

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

Stefan Heßbrüggen-Walter, School of Philosophy, NRU HSE, Moscow

The first part of this talk elucidates two recent attempts to reconstruct Kant's notion of reason in the light of central concepts: 'life' (Dörflinger 2000) and 'interest' (Hutter 2003). My main critique: both accounts are one-sided and leave out important aspects of Kant's overall understanding of philosophy. Still, the notion that reason is a faculty of living beings and that we must understand it as primarily practical is not completely misguided, but it does justice only to parts of Kant's philosophical project. My argument for how to complement these approaches proceeds in two steps:

1. I show how core ideas of the later conception are already present in the 1760s: metaphysics must be practical, presume dualism, and contribute to human (self-)perfection.
2. I demonstrate how these three fundamental assumptions are reformulated in the critical period using the concept of culture as a common denominator:
 1. culture is the ultimate natural end of the human species.
 2. It has two branches, corresponding to the fundamental dualism of nature and freedom, theoretical and practical philosophy.
 3. Self-cultivation is a moral duty.
 4. Philosophy is the most important medium of self-cultivation.

Life: Dörflinger's Understanding of Reason

Dörflinger's train of thought regarding reason and its role in the first Critique can be reconstructed as follows:

- Reason is teleologically organised (Dörflinger 2000, citing B XXIII).
- But thinking reason as an organism implies that we think reason as a self-sufficient and self-preserving entity (Dörflinger 2000, 8).
- We have unmediated access to our 'rational life' in the sense that we think spontaneously and autonomously (Dörflinger 2000, 19f).
- Our direct acquaintance with our own spontaneity of thinking and willing necessitates us to base these activities on an immaterial principle, because matter is inanimate (Dörflinger 2000, 21).
- Since direct acquaintance trumps analogous inference, the most fundamental kind of life is the 'rational life' of reason, whereas the generalised notion of biological life is derivative (Dörflinger 2000, 30f).

Interest: Hutter's Understanding of Reason

Hutter's exposition of the dual interest of reason:

- Reason has two uses, a speculative use and a practical use (Hutter 2003, 26f).
- speculative use of reason leads to speculative ideas of reason, practical use of reason leads to practical ideas (Hutter 2003, 27).
- 'Transcendental reason' has, correspondingly, a dual interest that can be either speculative or practical (Hutter 2003, 32).
- Interests of reason can also be needs (Bedürfnisse) (Hutter 2003, 35).
- Interests of reason realise themselves in actions (Hutter 2003, 69).
- The interests of reason can be articulated in questions (Hutter 2003, 88).

- The main interest of speculative reason is self-preservation of the human being as a part of nature (158).
- The main interest of practical reason is an extension of nature, so that its presupposition of 'the unconditioned' becomes justifiable (160f).
- Both interests are synthesised in an overarching interest of reason in its own self-preservation

(177).

- For this synthesis a subordinated interest of the faculty of judgment in effecting this synthesis is required as well (181).

Objections

Both accounts are uninformative:

- Reification of reason: reason is a faculty, faculties need a bearer (within the context of Kant's critical philosophy this must be incorporated human beings).
- If we relate the concepts of 'life' and 'interest' to living human beings rather than reified reason, both accounts generate only truisms: humans are living beings that do have a variety of interests. Still, both notions do play a role in Kant's understanding of his project, but if we want to understand their role, we must tie them in with a third concept: culture.

Kant's Project in the 1760s

- Both the notion of life and the practical interest of reason are already obvious in Kantian texts from the 1760s: here, he explicitly requires metaphysics to be practical, defends a metaphysics of dualism in various dimensions, and calls for human self-perfection.

