

# ENLIGHTENMENT AS PERFECTION, PERFECTION AS ENLIGHTENMENT? KANT ON THINKING FOR ONESELF AND PERFECTING ONESELF

in: *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 56, 2022, 281-289 <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9752.12651>

*Peter Baumann*

## *Abstract*

Kant's views about the nature and value of enlightenment have been discussed very much since 1784, and without ever losing any of their relevance and importance. I will discuss a topic which has not been discussed quite that extensively: Kant's conception of enlightenment as it relates to the idea of perfection ("Vollkommenheit") in particular. Is the project of enlightenment also a project of perfection (and vice versa), and if yes, in what sense and to what degree? My aim is twofold here: to present a sketch of Kant's views but also to do so in the light of contemporary, systematic questions and ideas concerning the idea of perfection.

## *Keywords*

Enlightenment; perfection; Kant

Kant's views about the nature and value of enlightenment have been discussed so much since 1784 (and without ever losing any of their relevance and importance) that one may very well feel reluctant to quote the well-known passages again. Has there not been, for instance and for an analogy, over-exposure to da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* or to Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, and so much of it that we have become somewhat numb und even insensitive to these works of art? Could something similar have happened to the first paragraph of Kant's famous article on enlightenment? Are we still seriously processing what Kant is saying there? I will try to minimize the danger of losing

understanding of what has become all too familiar by looking at some specific aspects of Kant's conception of enlightenment, especially as it relates to the idea of perfection ("Vollkommenheit"). Is the project of enlightenment also a project of perfection (and vice versa), and if yes, in what sense and to what degree? My aim is twofold here: to present a sketch of Kant's views (especially in *The Metaphysics of Morals*) but also to do so in the light of contemporary, systematic questions and ideas. All this also has implications for how we can think about education today, as both enlightenment and perfection are important ideas for any view on education; a good view of education needs to avoid certain pitfalls of misguided views about education (see below).

### *1. Thinking for Oneself<sup>1</sup>*

First on thinking for oneself.<sup>2</sup> The famous slogan "sapere aude!" (Kant 1996a, 8:35) is a bit misleading because we are not only being asked to be wise in the sense of being asked to know, or better: to acquire knowledge - about the relevant and important topics (though also see Kant 1900c, 21:117). Kant also talks about the use of one's understanding ("Verstand"; see Kant 1996a, 8:35); if one takes this as a faculty of acquiring knowledge ("Erkenntnisvermögen"), then we are missing the breadth, again, of the project. It is not just about knowledge. It is about thinking for oneself in general: whether it is about matters of fact about which one can acquire knowledge, or

---

1     References to Kant's works are mostly to the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. I am using the marginal page numbers of that edition which are identical with the page numbers of the *Akademieausgabe*, the canonical German edition of Kant's works. In a few cases (some of Kant's handwritten remarks and some lectures) I have to refer to the *Akademieausgabe*. In the case of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, I refer to the first ('A') and second ('B') edition, as is common.

2     See Kant 1996a, 8:33-42 and also: Kant 1998, A752/B780; Kant 2000, 5:294; Kant 1996c, 8:146, note; Kant 2007b, 7:200, 229; Kant 1992b, 9:57. See also reflections from the 1770s: Kant 1900a, 15.2: 715; Kant 1900b, 16:419. On the pre-critical Kant on thinking for oneself see Kreimendahl 2009. On Kant on enlightenment in general see Scholz 2006, and Allison 2000. On "popular enlightenment" ("Volksaufklärung") concerning citizen's political rights and duties, see, e.g., Kant 1996h, 7:89. For the feeling of wonder as a core motive to think for oneself see Zinkin 2021.

about other matters, like moral or aesthetic questions (about which one cannot acquire knowledge in the strict sense, according to Kant<sup>3</sup>). One can see this in Kant's example of having one's own moral conscience (see Kant 1996a, 8:35) or in his mention of the arts in the article on enlightenment (see Kant 1996a, 8:41). Since pure theoretical reason, practical reason and judgment cover all of reason, we can be confident that Kant wanted to have the broadest possible scope for the topics of self-thinking.

