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Kant and the Education of the Human Race

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13. Kant and the Education of the Human Race

Man must develop his tendency towards *the good*. Providence has not placed goodness ready formed in him, but merely as a tendency and without the distinction of moral law. Man's duty is to improve himself; to cultivate his mind; and, when he finds himself going astray, to bring the moral law to bear upon himself. Upon reflection we shall find this very difficult. Hence, the greatest and most difficult problem to which man can devote himself is the problem of education.¹

Kant's commentators have for the most part disagreed. Despite this explicit claim, found in the introduction to Kant's lecture notes on education, Kant's interest in the problems of educating the human race, as he puts it at one point, has been generally ignored by Kantian scholars. Even those specifically interested in his philosophy of education have failed to see the importance of education within the Critical philosophy. Far from judging the issue of education the most difficult of Kantian problems, most of Kant's commentators have assigned this role to his epistemology, his metaphysics, his ethics, or even to his political theory.

The reasons for such unwarranted neglect are perhaps to be found, first in the fact that, while Kant's lectures on education provide one with part of his concept of education, in order to achieve a comprehensive perspective of his philosophy of education one must look to discussions that occur in such diverse places as his pieces on history, his lectures on anthropology, and *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, and, second, in the belief that either questions about education are conceptually unrewarding in principle, a view that a consideration of *The Republic* or *Emile* would tend to confound, or that Kant's attempts to deal with these questions were motivated by the pedagogic requirements of his professorship and are thus peripheral to his central intellectual concerns. After all, no one has argued that Kant's lectures on education are comparable in intellectual stature to *Emile*, despite Kant's admiration for that work, or to *The Republic*.

This essay, however, is an attempt to take Kant's own statement about education seriously, to determine through an analysis of the idea of education in a variety of his works, why the 'greatest and most difficult problem to which man can devote himself is the problem of education.' The answer to this question will, we believe, tell us much about Kant's philosophical anthropology, his ethics, his political theory, and his philosophy of religion, a gain of no little consequence and one that suggests that, far from being conceptually peripheral, the neglected philosophy of education might provide an *entree* into the heart of the Critical philosophy. Indeed, in the end, Kant's conception of education might be seen to be a suitable companion for both *Emile* and *The Republic*.

In one sense, of course, Kant's question is not what one would expect of an Enlightenment humanist, or at least the phrasing of the question is not what is to be expected. Without doubt, the humanist would see the educational programme of individuals and nations, indeed, in the grander sense, the human race, as a matter of preeminent intellectual concern. But what gives pause is not the fact that education is a great problem — this is a commonplace in the humanist literature of the eighteenth century inasmuch as education along with science and reason were the three great pillars which supported the humanist programme — but that it is the 'most difficult problem' to which human energies can turn. Why is this the case?

A first and quite general answer might be that the problem of educating both ourselves and others is our most difficult problem, precisely because it involves us in a consideration of all of the dimensions of personhood. In this sense the question or questions of education connect with Kant's central conceptual agenda of explicating the nature of persons, of developing a philosophical anthropology founded on an understanding of persons as simultaneously inhabiting two orders: the order of nature and the order of freedom. To a large extent, the fact that the Critical philosophy is in the broadest sense a philosophical anthropology has been ignored, as most scholarly attention has been focused on the epistemological, metaphysical or ethical dimensions of Kant's work. Such narrowly focused readings of Kant have, however, served to blur the centrality of the question of human nature within his work, a centrality that is evident even in the pre-Critical periods.

In both the *Logic* and in an important letter of 1793 to C.F. Stäudlin, Kant sets out his intellectual agenda, an agenda centering not on the usual three, but on four questions.