Practical Metaphysics

- Kant, Dreams of a Spirit-Seer: "[...] from among the innumerable tasks which spontaneously offer themselves, to choose that task, the solution of which is of importance to man -- such choice is the merit of wisdom" (Kant 1992, 355, 2:369)
- Kant, Dreams of a Spirit-Seer: "[...] true wisdom is the companion of simplicity, and since [...] the heart commands the understanding, it normally makes the elaborate apparatus of learning superfluous, its purpose being only the means which lie within the reach of everyone." (Kant 1992, 358, 2:372)
- Kant to Mendelssohn, April 8, 1766 "I am far from regarding metaphysics itself, objectively considered, to be trivial or dispensable; in fact I have been convinced for some time now that I understand its nature and its proper place among the disciplines of human knowledge and that the true and lasting welfare of the human race depends on metaphysics [...]". (Kant 1999, 90, 10:70)

Dualist Metaphysics

- Kant to Lambert, December 31, 1765: "[...] in order to avoid the accusation that I am merely hatching new philosophical schemes, I must first publish a few little essays, the contents of which I have already worked out. The first of these will be the 'Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Philosophy' and the 'Metaphysical Foundations of Practical Philosophy.'" (Kant 1999, 82, 10:56)
- Kant, Dreams of a Spirit-Seer: "The principle of life is to be found in something in the world which seems to be of an immaterial nature. For all life is based upon the inner capacity to determine itself voluntarily. [...] It follows from this [...] that the state of all that which is material is dependent and constrained, whereas those natures which are supposed to be spontaneously active and to contain within themselves the ground of life [...] such natures can scarcely be of material nature." (Kant 1992, 315, 2:327, footnote)

Metaphysics and Self-Perfection

- Kant, Dreams of a Spirit-Seer: "[...] since our fate in that future world will probably very much depend on how we have comported ourselves at our posts in this world, I will conclude with the advice which Voltaire gave to his honest Candide after so many futile scholastic disputes: Let us attend to our happiness, and go into the garden and work." (Kant 1992, 359, 2:373)

Kant's Critical Project

However, in the 1760s, these three different aspects -- life, metaphysics, self-perfection -- still are not connected systematically. This changes in Kant's critical writings. The notion tying them together is that of culture.

Kant's Notion of Culture

- Kant, Critique of Judgment: "The production of the aptitude of a rational being for any ends in general (thus those of his freedom) is culture", the "formal, subjective condition [and not any objective condition, i. e. the maximisation of happiness], namely the aptitude for setting himself ends at all and (independent from nature in his determination of ends) using nature as a means appropriate to the maxims of his free ends in general". (Kant 2000, 299, 5:431)

Culture and Life

- Kant, Critique of Judgment: Culture is what must count as the "ultimate end that one has cause to ascribe to nature in regard to the human species [...]" (Kant 2000, 299, 5:431).

The Dualism of Culture

- Kant, Critique of Judgment: The capability to choose means to an end, is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for fulfill our natural end: "But not every kind of culture is adequate for this ultimate end of nature. The culture of skill is certainly the foremost subjective condition of aptitude for the promotion of ends in general; but it is still not sufficient for promoting the will in the determination and choice of its ends, which however is essential for an aptitude for ends." (Kant 2000, 299, 5:432)
- Kant, Critique of Judgment: We also need 'culture of the will': "The latter condition of aptitude, which could be named the culture of training (discipline), is negative, and consists in the liberation of the will from the despotism of desires, by which we are made, attached as we are to certain things of nature, incapable of choosing for ourselves, while we turn into fetters the drives that nature has given us merely for guidance in order not to neglect or even injure the determination of the animality in us, while yet we are free enough to tighten or loosen them, to lengthen or shorten them, as the ends of reason require." (Kant 2000, 299, 5:432)
- Kant, Metaphysics of Morals: Discipline must be complemented by striving for 'holyness' and moral perfection. 'Holyness' concerns the motivation for actions (from duty, not merely conformant with duty), perfection the complete fulfillment of duties. "First, this perfection consists subjectively in the purity (*puritas moralis*) of one's disposition to duty, namely, in the law being by itself alone the incentive, even without the admixture of aims derived from sensibility, and in actions being done not only in conformity with duty but also from duty. -Here the command is "be holy." Secondly, as having to do with one's entire moral end, such perfection consists objectively in fulfilling all one's duties and in attaining completely one's moral end with regard to oneself. Here the command is "be perfect." But a human being's striving after this end always remains only a progress from one perfection to another." (Kant 1996, 566, 6:446)

