall Kant 1787: B 367/A 310 f.: “no actual experience has ever been *completely* adequate to it [reason’s cognition expressed by the idea], yet to it every actual experience belongs”.

(*Vollendung*)⁸ – that reveals the insufficiency of the approximation, hence the disparity between the “highest degree” and its sensible realization in the “lower” ones (Kant 1787: B 373/A 317). Importantly, the latter can also be viewed as the process by which the ideal as *maximum* is established. I want to dwell now on the latter of these two procedures. My suggestion is that given the direction of this movement (which does not start but ends in the *maximum* and constitutes it), this progression describes the crucial way in which ideals are made. At issue is precisely the logic of this ascending progression. I shall begin by briefly dwelling on Kant’s thematic account of the “ideal in general” in the first *Critique*⁹.

3. *The ideal: individuality and Urbild*

Kant presents the “ideal in general” by placing it at the extreme of a spectrum in which different types of concepts differently measure up to their corresponding “objective reality”. At stake is the issue of conceptual “determination”. Kant first considers the objective reality proper of the understanding’s concepts, i.e., the determination of the objects of cognition within the realm of possible experience. Herein objective reality is guaranteed by the conditions of sensibility: categories can be “presented *in concreto* when they are applied to appearances” (Kant 1787: B 595/A 567). Reason’s ideas, by contrast, cannot be presented *in concreto* in any appearance as they imply a “certain completeness (*Vollständigkeit*)” (Kant 1787: B 595/A 567 f.), hence systematicity, that no empirical cognition can

⁸ For these two terms, see the discussion below.

⁹ I will not discuss here the hypostatization of the ideal to the theological concept of God; for this issue see Nuzzo 2013, see in general Grier 2007, Henrich 1967, Piché 1984.

attain although it strives to indefinitely approximate it. The idea stands therefore for “a systematic unity” that reason keeps in sight to “regulate”, as it were, the “empirically possible unity” of the understanding’s cognition. Now, the extreme case beyond the understanding’s concepts and reason’s ideas is offered by the “ideal”, which, Kant remarks, is even further removed from objective reality – hence from empirical, cognitive determination and determinability – than the idea. This is the definition of what Kant now calls the “ideal” (“was ich das *Ideal* nenne”)¹⁰: the ideal is “the idea not only *in concreto* but *in individuo*, that is, as a singular thing (*Ding*) determinable or even determined through the idea alone” (Kant 1787: B 596/A 568), i.e., a “thing” determinable or even determined neither through sensible intuition nor through understanding’s categories.

This definition prompts a series of questions. What kind of “things” satisfies the requirement of being “determinable or even determined” through ideas and through ideas *only*? And how does “determination through the idea” take place? Kant responds with the example of the way in which the concept of humanity stretched (or extended) to the highest degree of its “perfection” as the idea of “perfect humanity” is ultimately specified – or indeed determined – in the ideal of “the most perfect man” (Kant 1787: B 596/A 568). While the idea of humanity implies the “extension” (*Erweiterung*) of all the essential properties belonging to our concept of humanity up to the perfect congruence with its ends, the ideal entails, in addition, all that which belongs to the “complete determination of the idea” of the perfect man, namely, all those predicates among the

¹⁰ Notice the shift when compared with the *Dissertatio*. In the early work, Kant refers to the current contemporary denomination; herein by contrast, Kant explicitly claims the term as his own.

