

Merritt, Melissa

Kant on Reflection and Virtue

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Reviewed by Colin McLear

In her book *Kant on Reflection and Virtue*, Melissa Merritt presents an extended defense of Kant's "reflective ideal" against the objection that it is "precious, hyper-deliberate and repugnantly moralistic" (2).¹ This defense is in part constituted by the articulation of a theory of cognitive virtue, which Merritt attributes to Kant. Merritt hopes that Kant's statement that we have a "duty to reflect" (e.g. A261/B317) may be mitigated within the context of such a virtue theory.² The requirement to reflect is not, as the "caricature" has it, that one must constantly step back and deliberate as to whether something is worth doing or accepting as true. Rather, "the requirement is to be met by putting one's cognitive capacities to use in the right way, or in the right spirit: reflection can be adverbial, and it is not essentially episodic...what drives the development of cognitive and moral character is an essentially outward-directed interest in knowing" (206), which Merritt identifies with Kant's conception of a "healthy human understanding." This interpretation, she argues, allows the Kantian reflective ideal to avoid being overly demanding, and it helps explain how some kinds of cognitive activity that are not deliberate (at least as that term is typically understood) might nevertheless be justified or "cognitively excellent" (205).

The book is clear and, rather unusually for Kant scholarship, a lively read. Much of Merritt's discussion is plausible and compelling. Just as much of Kant's moral theory may be fruitfully construed within a broader virtue-theoretic framework, so too do virtue-theoretic considerations enliven a treatment of his epistemology and theory of cognition. But despite these sympathies, and since I am here in the role of critic, I will try to bring out some aspects of

¹ All parenthetical page references to Merritt's work will be to Merritt, *Kant on Reflection and Virtue*, unless otherwise noted.

² All references to Kant are from the *Akademie Ausgabe*, with the first *Critique* cited by the standard A/B edition pagination, and the other works by volume and page. Where available, translations generally follow the Cambridge editions of the Works of Immanuel Kant, general editors Paul Guyer and Allen Wood.

Merritt's discussion that could use clarification or further discussion. I examine three elements of Merritt's position: (i) the view of reflection as divided into two basic senses, which occupies the lion's share of my comments; (ii) the conception of reason as fundamentally cognitive; (iii) the resolution of the demandingness problem.

1. Reflection-C & Reflection-N

Merritt construes Kant's conception of "reflection" (*Überlegung*, *Reflexion*, *reflexio*) as having two distinct meanings or sets of uses. The first is a constitutive sense—"reflection-c"—which is glossed as the (typically) "tacit handle on oneself as the source of a point of view" (18). This is in contrast to the normative sense—reflection-n—which is glossed in various ways. For example, as "caring about how one's point of view is constituted" (18), as the "manner in which one puts one's cognitive capacities to use *in concreto*" (77), as a "normative requirement on sound judgment" (81), and as "making use of one's cognitive capacities in the right way" (206). Merritt employs several distinct but interrelated arguments in the course of advocating for the distinction between the two forms of reflection. First, she argues that this distinction is needed to resolve a putative puzzle regarding Kant's conception of the difference between affect and passion. I did not find this a particularly convincing entryway into the view, so I'll put it to the side here.³ Second, she argues that it best connects several distinct but central uses Kant makes of the term "reflection". Third, she argues that it makes best sense of the manner in which we are "required" to reflect on judgment. However, in each of these two cases I think the arguments face some difficult challenges.

1.1 Unifying the Texts

When one canvasses the various uses Kant makes of "reflection" and its cognates in even just the critical period, it certainly seems plausible that he means more than one thing by the term. Indeed, one might despair of finding some common thread that unites all of the disparate uses he makes of the notion. Here are five ways that Kant's critical writings use the term "reflection" (*Überlegung*, *Reflexion*, *reflexio*), all but one of which Merritt discusses.

³ For comments on the problems raised by the account of affect and passion see Russell, this issue.

