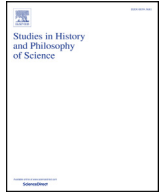




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Kant on science and normativity

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore Kant's account of normativity through the prism of the distinction between the natural and the human sciences. Although the pragmatic orientation of the human sciences is often defined in contrast with the theoretical orientation of the natural sciences, I show that they are in fact regulated by one and the same norm, namely reason's demand for autonomy.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore Kant's account of normativity through the prism of the distinction between the natural and the human sciences. Although the pragmatic orientation of the human sciences is often defined in contrast with the theoretical orientation of the natural sciences, I show that they are in fact regulated by one and the same norm, namely reason's demand for autonomy. To support this claim, I begin by spelling out the pragmatic nature of the human sciences. Insofar as they are directed towards human cultivation, civilisation and moralisation, they are committed to investigating human phenomena for a practical purpose, namely the realisation of human beings' aims. What is not sufficiently acknowledged, however, is that the human sciences also pertain to the enterprise of human cognition itself: they help human beings realise their cognitive vocation by promoting the conditions of good cognition. The second section examines these conditions and shows in what sense they constitute normative constraints upon belief. On the reading I propose, they take the form of epistemic principles that should guide our reflective attitude upon our cognitive activity. I then turn to the question of whether given their theoretical orientation, the norms that govern the natural sciences and cognition in general differ from those that govern the human sciences. For one may be tempted to think that even if cognition is normatively guided, its norms are epistemic whereas in the case of the

human sciences, by contrast, insofar as they are pragmatically oriented, their norms are practical. Yet the third section argues that this is not the case. On the interpretation of Kant I defend, our actions and our thoughts are subject to the same rational norm, for rationality expresses itself normatively through the demand for autonomy in thought as well as in action. However, crucially for my account, the prime locus of responsibility is not over beliefs and actions themselves but rather over the principles that should regulate them. Once we turn our attention to the role of these principles in regulating our activity, we can make sense of the Kantian picture according to which the only source of normativity is our capacity for autonomy.

2. The human sciences as enterprises with a pragmatic purpose

Kant begins his *Anthropology* with an explicit reference to its 'pragmatic point of view'¹: anthropology is 'the investigation of what [the human being] as a free-acting being makes of himself, or

¹ Insofar as the following works by Kant are cited frequently, I have identified them by these abbreviations: A: *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Kant, 2007); CJ: *Critique of the Power of Judgement* (Kant, 2000); CPR: *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant, 1999b); G: *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant, 1999a); LA: *Lectures on Anthropology* (Kant, 2012); LL: *Lectures on Logic* (Kant, 1992); MM: *Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant, 1999a); WOT: *What is Orientation in Thinking?* (Kant, 2001) For the sake of clarity in the references to Kant's writings, I have chosen to use titles rather than the author/date system. I have also included a citation to the Cambridge translation in parentheses, followed by a citation to the German text of the Prussian Academy edition (volume and page reference) in brackets.

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can and should make of himself.² The ‘makes’ points to the descriptive part of Kant’s project – i.e., what human beings actually make, or have made, of themselves. The ‘can make’ refers to the realm of possibility – i.e., the scope and limits of human beings’ influence on themselves, whilst the ‘should make’ indicates the prescriptive part of Kant’s project, which encompasses the realm of human action in general – i.e., its technical, prudential and moral dimensions. On this basis, Kant’s anthropology essentially aims at accomplishing three tasks. First, it describes human beings’ behaviour relative to their purposes. Second, it deduces from their predispositions the scope of what they can make of themselves. Third, it draws conclusions regarding what they should do in order to accomplish the best possible fulfilment of their purposes, whether technical, prudential or moral. For the realm of the pragmatic encompasses all the dimensions of human actions: the development of skills, the means of achieving happiness, and the helps and hindrances to morality.

The sum total of pragmatic anthropology, in respect to the vocation of the human being and the characteristic of his formation, is the following. The human being is destined by his reason to live in a society with human beings, and in it to cultivate himself, to civilize himself, and to moralize himself by means of the arts and sciences.³

To accomplish this task, Kant focuses on knowledge ‘of practical relevance’, that is to say knowledge that is useful to one’s conduct in life.⁴ This knowledge has an extremely broad scope: it discloses ‘the sources of all the [practical] sciences, the science of morality, of skill, of human intercourse, of the way to educate and govern human beings, and thus of everything that pertains to the practical’.⁵ The uniqueness of the human sciences’ approach lies in their commitment to investigating human phenomena for a practical purpose.⁶

Yet the fact that the human sciences are practically oriented does not entail that they do not have a theoretical dimension. On my reading, the pragmatic intent of anthropology calls for a descriptive and explanatory dimension since human beings need to

understand their nature in order to be able to determine what they are capable of and how they can achieve their purposes.⁷ This theoretical part of the project includes the investigation of nature’s purposes for the human species as well as of human beings’ psychological and biological make-up.⁸ As summed up in the *Lectures on Anthropology*, ‘Anthropology is thus a pragmatic knowledge of what results from our nature’.⁹ The knowledge of human beings’ natural constitution is necessary for them to use nature, and in particular their nature, to realise their purposes. As a result, far from being independent of each other, or even excluding each other, as is often presupposed, in anthropology the realm of the practical necessitates that of the theoretical.¹⁰ It is on the basis of theoretical observations about the human world that anthropology can play the crucial role of providing a map for human beings to orient themselves in it and realise their aims.¹¹