possible opposites, that individualize the idea into the unique ideal of the most perfect man (Kant 1787: B 596/A 568). It is at this point that Kant appeals to Plato. So conceived, Kant's ideal corresponds to Plato's idea, i.e., to "an idea of the divine understanding" which is "a singular object in its pure intuition" (Kant 1787: B 596/A 568). As such, the ideal functions as "*Urbild*" or "*Urgrund*" of all possible "*Nachbild*" instantiated within the realm of appearances. While the reference seems to echo the *Dissertatio*, now Kant draws a distinction between his own notion of idea and the ideal. Objects of experience are determined as appearances by the joint synthetic action of intuition and concept, whereby they display objective reality. Reason's ideas instead are determined by the understanding's concepts alone and accordingly, having no reference to sensibility, display no objective reality within experience. Finally, the ideal owes its determination *only* to reason's ideas, whereby it lacks objective reality and claims the difficult status of being individual *and* universal, intuitive *and* conceptual at the same time, lacking objective reality even more than ideas yet pointing to an individual "thing" determined through the idea alone. This seems indeed a paradox – if not an utter impossibility – within the transcendental framework. But Kant is swift to rectify this impression. While the "creative force" of Plato's ideas (whereby the idea produces the object of which it is the intellectual intuition) is indeed an unacceptable metaphysical assumption, the "practical force" of the ideal and the "regulative" validity that characterizes it designates a very real possession of human reason. In its practical validity the ideal indicates the condition of "the possibility of the perfection of certain actions" (Kant 1787: B 597/A 569; recall the *perfectio moralis* of *Dissertatio* § 9). In this case, the efficacy of the ideal model of determination hinges on

the practical determinability (or moral perfectibility) of the individual through the idea as moral principle – and through it *alone*.

Kant further develops his example with the aim of saving the practical value of the ideal – and indeed of the plural “ideals” (Kant 1787: B 597/A 569) – of reason. “Virtue” is an idea which has no objective reality in the realm of appearances since it cannot be *presented in concreto* within it (no intuition perfectly corresponds to the concept). “The sage (of the Stoics)” by contrast, is an ideal: it is a concrete and individual human being who, however, is real or “exists only in thought” and is “entirely congruent with the idea of wisdom” (Kant 1787: B 597/A 569). This suggests that its “concept” or “intuition” perfectly corresponds to the idea. Now, *whether* an intuition or a concept is here involved (since individuality is involved in complete determination and only intuition captures individuality intuition cannot be ruled out) and what kind of intuition or concept this may be (it certainly cannot be sensible intuition as the ideal “exists only in thought”) is precisely the problem. This ideal, which already appears as a cognitively problematic – indeed dialectical – notion is nonetheless a practically (and regulatively) indispensable thought that serves as the model or *Urbild* for the “complete determination” of the *Nachbild* – namely, of individual human actions in the world.

Kant recognizes the ambiguous position of the ideal between discursive concept and intuition – the position that, as noticed above, the ideal retains since the *Dissertatio*. Whereas the “ideal of reason” always and necessarily rests on “determinate concepts” so as to function as determinate “rule and model” (for action and for judgment: *Befolgung und Beurteilung*), there is also an “ideal of sensibility (*Ideal der Sinnlichkeit*)” put forward by the imagination, an ideal that is instead indeterminate and “suspended” – oscillating or

“wavering” (*schwebend*), as it were – among possible appearances and among possible conflicting significations¹¹. This is indeed the “unattainable model of possible empirical intuitions” (Kant 1787: B 598/A 570 f.), a model that unlike the ideal of reason can never yield a universal determinate rule for in it determination is never complete (and does not happen through the idea and this alone)¹². The aim of reason in its ideal is instead “the complete determination according to a priori rules”. This leads reason to “think of an object that must be completely determinable” even though to this task the sufficient conditions of experience are lacking and the concept itself is transcendent (Kant 1787: B 599/A 571). Thereby Kant presents the twofold fundamental problem of the ideal of reason: first, to clarify what complete determination is and how can it be brought about; second, to find the object that is, correspondingly, entirely determinable according to a priori rules (through the idea and through it alone). The difficulty lays in the apparent insufficiency of both concept and intuition to this twofold task.

The key theory through which Kant positions the notion of “ideal in general” within his transcendental discourse – discarding its metaphysical assumptions and implications while critically appropriating both its practical potential and its validity as a “rule” for judgment (*Beurteilung*, Kant 1787: B 598/A 570; *principium cognoscendi*, in *Dissertatio* § 9) – is the claim of transcendental idealism, whereby understanding and sensibility, concept and intuition are recognized as two irreducible sources of human cognition yielding objectively

¹¹ For a discussion of this position and for the importance of this passage for J.G. Fichte see Nuzzo 2013.