A. The activity characteristic of the discursive intellect generally:

the intellect intuits nothing but only reflects (4:288)

B. Activity connected with pure apperception:

consciousness of oneself (*apperceptio*) can be divided into that of reflection and that of apprehension. The first is a consciousness of understanding, pure apperception; the second a consciousness of inner sense, empirical apperception. (7:135, note)

C. A mental operation by which concepts are generated:

To reflect (to consider) [*Reflectiren* (Überlegen)], however, is to compare and to hold together given representations either with others or with one's faculty of cognition, in relation to a concept thereby made possible. (20:211)

[the] inner activity, (spontaneity), by means of which a concept (a thought) becomes possible, [is] reflection [*Reflexion*] (7:135, note)

D. A requirement of judgment:

we cannot and may not judge about anything without reflecting [*überlegen*] (*Logik Jäsche* 9:76; cf. Amphiboly, A261/B317)

E. A capacity we share with non-rational animals:

Reflecting [*Das Reflectiren*] (which goes on even in animals, although only instinctively, namely not in relation to a concept which is thereby to be attained but rather in relation to some inclination which is thereby to be determined) (20:211)

If Merritt is correct that Kant's various uses of "reflect" can be sorted into one of two fundamental kinds—viz. reflection-c or reflection-n, then this would at least show the usefulness of reading Kant in this way, whether or not it is what he intended. In Merritt's view (A)-(C) belong under reflection-c while (D) is indicative of reflection-n. She does not address the issue of (E), reflection in non-rational beings, and it is not clear how it can be incorporated into her view.

Below I first raise two sets of considerations that count against Merritt's unification of (A)-(C) via her account of reflection-c. I then go on to discuss some concerns with the account of reflection-n.

1.1.1 Comparison & Reflection

Anglophone interpreters have by and large been attracted to a reading of Kant's various uses of "reflection" as united by the activity of what Kant calls "comparison" (*Vergleichung*).⁴ Kant appeals to reflection in the comparison of representations to generate cognition at least as early as the *Inaugural Dissertation* (e.g. 2:394), but he makes clearest use of the notion of comparison in two key passages from the Amphiboly section of the first *Critique*.

The action through which I make the comparison of representations in general with the cognitive power in which they are situated, and through which I distinguish whether they are to be compared to one another as belonging to the pure understanding or to pure intuition, I call *transcendental reflection*. (A261/B317)

whether the things are identical or different, in agreement or in opposition, etc., cannot immediately be made out from the concepts themselves through mere comparison (*comparatio*), but rather only through the distinction of the kind of cognition to which they belong, by means of a transcendental reflection (*reflexio*). To be sure, one could therefore say that *logical reflection* is a mere comparison...(A262/B318)

⁴ Longuenesse *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*, ch. 5. takes this tack in her work, though as Merritt notes (Merritt, *Kant on Reflection and Virtue*, 35 note 37), it is unclear whether Longuenesse intends to support her reading primarily if not solely on the textual basis of A261-2/B317-18. Houston Smit, in "The Role of Reflection in Kant's Critique of Pure Reason," also appears to endorse a version of the comparison model, arguing that reflection is the representation of relations among one's representations (211), either with one another for the purpose of representing a form of judgment ("logical" reflection), or a form of cognition ("transcendental" reflection, 213).

In these passages Kant characterizes two notions of “reflection”—viz. logical and transcendental—in terms of the activity of comparing, respectively, a representation either with another representation or with the faculty from which it stems. Kant also consistently links reflection to the comparison of representations for the purpose of generating concepts in the logic and the metaphysics lectures, *reflexionen*, and in various other passages in the first *Critique* (see, e.g., *Logik Jäsche* 9:94; cf. R409, 15:165-6 (1772–1779?); *Metaphysik L₁*, 28:233-4 (1777-80); A86/B118; see also B1, A66/B91; *On a Discovery*, 8:222-3; see also the logic texts cited by Merritt, 51-2). Finally, Kant explicitly construes reflection in terms of the activity of comparison in the First Introduction to the third *Critique*:

To reflect (to consider) [*Reflectiren* (Überlegen)], however, is to compare and to hold together given representations either with others or with one’s faculty of cognition, in relation to a concept thereby made possible. (20:211)