One more point about knowledge in particular. It is conceivable that one could think for oneself and because of that not acquire knowledge or even lose the knowledge one had before. It is also conceivable that one could acquire and keep one's knowledge because one is trusting others rather than thinking for oneself about things.<sup>4</sup> If quantum mechanics is correct and not essentially incomplete, then the disagreeing Einstein missed out on some knowledge about quantum mechanics and did so because he thought for himself. In contrast, many, apparently, just took Niels Bohr's word for it and thus acquired knowledge about quantum mechanics (assuming here for the sake of the example that Bohr was right), trusting authority and in some cases perhaps not thinking too much for themselves about this. However, even though thinking for oneself does not guarantee the acquisition of knowledge we may assume that Kant thought that typically, and in most cases at least, autonomous<sup>5</sup> rational thought will lead to more knowledge rather than to less of it. This is, I think, a claim which is plausible with certain restrictions (see below) but for which I cannot

---

3 This does not mean or entail that there is no moral (or aesthetic) cognition. Not all cognition is about facts or about something that can be known. Moral reasoning is such a case, according to Kant. He emphasizes the distinction between knowledge ("Erkenntnis") as one type of cognition (dealt with in the first Critique) and moral reasoning as another type of cognition (dealt with in the second Critique). I am using "cognition" here in a non-Kantian sense.

4 In the first case: because thinking for oneself does not guarantee truth (which is required for knowledge). In the second case: because trusting others is compatible with knowledge. No particular theory of knowledge is assumed here.

5 I am using this term here in the sense of independent thinking, not necessarily in Kant's sense.

argue here. Given the close connection between enlightenment and perfection in Kant I will argue for, one can find further support for the above claim in Kant's view that part of the process of increasing self-perfection is the removal of errors and the increase of knowledge (see Kant 1996f, 6:387 and the corresponding claim in Kant 1996a, 8:39).

I think that Kant intended to extend this claim. There are, according to him, different standards of correctness for cognition about matters of fact ("Erkenntnis"), moral thinking, and aesthetic considerations: the correctness of truth, of grasping and applying the moral principle, and of responding adequately to aesthetic objects. In all these respects, thinking for oneself typically though not always promotes meeting the corresponding standard of correctness. And it accomplishes this so much more than not thinking for oneself.

All of this self-thinking has, of course, to be guided by reason (see, e.g., Kant 1996c, 8:146, note). What could this mean? First, our thinking about matters of fact, morality or aesthetics has to be guided by the standards for the proper use of our rational faculties. This claim looks more complex and interesting if one puts it in terms of more specific requirements of rationality: What exactly makes some piece of reasoning rational and some other piece less rational or even irrational? The explosion of rationality studies in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century makes this question very pressing for any contemporary Kantian. I expect that going further into this will also make the difference between reason as a cognitive faculty (be it theoretical reason aiming at knowledge ("Erkenntnis") or practical reason dealing with the question of what one ought to do) and reason in the sense of rational requirements, of reasons to think or do certain things, more important.

There is one particular respect in which a Kantian should say much more than Kant himself did: with respect to moral judgment. Kant held that neither grasping the supreme moral principle

nor applying it to cases requires much thinking or even poses serious problems (on this, Kant agrees with Rousseau 2002, 67). However, this I find very implausible. Take the categorical imperative in the version that says that any given maxim ought not to lose its “point” for oneself if everyone adopted that maxim (see, e.g., Kant 1996b, 4:402-403 or Kant 1996d, 5:30). More precisely, the idea is that the subject’s reason to adopt a given maxim (e.g., adopting a lying maxim because it is advantageous for oneself) should not be or become a bad reason under conditions of universal acceptance of that maxim (e.g., furthering one’s own advantage is not a good reason to adopt a lying maxim when everyone else does so; nobody would believe the subject any more, thus defeating their egoist goals).<sup>6</sup> Putting aside the worry that grasping such a principle is not as easy as Kant believed (as the experience of teaching this bit of Kant’s philosophy suggests) I want to raise problems about the application to cases. Take the case of lying (see Kant 1996g). Is it the case that universal adoption of a lying maxim like (there are many up for our choice here!) “I will lie whenever I think this will be to my advantage” is not universalizable? Would all communication break down and thus defeat the purpose of the maxim? We have to know what happens when everyone lies whenever they think it will be to their advantage. How many occasions are there for this? This will depend on the particular structure of any given society. Given any particular society, do we really have any clue as to how often such occasions would arise? And even if we had an idea about this, would it really follow even in extreme cases of widespread deception that communication would break down? Would people not sometimes figure out when deception typically happens and be careful in those cases? And in the very unrealistic case of a society of

---

6 This is just one amongst many interpretations of this version of Kant’s categorical imperative – and not an uncontroversial one. I cannot go into a discussion of different interpretations here; this would go far beyond the bounds of this paper. The remarks above should rather be seen as an illustration of the very non-trivial difficulties any subject would have to face when trying to understand and apply the categorical imperative. I take it that this kind of point holds for any interpretation of Kant worth to be taken seriously.

