

Wild chimeras: Enthusiasm and intellectual virtue in Kant

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Abstract

Kant typically is not identified with the tradition of virtue epistemology. Although he may not be a virtue epistemologist in a strict sense, I suggest that intellectual virtues and vices play a key role in his epistemology. Specifically, Kant identifies a serious intellectual vice that threatens to undermine reason, namely enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*). Enthusiasts become so enamored with their own thinking that they refuse to subject reason to self-critique. The particular danger of enthusiasm is that reason colludes in its own destruction: Enthusiasm occurs when self-conceit and reason's desire to transcend its boundaries mutually reinforce each other. I conclude by sketching an account of Kantian intellectual virtue that is consistent with Kantian moral virtue.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Kant typically is not associated with the tradition of virtue epistemology.¹ Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Hume, Reid, al-Kindī, al-Fārabi, and Avicenna have all been identified as historical precursors to contemporary debates in the field.² It may seem that Kant is rightly left off this list: Kant appears to have no discussion of intellectual virtues or vices.³ Yet it would be inaccurate to claim that Kant had no interest at all in the normative aspects of knowledge and belief.⁴ The *Lectures on Logic* contain extensive discussions on judging well and combating prejudice in thinking (Blomberg 24:159–164; Vienna 24:863–879; Dohna-Wunlacken 24:738–742; Jäsche 9:75–81).⁵ Kant also explicitly claims that the cultivation of virtue requires the cultivation of our cognitive abilities (6:445).⁶

Although Kant does not present his epistemology as virtue epistemology, I will argue that intellectual virtue and vice are central concerns for him. Specifically, I will argue that at the heart of Kant's epistemology is a specific and serious intellectual vice, namely, enthusiasm. Kant warns against the dangers of enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*) throughout his work, but the exact nature of his criticism is not obvious. Sometimes Kant simply charges someone or something with enthusiasm as though the seriousness of the charge speaks for itself (2:221, 6:114, 7:132). Determining

what is wrong with enthusiasm is complicated given (i) the apparent distinction Kant makes between different kinds of enthusiasm and (ii) the fact that Kant discusses enthusiasm across several works. Here I will focus on enthusiasm as it appears in the theoretical contexts and argue that enthusiasm occurs when we become too enamored with our own thinking.⁷ As a result, enthusiasts refuse to subject reason to self-critique and become impervious to the reason of others. For Kant, enthusiasm presents a serious danger because it is an easy pitfall on the path of enlightenment. Becoming enlightened requires us to think for ourselves, but thinking for ourselves can easily lead us to enthusiasm if we think without the proper discipline.⁸ The particularly pernicious danger of enthusiasm is that reason colludes in its own destruction. Enthusiasm occurs when self-conceit and reason's desire to transcend its boundaries mutually reinforce each other to the point where reason abandons its own rules.

The paper proceeds as follows: I first explain some of the difficulties with Kant's terminology and briefly situate his discussion of enthusiasm in the wider historical context. I then try to identify what Kant thinks *Schwärmerei* is. In Section 4, I provide a detailed discussion of Kant's favorite example of an enthusiast: Emmanuel Swedenborg from *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*. Kant's treatment of Swedenborg helps illustrate how the enthusiast goes wrong. I then argue that Kant thinks of enthusiasm as an intellectual vice rather than merely a mistake or a mental illness. I conclude by sketching an account of intellectual virtue that is consistent with Kant's account of moral virtue.

2 | SCHWÄRMEREI AND ENTHUSIASMUS

It is important to note that Kant uses two different terms both of which are translated as "enthusiasm:" *Schwärmerei* and *Enthusiasmus*.⁹ There are difficulties making the difference between the two explicit as well as difficulties defining each term. Additionally, sometimes in Kant's work, the distinction between the two enthusiasms is blurry.¹⁰ For example, one of the causes of *Enthusiasmus* is the idea of freedom. The French have an "infectious spirit of freedom" that "causes an enthusiasm" (*Enthusiasmus*) (7:314).¹¹ Yet in *Observations*, the "fervor for freedom" causes *Schwärmerei* rather than *Enthusiasmus* (2:221). Given that the concept of enthusiasm was contested during the German Enlightenment, we should perhaps not be surprised to encounter similar difficulties fixing its meaning in Kant's works.¹²