The connection of reflection with comparison seems further supported by the fact that Kant indicates that there are rational (specifically, discursive) and non-rational forms of reflection in the *Critique of Judgment*, quoted above, in (E), where he attributes reflection to both (non-rational) animals and humans. Kant there glosses reflection as either that by which one attains a concept, or in the animal case, as that by which some inclination is “determined” [*bestimmt*]. Kant also elsewhere allows that animals may compare representations in order to explain their ability to discriminate similarities and differences amongst things (e.g. *Logik Jäsche* 9:64; *Logik Wien* 24:845-6 (c.1780/81)).⁵

Merritt is concerned to deny that Kant identifies “reflection” with the activity of comparison (35-6), construing it as rather only “involving” comparison (36). But given what Kant says above, one might wonder why it isn’t simplest to construe reflection as a kind of comparative activity. Reflection is the activity whereby one attends to one’s representations for the purpose of comparison, and where the exact relata of this comparative activity determine the

⁵ Kant does at times deny that animals are capable of reflection (e.g. *Anthropologie Friedländer* 25:474 (1775/76); *Anthropologie Mrongovious* 25:1319 (1784/85)), but the context makes clear that what Kant denies is the capacity of an animal to “reflect” in the sense of making a *reflective judgment* and thus subsuming an object (or a concept) under a concept.

exact nature of the reflection involved.⁶ Thus, in the case of logical reflection one is comparing one's representations for the purpose of generating a concept, in the case of transcendental reflection one compares one's representations with one's cognitive powers in order to determine their faculty of origin. In the case of non-rational reflection, an animal compares representations for the purpose of generating a desire or inclination to act in one way or another.

1.1.2 Reflection-C as (Pure) Apperception

Merritt allows that comparison is a "mode" of reflection, but specifically that it is a mode of reflection-c. If this were true then there would have to be a connection between comparative activity and thinking, since reflection-c is supposed to be present in any thinking whatsoever. Why think there is such a connection? Merritt relies heavily on Kant's *Anthropology* note that claims that

consciousness of oneself (*apperceptio*) can be divided into that of reflection [*Reflexion*] and that of apprehension. The first is a consciousness of understanding, pure apperception; the second a consciousness of inner sense, empirical apperception. (7:135, note)

According to Merritt, Kant *identifies* reflection and pure apperception in this passage. However, she concedes that this "remark does not unambiguously entail an identity between reflection and pure apperception" (27) but argues that the kind of reflective comparison of representations at work in generating concepts (i.e. "logical reflection") requires "the possibility of recognizing that *one's own thinking* is the source" of the unity of a concept (28; emphasis in original). Merritt takes this to mean that reflection is either identical with pure apperception or is merely "notionally" distinct from it.

If the text is ambiguous then why make the strong claim about identity? Recall that, among the various uses of reflection mentioned above were:

⁶ Note that this proffered view is meant to be distinct from the "received view" criticized in Merritt, "Varieties of Reflection in Kant's Logic." It does not take the controversial *Logik Jäsche* passage at §§5–6 9:93–5 as central, nor does it construe reflection as always aimed at concept generation, which would, in any case, fail to explain the sense in which non-rational animals might reflect.

- A. The activity characteristic of the discursive intellect generally
- B. Activity connected with pure apperception
- C. A condition of the possibility of concept generation

Merritt's view is that (A)-(C) are all versions of reflection-c, the (typically) "tacit handle on oneself as the source of a point of view" (18), which is always present in all thinking. (A) and (C) plausibly are captured by the comparative activity involved in concept generation that Kant discusses in the *Amphiboly* and in various logic texts. (A) is also plausibly connected to concept generation, since Kant's remark in the *Prolegomena* concerning the fact that the understanding does not intuit, "but only reflects," is presumably a remark about the understanding as a discursive faculty for cognition. Note, however, that Merritt's account is not alone here. The comparative account can also plausibly connect (A) and (C) in a similar manner.