¹² See also *Critique of judgment* § 17 for the “indeterminate idea [...] of a *maximum*”.

valid knowledge in their a priori synthesis but implying, at the same time, the limitation of such cognition to the realm of appearances. The determination proper to the cognitive synthesis is the determination of objects as appearances, not of things in themselves. It is, in addition, determination of given objects, not their creation or production (as is the case instead of the Platonic idea as divine intuition). From the fact that ideas and ideals of reason, by contrast, cannot be *presented in concreto* in sensible intuition their lack of cognitive validity (or objective reality) follows. No object of experience as appearance is determined through them. In the case of the ideal, in addition, at stake is the need for a determination that is *complete*, i.e., such as to refer to an individual thing (which is what intuition does) but also such as to take place “through the idea alone” (Kant 1787: B 596/A 568). However, from all this it does not follow that reason’s ideals have no validity at all – it does not follow that they are utterly indeterminate concepts (they are not *entia rationis*)¹³. For, in the practical sphere, ideals as moral ideals do indeed display a field of possible employment or determination. Herein, the ideal, although one cannot attribute to it any “objective reality (existence)” provides reason with an indispensable “concept of that which is entirely complete in its kind (*was in seiner Art ganz vollständig ist*), thereby enabling it to estimate and to measure the degree and the defects of the incomplete (*des Unvollständigen*)” (Kant 1787: B 597/A 569 f.).

¹³ Kant 1787: B 597/A 569: Kant warns that the ideals should not to be viewed as mere “*Hirngespinnste*”, see also Kant 1787: B 348/A 292.

A passage of the *Metaphysik Pölitz* (AA 28, 2/1, 577)¹⁴ offers further evidence of how Kant conceives of the generation of the ideal as the problem of the *individual* and *complete* determination of a “thing” through the idea *alone* – an issue that places the ideal as such (and not only the ideal of the imagination) in a “suspended” position, as it were, between intuition and concept, sensibility (or sensible reality) and ideas. Importantly, while the passage insists on the moral validity of the ideal thereby generated, it couches its production in a terminology that brings it close to the aesthetic ideal that Kant will later explore in the third *Critique*. In the *Metaphysik Pölitz* lectures Kant defines the “idea” as that “a priori cognition through which the object is possible”. He concedes that the very thought of “objects” being possible through a priori cognition may seem “strange”. As usual, Plato’s theory of ideas is appealed to and apparently embraced. With a shift that should remind us yet again of the *Dissertatio*, Plato mediates the transition from Kant’s notion of idea to the notion of ideal. Plato’s idea is *Urbild*, i.e., model and archetype. Now – *nunc temporis* in general, and for Kant in particular – the notion of *Urbild* specifically indicates the idea *in individuo*, or the ideal. Kant defines “a model” as “an object of intuition insofar as this is the basis of imitation (*Nachahmung*)”. Here, however, the example is not Platonic. It is “Christ” as “the model of all morality”. Kant gives an account of how the ideal, in this case, is formed – the ideal as “a singular thing (*Ding*) determinable or even determined through the idea alone” (Kant 1787: B 596/A 568). At stake is the act of “regarding” (and indeed, judging) some real case given in intui-

¹⁴ All quotes in this paragraph are from this page, in the section entitled “Von der Idee und dem Ideale”.