... the plan I prescribed for myself a long time ago calls for an examination of the field of pure philosophy with a view to solving three problems: (1) What can I know? (metaphysics). (2) What ought I do? (moral philosophy). (3) What may

I hope? (philosophy of religion). A fourth question ought to follow, finally: What is man (anthropology, a subject on which I have lectured for over twenty years).²

Aside from the fact that Kant here treats even the first question as metaphysical rather than epistemological, it is important to note that it is this outline, not Kant's after-the-fact reconstruction of his conceptual development, but the recounting of a plan 'prescribed ... a long time ago' which governed the development of the Critical philosophy. Moreover, all of the questions focus quite obviously on human nature — what can man know? what ought he to do? and for what may he hope? — with the fourth question, as Kant suggests, pulling together, as Kant attempts to do in the final part of his *Anthropology*, the somewhat disparate aspects of personhood that emerge from the answers to the previous questions.

Two letters, one to Moses Mendelssohn in 1766 and the other to J.S. Beck in 1791, corroborate the importance of human nature in Kant's thinking suggested by his reduction of philosophy to the famous four questions noted above. In the letter to Mendelssohn, Kant suggests that his central philosophical preoccupation is whether there is, or indeed, can ever be, sufficient data to be able to understand how 'the soul is present in the world....'

If, for the time being, we put aside arguments based on propriety or on the divine purposes and ask whether it is ever possible to attain such knowledge of the nature of the soul from our experience — a knowledge sufficient to inform us of the manner in which the soul is present in the universe, in relation both to matter and to beings of its own sort — we shall see whether *birth* ..., *life*, and *death* are matters we can ever hope to understand by means of reason.³

Kant is certainly interested in knowledge, but epistemology is cast here in the context of personhood in that it is knowledge of the 'nature of the soul,' its birth, life and death, which is Kant's real interest.

The letter to Beck in which Kant attempts to convince him to undertake the task of writing a summary of Kant's works, strikes a similar note of anthropological primacy. 'Now what can serve better for this and for a lifetime than investigating something that concerns the whole nature of man, especially if one has the hope of making some progress from time to time by a systematic effort of thought. Besides, the history of the world and of philosophy are tied up with this enterprise....'⁴

The centrality of human nature in Kant's conceptual agenda is even more apparent in the passage from the *Logic*, where, after listing the four questions of a 'cosmopolitan philosophy,' Kant notes that the first three are in fact really anthropological questions themselves.

The field of philosophy in this cosmopolitan sense may be reduced to the following questions:

1. What can I know?
2. What ought I to do?
3. What may I hope for?
4. What is man?

The first question is answered by *metaphysics*, the second by *morals*, the third by *religion*, and the fourth by *anthropology*. In the end, all may be related to the fourth.⁵

Thus, if one of Kant's self-described tasks was to develop a viable account of human personhood, it was natural that the question of education, educating the human race in the grand sense, a question that by its very nature forces one to raise first-order anthropological questions, would be properly described as the 'most difficult problem' to which one may turn.

But while such a general answer to our question provides a glimpse, perhaps even a sketch of the direction we must take, it is nonetheless incomplete. In order to arrive at a satisfactory account of why Kant views education as the most difficult of human problems we must essay something more precise; to wit, education is so demanding; first because its sources are so varied, second because its dimensions are so comprehensive, third because its driving force, reason, and (with reason) freedom are so demanding, and fourth because its ultimate outcomes are so laboriously and rarely won and so tenuously maintained.

First, the education of persons is our greatest problem, because the sources of such education are so varied and in some crucial senses so unsatisfactory. If we turn to the *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* where Kant provides a philosophical re-construction of the Genesis narrative of human creation and development, and to the lectures on philosophical anthropology, we can discover at least three educative sources. One is self-education, the process of discovery, experience, and reflection that is a part of the life of Everyman. Another is the education provided by others, and here Kant refers to both the formal instruction provided by the state — the subject of his lectures on education — and to the less formal, but equally formative, education arising from the social nature of human existence. Both the formal education of the state and the less formal self-education are deeply problematic in that, as Kant notes in *An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?*, their only chance of success lies in their inspiration and implementation, arising at the top of society in the form of enlightened rulers, something, all things considered and despite some historical

