

Anastasia Berg
Research Statement

The central question that animates my research is how best to reconcile the possibility of freedom with our dependence on conditions that lie beyond our individual rational control and choice. Our care-providers, educators and the political communities into which we are born shape our emotions, preferences and character, which in turn guide the way we lead our lives. But if we have no control over the conditions in which our characters develop, how could we be said to be responsible for them?

My broadly Kantian perspective on the question grows out of my dissertation on Kant's practical philosophy. I argued there that, contrary to received opinion, Kant's practical philosophy provides us with the conceptual resources necessary to conceive of our emotions and character not as restrictions on human freedom, but rather as preconditions of its realization. My subsequent work aims to recover for a contemporary audience an account of freedom based in the German Idealist tradition that is centered on a special kind of rationality—one which fundamentally involves the acquisition of habits and whose paradigmatic manifestation is not deliberative choice but rather what I call 'non-voluntaristic practical agency' based on 'rational receptivity'. My research thus takes place at the intersection of two areas that I find to be insufficiently in dialogue with one another in contemporary philosophy: (1) the history of fundamental attempts to carve out what practical thinking as such is (especially those found in Kant and post-Kantian Idealism, but also in Aristotle, Spinoza, and Heidegger), and (2) various areas contemporary moral philosophy insofar as they wittingly or unwittingly presuppose some substantive but largely unquestioned conception of the nature of practical thought (as, for example, we find in much contemporary moral psychology, theory of practical reason, and meta-ethics).

My current and projected research divides into three parts. The first part grows out of my prior work on Kant's conception of moral motivation, feeling and character. Building on that account, this work seeks to provide the basis for a novel Kantian understanding of the kind of failure that moral evil is—namely, the failure to acquire a good, stable moral character. The second part draws on this interpretation of moral failure, and combines it with a Kantian understanding of practical self-consciousness, in order to contest contemporary accounts of the nature of moral self-opacity. The third part ties the forgoing strands together into an overarching conception of moral psychology—one that turns on a proper conception of the relation between moral habituation, education, and non-voluntaristic agency.

I. Rational Feeling, Character and Desire in Kant

Drawing directly on materials from my dissertation on freedom, feeling and character in Kant, the following articles are either forthcoming or under review at peer reviewed journals:

1. Kant on Moral Respect (*revise and resubmit at Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*)

Kant's account of the feeling of moral respect is often alleged to be paradoxical: on the one hand, moral action is supposed to be autonomous and, in particular, free of the mediation of any feeling; on the other hand, the subject's grasp of the law necessarily involves the feeling of moral respect. I argue that—contrary to the two most influential contemporary accounts—Kantian

moral respect is neither a mere secondary effect of the determination of the will on sensibility, nor a special kind of morally motivating feeling. It is rather itself nothing less than a *sui generis form of practical self-consciousness*—one that constitutes a person’s awareness of herself as a morally bound agent. As such, respect constitutes a capacity for receptive awareness of particular features of our environment insofar as they benefit and harm us as free and finite moral beings.

2. Kant and the Freedom to Do What you Want (*under review at Journal of the History of Philosophy*)

A moral agent does not act only from recognition of moral duty; often she acts to satisfy desires that are not intrinsically moral. Yet if the capacity to act freely is, as Kant insisted, the capacity to act from the recognition of principles, rather than simply because of some contingent feature of our psychology, how can an agent remain free while gratifying an errant desire? I contest the standard answer to this question, the so-called Incorporation Thesis, on both textual and philosophical grounds. First I argue that what renders a desire sensible or contingent is not its extra-rational, or natural source, but rather that it aims at a particular ends which the agent can try to realize by following merely instrumental principles. To this extent, I demonstrate, the opposition to morality is *internal* to practical reason. Second, I argue that the question of how agents can freely act on contingent desires is *not* that of how extra-rational desires can be incorporated into a principle that opposes the moral law but the question of how agents can be intelligibly thought to freely determine their own moral characters.

3. Evil or Only Immature? (*forthcoming in Rethinking Kant*, Edgar Valdez, ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2020))

According to Kant’s general account of radical evil, every evil action is grounded in evil character—a state of systematic, stable selfishness, which consists in an agent’s freely according her own sensible motives pride of place. This account of evil leaves, it seems, no room for Kant’s own account of the progressive degrees of evil action: frailty, impurity, and wickedness. A dismissal of these three grades of evil comes at a high exegetical price as well asXXXX: for they are essential to a properly Kantian account of moral development. I argue that we can resolve the apparent tension if we understand frailty and impurity as states of moral *immaturity*, a condition characteristic of an agent who is in the process of acquiring a stable moral character.

4. Book Project: I have begun a book project titled *Feeling and Freedom: Kant’s Account of Practical Self-Consciousness*—of which I intend to have a complete draft by the end of the final year of my current fellowship (June 2020). The aim of the project is to provide a systematic interpretation of Kant’s account of the significance of the acquisition of affective capacities for moral agency. A fundamental assumption that has guided the interpretation of Kant’s practical philosophy in the twentieth century is the thought that an agent who acts to satisfy a particular desire for a particular end, acts in order to satisfy a “natural”, impulse or urge—in other words, something that in a different context would be sufficient to determine movement *extra-rationally*. I argue that such a model of psychic alienation can be overcome, without lapsing into an implausible form of rationalism, on the basis of a novel understanding of Kant’s accounts of feeling, the so-called lower faculty of desire, and the constitution of moral character.

