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Life — Interest — Culture: Kantian Reason in Contemporary German Transcendentalism

My presentation discusses two attempts in German Kant scholarship to reconstruct Kant's philosophy based on what is taken to be its 'central concept': 'living reason' (Dörflinger 2000) and 'interest of reason' (Hutter 2003). I will then propose a pair of alternative concepts that, in my view, capture Kant's most fundamental intentions more correctly and may help us to understand Kant as a philosopher of the Enlightenment in his historical context: 'metaphysics' and 'culture' – two concepts that are closely intertwined in Kant's thought.

I will argue that Dörflinger and Hutter commit two fundamental mistakes that bar them from taking in Kant's project comprehensively: both reify reason and do not pay sufficient attention to the fact that Kant understands humans as fallible, but perfectible beings. In order to do justice to Kant, we must understand reason as a faculty rather than as an actor in its own right (Heßbrüggen-Walter 2004). This means in turn that this faculty must have a bearer: incorporated human beings. But if we transform both Dörflinger's and Hutter's views using this insight, their core theses become truisms: yes, human beings are alive. And they have interests. But neither of these facts helps us to understand Kant's philosophy.

But still Dörflinger and Hutter express important parts of Kant's self-understanding. Only a faculty that is an expression of life (i. e. a spontaneous faculty) is capable of being perfected. And there must be a motivation for a being to perfect these faculties. But at the same time they miss crucial aspects: perfectibility must be based on a conscious choice of the individual human being and be more than just an expression of its organic development). And it must aim at a determinate goal: there must be a possibility that the motivation can be fulfilled and is based on more than wishful thinking. Kant unifies both these notions in his concept of self-cultivation. I will propose a first cursory analysis of this concept that is based on two theses taken from the first *Critique* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*: Metaphysics is the perfection (*Vollendung*) of the culture of human reason (B 878f). General and moral self-perfection (i. e. cultivation of *all* faculties and cultivation of our morality in particular, 6:391f) are moral duties. Seen together, both theses suggest that we do not have merely an interest in metaphysics, but a duty to incorporate it into our lives. And this duty is within our reach, because we are living beings capable of and striving for self-perfection.

If these reflections are convincing, they call for a deeper and contextualised investigation of Kant's role in the German Enlightenment and of the possible overlap between philosophy in general and metaphysics in particular. Finally, we may need a clearer understanding of what Kant is calling 'culture' and how this conception connects to earlier attempts to understand philosophy as individual and communal

self-cultivation. Only then are we in a position to assess the value of Kant's philosophical project as a whole for contemporary philosophical reflection.

References

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Axel Hutter, *Das Interesse der Vernunft: Kants ursprüngliche Einsicht und ihre Entfaltung in den transzendentalphilosophischen Hauptwerken*, Hamburg: Meiner, 2003