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Melissa Merritt: “Kant on Reflection and Virtue”, Cambridge University Press, 2018

Kant claims that every judgement requires reflection or deliberation (*Überlegung*) (A/B: 260-1/316-7), and such reflection is supposedly a duty (A/B: 263/319). This seems absurd, as it lends itself to all kinds of intellectualist caricatures of the conscientious Kantian who would constantly have to engage in long-winded thought processes before she makes even the simplest of judgements. As Merritt phrases it: We would be “forever poised to step back from the exigencies of judgment and action” (206). Such a caricature might remind one of stereotypes frequently associated with philosophers and those who excel in theoretical activities, but much less so in practical pursuits. (A great recent example from popular culture is the philosopher Chidi Anagonye in the TV show the *Good Place*). In her book, Merritt argues that whilst “Kant accords supreme value to being rationally reflective” (2), we should interpret Kant’s claims about reflection in ways that avoid any caricature and overintellectualizing.

Merritt’s book explores the relation between Kant’s emphasis on reflection and his conception of virtue and theory of judgement and cognition. It is textually well-informed and tightly argued and will be of interest to Kant scholars working on Kant’s conception of judgement, reflection, deliberation and rationality in general. It does also contain a number of insights into the relation between practical and theoretical cognition and into Kant’s conception of virtue, though Merritt’s discussion of the latter is more speculative than the rest of her book. The main idea of her book is that the requirement to reflect is already satisfied in a good use of one’s rational capacities and does not require additional intellectual means or procedures, such as introspection. Merritt sometimes refers to this as an “adverbial” model as opposed to an episodic one. In her adverbial model reflection is a way of using one’s rational capacities well when judging, not an additional process on top of judgements that is episodically realized at specific points in time. That every judgement requires reflection then should be understood as the requirement to cultivate one’s rational capacities and use them well every time one judges. Kant’s prime example for lack of such a good use is prejudice (29). Avoiding prejudiced thinking might still be challenging at times, but is far from intellectual overdemanding and it does not require that we become any kind of caricature.

According to Merritt, Kant’s term for cultivated rational capacities is “healthy understanding”. In the first part of her book, Merritt argues that healthy understanding requires standards or guiding principles and that these standards are the *three maxims of healthy human*

understanding, which outline the unprejudiced way of thinking. The first maxim (Think for yourself) is supposed to prevent intellectual passivity, the second (Think in the position of everyone else) is supposed to prevent logical egoism and the third (Think consistently) is a combination of the other two. The reflective person is not the person who constantly steps back from everything they think or do, but rather the person whose thinking is (often tacitly) guided by these maxims.

Merritt believes that these maxims constitute “*general requirements on common human understanding, requirements that hold regardless of whether the thought at issue is theoretical (...) or practical*” (65-6). She thus needs to tell a unified story of the good use of cognitive capacities. She does this in the second part of her book. She first argues that “*reason is a single cognitive capacity admitting of distinct theoretical and practical employment*” (113) and that both of these employments yield cognitions. She then aims to establish two theses: Firstly, the specification thesis: “that moral virtue is general cognitive virtue inflected for the specifically practical use of cognitive capacities” (113), and the skill thesis, according to which virtue is a so-called “free skill”. These two theses are supposed to exegetically vindicate and spell out the idea that Kant’s concern with reflection is really a concern for the cultivation of our rational capacities.

According to the *specification thesis*, the most general cognitive virtue is healthy understanding and moral virtue is a specification thereof. Merritt is careful to note that her claim that moral virtue depends on and is a specification of general cognitive virtue is a reconstruction, since Kant himself only ever speaks of *moral* virtue, never of cognitive virtue. Furthermore, she argues that it has been neglected in the literature that virtue for Kant is a type of *skill (Fertigkeit)*, namely a *free* skill. Skill is practical intelligence concretely embedded as a disposition for actions. Free skills are skills that are not necessitating habits but rather involve “certain consciousness of principles” (177). Certain skills, such as the cognitive virtue of healthy understanding, have reflection embedded within their exercise. For spelling out in more detail what this skill model and the duty to cultivate certain skills means specifically for *moral* virtue, Merritt directs our attention to the *Doctrine of Virtue’s* aesthetic preconditions: “the determinacy of a broader commitment to morality can only keep pace with the extent to which one has cultivated the raw resources needed to act in a way that concretely honors or instances this commitment” (199-200). Mentioned raw resources are the aesthetic preconditions. Merritt’s discussion of these preconditions is one of the weaker aspects of her book, as she hardly engages with any secondary literature on the aesthetic preconditions and this makes it

difficult to assess how her reading relates to and compares with alternative approaches to the aesthetic preconditions – an intriguing and puzzling aspect of Kant’s work that has recently seen quite a bit of attention. This part of the book felt somewhat shoehorned in and inessential to the otherwise cogent main argument.