people who always lie, would that not rather trigger a change in the meaning of words than make communication break down?<sup>7</sup> I do not want to answer these questions here but rather make the point that Kantian moral thinking, taken seriously, turns out to be very complex and challenging, and raises basic questions not (or only partly) answered by Kant. Ironically, this supports a point that is very Kantian after all: that practical reason has a lot to do with reasoning. In the worst case it could turn out that we can never have the kind of empirical information and conceptual sophistication which the application of the categorical imperative requires, - a fate to be shared with consequentialist theories, for instance.<sup>89</sup>

Another issue complicates the Kantian picture further. As far as knowledge is concerned, we cannot do without the testimony of others. It seems uncontroversial that most if not almost all of our knowledge we acquire on the basis of some testimony by others. Kant knew this, of course. The controversial question is whether testimony is an irreducible source of knowledge, as Thomas Reid and others have argued (see Reid 1863, 194-198), or whether what one acquires via testimony can be reduced to the result of the use of the individual's own cognitive abilities, as David Hume and others have argued (see Hume 1975, section X, part I). Where does Kant stand here? At the

---

7 A referee objected that the application of the categorical imperative is wholly a priori. However, I am not convinced that this is so. For reasons like the ones mentioned above, one still needs information about what would happen if, say, everyone was lying whenever they felt like it. And that information is at least to a large part empirical information.

8 For instance, the measurement and interpersonal comparison of whatever is considered to be good (utility, etc.) is a major conceptual challenge for consequentialist theories, apart from other well-known empirical challenges (can we ever have enough information about, say, remote consequences of actions?).

9 Is the means-ends version of the categorical imperative (see Kant 1996b, 4:429 and also Kant 1996d, 87) easier to understand and to apply to cases? I cannot pursue this important question here in any detail but can add that one has reason not to be very optimistic in this regard. There are some very non-trivial questions one has to face here. What does it mean to instrumentalize someone? What exactly is the criterion for treating someone as a means only in contrast to treating them as means but also respecting them as rational beings and final ends? Am I treating the grocery shop owner merely as a means to my end of getting my groceries? Is it sufficient for avoiding this to greet him with politeness and respect? Is the thought that the other rational being is an end in itself necessary, or sufficient or both for not treating them merely as a means?

beginning of the article on enlightenment Kant briefly mentions the case of doctors and that one should not just go by their advice (see Kant 1996a, 8:35). This I find puzzling, not just because it seems very reasonable to accept a certain cognitive division of labor but also because there are other passages in which Kant rejects the idea that one person could think it all through independently from interaction with others.<sup>10</sup> This, however, still leaves open the question whether Kant is siding with Reid (non-reductionism) or with Hume (reductionism). As so often, he takes a more complex intermediate position: On empirical (e.g., historical) knowledge he is with Reid (see Kant 2000, 5:469; Kant 1996c, 8:141; Kant 1992b, 9:72, note; Kant 1900b, 16:384 (R 2471), 16:511 (2789); on judgments of (theoretical or practical) reason or of taste he is with Hume (see Kant 2000, 5:284; Kant 1996c, 8:141; Kant 1900b, 16:384 (R 2471), 16:511 (2789)). I think Kant is offering a very attractive position here. As far as the implications for the project of enlightenment are concerned, however, one has an additional task to deal with: explaining what thinking for oneself can mean when there is essential and irreducible dependence on others. All this pertains to matters of knowledge. Perhaps there is more room for independence in the case of moral thinking or aesthetic judgment, as Kant thought. There seems to be something deeply wrong with trusting moral experts (if there are any). Here the case for “Selbst Denken”, thinking for oneself, seems the strongest (but see also Sticker 2021b). An intermediate case is, perhaps, the aesthetic one – if it is correct to admit that there are experts here even if the final judgment has to be up to the individual.

---

10 See, e.g., Kant 1996c, 8:144, Kant 2000, 5:293-295, Kant 2007b, 7:200, 228-229 as well the passage on logical, aesthetic and moral “egoism” in Kant 2007b, 7:128-130; see also Kant 1992b, 9:57 and some reflections from the 1770s like, e.g., Kant 1900a, 15.2: 715 and Kant 1900b, 16:419. See also Kant 2012, 25.2, 1480 (lectures after Busolt, end of the 1780s).