tion “as a model” for imitation. This is possible only under the condition of previously having “an idea according to which we can (re)cognize the model” in order to hold *that* individual object precisely *as a model*. Lacking the idea, by contrast, nothing in reality could be indicated and serve as a model (not even “should it have come down directly from heaven” adds Kant). Thus, as claimed in the *Critique*, the ideal is *determined* (and indeed determinable) by the idea *alone* (lacking the idea nothing in reality can be determined as a model). Given that the idea determines an individual case as an ideal model to be imitated and followed, the ideal is a point of intersection between intuition and pure intellectual ideality – this, however, not in the sense of the Platonic divine intuition directly creative of its objects. Kant’s individual object is an empirically given case; while the ideal is the individualized idea to which that empirical case is uniquely connected. We know full well that the latter never completely or adequately matches the former; and yet, remarkably, in the passage of the *Metaphysik Pölitz*, Kant does not seem interested in this insufficiency. Rather, he insists on the (albeit partial) “congruence” that binds the individual instance to the model – determining the instance as itself a model of moral behavior. This congruence, which constitutes the individual case as “model” (*Muster*), is the basis for *Nachahmung* – indeed it is the “common measure”, as the *Dissertatio* puts it, for all imitation both in the moral and in the aesthetic sphere: “Christ is the model (*Urbild*) of all morality”. To be sure, Kant adds that one may very well perform “actions” and realize “objects” “according to a model (*Muster*) even *without* the idea”. In this case, however, such actions and objects “correspond *only approximately* to the model”.

4. *Human reason and the task of “completing concepts”*

In the lengthy *Reflexion* 6206 (AA 18, 489-94) jotted down in connection with the introduction of Johann August Eberhard's 1781 *Vorbereitung zur natürlichen Theologie*, Kant remarks on a “peculiar character” of human reason (which reminds us of reason's “peculiar fate” that opens the 1781 preface to the first *Critique*; Kant 1787: A VII). In addition to that which is required “to make a concept of a thing” with a determinate cognitive aim in view, human reason strives “to complete (*zu vollenden*)” not only this same concept by pursuing “all” the notes that constitute such concept intentionally, “but also the object of the concept” with regard to the kind of things to which such object belongs. To raise the issue of conceptual completeness is another way to raise the issue of conceptual determination. Ultimately, by following the progression of reason's quest for completeness, Kant points out that human reason's peculiarity is the tendency and the need to make for itself ideals. For, the tendency and the need “to complete” the concepts it makes in the cognitive process involves reason in two distinct, yet strictly interconnected, procedures. On the one hand, reason aims at completing the *concept*, thereby making the concept into an idea. As the *Critique* puts it, the idea of humanity, for example, is produced through the “extension” (*Erweiterung*) of all the essential properties belonging to our concept of humanity up to the perfect congruence with its ends (Kant 1787: B 596/A 568). The concept of perfection arises in this way (perfect humanity). But then reason also aims at somehow “completing” the *object* of such a concept, i.e., aims at determining the most perfect exemplar or instance within its kind (in the example of the *Critique*, the ideal of the perfect man, which entails all that which belongs to the “complete determination of the idea” of perfect humanity). Significantly, however, the examples Kant dis-

cusses in this *Reflexion* are not exclusively moral or are not moral in the first place.

To be sure, the first step in the act of completing the concept does not itself lead reason to make for itself ideas and ideals. That first step entails a quite legitimate act within the cognitive process to which, however, the making of the ideal is directly connected. “We are not satisfied”, Kant observes, “with that which would be sufficient for the common use of the word in order to distinctly know the concept of a body, a human being, a plant”. In addition, we aim at gaining awareness of such a concept “in all its notes (*Merkmale*)”, thereby producing (when the principle of economy is also invoked) “the definition” of a concept (AA 18, 489). Indeed “the definition is the criterion of possibility of a concept (not of its object)” (B 115). Importantly, the definition offers Kant’s critical modification of the *transcendentalia* of the scholastic tradition – *unum, verum, bonum* or *perfectio*. For, the definition expresses “the unity of the concept, the *truth* of all that may be immediately deduced from it, and finally, the *completeness* (*Vollständigkeit*) of what has been thus deduced from it” (B 115). This is, to be sure, the same process outlined in *Reflexion* 6206 although it is viewed from the opposite direction (i.e., once the definition of the concept has been reached). It is not the process of first *obtaining* the definition (which requires the act of completing the concept and is Kant’s concern in that *Reflexion*) but its direct implication: the implication of the concept’s definition is “completeness” of what is deduced (and can be deduced) from it.