evidence to the contrary, that at best stretches credulity and at worst is patently absurd. Moreover, the state and the self as sources of education are also suspect because of their inability to discover a suitably uncorrupted model of what persons should be. As Kant despairs in *Anthropology*, 'But since he needs, for his moral education *good* men who must themselves have been educated for it, and since none of these are free from (innate or acquired corruption) the problem of moral education for our *species* remains unresolved in principle, and not merely in degree.'⁶ Where, queries Kant, do we find the appropriate teacher/saviour in such corrupted stock?

A third source of education is the learning 'from above,' learning enjoined by providence or God. This education is again enormously varied, but its main dimensions include the development of the good will, the perfect constitution based on the 'principle of freedom' and the ability to live without resort to war. In speaking of such divine education in the *Anthropology* Kant notes '... he expects it from a wisdom that is not *his*, but is yet the Idea of his own reason, an Idea that is impotent.... This education from above is salutary, but harsh and stern,'⁷ a description that conjoins all of the most unpleasant characteristics of schoolmaster and divinity.

But it is not simply the varied sources of education that make it the greatest problem, it is secondly the fact that the dimensions, the scope of education are so comprehensive. Not only must the education of persons embrace the pragmatic, the mastering of culture and sociability and technology, but it must also include the paradoxically much more straightforward and subtle epistemic dimension of personhood. In the straightforward sense much of this epistemic dimension is self-discovered — the spontaneous and largely intuitive understanding through the categories of how our senses and reason connect us, how they fit us to the world of space and time. But in the subtle sense much of epistemic education is extraordinarily difficult, difficult because of our seemingly inescapable desire for cognitive completion, for epistemic wholeness, for fathoming the entire character of the world, a desire that clashes so obviously with our limited cognitive abilities. The gap between epistemic longings and epistemic possibilities is one that education can do something, but ultimately nothing really satisfying, about. And thus our epistemic education is an education in the school of restraint and modest expectations.

Pragmatic and epistemic education are also joined by political education, learning the difficult art of fashioning institutions to accommodate our instinctive unsociability within at least the semblance of community, institutions that preserve the essentials of autonomy while yet giving appropriate place to order. Closely aligned to political learning is the

learning wrought by history and religion, learning that is intended to give us some sense both of our origins and our prospects, learning that, while suggesting that much of the human story is, to use Kant's description 'vice and folly,' also counsels hope that the mechanism of providence and redemptive purpose might yet triumph, at least collectively, if not individually.

And what of the individual? Is education something that is brought to bear only on the pragmatic and epistemic dimensions of the person? Hardly, for Kant holds that the collective education of our species can proceed only on the basis of the moral enlightenment of individuals, something that in itself might well give rise to educational despair. And such enlightenment, though the most crucial education conceivable, is also the most frequently botched. This becomes more understandable, and indeed tenable, once we are able to achieve some insight into what it was that Kant meant by genuine moral education. Essentially, it is the realization, difficult in attainment and maintenance, of how fundamentally warped our perspective, and hence our judgments, of the world really are. Though we might think we judge from the universal standpoint, from impartiality, and though we might believe that we include all our fellow beings within the moral community and accord their interests equality with our own, these beliefs are really delusions born of our egocentricity. As the second *Critique* puts it:

We find ... our nature as sensuous beings so characterized that the material of the faculty of desire (objects of the inclination ...) first presses upon us; and we find our pathologically determined self, although by its maxims it is wholly incapable of giving universal laws, striving to give its pretensions priority and to make them acceptable as first and original claims, just as if it were our entire self. This propensity to make the subjective the determining ground of the will in general can be called self-love; when it makes itself legislative and an unconditional practical principle, it can be called self-conceit.⁸