## 2. *Enlightenment and Perfection: One or Two Projects?*

One can find a plurality of notions of perfection in Kant's writings.<sup>11</sup> In his pre-critical article on optimism he distinguishes between absolute perfection as the degree of reality, without relation to anything else, on the one hand, and relative perfection ("Vollkommenheit im respectiven Verstande") as perfection in relation to some rule ("Regel") on the other hand (see Kant 1992a, 2:30-31). Here, he is concerned with the idea of a best of all possible worlds. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* there is talk about perfection as the complete purposive unity ("vollständige zweckmässige Einheit") of nature (see Kant 1998 A694/B722). In the *Groundwork* he briefly mentions an "ontological notion of perfection", explained in terms of degree of reality and finds it not to be useful as a foundation of morals (see Kant 1996b, 4:443). In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant distinguishes between theoretical perfection (transcendental or metaphysical) (see Kant 1996d, 5:41) and practical perfection, that is, the usefulness or appropriateness of some thing for all kinds of ends ("Tauglichkeit oder Zulänglichkeit eines Dinges zu allerlei Zwecken": Kant 1996d, 5:41); perfection is here seen as the cultivation of one's talents. Because of the relation to given ends, he finds this notion of perfection inadequate for the foundation of morals. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant contrasts the judgment of taste with the idea of perfection (see Kant 2000, 5: 226-229). The latter is concerned with ends which the former is not. He also introduces the distinction between "qualitative" perfection (the end determines what the object should be like) and "quantitative" perfection (related to what the object is on its own).<sup>12</sup> In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* there is a bit of talk about natural perfection (taken as skill in arts and

---

11 See Schwaiger 2001 for some prehistory, especially on Wolff and Baumgarten. Schwaiger argues that according to Baumgarten one's own perfection is an end but also a means towards the perfection of others. This is in contrast to Kant's stronger view that we have a moral duty to promote the perfection of others (see below).

12 See Kant 2000, 5:227; see also the same distinction expressed as one between "formal" and "material" perfection in Kant 1996f, 6:386.

sciences, taste, agility of the body, etc.: “als Geschicklichkeit in Künsten und Wissenschaften, Geschmack, Gewandtheit des Körpers u. d. g.”: see Kant 1996e, 6:3-4); this kind of perfection, too, cannot contribute to the foundations of morals. In *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* one finds the somewhat platonist idea of “inner perfection” as the ruling of the understanding over the sensibility (see Kant 2007b, 7:144). His *Logic* contains a passage on perfection of “Erkenntnis” (cognition or knowledge) and distinguishes between logical and aesthetic (beauty-related) perfection (see Kant 1992b, 9:37-38).

For the relation between perfection and enlightenment *The Metaphysics of Morals* is by far the most interesting and relevant work of Kant’s. Here he presents two ends that are also duties: apart from the happiness of others, one’s own perfection.<sup>13</sup> Humans have a duty to strive after their own perfection (see Kant 1996f, 6:386). This is understood as the cultivation of one’s theoretical as well as practical talents. There is the duty to leave the state of ignorance, correct one’s errors and acquire knowledge (see Kant 1996f, 6:387). There is not only the duty to cultivate the intellect but also the will: to get into a state where one does one’s duty because it is one’s duty (see Kant 1996f, 6:387, 392, 446-447). One thus has a duty to turn oneself into someone who does one’s duty out of a sense of duty – an interesting iteration of duties which is absent in earlier writings of Kant. Kant also specifically mentions the intellectual, psychological and physical abilities (“Geistes=, Seelen= und Leibeskräfte”: see Kant 1996f, 6:444): the first contain “Wissenschaft” (science), the second memory and imagination which also help with the aesthetic sensibility (see Kant 1996f, 6:445). Through the cultivation of one’s talents one becomes generically apt and

---

13 See Kant 1996f, 6:385-386; see also Jeske 1996 for an interesting discussion and argument that contrary to Kant we also have a duty to promote our own happiness and well being as well as the perfection of others.

useful for the attainment of all kinds of ends (see Kant 1996f, 6:392, 444, 446). This is our duty: this way we are useful “to the world”.<sup>14</sup>

Kant points out that the duty to perfect oneself is an imperfect duty: It remains open how far one should go with the cultivation of which talents and in which proportion the different talents should be cultivated (see Kant 1996f, 6:392, 445-447 but also see Sticker 2021a). Of particular interest is also Kant’s sense for human limits: Because of that, because of our fragility (“Gebrechlichkeit”), it cannot be our duty to attain perfection (*Ought* implies *Can!*: see, e.g., Kant 1998, A548/B576); it can only be our duty to strive after perfection, to make continuous progress towards it (see Kant 1996f, 6:446; see also Kant 2007a, 8:23). The limits of possible human knowledge (“Erkenntnis”) which Kant described in the *Critique of Pure Reason* are another reason to support the idea of principal limits to possible human perfection. One can also add the above points about epistemic dependency in testimony.

