

Anastasia Berg
Research Statement

The central question guiding my research is how best to understand the nature of our dependence on conditions that seemingly lie beyond our individual rational control and choice: our emotions, our character and other persons—be they caretakers, teachers or our fellow political subjects. My aim is to show that these forms of dependence need not be thought of as restrictions on human freedom. Instead I want to recover from the philosophical tradition and develop for a contemporary audience an account of freedom that is centered on a kind of rationality whose paradigmatic instantiation is not in calculation and choice but in what I call “rational receptivity.” My research interests lie therefore at the intersection of contemporary moral philosophy (metaethics, practical reason, and moral psychology) and the history of moral philosophy, especially Kant and post-Kantian German Idealism (but also Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, and Heidegger).

My current and foreseeable research is divided into three parts. (I) A development of my dissertation work: an interpretation of Kant’s account of moral motivation, feeling and character (II) A research project on practical self-knowledge and self-opacity in Kant, and (III) A research project in the philosophy of the emotions.

- I. Drawing directly on materials from my dissertation I am in the process of publishing the following three articles:

1. **Kant’s Feeling of Moral Respect as Practical Self-Consciousness** (*under review*)

Kant’s account of the feeling of moral respect has notoriously puzzled interpreters: 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 moral respect for Kant is neither, *pace* the ‘intellectualists’, a mere secondary effect on sensibility, nor, *pace* the ‘affectivists’, a particular kind of morally motivating feeling—even of a very special sort. It is instead a form of self-consciousness which constitutes the subject’s recognition of the moral law and thus of herself as a moral agent, i.e., one intrinsically bound by the moral law.

2. **The Freedom to Do Evil: A Critique of the Incorporation Thesis** (*under review*)

Kant’s account of freedom—whereby to be free is to determine oneself to act from a recognition of the laws of reason—offers a challenge to those wishing to explain how agents can freely choose to do evil, and therefore how they can be held responsible for acting badly. Henry Allison offered a canonical solution to this problem which he called “The Incorporation Thesis”: an agent is responsible for acting on contingent desire insofar as that agent has freely “incorporated” that desire into her principle of action by *deeming the desire a reason to act*. I argue that this widely accepted solution is philosophically untenable: as long as desire is understood as a brute fact, it cannot *itself* ever come to be considered as a *reason* to act. I then demonstrate that Allison’s interpretation is not exegetically supported. I conclude by offering an alternative reading of the passages he focuses on: the agent does not incorporate a particular desire into a particular maxim at all, but constitutes one’s character, i.e., one’s identity as a practical agent by subordinating the pursuit of all particular, material ends to the pursuit of moral, formal ends, or vice versa.

3. Evil or Only Immature? Reconciling Freedom and the Complexity of Moral Evil

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 freely giving sensible incentives absolute priority in action. This account of evil leaves, it seems, no room for Kant's own, important, account of the degrees of evil: frailty, impurity, and wickedness. Dismissing the grades of evil would exact a high price: among other things, these seem necessary to account for moral development. Dismissing Kant's account of evil character, however, would deprive Kant of the resources to account for how evil actions are free, and therefore imputable to their agents. I argue that we can resolve the apparent tension if we understand frailty and impurity as states of moral *immaturity*, the condition that precedes the acquisition of a stable moral character. I argue that Kant, who is often taken to reject the idea of moral *acquisition* out of hand, instead offers the resources to conceive of the acquisition of rational capacities in general, and of the acquisition of moral virtue in particular.

II. Moving beyond my dissertation I have started in the past year a project on moral self-knowledge in Kant. This is the first paper in this project:

1. "Practical Reason in Kant: Self-Conscious or Self-Opaque?"

Most interpreters attribute to Kant the claim that we can never know whether actions, even our own, are performed merely in accordance with the moral law or from it and that therefore we can never know whether our actions are merely legal or have genuine moral worth. This claim, however, not only threatens skepticism about moral knowledge and therefore the possibility of morally worthy action, but seems to fly in the face of Kant's philosophical teaching concerning our rational capacities and in particular the will: namely, that they are essentially *self-conscious*. I evaluate Kant's so-called 'self-opacity' thesis and demonstrate that it applies *asymmetrically* to so-called good and bad cases: while it is true that when I act from the motive of self-love I may not know that I am not acting from the moral law, it does not follow that when I do act from the moral law, I do not know that I do. Thus I demonstrate that acknowledging the possibility of being deluded about one's moral motivation need not lead to skepticism and in particular does not threaten our ability to know what the right thing to do is and to know that one is acting from such awareness. Second, we see that far from undermining the self-consciousness of practical reason, the self-opacity characteristic of bad action is not only consistent with self-consciousness, but is born of it.

Further developments of the project will concern practical concepts, practical receptivity, and the relation between theoretical and practical cognition.

III. Contemporary Philosophy

I think that we stand to benefit from recovering insights from the philosophical tradition and reintroducing them into contemporary debates. My primary sources of inspiration here are Aristotle, Spinoza, Kant and Heidegger but I do not intend the work as an interpretation of their work. This is the first paper in this project:

1. The Emotions as Modes of Practical Self-Consciousness

The study of the emotions has enjoyed a resurgence in philosophy as well as in the cognitive sciences. This dual disciplinary interest reflects the nature of the subject matter—emotions are very much like Descartes's pineal gland, the place mind and body most closely, but also most mysteriously, interact. In attempting to account for their diverse and elusive features, scientists and philosophers alike have traditionally reduced, assimilated or analogized emotions to other kinds of physical and mental states: feelings, beliefs/cognitions, value judgments, and perceptions. However, as has been widely noted, each theory seems to miss an important aspect of the phenomena in question. Moreover, what is less noted is that all theories neglect to appreciate the close connection between emotion and action. Taking a cue from Kant, I offer an alternative account which both captures what is promising in each of the dominant philosophical approaches as well as secures the close link between emotion and action. I propose that emotions are constituted by our awareness of the agreement and disagreement between the exercise of our various capacities—primarily, our capacity to act—and the world around us. Emotions therefore do not motivate action, but are a form of self-consciousness which constitutes the subject's various modes of recognition of herself as a vulnerable, non-self-sufficient agent: an agent that acts but is also acted upon—dependent on the cooperation (and so sensitive to the hindrance) of her environment in the pursuit of her ends.

This is the first step in a broader project that seeks to introduce a new anti-sentimentalist account of the significance of emotions in moral life. I hope this to be the basis of a book.