The crucial step in reason’s progressive quest for completeness is the next one, which leads from the concept to the object of the concept. Beyond all that has been pursued to complete the concept, Kant maintains, “once we have assigned the object [of that concept

(a.n.)) to a certain kind of things, we attempt to *think it completely* (*vollständig zu denken*) with regard to this kind" (AA 18, 489 f., my emphasis). Kant offers a physical example. "Body belongs to matter, and what in its extension is not matter is the empty space; hence we make for ourselves the concept of a perfectly dense body". This is the cognitive route by which we construct the object that perfectly completes its own kind according to the concept we have of it. And yet, Kant adds, in carrying on this procedure we do not concern ourselves with the question of "whether such object is actual or also (only) possible" (AA 18, 490). There is no claim concerning the existence of the object that completes its kind (no such a claim is properly needed). The object thereby obtained is an ideal (object), without this entailing any subreption from reason's part. Kant insists on the function that such ideal has in cognition. Without implying any claim of existence, "the completeness of a thing of a certain kind serves us only as measure (*Maassstabe*) for all the other concepts that we can make of it insofar as these concepts [things] differ only with regard to their magnitude". What we have here is, yet again, a constellation close to the argument of the *Dissertatio*: the ideal, as *maximum perfectionis*, is both "common measure" and "principle of cognition" for all those things of a certain kind that display a variable quantity. In this *Reflexion*, however, Kant is careful not to tie this process of completion – or indeed idealization – to ontological commitments, i.e., ultimately to reason's subreption. At least not yet.

That the ideal or the "complete" object of a given concept functions as the (common) "measure" for all other concepts and objects of a certain kind hints at its function as a criterion of judgment. This is, indeed, the cognitive value of a "model". The *Reflexion* repeats the *Dissertatio* in stressing that we are dealing here with "variable magnitudes" ("*Diese Größen sind Veränderlich*": AA 18, 490; the *gen-*

era of things at stake are those “*quorum quantitas est variabilis*”: *Dissertatio* § 9). In this case, in order to ascertain the degree of variation (and approximation to completeness, perfection or to the ideal) in such a magnitude, “one must compare it with a magnitude that is invariable, that is, to that of a thing that contains everything which can be contained in its concept in relation to its kind”, i.e., a thing that is complete or completely determined within its kind (AA 18, 490). This object or thing is the ideal as the invariable *maximum* that serves as the basis and “measure” for all possible variation and judgment thereof¹⁵.

This argument displays an important proximity with the account of the mathematical sublime developed in § 25 of the *Critique of Judgment*. Herein the issue of ascertaining the magnitude of things is moved from the cognitive determination of appearance or the practical judgment concerning actions to the extreme of an “absolute” magnitude beyond all comparison yet valid as the measure of all comparison – a measure, however, that is not to be found in any (existing) object (or thing in nature) but is rather exclusively subjective, i.e., is to be found only in our ideas. At stake here is the measure – and indeed the ideal – for (and of) aesthetic judgment.

But Kant’s *Reflexion* 6206 pushes the issue of conceptual completion or *Vollendung* a step further generating an important progression. Some concepts, Kant maintains, can be completed “insofar as we have a determinate concept given in experience [at least negatively] of that which belongs to its completion” (the example provided here is the diameter of the circle among all the chords). Other

¹⁵ See Kant 1787: B 597/A 569 f. commented above with regard to the practical validity of the ideal in judging moral actions.