However, it *is* a problem for Merritt that (A) and (C) are episodic, and thus certainly not "constitutive" in the sense of reflection-c, that is, as "always going on, by sheer default, inasmuch as one manages to think at all" (28). I take it that Merritt justifies her interpretation by means of a connection of (A) and (C) with the pure apperception of (B). We can capture this in the following inference:

1. Reflection is identical with pure apperception
2. Pure apperception is a constitutive condition for all thinking, and for all synthetic activity more generally
3. ∴ Reflection is a constitutive condition for all thinking, etc...

That's a valid argument, but I think there are good reasons for not accepting (at least without further defense) either premise (1) or (2).

Concerning the first premise, it seems to me that there is a straightforward alternative to the identification (or mere "notional" difference) of reflection with pure apperception that still accommodates *Anthropology* 7:135, which is that reflection is sufficient, though not necessary for (and thus not identical with) pure apperception. It is thus a form of being intellectually conscious of oneself even if one can be so self-conscious without reflecting.

But if reflection is merely sufficient rather than necessary for pure apperception then it is not the case that reflection is identical with pure apperception. Therefore it is not the case that, as Merritt holds, pure apperception is “a reflection that is always going on...inasmuch as one manages to think at all” (28). It is certainly true that reflection, in the senses at issue in the Amphiboly and logic lectures, might be *necessary* for thinking in so far as it is necessary for the grasp or acquisition of concepts by means of which one thinks (the material of thought as it were), but this does not mean that in thinking one also reflects, or that reflection is otherwise always occurring.

Moreover, even if we were to accept the first premise in the above argument, there is still a problem with the second. Kant famously says that the “I think” of pure apperception must merely *be able to* accompany all thinking (B131). However, premise 2 is a stronger claim. It says that in thinking (or related synthetic activities) one *is* purely apperceiving. Merritt needs the stronger claim to get the result that reflection-c occurs whenever thought occurs. While I am sympathetic to the position that pure apperception is a form of self-consciousness that is present in mental activity even with not explicitly signaled by the “I think,” I’d like to hear more about the connection (on its face it is much more obviously Fichtean than Kantian). What justifies the move from a possible apperception to actually apperceiving?

If Merritt fails to make the case that reflection is pure apperception, then she is unable to show that there is a genus of reflection that is constitutive of thinking or intellectual mental activity generally, and so a use of “reflection” that unites the various uses specified above. In particular, reflection as the activity of attending to one’s representations for the purpose of comparison, which is the paradigmatic form of reflection that Kant discusses in both his published work and his logic lectures, does not obviously connect with the constitutive sense of reflection advocated by Merritt.

What of the duty to reflect? Whether or not Kant thinks that reflection is something we are constitutively engaged in as thinkers, Merritt may well be correct that he regards reflection as something we ought to be doing. I turn to this issue next.

1.2 The Duty to Reflect

Merritt notes that there is a fair bit of textual evidence that Kant conceives of “reflection,” in some sense of that term, as a duty or requirement for judgment. This textual evidence, along with the fact that Kant typically discusses reflection in connection with combating what he calls “prejudice” forms the basis for her position that there is a distinctively normative sense of “reflection”—her “reflection-n”—at work in Kant’s critical writings. I’m not convinced that the textual evidence supports her claim, and I think there is another way of understanding the connection between reflection and prejudice that undermines a distinctively normative sense for “reflection.” Let’s take these points in turn.

Here are some central texts:⁷

From the *Logik Blomberg*:

To reflect is to compare something with the laws of the understanding. To investigate, however, is actually to reflect mediately. Concerning many things we can quite well cognize without investigation what is true, what false. But reflection, on the other hand, is always necessary for any judgment, and for the distinction of the true from the false, even if it be in general, or in a [particular] cognition, etc., in all cases indispensable. (24:161)

From the *Logik Jäsche*:

The cause of this deception is to be sought in the fact that subjective grounds are falsely held to be objective, due to a lack of reflection, which must precede all judging. (9:76)

[E]ven if we can accept some cognitions, e.g., immediately certain propositions, without investigating them, i.e., without examining the conditions of their truth, we still cannot and may not judge concerning anything without reflecting, i.e., without comparing a cognition with the power of cognition from which it is supposed to arise (sensibility or the understanding). (9:76)

From the Amphiboly of KrV:

⁷ For a full list see Merritt, 50-1.

