

Freedom and Anthropology in Kant's Moral Philosophy

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Introduction

A Problem with Kant's Moral Anthropology

1. Kant's *Anthropology* and Schleiermacher's Objection

In 1798, Immanuel Kant published his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. In this work, he discusses “what man makes, can, or should make of himself” (7:119). The book offers detailed, even if incomplete, accounts of human capacities and character, and these accounts help flesh out Kant's Critical philosophy with empirical information about human beings. This 1798 *Anthropology* was not Kant's first foray into anthropology. Starting in 1772, Kant offered yearly lectures on anthropology that parallel the published work. In addition, anthropological insights are scattered throughout Kant's other publications. The essays on history (primarily from 1784 to 1786), the third *Critique* (1790), *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793), and the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) all present various aspects of Kant's anthropology. But the *Anthropology* of 1798 is the most detailed, systematic, and public treatment of anthropological issues in Kant's corpus.

Within a year and a half of its publication, at least eleven reviews of Kant's *Anthropology* appeared.¹ Among these was an important review by a young Friedrich Schleiermacher, published in the Romantic journal *Athaeneum*. In his review, Schleiermacher sarcastically suggests that Kant's *Anthropology* must have been intended as a “negation of all anthropology” (Schleiermacher 1984: v.1, p. 366, cf. Schleiermacher 1998) because it blatantly conflicts with the rest of Kant's philosophy. The review criticizes the *Anthropology* for disorganization and triviality and accuses Kant of failing to combine systematicity and popularity in it.² But the most philosophically important objection comes in the form of a

challenge to Kant to choose between his anthropology and his theory of freedom, insisting that Kant cannot have both.

The conflict is between two claims, that “nature is choice” and that “choice is nature” (Schleiermacher 1984: v.1, p. 366). Kant’s anthropology, according to Schleiermacher, must affirm that “choice is nature.” That is, human beings and all their choices must be considered objects in nature if they are to be studied by anthropology. But Kant must also affirm that “nature is choice” – that is, that an individual’s human nature is due to that individual’s choice. The “nature” that anthropology studies cannot be merely the result of natural causes. Schleiermacher gives two reasons for insisting that Kant must reconcile his anthropology with this strong claim about freedom. First, he points out that the conception of freedom developed in Kant’s Critical philosophy commits Kant to the view that freedom grounds human choices, and thereby human “nature.” Second, he suggests that any anthropology must have some account of choice underlying nature to make sense of the epistemic norms implicit in scientific inquiry.³

Kant could have offered an anthropology that would not conflict with his Critical philosophy. The problem is the particular sort of anthropology he presents, one that is both empirical and morally relevant. The dilemma can be stated in terms of a conflict among three claims to which Kant seems committed:

- Human beings are transcendentally free, in the sense that empirical influences can have no effect on the moral status of a human being and in the sense that choice is fundamentally prior to natural determination.
- Moral anthropology is an empirical science that studies empirical influences on human beings.
- Moral anthropology is morally relevant, in that it describes influences on moral development.

Schleiermacher suggests that Kant is committed to all three of these claims and that the claims are inconsistent with one another. Any *two* of them could be held consistently, but all three cannot. Unless Kant is willing to sacrifice the conception of freedom on which his moral philosophy depends, his *Anthropology* can be nothing more than a “negation of all anthropology.”⁴

2. The *Practical* Problem of Moral Anthropology

At this point, it is important to distinguish Schleiermacher's objection to Kant's anthropology from a familiar objection to Kant's metaphysics. From Kant's earliest critics, such as Rehberg, Fichte, and Hegel,⁵ to more recent commentators, Kant's account of freedom has been criticized as an incoherent form of compatibilism. This criticism takes different forms, but the basic point is that one cannot claim *both* that one's actions are causally determined in a series of natural events *and* that one is free in the sense that one's actions are ultimately caused by some more fundamental freedom. There is simply no room for both natural and free causes, when freedom is understood in Kant's anti-determinist sense. Responses to this objection have been almost as varied as the formulations of the objection itself.⁶

The problem that Schleiermacher raises is not primarily this metaphysical one. Schleiermacher is not claiming merely that studying human beings as natural objects is impossible because they are metaphysically free. His objection also, and more fundamentally, involves a problem from the standpoint of *practical* reason. This problem arises in the context of *moral* anthropology.⁷ The practical problem is how to account for moral judgments that make use of anthropological insights regarding helps and hindrances for moral development.