Kant’s point above about being useful to humanity is astonishingly utilitarian for him but I think this is not his main point. Much more important and crucial to him are the above mentioned theoretical and practical perfections. Why should one think we have such a duty to perfect ourselves? Kant describes the process of cultivation quite drastically as the move from animal to human (see Kant 1996f, 6:387, see also). He points out repeatedly that we have to be “worthy of humanity” (see Kant 1996f, 6:387), to further the ends and the worth of humanity “in our own person” and to thus show respect for humanity (see Kant 1996f, 6:392, 446). All this is certainly open to more than one interpretation and invites many requests for clarification and support by reasons. In the *Groundwork*, the cultivation of one’s talents (see Kant 1996b, 4:423) was more

---

14 See Kant 1996f, 6:446. – See also Sturm 2017 on the relation between self-consciousness and self-cultivation in Kant.

explicitly related to the categorical imperative, and their connection is much more in the foreground; perhaps the means-ends-version is the most promising version here. But still, the question remains whether and if yes, why we should cultivate our theoretical and practical talents. The normative basis for the idea of human perfection remains a “construction site” for the contemporary Kantian.

I do not intend to go into this in any more detail. What I mean to point out is the convergence of the aims of the two projects: enlightenment and perfection. The cultivation of our theoretical as well as practical abilities is common to both.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, human dignity and the dignity of humanity is mentioned as a reason in both cases (see Kant 1996a, 8:42 and Kant 1996f, 6: 387, 392, 446). Should we then conclude that enlightenment and perfection are two different sides of the same project? Or, alternatively: that for Kant talk about enlightenment and talk about perfection refer to the same project?

A lot speaks in favor of this even if Kant does not say much at all explicitly on the relation between the two. What one can say is that Kant goes into more detail and tries to offer more reasons to back up his views when writing on perfection than when presenting his views on enlightenment. Another difference has to do with the fact that the basic formal attitude of rational autonomy, thinking for oneself, is more in the foreground (see, e.g., Allison 2000) when he talks about enlightenment; when he talks about perfection the specific dimensions in which humans are expected to make progress are more in the foreground. But neither can be fully understood without the other. So, there is just one complex project for Kant though different aspects are treated from somewhat different perspectives. Enlightenment and perfection are not identical but they are

---

15 See also for this Kant 1900c, 117 where Kant explicitly connects “sapere aude” with the project of self-cultivation; see in contrast Guyer 2011, sec.III who sees Kantian perfectionism only as one of the good will and the autonomy of the will, and also, for instance, Mendelsohn 1974, who relates enlightenment to perfection while restricting it to theoretical skills.

closely related, and one cannot have one without the other.<sup>16</sup> So much for Kant's views, especially his views in *The Metaphysics of Morals*.

### 3. Perfection: Issues and Problems

Kant argues that because of basic and unchangeable human limitations we cannot ever attain full perfection but only strive after it. Because we cannot have a duty to do what we cannot do, we can only have a duty to strive after perfection. Perfection can be seen as a regulative ideal. This suggests or at least leaves open that the idea of perfection itself makes sense as an aim for humans. I want to argue that it does not if taken in a certain straightforward sense.

Let us take perfection as maximal goodness: Something is perfect just in case it could not be better (see also Kant 1992a, 2:27-35). The resulting notion of perfectionism differs from others which do not imply any maximization; I am only dealing with maximizing perfection here. It is helpful to distinguish between different senses of our term. Specific perfection is perfection in a specific respect. Perhaps a particular hammer could be considered perfect for dealing with a particular type of nails and particular kinds of hammering tasks (whereas it is not perfect for cutting one's finger nails). Similar for humans: Someone might be considered a perfect cook while not good at all at training horses. A second notion, universal perfection, builds on the notion of specific

---

16 On this particular claim, Rousseau, First could agree while taking a contrary position to Kant on the value of enlightenment and perfection. It is interesting to see how strongly Kant and Rousseau agree as well as disagree on some of the issues here. – Could one see one of these projects as a proper part of the other project? For the reasons mentioned above, I would deny this question. Thanks to Andrey Zilber for bringing up this question. – Is enlightenment more of a process and perfection more of a product or state? Thanks to Thomas Sturm for raising this question and the possibility of distinguishing the one from the other in this way. I think that there is both a process of “Vervollkommnung” (perfection as process) and the product or state of “Vollkommenheit” (perfection as product or state) – as there is both a process of “Aufklären” (to enlighten) and a product or state of “Aufgeklärtheit” (being enlightened). Different languages might express these differences differently. It is a big methodological question how much we can learn about the metaphysics of perfection and enlightenment from linguistic analysis. I cannot go more into this here.

perfection: perfection in all respects. One problem with this idea is that some properties are incompatible with each other: Can one be a perfect boxer and also a perfect violinist (see below)? Finally, there is the idea of absolute, non-relativized perfection (like the second idea, this one resonates with Descartes' idea of the *ens perfectissimum* in his 5<sup>th</sup> Meditation: see also in general Descartes 1907). Here one problem consists in lack of intelligibility. The pre-critical Kant appealed to the idea of a maximal degree of reality (see Kant 1992a, 2:30-33) but nowadays it seems harder than ever to explain more clearly what this could mean. So, let us just refer to specific perfection here and understand talk of perfection in this sense.