The nature of our moral life, if we can call it that, is to persistently and yet unknowingly mis-describe, to our advantage, the moral world. What occurs, according to Kant, is a reversal of the 'ethical order among the incentives of a free will,'⁹ where the incentives to action are determined by one's sensuous nature in accordance with the principle of self-love, rather than by one's moral nature in accordance with the moral law. Man 'reverses the moral order of the incentives when he adopts them into his maxim. He adopts ... the moral law along with the law of self-love; yet when he becomes aware that they cannot remain on a par with each other, but that one must be subordinated to the other as its supreme

condition, he makes the incentive of self-love and its inclinations the conditions of obedience to the moral law....'¹⁰ Moral education must deal then, not merely with what Kant calls our pathological self-love, but with our persistent self-deceit, with our 'tendency to deceive ... in the interpretation of the moral law.'¹¹ And it is these difficulties with moral education that lead us to the third reason why Kant believes that education is the greatest human problem, namely, the demanding character of reason and freedom, the two engines that power the educational machine.

In one sense it is not too much to claim that education is such an intractable problem, precisely because so much of it depends on something as variable as reason. This is not to suggest that reason, at least in principle, is incapable of such things, for as Kant reminds us in the *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*: 'Reason in a creature is a faculty of widening the rules and purposes of the use of all its powers far beyond natural instinct; it acknowledges no limits to its projects.'¹² Reason, and with reason freedom, have for Kant an objective character, an ability to stand outside of the conflicting perspectives generated by subjectivity, and to observe things as they 'are.'

Kant, however, is keenly alive to the immense difficulty involved in such an undertaking, even while arguing that reason must, at least in principle, possess such a character. For instance, in both the third *Critique* and in the *Anthropology*, Kant argues for what he terms the 'maxims of common human understanding, maxims that define human rationality.

Common human understanding ... is looked upon as the least we can expect from any one claiming the name of man.... By the name of *sensus communis* is to be understood the idea of a *public* sense, i.e. a critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account ... of the mode of representation of every one else, in order, *as it were* to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of mankind, and thereby avoid the illusion arising from subjective and personal conditions which could readily be taken for objective, an illusion that would exert a prejudicial influence upon its judgement. This is accomplished by weighing the judgement, not so much with the actual, as rather with the merely possible, position of everyone else, as the result of a mere abstraction from the limitations which continually affect our own estimate.¹³

From this idea of common human understanding Kant deduces three maxims. The first and third reflect the active role of reason in freeing one from tutelage to the opinions and beliefs of others, namely to think for

oneself and to think consistently. The second, however, focuses on reason's capacity to view the world from the objective perspective.

As to the second maxim ... this ... still indicates a man of *enlarged mind*: if he detaches himself from the subjective personal conditions of his judgement, which cramp the minds of so many others, and reflects upon his own judgement from a *universal standpoint* (which he can only determine by shifting his ground to the standpoint of others).¹⁴

This capacity of 'shifting his ground to the standpoint of others,' latent in most persons, involves the moral quality of objectivity, or as Kant calls it here, the 'idea of a *public sense*.' Rationality is thus not simply autonomous thought, or indeed coherently ordered thought, but thought that is possessed of cognitive empathy in that it is devoid of the illusions of subjectivity arising from contingent situations and reflects upon its own judgements from a 'universal standpoint.' Reason can, as it were, free us from the blinding bias of self-interest, and allow us to see the world as it objectively is. Autonomy is thus checked by objectivity. Or, seen in a slightly different way, autonomy and objectivity merge in the sense that the autonomy about which Kant speaks is the autonomy from the determination of one's actions by the principle of self-love, the autonomy which structures its judgements according to the universality of the moral law.