Anthropological insight into empirical influences on moral choice is not merely scientific knowledge of human beings. For one thing, it is knowledge that is specifically articulated for practical use. In his anthropology, for example, Kant argues that politeness promotes virtues.⁸ This observation leads to a *duty* to promote politeness. The anthropological perspective enters into the practical one. Of course, scientific perspectives enter into practical deliberation all the time. When I serve tea to guests, I make use of my knowledge that tea will contribute to their happiness. A murderer who decides to pull a trigger makes use of his or her knowledge that the gun will fire and kill the victim. But moral anthropology enters into deliberation in a more problematic way. Specifically, a human agent must be considered *at once* as both empirically influenced and morally responsible. One must consider people as capable of influence by polite society, or one does not have any responsibility to promote polite society. But one must also think of this influence as bearing on the *moral* status of those people, because that is the particular sort of influence that makes politeness so important.⁹ But then people must be considered from a practical perspective and thus as free from any empirical

influence. The conflict between freedom and moral anthropology arises as a practical problem even if metaphysical issues surrounding freedom can be resolved.

3. Kant's Susceptibility to the Problem

Ultimately, this book defends Kant's account of freedom and anthropology. But the first half of the book shows just how closely Schleiermacher's objection makes contact with Kant. One easy way to defend Kant would be to deny one of the three claims that constitute Schleiermacher's dilemma. If Kant does not affirm transcendental freedom, or does not hold that anthropology is empirical, or restricts anthropology to nonmoral contexts, then he is easily saved. But Kant cannot be saved that easily. He *does* affirm all three of the claims that form the dilemma. The project of saving Kant thus involves showing that there is a way that they can all be held consistently.

In Chapter 1, I show that Kant has a strong, noncombatilist conception of human freedom. I focus on one crucial feature of Kant's account that makes his anthropological work difficult. That feature is an asymmetry in the causal relation between the noumenal free self and its phenomenal appearance in the world, an asymmetry that arises whether one holds a two-object, two-aspect, or two-perspective account of Kant's metaphysics.

Kant resolves the third antinomy of the first *Critique* by suggesting that although there cannot be a free cause *in nature*, there can be a free ground of *effects* that are in nature (see A537f./B565f.). This ground has a relation to its effects in the world similar to that of a natural cause, though it is not spatiotemporal. In the first *Critique*, Kant does not show that there *is* a free ground of empirical effects, only that for all we know there *can* be such a ground. What is important, however, is that Kant specifies the metaphysical place that such a ground would occupy. A free ground of effects in the world would have to lie *outside* of nature in the sense that it would not be susceptible to being an effect of natural causes. This is precisely what it means for such a cause to be free. Theoretical reason provides a basis for saying that *if* there are free causes, they must not be influenced by other causes in the empirical world. In that sense, the relationship between freedom and nature is asymmetrical.

In the second *Critique*, Kant argues that human beings actually *are* free agents. Human beings fill the spot left open but empty by the first

Critique. And in the second *Critique*, Kant again emphasizes the asymmetry between the free cause – the agent – and the empirical world in which one's agency is effective. Not only for theoretical reasons (the nature of causation) but for moral ones (the conditions of possibility of moral responsibility), the free agent must affect *but not be affected by* the world.

In Chapter 2, I show that Kant's anthropology is empirical. This is the most consistent claim that Kant makes about his work in anthropology, persisting through all his lectures on it and enduring in his published work from his earliest works to his published *Anthropology*. In the *Groundwork*, he distinguishes pure morality, which is the rational part of ethics, from "practical anthropology," which is the "empirical part" (4:388). In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he explains that in anthropology "we shall often have to take as our object the particular nature of human beings, which is cognized only by experience" (6:216–17).

In the *Anthropology* itself Kant makes clear that anthropological investigation is a matter of empirical observation, not a priori theorizing. Although he dismisses observations that are not put to use as "speculative theorizing" that "is a sheer waste of time," proper anthropological investigation also consists in "observations," but only when one "distinguishes between those observations which have been found to hinder and those which have been found to promote" the faculty under investigation (7:119). Both the fruitless and the proper sorts of anthropology are empirical. The difference is that proper anthropology puts empirical observation to use. In Chapter 2, I articulate what it means for anthropology to make claims that are at once universal, related to the free self, and empirical.