[A]ll judgments, indeed all comparisons, require a reflection, i.e., a distinction of the cognitive power to which the given concepts belong. (A261/B317)

This transcendental reflection is a duty from which no one can escape if he would judge anything about things a priori. (A263/B319)

Merritt presents Kant's position in these texts as if he were saying that reflection is a requirement of all rational judging subjects as such (29, and note 22). But I think this is not so clear.

First, the requirement to reflect discussed in the Jäsche texts and in the Amphiboly is not a requirement to “reflect” *in all its senses*.⁸ Rather, Kant is concerned to show only that one must *transcendentally* reflect, which he glosses as the comparison of one's representations (or cognitions in particular) with their faculty of origin (or “power of cognition”). Transcendental reflection allows us to discern the characteristics objects would have if we had purely intellectual or conceptual cognition of them, which we can then compare with the characteristics of the objects we actually experience.⁹ According to Kant, such comparison exhibits four different discrepancies between the characteristics objects would have if cognized purely intellectually or conceptually and those cognized via our actual experience. Ignoring such discrepancy results in what Kant calls “a transcendental amphiboly, i.e., a confusion of the pure object of the understanding with the appearance” (A270/B326) or of the purely “logical” use of a concept with its “real” use in experience.

Second, in the Amphiboly the requirement to reflect is a conditional or hypothetical one. One must transcendently reflect *if* they would judge anything about things a priori. Why is this a requirement? As the discussion of the Amphiboly makes clear, Kant considers a priori judgment as subject to error—subject to “false pretenses of the pure understanding and illusions arising therefrom” (A268/B324)—which transcendental reflection helps to dispel. The metaphysician, who aims at giving a true account of reality via pure a priori reasoning, must thus engage in transcendental reflection or risk serious error in their theory, error that Kant illustrates

⁸ What about the *Blomberg Logik* and related texts? Kant is reported there and in the other lectures Merritt canvasses to talk of reflection as “comparison with laws of the understanding,” which seems rather close to transcendental reflection. Since the Amphiboly account is consistent with the *Blomberg Logik* and is a published work, I take it as having precedence.

⁹ See Pereboom, “Kant's Amphiboly,” 57 for this kind of account.

and criticizes in his examination of Leibniz/Leibnizian philosophical commitments in the latter part of the Amphiboly.

Moreover, Kant seems to construe the requirement to reflect in judgment as stemming from a requirement to reflect on all (logical) acts of comparison (A261/B317).¹⁰ He clearly does not mean here that one cannot actually judge a truth-functional content without engaging in reflection, or at least, this much seems clear from his claim that many judgments are “accepted out of habit” in that “no reflection preceded” them (A260/B316). Why then might transcendental reflection be required for *comparison*, and in a way that relates to judgment? I take Kant’s point here to be that without such reflection one always has the potential to fall into amphiboly, i.e. to make errors based on ambiguities concerning the concepts one uses. Since comparison is a condition of concept formation, and (objective) concepts are free of all ambiguity, any act of “mere” logical comparison in the formation of a concept is going to depend on transcendental reflection as to the source of the concept in either the intellect or in sensibility. This does not seem to me to be a new or different sense of “reflection” but rather an explication of why (transcendental) reflection is important.

If the texts themselves do not clearly point to a distinctively normative sense of “reflection” with respect to judgment, what about the fact that Kant links the need to (transcendentally) reflect with combating the three natural sources of prejudice: habit or custom (*Gewohnheit*), inclination (*Neigung*) and imitation (*Nachahmung*). All three prejudicial sources constitute principles for associating representations. They are thus ways of fixing the acceptance of a propositional content due to aspects of one’s sensibility or non-rational nature, rather than due to the exercise of one’s rational spontaneity or intellectual faculty. If Merritt is correct that Kant’s view is that prejudice is a case of unreflective judgment, then insofar as one should avoid prejudicial judgment, one would have a duty to reflect.

It is crucial to Merritt’s argument that a distinctive “normative” sense of reflection would be one according to which reflection is a condition of judging “well,” though one could still count as judging in the relevant sense without such reflection (29).¹¹ However, there are some

¹⁰ It is this section that is quoted almost verbatim in the *Jäsche Logik*, and which is largely the same in the other lectures as well.