Depending on our purpose when we adopt its recommendations, anthropology can be used either towards the realisation of morality, or towards the realisation of our own happiness.¹² As a doctrine of prudence, it contributes to the latter insofar as not only does it help us choose ends that are consistent with the greatest possible happiness, it also teaches us how to realise these ends.¹³ In its moral dimension, it examines the empirical helps and hindrances to moral agency – not any empirical helps and hindrances but specifically ‘the subjective conditions in human nature’.¹⁴ By identifying and recommending the means that help the realisation of our duty and counseling against the hindrances to it, it makes us more morally efficacious.¹⁵ It is in this sense that Kant’s anthropological project is a pragmatic project directed towards human cultivation, civilisation and moralisation.

The practical orientation of the human sciences is often interpreted in contrast with the theoretical orientation of the natural sciences. In the Preface of his *Anthropology*, Kant himself distinguishes between the investigations of ‘a mere observer’, which he calls ‘theoretical speculation’, and the knowledge of ‘how to put them to use for his purposes’ – ‘anthropology with a pragmatic purpose’.¹⁶ Thus there seems to be a *prima facie* contrast between theoretical and pragmatic sciences, a contrast that can further be situated within the broader contrast between the practical and the

² A 231 [7:119]. As is now well-known, Kant calls his anthropology ‘pragmatic’ rather than ‘practical’. But in the context of the introduction to the *Anthropology*, the meanings of these terms coincide insofar as they both have to do with the realm of action: ‘anthropology is concerned with subjective, practical rules’ (*Lectures on Ethics* 42 [27:244]). Contrast this with the narrow meaning of ‘practical’ as having to do with free action (G 95 [4:448]). As is regularly noted by commentators, Kant sometimes calls the prudential dimension of human action ‘pragmatic’ (e.g., Loudon (2000), pp. 69–70). For instance, he writes: ‘The first imperative could also be called technical (belonging to art), the second pragmatic (belonging to welfare), the third moral (belonging to free conduct as such, that is, to morals)’ (G 69 [4:416–17]; see also MM 565–6 [6:444–6]). However, far from entailing an inconsistency, this merely implies that the word ‘pragmatic’ can be understood in two distinct senses: in a narrow sense as ‘prudential’, having to do with welfare and happiness, and in a broad sense as ‘practical’, having to do with the field of action in general. My claim is that when Kant uses the term ‘pragmatic’ to describe his *Anthropology*, he uses the term in the latter rather than the former sense.

³ A 420 [7:324].

⁴ A 233 [7:122].

⁵ *Correspondence* 141 [10:145]. The notion of ‘knowledge’ is of course problematic in this context since Kant does not mean to suggest that the knowledge at stake in anthropology is of the same kind as the knowledge in natural science. However, it goes well beyond the remit of this paper to tackle this issue. Suffice to say that for Kant, anthropological knowledge is based on empirical generalisation, induction and interpretation. For discussions of this question, see Cohen (2009), Sturm (2009) and Wilson (2006).

⁶ As Loudon has noted, ‘Kantian social science ... is not value-free but morally guided. We seek *Weltkenntnis* in order to further the goal of moralisation. Knowing the world stands under the moral imperative of making the world better’ (Loudon (2000), p. 230).

⁷ I have defended this claim in Cohen (2009), pp. 71–84.

⁸ Unfortunately, I cannot get into the details of the theoretical dimension of the human sciences for Kant. For a discussion of Kant’s biological account of the human species and nature’s purposes for it, see Cohen (2006). For a discussion of his psychological account of human beings, see Frierson (2014), pp. 1–50.

⁹ LA 48 [25:471].

¹⁰ For a version of the reverse claim that the theoretical standpoint necessitates the practical standpoint, see O’Neill (1989): ch. 3.

¹¹ For an account of anthropology as a map-making venture, Cohen (2009).

¹² ‘[P]rudence is the capacity to choose the best means to our happiness. Happiness consists in the satisfaction of all of our inclinations’ (LA [25:413]). Reason clearly indicates our moral destination, namely the realisation of the moral law: ‘reason by itself and independently of all appearances commands what ought to happen’ (G 62 [4:408]). For a defense of the claim that Kant’s pragmatic anthropology encompasses both prudential and moral dimensions, especially by contrast with Brandt (2003: 92), see Cohen (2009), pp. 70–71.

¹³ See Reflection [6:45n]. For a very clear account of prudence and prudential ends in Kant’s anthropology, see Kain (2003).

¹⁴ MM 372 [6:217]. Moral anthropology ‘would deal with the development, spreading, and strengthening of moral principles (in education in schools and in popular instruction), and with other similar teachings and precepts based on experience. It cannot be dispensed with, but it must not precede a metaphysics of morals or be mixed with it’ (MM 372 [6:217]).

¹⁵ The nature and extent of moral anthropology is the subject of numerous debates in the literature. However, it falls beyond the remit of this paper to engage with them. For helpful discussions, see Cohen (2009): 89–104, Frierson (2003) and Loudon (2000) in particular.

¹⁶ A 231 [7:119].

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