In Chapter 3, I describe how Kant's empirical anthropology is a *moral* anthropology. That is, anthropology takes moral choice as one of its objects. Based on Kant's distinction between moral, pragmatic, and technical considerations in the *Groundwork*, one might think that the title of Kant's published work, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (emphasis added), speaks against its inclusion of *moral* considerations. However, the term *pragmatic* is used in several different ways in Kant's work, and I show that the primary sense of *pragmatic* in the *Anthropology* contrasts not with moral but with merely theoretical or physiological concerns. Kant's anthropology is meant to be useful, rather than mere knowledge of human beings. And one of the uses of anthropology is to cultivate and encourage good *moral* choices.

Thus one finds in the *Anthropology* examples of empirical helps and hindrances to having a good will. Kant's discussions of politeness, of the passions, and of character all present these as helps or hindrances to morality itself, so I briefly discuss each of these examples. The chapter concludes by pointing out the systematic place of moral anthropology in Kant's anthropology as a whole. The first three chapters thus show that Kant's moral anthropology makes him susceptible – at least at first sight – to Schleiermacher's criticism.

4. Freedom and Anthropology in Contemporary Moral Theories

In recent years, neokantian moral theorists have begun to pay more attention to Kant's moral anthropology. Onora O'Neill, in a chapter of *Constructions of Reason* called "Action, Anthropology, and Autonomy," accounts for a "gap between Kant's practical philosophy and contemporary would-be Kantian writing on ethics" in part by pointing out that "modern protagonists of 'Kantian' ethics are mainly interested in rights, which for Kant are one element in a broader picture" (O'Neill 1989: 66). Anthropology helps to flesh out this broader picture. Allen Wood explicitly articulates his conception of Kant's ethical thought in contrast to approaches that are open to "common charges that Kantian ethics is unconcerned with the empirical realities of psychology, society, and history, that it sees no value in the affective side of our nature, and that it is individualistic" (Wood 2000: xiv). This new approach to Kant involves an extensive treatment of Kant's anthropology (see pp. 193–320). Robert Louden's *Kant's Impure Ethics* is devoted entirely to drawing attention to "the *second* part of Kant's ethics, a part that . . . unfortunately remains a well-kept secret [and that] Kant referred to . . . as 'moral anthropology'" (Louden 2000: vii). And G. Felicitas Munzel's *Kant's Conception of Moral Character* (1999) seeks to integrate Kant's anthropology into his moral philosophy through a study of the notion of "character."

Even neokantians who do not discuss Kant's anthropology as a whole often turn to specific aspects of moral anthropology to flesh out their Kantian moral theories. Kant's remark that people are "not to shun sick-rooms or debtors' prisons" (6:457) has become a popular text to point out Kant's awareness of the importance of cultivating sympathy for the moral life.¹⁰ Barbara Herman has drawn attention to the role that community and education can play in promoting moral behavior (Herman 1993, esp. pp. 82–3), and she has drawn attention to the importance of "character" for Kant (Herman 1996). Nancy Sherman, in a series of

books and articles, has shown that Kant's account of emotions can contribute to a richer Kantian ethical theory (Sherman 1990, 1995, 1997, and 1998). All of these developments spring from Kant's anthropological observations.

The attention to Kant's anthropology in contemporary ethics is not merely an attempt to be historically accurate. Neokantian moral theorists find in Kant's anthropology a richness of detail and attention to human particularity that should be an important part of any moral theory. The recent rise of neo-Aristotelian, Humean, and anti-theoretical approaches to moral theory has presented serious challenges for Kantian moral theories.¹¹ These apparent alternatives to Kant tend to focus on character rather than action, virtues rather than rights or duties, and take into account a wide range of features of human psychology that Kantians have sometimes ignored. They thus present sensitive accounts of moral development and the role of emotions in moral motivation, and they can seem to provide a very nuanced account of ethical life. The focus on formulaic applications of the categorical imperative, and a general emphasis on the *Groundwork* in Kantian moral theory, has made some Kantians particularly susceptible to challenges from these alternative accounts of ethics.

Kant's anthropology provides effective responses to many of these objections. His moral anthropology includes extensive discussions of the importance of community and education for moral development. He discusses and differentiates different sorts of emotions and various roles that these can play in moral life. His moral anthropology focuses on cultivating a virtuous character, rather than on merely doing good deeds. And throughout his anthropological writings, Kant discusses character, disposition, and virtue.¹² Moreover, his anthropology provides detailed, even if scattered, accounts of the particulars of human life. He analyzes the psychology that underlies sexual temptation, gives a sophisticated treatment of the role of politeness in modern life, and even provides advice on conducting an excellent dinner party. Even when these descriptions of human life fall short of what one might hope for, they go far beyond the abstraction of the categorical imperative.