One problem with it has to do with the assumption that there is a maximum of goodness in the first place. Why assume that? There is no greatest number – so why should there be a maximally good musician, geologist, sumo wrestler, helper of the poor, or: autonomous reasoner (but see Kant 1992a, 2:32-33 here)? Could one not always do better? And even if there should be an upper bound – what reason would we then have to deny that perfection only approximates the limit without ever reaching it, and that every attainment has one possible attainment “next to it” that is closer to the limit? Additional serious problems arise for the idea of someone who knows everything, does everything morally good, appreciates all possible works of art, or is maximally rational. Can we make any sense of such ideas? One just has to try and will find the very idea is very dubitable. In the case of omniscience one also faces a threat of an infinite regress: whoever knows everything also knows that they know everything, and knows the latter, and so on.

Moreover, what if there are several specific perfections all worthy on their own but such that attaining one diminishes the success with respect to other perfections? Susan Wolf (see Wolf 1982) has argued that too much moral goodness damages other values in life. More generally, what if the perfection of one talent takes away from the perfection of other talents? That this can typically

happen seems quite realistic. So, perhaps we should rather go after being good enough in many ways than after being perfect in some or even all ways. Or perhaps we could excel at one or two things and just be “merely” good at everything else? Günther Patzig used to talk about T-knowledge – where the vertical stroke represents depth and expertise (perfection?) while the horizontal stroke represents breadth. One could also think about Π-knowledge (if one perfection only should not be enough). Thinking more about this the idea of perfection starts to turn more into the idea of an optimum, weighed in different dimensions, rather than the idea of a maximum (if the optimum does not count as a maximum of a higher order).

Do we lose anything if we give up on perfection? We can still hold on to the idea of the good (see, e.g., Aristotle 2009; see also Tugendhat 1984). We do not need to maximize in order to get to what is good enough (see, e.g., Simon 1983 or Slote 1989 and against this Hurka 1993); perhaps more of a good thing is not always better than less of it. When we are seriously engaged with some task, then we are typically trying to do justice to the task and are not obsessed with the abstract idea of maximal goodness.

And perhaps it could, in addition, even be a bad idea to pursue perfection? Is the best the enemy of the good, as one can hear often? Recent discussions about human enhancement (for instance, designer children<sup>17</sup>) raise at least serious moral questions about the acceptability of such things (see, e.g., Sandel 2007). One might reply that the problem here is not with the idea of maximal specific goodness but with something else. However, this reply would have to be made in the first place; so far, I do not see how one could make it convincingly. More generally, it seems to me that failure and lack of perfection is an essential part of the human condition and the lack of

---

17 Parents who push their children to extreme (academic, sportive, etc.) performances are a more common example these days. Thanks to a referee here.

failure would even impoverish life as such and make it worse.<sup>18</sup> Freely after Yogi Berra: If life were perfect, it wouldn't be.

So much against perfection, understood in a maximizing sense. Even if it seems in many passages that Kant adhered to the regulative ideal of maximizing perfection (see Kant 1900d, 27.1:470 (Collins, 1795)), we should, I think, try to read Kant more charitably: less as a maximizer focused on the best (see also Allison 2000, 42) and more as an author who focuses on the good and what is good enough.<sup>19</sup> That the duty to perfect oneself is an imperfect duty in the sense that it is not a duty to be maximally perfect strongly supports the latter reading.<sup>20</sup> All this entails replacing the notion of maximizing perfection as well as the corresponding notion of enlightenment by more “modest”, satisficing notions of enlightenment and perfection.<sup>21</sup> (I leave open the question whether being more modest about the aim amounts to the same as taking the

---

18 See, e.g., Baumann 2004. – Ironically, embracing imperfection can sometimes minimize it. The artist who is aware of his limits might push himself harder than he would otherwise have, given a more optimistic view of himself. Thanks to Michael Bishop who brought up this kind of question in discussion.

19 See, e.g., Timmermann 2018, 389-390 who argues that goodness is graded, according to Kant, while rightness is not. One can be less good than one might have been without therefore being in the wrong.

20 For different views on the notion of an imperfect duty in Kant, see, e.g., Walla 2015, Timmermann 2018, Biss forthcoming, and Sticker 2021a. Walla and Timmermann argue that imperfect duties are still stringent ones, according to Kant. Biss argues against a quantitative conception of moral perfection according to which we ought to do as many good deeds as possible and the more good deeds we do, the more perfect we are. The view defended above – that the duty to perfect oneself is not a duty to be maximally perfect – is compatible with all these views and is all I need here. - Thanks to Martin Sticker for comments on this and to a referee for pressing me on this.