¹¹ This is in keeping with the idea that something may be targeted for normative assessment even if it fails to meet the requisite norm. For discussion see Tolley, “Kant on the Nature of Logical Laws”; “Kant and the Normativity of Logic.”

reasons to doubt whether this is true. That is, there are reasons to think that Kant’s view is that one altogether *fails* to judge in the relevant sense when one does not reflect. Let me explain.

There is a consistent ambiguity in Kant’s use of the term ‘judgment’ (*Urteil*) (e.g. 7:146). He sometimes uses it to denote the act of contentful, truth-functional representation (what we might now describe as the grasp of a propositional content—call this “judgment_C”), and other times uses it to denote the *acceptance* of the truth of such a content—call this “judgment_A.”¹² Occasionally Kant will signal the distinction between content and acceptance by using the transitive verb ‘*beurteilen*’ and its nominative ‘*Beurteilung*’ for denoting the act of assertion or acceptance (e.g. CPR 5:57–8), and the nominative *Urteil* for denoting the content asserted. But Kant does not always do this. Nevertheless, the ambiguity here is often harmless, since it is typically the case that the grasp of a content involves some stance towards its truth, even if only to take its truth as “problematic” in the sense of being assertible though not asserted (see A74/B99-100).

Without reflection, one rationally “judges,” at most, only in the sense of grasping a truth-functional content—i.e. judgment_C. In order to *accept* a judgment (i.e. judge_A) in a way that counts as an exercise of one’s *rational* capacities, and thus one’s spontaneity, one must fix one’s acceptance of a content by virtue of epistemic and logical laws and not via associative mechanisms tied to sensibility, such as custom, inclination, or imitation. Content accepted via such mechanisms is merely the “mixed effect” (*vermischten Wirkung*) of sensible forces on the intellect, and Kant says that one “errs if one takes this mixed effect to be a judgment of the understanding” (R2244 16:283 (1773–78?); cf. A294/B350, *Logic Jäsche* 9:53-4, *Logik Wien* 24:824-5 (1780-2), R2142 16:250 (1776-1781)).

Hence, in the case of *irrational* acceptance, one is not really *acting* at all. In cases of prejudice, or more broadly, any case of “persuasion” (*Überredung*), the content (the judgment_C) is *being fixed* in one’s mind by sensible impulse rather than its being the case that one’s own intellectual activity (i.e. one’s reason) does the *fixing* (the acceptance) of the content.

¹² For discussion of Kant’s view of doxastic attitudes in general and notion of acceptance in particular see Chignell, “Belief in Kant.” One might worry that Kant does not adequately distinguish between predication and the acceptance or endorsement of the truth of what is thereby predicated. For such worries about figures in the Early Modern period see, e.g., Geach, “Ascriptivism”; Hylton, “The Nature of the Proposition and the Revolt Against Idealism”; Buroker, “Judgment and Predication in the Port-Royal Logic”; Owen, “Locke and Hume on Belief, Judgment and Assent.” For discussion of Kant see McLear, “Kant on Perceptual Content,” 106–12.

If I am right about the plausibility of an ambiguity in Kant's use of "judgment" then there is a problem when Merritt claims that good or "sound" judgment requires reflection, but that the very same judgment could occur, poorly, without such reflection. For example she says,

Kant's considered view is that one exercises cognitive agency badly in prejudice, but not that one fails to exercise cognitive agency altogether. Taking things to be a certain way is an exercise of cognitive agency, even if we don't deliberately reflect on the soundness of those views and the principles on which they rest. (44)

Here I think Merritt slides from judgment_C to judgment_A in her use of the notion of "taking things to be a certain way." I agree with Merritt that grasp of a truth-conditional content—a proposition—via the cognitive process of ordering representations in one consciousness is a kind of cognitive activity, and at least to that extent an exercise of the subject's "agency." This is the generation of a judgment_C. But, in contrast to Merritt, I take Kant's considered view to be that one indeed *fails* to exercise one's cognitive agency when one *accepts* a judgment_C due to sensible rather than rational conditions. As I take Kant's view, there is no stable target of normative assessment across cases where a judgment_C is sensibly rather than rationally accepted. Failure to meet the conditions of rational acceptance means that one does not judge_A rather than, as Merritt has it, that one simply judges_A poorly.