In spite of the occasional fuzziness between the two, one thing that does seem clear is that Kant is usually far more critical of *Schwärmerei* than *Enthusiasmus*. The clearest definition of *Enthusiasmus* comes in the third *Critique* where Kant describes it as "the idea of the good with affect" (5:272).¹³ *Enthusiasmus* seems to be an exhilarating experience associated with our awareness of the possibility of morality and other noble ideals. In the third *Critique* where he offers this definition, Kant classifies *Enthusiasmus* as an affect and contrasts it with the passion of *Schwärmerei* (5:275). Whereas *Enthusiasmus* is a thrilling feeling that arises seemingly in response to certain noble ideals (Kant often names freedom, patriotism, and friendship as examples), *Schwärmerei* is a "delusion of being able to see something beyond the bounds of all sensibility" and a "disease that destroys" the understanding (5:575). As Clewis, Shell, Sorensen, Zuckert, and Kneller have argued, Kant's views about the value of *Enthusiasmus* are mixed and require further clarification. Kant sometimes praises *Enthusiasmus* and sometimes warns against it.¹⁴ Because I am interested in his criticisms, I will leave *Enthusiasmus* aside and focus on *Schwärmerei*.

3 | THE PROBLEM WITH SCHWÄRMEREI

Even though Kant spends more time talking about *Schwärmerei* than he does talking about *Enthusiasmus*, less scholarly attention has been paid to his worries about the former.¹⁵ My aim in this section is to try to reconstruct more precisely what *Schwärmerei* is. Because I am primarily interested in the normative aspects of Kant's epistemology, I will largely leave aside both religious and moral enthusiasm and focus instead on what Zuckert calls "theoretical" enthusiasm (2010, 297). The work that I do in this section will necessarily be reconstructive because Kant does not provide a systematic treatment of enthusiasm. I will rely on a variety of passages across the corpus for support.¹⁶

For Kant, there seem to be two ways enthusiasm manifests. First, enthusiasts mistakenly take an appearance, ideal, or imagining to be real. Second, enthusiasts believe they can sense or know things to which they have no substantive epistemic access.¹⁷

With regard to the first, Kant claims that enthusiasm consists in “taking the appearances of inner sense for external appearances, that is, taking imaginings for sensations” (7:161). One of the examples Kant uses to illustrate is intense self-observation: a “methodical compilation of the perceptions formed in us” that leads to “enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*) and madness” (7:132). The danger, as Kant explains, is that we begin to “make supposed discoveries of what we ourselves have carried into ourselves” (7:133). Self-observation of this kind tries to split the self into a subject and an observer. The observer (allegedly) simply records what it sees in the subject. Of course, as Kant points out, subject and observer are the same person, so the observer cannot impartially discover things in the subject—“the stability of observation necessary for experience does not occur” (7:134). This kind of observation results in enthusiasm because the person believes she can actually observe her own thoughts as she would observe something with her external senses. Kant thinks hypochondria is also a clear example of this kind of enthusiasm: “The chimeras which this malady hatches do not properly deceive the outer senses but only provide the hypochondriac with an illusory sensation of his own state” (2:267). Rather than mistaking the objects of inner sense for those of outer sense, the hypochondriac feels things that are not there. He “feels in himself the illusion of almost all maladies of which he as much as hears” (2:267). The mere mention of a disease or disorder will lead the hypochondriac to detect the symptoms of that disorder in himself.