21 Thanks to David Bakhurst for raising the question whether there could not be a lazy kind of contentment with what one has achieved, - a laziness in giving the verdict that what one has done is good enough. I think this is correct. There is indeed a difference between lazy satisficing and well justified satisficing. If I am concerned with some serious task but stop at a point where I could easily or realistically do better, then I am satisficing lazily and not trying hard (enough). To try seriously to do better in such a case does not mean that one is going for some maximum but rather that one is trying hard enough. What would count as ‘hard enough’ depends on the task and the circumstances of taking it on. Of course, all this only applies to tasks that are serious enough and worth taking on, not to trivial matters (like, e.g., getting all one's pencils in line on one's desk). The implications for education are easy to see. To push students towards impossible maxima can only backfire and produce frustration, alienation and underperformance. To encourage students to satisfice lazily does not take their potential seriously and does not do them justice. There is a third, good way between these two extremes: the way of modest, well justified satisficing proposed above.

ambitious aim merely as a regulative ideal<sup>22</sup>). This kind of modesty does not make the project of enlightenment less radical; rather, it gives it more bite. All the better for the project of enlightenment and human betterment.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For comments and discussions of this paper I am grateful to the participants at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Kantian Rationality Lab Conference (October 15-17, 2021) on “Kantian Rationality in the Project of the Enlightenment” at the Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Kaliningrad. In particular I want to thank David Bakhurst, Michael Bishop, Martin Sticker, Thomas Sturm, and Andrey Zilber

---

22 To think or say something of the form “I strive after X but the idea of X is bad” is somewhat Moore-paradoxical or close to it. This kind of attitude might just be irrational like the attitude expressed in “It’s raining but I do not believe it” or “It’s raining but I believe it’s not raining” (see Moore 1959, 175-176).

## References

- Allison, H.E. (2000) Kant's Conception of Enlightenment. In: M.D. Gedney (ed.) *The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*, Vol, 7: Modern Philosophy. Bowling Green: Philosophy Documentation Center, 35–44.
- Aristotle (2009) *The Nicomachean Ethics* (ed.: Lesley Brown; tr.: David Ross). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Baumann, P. (2004) Involvement and Detachment: A Paradox of Practical Reason. In: P. Baumann and M. Betzler (eds.) *Practical Conflicts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 244–261.
- Biss, M. (forthcoming) On Trying too Hard: a Kantian Interpretation of Misguided Moral Striving. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*.
- Descartes, R. (1907) *Meditationes de prima philosophia*. In: R. Descartes, *OEuvres de Descartes* (eds.: C. Adam and P. Tannery). Paris: Vrin 1907-1913 (reprint Paris 1964-1976), vol.VII.
- Guyer, P. (2011) Kantian Perfectionism. In: L. Jost and J. Wuerth (eds.) *Perfecting Virtue. New Essays on Kantian Ethics and Virtue Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 194–214.
- Hume, D. (1975) *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (ed.: Peter H. Nidditch). Oxford: Clarendon.
- Hurka, T. (1993) *Perfectionism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jeske, D. (1996) Perfection, Happiness, and Duties to Self. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 33, 263–276.

- Kant, I. (1992a) An Attempt at some Reflections on Optimism. In: I. Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770* (tr. and eds.: D. Walford, in collaboration with R. Meerbote). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 67-76.
- Kant, I. (1998) *Critique of Pure Reason* (tr. and eds.: P. Guyer and A.W. Wood). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. (2007a) Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim (tr.: A.W. Wood). In: I. Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education* (eds.: G. Zöllner and R.B. Louden). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 107-120.
- Kant, I. (1996a) An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment? In: I. Kant, *Practical Philosophy* (tr. and ed.: M.J. Gregor). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 11-22.
- Kant, I. (1996b) Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals. In: I. Kant, *Practical Philosophy* (tr. and ed.: M.J. Gregor). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 37-108.
- Kant, I. (1996c) What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking? In: I. Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology* (tr. and eds.: A.W. Wood and G. Di Giovanni). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-18.
- Kant, I. (1996d) Critique of Practical Reason In: I. Kant, *Practical Philosophy* (tr. and ed.: M.J. Gregor). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 133-271.
- Kant, I. (2000) *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (tr.: P. Guyer; eds.: P. Guyer and Eric Matthews). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. (1996e) Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason. In: I. Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology* (tr. and eds.: A.W. Wood and G. Di Giovanni). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 39-216.