Thus neokantians have been right to look to Kant's anthropology for an ethical theory that can hold its own against recent virtue-based and anti-theoretical approaches to ethics. But there has been insufficient attention to the problems that Kant's anthropology presents for his overall moral theory. In Chapter 4, I take up three of the more prominent

current neokantians who draw extensively from Kant's anthropology – Nancy Sherman, Robert Louden, and G. Felicitas Munzel. All three explicitly articulate their accounts as theories that can meet some of the challenges recently raised against Kant, especially by those sympathetic to Aristotle. Because of their use of Kant's anthropology, these contemporary neokantian moral theories are susceptible, in varying degrees, to Schleiermacher's objections to Kant.

Unfortunately, no one has yet offered a sufficient integration of Kant's moral anthropology with his conception of freedom. Thus contemporary accounts often fall short of seeing the full significance of Kant's moral anthropology. In some cases, they simply fail to recognize all the ways in which Kant's anthropology affects his ethics. Nancy Sherman, for example, allows for important anthropological influences but ultimately does not give anthropology the range of moral significance that Kant allows. In other cases, neokantians fail to save Kant's theory of freedom. The result is a moral theory that is so tied to anthropology that it loses its distinctive Kantian emphasis on freedom. At times, Louden and Munzel go in this direction. Given the increasing emphasis on moral anthropology as an important part of a contemporary Kantian ethics, there is a need to articulate an answer to Schleiermacher's challenge that can justify the integration of anthropological insights into a genuinely *Kantian* moral theory.

5. Solving Schleiermacher's Dilemma

The second half of this book, especially Chapters 5 and 6, offers the needed solution to Schleiermacher's dilemma. In Chapter 5, I show that Kant has the resources to distinguish between the empirical will, which can be affected by empirical influences, and the free will, which cannot. The connection between these is such that the empirical will is morally relevant as the *expression* of the moral status of the free will. In the simplest case, an action in the world such as making a false promise for personal gain expresses an evil will. But the situation is complicated by the presence in human beings of what Kant calls *radical evil*. Radical evil involves both choosing badly and making choices that reinforce one's tendency to choose badly. This evil forces Kant to reconceive of the nature of the human good will and its expression in the world. According to Kant's account in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, the best that humans can hope for is a "revolution" against evil, the expression of which is a constant struggle against evil in one's nature. Although the revolution

itself is not something temporal, the struggle that expresses a revolution in the will is temporally extended. To combat radical evil, one must not only choose rightly but also act to counteract one's tendency to choose poorly in the future. In cool hours of moral self-control, one who is in revolution will act to effect a good empirical will not only in the present but in the future as well. In this context, moral anthropology is crucial. Moral anthropology explains the means for effectively correcting and improving one's empirical will. And the effort to correct and improve one's empirical will is part of the struggle against evil that expresses the will in revolution. Promoting a good character through methods explained in moral anthropology is an *expression* of one's free will, so the asymmetry between nature and freedom in Kant's philosophy is preserved. But because it is an expression *of one's moral status*, anthropology has moral significance. This solution to Schleiermacher's dilemma is worked out in detail in Chapter 5.

In Chapter 6, I take up an important remaining problem with the account offered in Chapter 5. If considerations from moral anthropology are relevant because they enable one to express a revolution against evil, it is not clear how *interpersonal* moral influence can be morally significant. I argue that Kant is not as committed to the possibility of interpersonal moral influence as some have suggested. He does not think that one should seek to effect moral revolutions in others. Nonetheless, acting to improve the character of others is morally significant for several reasons, which I explore in Chapter 6. Most important, because one's own empirical will is connected to the wills of others, acting to improve the wills of others expresses one's *own* struggle against evil. I even argue that there is some room for Kant to allow that the actions of one agent can genuinely affect the moral status of another. Still, one can never know how this occurs and should not consider it a reason for acting to promote moral development in others.

In the brief Epilogue, I reflect on where the debate between Kant and Schleiermacher, and Kant's many other critics, stands given the account of Kant's moral theory offered in this book. Although this book does not show that Kant's moral theory is the only reasonable option, it does show that one of the most important objections to that moral theory fails. Kant can integrate moral anthropology into his ethics without sacrificing the account of freedom that lies at the core of his philosophy.