concepts, however, are such “that we can only think the *Vollendung*, but we cannot complete the concept” (AA 18, 490). This latter seems to be the case of the ideal addressed in the first *Critique* with the case of the wise of the Stoics. We can indeed think the completion of the concept but we cannot empirically complete the concept by exhibiting a perfectly corresponding object. In the *Reflexion* Kant discusses the case of the empirical concept of “well-being” (*Wohlbefinden*), which may very well lack something and therefore fall short of being full contentment with one’s state. In order to “complete” it “one needs a concept that lacks nothing in content”, namely, “the highest and immutable well-being or happiness (*Glückseligkeit*)” – which indeed is something that we can never think of determinately. On the basis of its indeterminateness this is, in fact, “not an ideal of reason but of the imagination” (*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* AA 4, 418). The process of completing the concept is then carried: once happiness is thought as not depending on external accidental causes and circumstances, we have the concept of “beatitude” (*Seeligkeit*). But we can extend this concept even further and think of the contentment of a rational being not only with regard to what it enjoys but also of “what it does”. Herein contentment concerns moral “satisfaction with one’s own person and the moral good” while the “complete moral good” is the “highest virtue”. The culmination of this *Vollendung* – the idealization taking place in the concept although always empirically incomplete – leads to the “idea of heaven” which combines “holiness of the will and beatitude in one’s state” (AA 18, 490).

Now, in conclusion, the process of completion – the *Vollendung* and complete determination – that Kant describes in *Reflexion* 6206 brings together theoretical hints ranging from the 1770 *Dissertatio* to the first *Critique* and stretching on to his practical philosophy and

to the third *Critique*. This is a process of idealization or the process through which ideals are made. It is the path through which our different mental powers, driven by a “peculiar character” of their own, add an “ideal” dimension to the world of experience – the understanding in forming its concepts of natural or geometrical objects, judgment in estimating the degree of variable magnitudes but also in judging the mathematically sublime in nature on the basis of an absolute subjective measure that resides only in ourselves (in ideas), the imagination in estimating magnitudes (aesthetically, this time, as it happens in the *Critique of judgment* § 25, AA 5, 250)¹⁶ but practically as well, in inexorably positing the ideal of happiness, and finally, reason both in its practical and in its speculative use. What is relevant in this account of how ideals are made by different mental powers is the fact that Kant seems not as interested in stressing the lack of objective reality of ideals (and ideas) as he is when at stake is the task of investigating the subreption that leads speculative reason to produce the theological ideal as *Prototypen Transcendentale*. As the drive to idealization or the making of ideals belongs to our human mental powers, the use of ideals within human experience is itself a legitimate experience worth attending to.

Bibliography

Grier, M., *Kant's doctrine of transcendental illusion*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

¹⁶ The imagination is “*das Vermögen der Grössenschätzung der Dinge der Sinnenwelt*”.

Heimsoeth, H., *Platon in Kants Werdegang*, in *Studien zu Kants philosophischer Entwicklung*, Hildesheim, Olms, 1967.

Henrich, D., *Der ontologische Gottesbeweis*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1967.

Kant, I., *Dissertatio 1770. De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis*, in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 2, hrsg. von der königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, Reimer, 1910.

Kant, I., *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 4, hrsg. von der königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin-Leipzig, Vereinigung Wissenschaftlicher Verleger, 1911.

Kant, I., *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft*, Leipzig, 1787 (*Critique of pure reason*, ed. by N. Kemp-Smith, H. Caygill, Palgrave Macmillan, London-New York, 2007).

Kant, I., *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 5, hrsg. von der königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, Reimer, 1913.

Kant, I., *Reflexionen*, in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 18, hrsg. von der königlich Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin-Leipzig, De Gruyter, 1925.

Kant, I., *Vorlesungen über Metaphysik*, in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 28, hrsg. von der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Berlin, De Gruyter, 1968.

Longuenesse, B., *Kant and the capacity to judge*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998.

Nuzzo, A., *Determination and freedom in Kant and in Fichte's Bestimmung des Menschen*, in *Fichte's vocation of man. New interpretive and critical essays*, ed. by D. Breazeale, T. Rockmore, Albany, SUNY Press, 2013.

Piché, C., *Das Ideal. Ein Problem der Kantischen Ideenlehre*, Bonn, Bouvier, 1984.