Thus I think neither the textual evidence nor the philosophical position relating reflection to prejudice conclusively supports Merritt's position that there is a distinctive normative sense of "reflect" at work in Kant's critical philosophy. In what follows I raise some questions for Merritt's treatment of reason, and ultimately the sense in which the reflective ideal is overly demanding.

2. Reason

Merritt construes reason as "a single cognitive capacity admitting of distinct theoretical and practical employments" (113). This is in service of her argument that there is a general form of cognitive normativity, which her account of healthy human understanding captures, and which admits of further specification into theoretical and practical uses. The general claim about reason

is controversial in at least two respects. First, it construes the practical use of reason as *cognitive*. Second, it construes reason as a single unified power or faculty. I want to briefly raise a few questions concerning both of these claims. I then raise a third issue that seems important even if we accept Merritt's interpretation of reason.

First, why think that reason is fundamentally a cognitive faculty? In order to answer this we need to know more about what it means to say that reason is "cognitive." Since it isn't clear what Kant means by cognition (figuring this out has now become its own cottage industry), and Merritt never explicitly articulates her conception of cognition, I'm speculating somewhat. But I take it that Merritt construes the cognitive as aiming at knowledge, and thus of reason as a unitary faculty of cognition as a faculty for acquiring knowledge, specifically, knowledge of objects. Knowledge of an object, in turn, requires that the object be "something that obtains independently of any particular effort to come to cognitive terms with it; 'the good' by Kant's lights, is the object of practical reason" (116, note 3). So theoretical reason is fundamentally a capacity for knowledge of phenomena, while practical reason is fundamentally a capacity for knowledge of the good, but both hold in common the fact that they are capacities for knowledge of an object in the above sense.

I think there are at least three problems with this interpretive approach. First, while Kant often talks of theoretical knowledge, theoretical and practical cognition, practical belief, and practical wisdom (*Weltweisheit*), to my knowledge he *never*, in his entire written corpus, uses the phrase "practical knowledge" (*praktische/s Wissen*). Second, while it seems true that the *intellect*, understood as the "higher" faculties of understanding, judgment, and reason, is a faculty of or for knowledge, it isn't clear to me either that the intellect is *fundamentally* a faculty for knowing, or that *reason*, in the sense at issue in the first two *Critiques*, is such a faculty. Moreover, in the first *Critique* Kant characterizes reason as a faculty for making inferences, and more broadly, the faculty by which rational beings achieve *understanding* via the grasp of the explanatory relations holding amongst various discrete bits of knowledge, rather than knowledge per se. Third, virtually all of the evidence presented by Merritt for the claim that reason is a single cognitive capacity with different "modes of knowing" (115) concerns Kant's discussion of *cognition*. But cognition is not knowledge (e.g. there can be false cognition), and so while we should all readily agree that Kant allows for practical *cognition*, this is not the same as practical knowledge, nor does the fact that theoretical and practical cognition are species of cognition entail that the

theoretical and practical uses of reason are both modes of *knowing* in a univocal sense of that term.

Concerning the second issue, of reason as a single unified faculty, while Merritt discusses various texts in which Kant speaks of reason as a single cognitive faculty (e.g. G 4:391; KpV 5:121), or of practical and theoretical reason as derived from a “common principle” (Axx), as Merritt further points out (e.g. 120), Kant neither explicitly states what such a common principle or unifying ground might be and also consistently treats the unity of reason as a problem in search of a solution. For example, Kant speaks in the *Groundwork* of the task of uncovering the “common principle” that unifies practical and speculative reason, a task that he has to postpone until he can give a “Critique of Pure Practical Reason” (G 4:391). But then, in the second *Critique*, he hopes merely of “being able *some day* to attain insight into the unity of the whole rational faculty (theoretical as well as practical) and to derive everything from one principle” (5:91; my emphasis).¹³ If the unity of theoretical and practical reason lies in their being basic modes of knowing, as Merritt suggests, then it is hard to see why Kant kept postponing saying so. Merritt rightly points out that one version of the “problem of the unity of reason” concerns the unification of the principles of nature with those of freedom, but this is not obviously what concerns Kant in the passages from the *Groundwork* or second *Critique* when he discusses the task of unifying the disparate uses of reason under one principle. So if we admit that Kant thought there was a task or problem requiring explanation—viz. how are the very different uses of *theoretical* and *practical* reason to be both construed as uses of a single faculty of *reason*—then it is unclear why we should accept Merritt’s view of reason as a faculty for knowledge.