Persons then assume their foundational importance for Kant the Enlightenment humanist because of their wholly unique instantiation of freedom and reason, objectivity and morality. Together, freedom and reason are virtually unbounded, together, they can be emancipatory from self, others, and the natural world. Similarly, in the first *Critique*, freedom is described as having the power to 'pass beyond any and every specified limit,'¹⁵ in part because in the end it is the 'inner principle of the world.' Freedom and reason must, however, be joined with morality and objectivity, for the realization of genuine personhood. Indeed, it is freedom and reason that make morality in the sense of freely chosen conformity to the objectivity of the moral law possible. Only reason and freedom, properly exercised, can free persons from their cognitive and moral egocentricity — what Kant refers to as the 'maxim of self-love' — and allow them to see both the world and themselves from the most general and comprehensive, that is to say, from the most objective position available. Self-love — the 'propensity to make the subjective determining grounds of one's choice into an objective determining ground of the will in general'¹⁶ — is the main source of man's failure to become an end of absolute value, in that it is what renders moral

objectivity and moral autonomy impossible. Self-love, Kant argues, makes genuine thinking, genuine freedom, genuine objectivity — and hence genuine personhood — impossible, for it abrogates unprejudiced thought, enlarged thought, and consistent thought, the maxims of common human understanding, simultaneously. The possession of what Kant calls a 'public sense' the 'critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account ... of the mode of representation of every one else, in order ... to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of mankind ...'¹⁷ is impossible, for self-love destroys our ability to 'put ourselves in the position of everyone else' and enthrones rather than checks the illusions that arise from the 'subjective and personal conditions.' Only the moral law can 'exclude the influence of self-love from the highest principle'¹⁸ and check 'self-conceit' inasmuch as the 'idea of the moral deprives self-love of its influence and self-conceit of its delusion.'¹⁹ Reason and freedom thus provide at least the potential for the moral education that can lead to a 'goodness of heart.'²⁰

Reason, freedom, and morality, and the moral education of the race, together bring us to the final reason why education is our greatest problem, that is the ultimately tenuous character of the entire enterprise. What we might call the fragility of education derives from a number of sources, according to Kant. One lies in the fact that its goals, its ends, are so open-textured that we find ourselves in substantial perplexities about the strategies and the means that we should adopt to reach those ends. In his famous humanist essay 'What is Enlightenment?' Kant notes that the ideal character is one who has the courage to use his own understanding, the one who has left the tutelage of others:

Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason, but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another....²¹

He repeats this same description in the *Anthropology*:

The most important revelation within man is 'leaving the tutelage for which he himself is responsible.' Before revelation others did his thinking for him, and he merely imitated them or let them lead him by guide ropes. Now he risks walking forward with his own feet on the ground of experience, even if he wobbles along.²²

Read in this way, education is emancipation from the bondage of prejudice inflicted both by ourselves and by others; it is briefly, but not simply, the autonomous use of reason. Education moves us towards freedom, yet in doing so it resists any precise formulation of what freedom is.

Kant, however, as we have seen in the maxims of human understanding, does chart a more specific educational course in character-building, for there we are enjoined not just to think for ourselves, but to think consistently, logically, and, most crucially, from a universal perspective. Education then aims not simply at freedom as mere spontaneity, but at a freedom that accepts the generalized perspective and the inclusive moral community of the moral law.

A second source of the fragility of the educational project is its multi-variant and inter-connected character. Education for Kant involves not simply a mastery of the pragmatic and the epistemic, but equally of the political, historical, religious, and moral dimensions of life. And what is more it is not simply a mastery of these aspects of life successively, but in some sort of genuinely synthetic way. For instance, our sense of our genuine epistemic possibilities, what we can really know, must be developed, not only with respect to the common requirements of everyday living, but also with regard to the more abstract elements of political, historical, moral, and religious experience. Similarly, our understanding of what morality or practical reason means can be discovered only in the context of the historical and the political. Education is thus both demandingly theoretical and practical.

Third, education is more likely to fail than to succeed because of the decidedly ambiguous character of our race, on the one hand cognitively ambitious but epistemologically finite, driven by instincts but at the same time free to set ends, enjoined to perfection yet radically evil, desirous of certainty yet resigned to faith, responsible for creating ourselves yet needing divine assistance, unsocial yet destined to find and fulfill ourselves in the company of others. With such evenly balanced propensities, with such fragile possibilities, on what basis can we found optimism?