- Kant, I. (1996f) The Metaphysics of Morals. In: I. Kant, *Practical Philosophy* (tr. and ed.: M.J. Gregor). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 353-603.
- Kant, I. (1996g) On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy. In: I. Kant, *Practical Philosophy* (tr. and ed.: M.J. Gregor). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 605-615.
- Kant, I. (1996h) The Conflict of the Faculties. In: I. Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology* (tr. and eds.: A.W. Wood and G. Di Giovanni). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 233-328.
- Kant, I. (2007b) Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View (tr. R.B. Louden). In: I. Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education* (eds.: G. Zöllner and R.B. Louden). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 231-429.
- Kant, I. (1992b) The Jäsche Logic. In: I. Kant, *Lectures on Logic* (tr. and ed.: J.M. Young). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 517-640.
- Kant, I. (1900a) *Handschriftlicher Nachlaß. Anthropologie*. In: I. Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften* ('Akademieausgabe'), Berlin: G. Reimer 1900ff., Vol. XV.
- Kant, I. (1900b) *Handschriftlicher Nachlaß. Logik*. In: Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften* ('Akademieausgabe'), Berlin: G. Reimer 1900ff., Vol. XVI.
- Kant, I. (1900c) *Handschriftlicher Nachlaß. Opus Postumum. Erste Hälfte*. In: I. Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften* ('Akademieausgabe'), Berlin: G. Reimer 1900ff., Vol. XXI.
- Kant, I. (2012) Anthropology Busolt 1788-1789 (tr.: A.W. Wood). In: I. Kant, *Lectures on Anthropology* (eds.: A.W. Wood and R.B. Louden), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 511-524.
- Kant, I. (1900d) *Vorlesungen über Moralphilosophie*. In: Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften* ('Akademieausgabe'), Berlin: G. Reimer 1900ff., Vol. XXVII.

- Kreimendahl, L. (2009) Kants vorkritisches Programm der Aufklärung. In: H.F. Klemme (ed.), *Kant und die Zukunft der europäischen Aufklärung*. Berlin etc.: de Gruyter, 124–142.
- Mendelssohn, M. (1974) Über die Frage: was heißt aufklären? In: E. Bahr (ed.), *Was ist Aufklärung? Thesen und Definitionen*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 3-8.
- Moore, G.E. (1959) Russell's Theory of Descriptions. In: G.E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers*. London/ New York: Allen & Unwin/ Macmillan, 151-195.
- Reid, T. (1863) *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense*. In: T. Reid, *The Works of Thomas Reid* (ed.: W. Hamilton), Edinburgh: MacLachlan and Stewart, vol. I, 93-211.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (2002) *Discourse on the Sciences and Arts (First Discourse) (1750)* (tr.: S. Dunn). In: J.-J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract and the First and Second Discourses* (ed.: S. Dunn). New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 43-68.
- Sandel, M.J. (2007) *The Case against Perfection. Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering*. Cambridge/MA: Belknap.
- Scholz, O.R. (2006) Aufklärung: Von der Erkenntnistheorie zur Politik – Das Beispiel Immanuel Kant. In: *Philosophiegeschichte und logische Analyse*, Vol. 9, Paderborn: mentis, 156–172.
- Schwaiger, C. (2001) Vollkommenheit als Moralprinzip bei Wolff, Baumgarten und Kant. In: M. Oberhausen (ed.), *Vernunftkritik und Aufklärung. Studien zur Philosophie Kants und seines Jahrhunderts*. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 317–328.
- Simon, H. (1983) *Reason in Human Affairs*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Slote, M.A. (1989) *Beyond Optimizing: A Study of Rational Choice*. Cambridge/ MA: Harvard University Press.

- Sticker, M. (2021a) Kant, Moral Overdemandingness and Self-scrutiny. *Noûs* 55, 293-316.
- Sticker, M. (2021b) Kant on Thinking for Oneself and with Others – the Ethical A Priori, Openness and Diversity, *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 55, 949-965.
- Sturm, T. (2017) Reines und empirisches Selbstbewusstsein in Kants Anthropologie: Das “Ich” und die rationale Charakterentwicklung. *Kant-Studien-Ergänzungshefte*, vol.197, 195-220.
- Timmermann, J. (2018) Autonomy, Progress and Virtue: Why Kant Has Nothing to Fear from the Overdemandingness Objection. *Kantian Review* 23, 379-397.
- Tugendhat, E. (1984) Antike und Moderne Ethik. In: E. Tugendhat, *Probleme der Ethik*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 33-56.
- Walla, A.P. (2015) Kant’s Moral Theory and Demandingness. In: *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 18, 731-743.
- Wolf, S. (1982) Moral Saints. *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, 419-439.
- Zinkin, Melissa (2021) Kant on Wonder as the Motive to Learn, *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 55, 921-934.