Before I turn to more criticism, let me point out two virtues of Merritt’s book: Firstly, Merritt’s writing is extremely lucid. I found it much easier to follow her argument than is the case for many comparable exegetical works that sometimes get lost in the plenitude of textual material and in its various historical sources. Merritt organizes her material extremely well. Secondly, it is exemplary how aware Merritt is of the different statuses of the sources she works with. She draws on many lecture notes from various stages of Kant’s work, and she carefully seeks to verify and authenticate passages from lecture notes in Kant’s handwritten remarks to ensure that she is discussing Kant’s authentic views as opposed to corruptions or additions introduced by those who copied and edited the lecture notes. This is exemplary, and I wish that more Kant scholars and Kantians would be as conscientious.

Let me close with two critical remarks: Firstly, the way Kant phrases the second maxim of healthy understanding (taking “account (*a priori*) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought” by “holding one’s judgement up not so much to the actual as to the merely possible judgements of others, and putting oneself in the position of everyone else” V:293.32-294.3) strongly suggests an *episodic* understanding, not an adverbial one, as Merritt assumes. The maxim asks us to *do* something and to engage in cognitive procedures (taking account, comparing one’s judgement with those of others, and putting oneself in the position of others). In fact, comparing one’s judgements to others’ *possible* judgements and putting oneself in *everyone’s* position does sound extremely challenging. This maxim does not lend itself easily to the deflationary adverbial reading of the requirement to reflect that Merritt proposes. Merritt interprets the maxim as being concerned with “communicability” (72), but the way Kant himself phrases this maxim strongly suggests a (very demanding and onerous) episodic reading. Merritt might be right that healthy understanding is our most important virtue and to be cultivated and that the three maxims are its guiding principles – and yet, the duty to reflect might be implausibly difficult and require frequent episodes of stepping back, because one of these maxims can only be satisfied via challenging procedures that agents have to perform in addition to the judgement itself.

Secondly, whilst I think that much of what Merritt says about judgement and reflection and about Kant's theoretical philosophy is very insightful, I am less convinced about some of her claims concerning his practical philosophy. It becomes apparent in ch.5 that she bases her reading of how good judgement plays out for practical cognition on a contentious interpretation of Kant's ethics that she does not argue for sufficiently. According to Merritt, Kant's ethics is chiefly concerned with the value of and respect for humanity. The reader will be left wondering what the roles of universalization tests and contradictions in thought and willing are on this picture. In addition, it is striking that when Kant announces in the *Groundwork* that his ethics moves from the common rational cognition of duty to a philosophical systematization and vindication thereof, he does not mention any of the three maxims of healthy understanding. These maxims come up in places such as the *Anthropology* and Third Critique. In the *Groundwork* and Second Critique, Kant's systematization of common human reason is focused on the authority of morality and universalization as an ethical criterion, not on the three maxims. Obviously, there is some overlap, for instance, between the third maxim that requires to think consistently and universalization tests. Yet, Kant does not, as we would expect following Merritt's reading, systematize and vindicate the three maxims of healthy understanding in his foundational ethical writings. Instead, Kant is here concerned with the unconditionality and universality of morality, and specifically with ways to reason about morality based on the criterion of universalizability that philosophers can uncover in the common rational cognition of duty (see especially *Groundwork* I). If Merritt were right that above all Kant wants us to cultivate our rational capacities in the form of the three maxims of healthy understanding, then why would Kant in the part of his oeuvre that is most immediately concerned with common human reason and its role for philosophical theorizing fail to mention the supposedly three highest principles of reasoning that we can uncover as commitments in the ordinary use of reason? Rather, it seems that Merritt's interpretation does not capture what Kant thinks is important about the common cognition of *duty*, and how he actually proceeds in his systematization of the practical side of common human reason.

There might be important differences between practical and theoretical cognition and their underlying principles. It would be a fruitful venue for further investigation to work out whether, according to Kant, there is really one set of principles or maxims that is to guide theoretical and practical judgement, or whether there are significant differences between our theoretical and practical judgments that require quite distinct principles of judgment and distinct virtues as well as different philosophical approaches to systematize and vindicate.