Consider, for instance, the problem of where, given this reading of human nature, we are to find the master teacher, the being who has come to self-consciousness, who has made himself in the world with these possibilities and who is nevertheless, to use Kant's phrase, 'free from corruption.' And if by chance we should find such a teacher, how can we be certain that the education of the race will not go wrong through transforming such a teacher into a saviour and thus abrogating the possibility of genuine autonomy?

Or consider again the problem of what Kant calls radical evil, a problem that increasingly comes to dominate his mature anthropology.

Is not such evil, resident according to Kant even in the best, an evil that leads us to pursue self-interest under the guise of moral inclusiveness and indeed benevolence and thus corrupts our characters at their foundation; is not such an evil enough to make the problem of education not just practically but theoretically insoluble? Does not such radical perversity lay waste to moral, religious, political and historical education alike, as well as render reason and freedom impotent?

Not quite, Kant would argue. And it is for this reason that Kant suggests that though education may be the most difficult of human problems it is not thereby an *insoluble* human problem. The answer, which comes properly hedged in all the usual scholarly qualifications, but is as well often put with startling directness, the answer to the final fragility of the educational enterprise is a reasoned reliance, a hope founded on both the powers of human reason and the mystery of divine grace.

Because human nature is, Kant believes, finally responsible for what we are, it can recognize the nature of our self-deceit and act at least to begin to change the foundations of our moral life. Human reason and freedom can together also work toward the establishment of what Kant describes as an ethical commonwealth, in which those who have left radical evil behind work to strengthen the new moral life in those who form the ethical community. Human reason can also engender hope: hope at the personal level that the moral life is possible for human persons; hope at the community level that the process of history is ultimately purposeful and that the traditional political community can work to secure justice and peace; and hope too, finally, at what perhaps is the level of the race, that that which Kant calls its destiny, freedom, can be obtained.

To speak in this fashion of the educational possibilities of reason and freedom is, however, to miss the second and equally crucial aspect of Kant's formula, for what powers reason toward self-discovery and the abandonment of self-interest, toward the establishment of an ethical commonwealth, and what sparks hope in the face of an often overwhelming temptation to moral despair is what Kant calls divine grace, which itself is a form of hope, a confidence that, in having done all that we can, in fulfilling the educational project to the best of our abilities, what remains unobtained will be provided. That hope with both its fragility and its possibilities, with its epistemological limitations and its metaphysical uncertainties ultimately makes education the 'greatest and most difficult problem to which man can devote himself....'

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Notes

- 1 I. Kant, *Education*, tr. A. Churton (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1960), 11.
- 2 I. Kant, *Kant: Philosophical Correspondence, 1759-99*, tr. A. Zweig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 205.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 57.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 179.
- 5 I. Kant, in L. Goldmann, *Immanuel Kant* (London: Left Books, 1971), 130.
- 6 I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, tr. M. Gregor (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 188.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 189.
- 8 I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, tr. L. Beck (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), 77.
- 9 I. Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, tr. T. Greene & H. Hudson (New York: Harper Row, 1960), 25.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 31-2.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 12 I. Kant, 'Idea for a Universal History,' *Immanuel Kant on History*, ed. L. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 13.
- 13 I. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, tr. J. Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), Pt. I, 151.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 152.
- 15 I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. N. Smith (London: MacMillan, 1929), A 317, B374.
- 16 Kant, *Practical Reason*, 77.
- 17 Kant, *Critique Judgement*, Pt. I, 151.
- 18 Kant, *Practical Reason*, 77.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 78.
- 20 Kant, *Idea*, 14.
- 21 Kant, 'What is Enlightenment?,' in *Immanuel Kant on History*, 3.
- 22 Kant, *Anthropology*, 97.