Culture and Self-Perfection

- Kant, Metaphysics of Morals: Self-cultivation is nothing that happens by nature. "A human being has a duty to himself to cultivate (*cultura*) his natural powers (powers of spirit, mind, and body), as means to all sorts of possible ends. - He owes it to himself (as a rational being) not to leave idle and, as it were, rusting away the natural predispositions and capacities that his reason can some day use." (Kant 1996, 564, 6:444)
- Kant, Metaphysics of Morals: Self-cultivation is a (wide) duty of reason, i. e. a duty to choose certain maxims rather than a duty to execute certain actions. "Which of these natural perfections should take precedence, and in what proportion one against the other it may be a human being's duty to himself to make these natural perfections his end, are matters left for him to choose in accordance with his own rational reflection about what sort of life he would like to lead and whether he has the powers necessary for it (e.g., whether it should be a trade, commerce, or a learned profession). For, quite apart from the need to maintain himself, which in itself cannot establish a duty, a human being has a duty to himself to be a useful member of the world, since this also belongs to the worth of humanity in his own person, which he ought not to degrade. But a human being's duty to himself regarding his natural perfection is only a wide and imperfect duty; for while it does contain a law for the maxim of actions, it determines nothing about the kind and extent of actions themselves but allows a latitude for free choice." (Kant 1996, 565, 6:446)
- Kant, Metaphysics of Morals: Self-cultivation transcends the requirements of our natural, i. e.

animal life: "Even supposing that he could be satisfied with the innate scope of his capacities for his natural needs, his reason must first show him, by principles, that this meager scope of his capacities is satisfactory; for, as a being capable of ends (of making objects his ends), he must owe the use of his powers not merely to natural instinct but rather to the freedom by which he determines their scope. Hence the basis on which he should develop his capacities (for all sorts of ends) is not regard for the advantages that their cultivation can provide; for the advantage might (according to Rousseau's principles) turn out on the side of his crude natural needs. Instead, it is a command of morally practical reason and a duty of a human being to himself to cultivate his capacities (some among them more than others, insofar as people have different ends), and to be in a pragmatic respect a human being equal to the end of his existence." (Kant 1996, 564, 6:444)

Culture and Philosophy

- Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*: Culture can contribute to wisdom: "Powers of spirit are those whose exercise is possible only through reason. They are creative to the extent that their use is not drawn from experience but rather derived a priori from principles, of the sort to be found in mathematics, logic, and the metaphysics of nature. The latter two are also included in philosophy, namely theoretical philosophy, which does not then mean wisdom, as the word itself would suggest, but only science. However, theoretical philosophy can help to promote the end of wisdom." (Kant 1996, 564, 6:444)
- Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*: "Just for this reason metaphysics is also the culmination [Vollendung] of all culture of human reason, which is indispensable even if one sets aside its influence as a science for certain determinate ends. For it considers reason according to its elements and highest maxims, which must ground even the possibility of some sciences and the use of all of them. That as mere speculation it serves more to prevent errors than to amplify cognition does no damage to its value, but rather gives it all the more dignity and authority through its office as censor, which secures the general order and unity, indeed the well-being of the scientific community (*wissenschaftliches gemeinsames Wesen*) and prevents its cheerful and fruitful efforts from straying from the chief end, that of the general happiness." (Kant 1998, 701, B 878f).
- Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*: "Thus the metaphysics of nature as well as morals, but above all the preparatory (propaedeutic) critique of reason that dares to fly with its own wings, alone constitute that which we can call philosophy in a genuine sense. This relates everything to wisdom, but through the path of science, the only one which, once cleared, is never overgrown and never leads to error. Mathematics, natural science, even the empirical knowledge of humankind, have a high value as means, for the most part to contingent but yet ultimately to necessary and essential ends of humanity, but only through the mediation of a rational cognition from mere concepts, which, call it what one will, is really nothing but metaphysics." (Kant 1998, 700f, B 878)

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