II. Moral Self-Knowledge and Self-Deceit

As part of a new research project on practical self-knowledge and self-opacity, the following articles are under review or in progress:

1. Kant on Moral Self-Opacity (*under review at Australasian Journal of Philosophy*)

It has been widely accepted that Kant holds the ‘Opacity Thesis,’ the claim that we cannot know the ultimate grounds of our actions. The Opacity Thesis is, however, at odds with Kant’s claim that I act from the always potentially conscious representation of principles of action and that, in particular, in acting morally I act in consciousness of the moral law’s determination of my will. Thus the Opacity Thesis threatens to render acting from duty impossible. I argue that, in order to diffuse this appearance of conflict, one needs to appreciate to things: (I) how a proper understanding of the character of Kant’s own concern with the ubiquity of moral self-opacity in no way implies an Opacity Thesis of the radically skeptical form standardly attributed to him (that is to say, the ubiquitous possibility of moral self-deception does not itself entail that moral self-knowledge is in principle impossible); (II) how moral self-opacity does not undermine the will’s practical self-consciousness but rather is born of it.

2. Self-Deception (*work in progress*)

Recent attempts to reconcile practical self-deception—our failure to acknowledge the principles of our own actions—with the essential self-consciousness of our rational faculties have sought to explain the phenomenon by reference to the sort of sensible gratification that ignorance can afford: be it the avoidance of pain (Marcus), or the maintenance of the pleasure of moral vanity (Longuenesse). I argue that this assimilates self-deception too closely to ordinary intentional action, and argue instead that self-deception is not sensibly motivated; its etiology is instead structural. We cannot represent ourselves in such cases as acting for the mere satisfaction of a desire for some particular end, for it belongs to the essence of such cases that there is an essential *indeterminacy* in the very concept of the end at which all such activity aims.

III. Contemporary Moral Psychology

The past decades have witnessed the emergence of work in contemporary theoretical philosophy that has sought to expand our understanding of rational cognition to encompass our receptive (perceptual) capacities and non-voluntaristic doxastic agency. (In this regard I am particularly interested in the work of Irad Kimhi, about whose new book I have written a forthcoming article titled “‘Language is Critical’: On Kimhi’s Radicalization of the Kantian Project.”) The goal of my new project is to explore an analogous expansion of our conception of what it is to be rational in the practical realm. To extend our conception of practical rationality beyond the ideas of practical deliberation and judgment requires attention to the nature of the acquisition of habits of feeling and action and their paradigmatic forms of realization. These are not acts of deliberative choice but rather forms of what I call non-voluntaristic practical agency based on rational receptivity. The articles mentioned below involve attempts to exhibit some of the ways in which a conception of practical rationality might be so extended.

1. The Emotions as Modes of Practical Self-Consciousness (*work in progress*)

Scientists and philosophers alike—when they turn to the task of accounting for the diverse and seemingly disparate features of what we commonly refer to when we speak of ‘emotions’—tend to reduce or assimilate emotions to other kinds of physical and mental states: physical feelings (pleasure and pain), beliefs/cognitions, value judgments, perceptions, etc. Such theories not only abandon the very attempt to provide a unified account of what emotion as such is, they also systematically neglect to appreciate the intimacy of the connection that obtains between emotion and action. Taking my cue from Kant, I offer an alternative account that seeks to do two things. First, it aspires to do full justice to the entire range of emotional phenomena, some limited portion of which each of the currently dominant philosophical approaches tends to privilege at the expense of others. Second, it doing so it seeks to illuminate the general tie between emotion and action throughout the range of such phenomena. What emerges from the ensuing account is that the emotions are forms of awareness of the actual or potential agreement or disagreement between their objects and our various capacities for perception, response and, above all, action.

2. Desire: Between Action and Passion (*forthcoming in Practical Reason*)

Tamar Schapiro has put her finger on an important difficulty in observing that desire has a seemingly paradoxical character: we are passive in relation to it, and yet it plays a distinctive role in our *self*-movement. I argue that the appearance of a difficulty here points to a fundamental inadequacy in contemporary conceptions of the nature of practical agency. I seek to show that the very idea that there is a paradox in this area to be resolved itself rests on a confusion. Desire’s apparent passivity may be traced to widespread underlying conception of rational activity according to which all genuinely practical activity has its source in modes of deliberation or voluntary action. Once we free ourselves from this assumption, it becomes possible to see that a proper account of the sense in which we do not choose our desires is fully consistent with a conception according to which desire itself is the expression of our capacity for spontaneous rational agency. Drawing on Aristotle’s understanding of the relation of passion to action, I argue that for rational embodied beings such as ourselves passion and action are not separable sources of motivation: our way of being practically receptive to features of the world in the paradigmatic case essentially expresses itself through activity.