Finally, even if one accepts that reason is fundamentally a cognitive power along roughly the lines that Merritt suggests, this does not entail that the two fundamental modes of knowing—viz. theoretical and practical—are *harmonious* with one another. Indeed, Kant briefly discusses the possibility of a “conflict of reason with itself” that would arise if theoretical and practical reason “were arranged merely side by side” (KpV 5:121). Perhaps Merritt intends to rule out this potential problem by means of the argument that (i) reason is a faculty of knowledge and (ii) knowledge is always consistent with knowledge (to use Engstrom’s phrase).¹⁴ But it would be

¹³ For discussion of these sorts of problems see Kleingeld, “Kant on the Unity of Theoretical and Practical Reason”; Williams, “Kant’s Account of Reason.”

¹⁴ See Engstrom, *The Form of Practical Knowledge*, 14.

good to hear more about why (ii) is true, especially since Kant seems to worry in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that it is not.

3. The Demands of Reflection

I want to close with a few questions surrounding the problem of the demandingness of Kant's reflective ideal and Merritt's solution to this problem. Merritt worries that if we take Kant seriously about the duty to reflect, this demand will be, if even plausible, far too onerous when taken as a demand to engage in discrete acts of reflection every time we judge. Merritt's solution is to construe the demand to reflect as a demand to be a certain kind of cognitive agent.

the requirement to reflect-n properly lodges at the level of character, rather than piecemeal over individual acts of judgment: the requirement is to take the appropriate interest in one's cognitive agency, where this interest governs cognitive activity globally.
(81)

We can see one clear advantage of Merritt's interpretation—the demand to reflect need not be construed as a demand to engage in an episodic activity of “stepping back” on the occasion of each and every judgment. We do not need to “step back” and deliberate every time we make a judgment or form a belief. But here's one worry: haven't we just traded one overly demanding conception for another? Merritt's interpretation saves the reflective agent from the task of near-constant deliberation but leaves such an agent with the perhaps equally demanding task of improving their cognitive virtue. This seems to be both as near-constant as the caricatured version of over reflection itself and just as difficult to achieve. For example, Merritt claims that

a central question that the reflective person bears in mind, and continually returns to, is: *What am I paying attention to, and why?* This is an essential part of what it is to take an interest in one's own cognitive agency (107; emphasis in original)

But asking this question, and having the right set of cognitively virtuous dispositions to understand what counts as a good answer (or set of answers) to this question sounds pretty

demanding! Indeed, it sounds, if not more, at least *as* demanding as the “precious, hyper-deliberate and repugnantly moralistic” caricature of the reflective ideal that Merritt seeks to replace.

Here’s another worry: since no actual person is perfectly cognitively virtuous, one can always raise the question, “Did I make this judgment in a cognitively virtuous manner?” (i.e. did it come about due to rational as opposed to merely natural causes). In asking such a question one’s rationality is open to doubt. It seems that the curative here would be engaging in an episode of reflective deliberation on the grounds of one’s judgment and the process(es) by which one acquired the belief. Now, to the extent that a cognitive agent is at all virtuous they should admit that they are not *perfectly* virtuous. So why isn’t it the case that every exercise of their cognitive skill isn’t also one for which they need to ask the question, “was this a virtuous exercise?” and thus one that requires (the demanding, precious, repugnantly moralistic, etc.) overt deliberation? But then we’re back to the old “caricature” of the overly-demanding requirement to reflect.

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