We should pause for a moment to examine the question of whether this manifestation of enthusiasm is a kind of mental illness or pathology.¹⁸ Initially, this reading seems plausible. Kant himself sometimes describes it as a mental weakness or illness: in *Maladies*, the enthusiast is a “properly deranged person” (2:267). Likewise, in the *Anthropology*, enthusiasm “stands in close relation to the derangement of the senses” (7:145). It is tempting to think that someone who sees something that is not really there is simply crazy. Yet it is clear that Kant thinks enthusiasm is not always pathological. Even in the discussion in *Maladies*, Kant explains derangement as an outgrowth of the common human tendency for “painting all kinds of images of things that are not present” (2:264). He gives the example of daydreaming: “When after waking up we lie in an idle and gentle distraction, our imagination draws irregular figures such as those of the bedroom curtains ... into human shapes” (2:265). There is no need to worry about this activity because we “have the chimera in our power” (2:265). By contrast, the deranged person senses some imagined thing as strongly and as vividly as she senses a real thing. The difference between daydreaming and derangement seems to be one of degree rather than kind. Further, Kant suggests that daydreaming and full-blown enthusiasm exist on a continuum with intermediate states in between. One of those intermediate states is the fantast. Fantasts are enthusiasts,¹⁹ and they are like deranged people except that the “usual illusion of his senses is only in part a chimera, but for the most part an actual sensation” (2:265). The religiously devout person who sees “the passion story in speckled marble” and the person suffering from hypochondria are fantasts in this way (2:265–6). The devout person and the hypochondriac are only partially imagining things. The specks on the marble are real, and the hypochondriac’s bodily sensations are also real, but both people then see more in those appearances than is actually there. The problem on Kant’s view is that they see “what their inclination depicts for them” just as fear turns a “signpost into a giant ghost” (2:266). Even if enthusiasm becomes derangement once it reaches a certain level, Kant seems to think that people of otherwise sound mind can fall victim to enthusiasm.

The second manifestation of enthusiasm occurs when we think we can see or know things beyond what we can experience. Sometimes Kant claims that this enthusiasm is a problem in the imagination: Enthusiasm occurs when the imagination does not “harmonize with concepts” (7:172).²⁰ Kant also has in mind the “joyous and bold premonitions of enthusiasts (*Schwärmer*) who scent the imminent revelation of a mystery for which the human being has no such receptivity of sense” (7:187). One of Kant’s favorite examples of this version of an enthusiast is Emmanuel Swedenborg, the Swedish mystic.²¹ I will say more about Kant’s treatment of Swedenborg in the next section, but for now, let me briefly explain why Swedenborg is an enthusiast of this sort. Swedenborg claimed to have the “closest contact with spirits and with the souls of the dead” (2:354). From this contact, he claimed to be able to know details

about the spirit world and composed “hefty volumes devoted to his discoveries” (2:354). On Kant’s view, there is no way for Swedenborg to know things about the spirit world because it is beyond any possible experience. Swedenborg is not the only person who is guilty of this sort of enthusiasm. Kant also charges Spinozists and neo-Platonists with the same offense. Spinozists claim to have “insights into the impossibility of a being the idea of which consists solely of pure concepts of the understanding, which has been separated from all the conditions of sensibility” (8:143n). On Kant’s view, this “leads directly to enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*)” (8:143n). Plato, “through no fault of his own,” becomes “the father of all enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*)” (8:398). On Kant’s view, Plato (wrongly) claims that we can have knowledge of the super-sensible. As such, the neo-Platonist “believes he has stumbled upon a mystery, and for that reason is seeing something transcendently great, where he is not seeing anything” (8:393).

To summarize, the first manifestation of enthusiasm causes people to take an imagining, memory, or dream to be real. People in the midst of the second enthusiasm believe they can see or know things beyond what they can experience or think they have experiential access beyond what they actually possess.

From the preceding remarks, we have a better sense of what *Schwärmerei* is, but the exact nature of Kant’s criticism is still unclear. In several places, Kant seems to think of it as a type of delusion or derangement (2:267, 7:145). Elsewhere, Kant seems to think of it as mere folly; in the *Anthropology* lectures, people become enthusiasts “through their stupidity” (25:529). In other works, however, enthusiasm is worse than folly. In the third *Critique*, enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*) is a “deeply-rooted, oppressive passion” as well as a “disease that destroys” the understanding (5:275). In the *Religion*, Kant goes so far as to call enthusiasm “the moral death of reason” (6:175). In *Maladies*, Kant writes: “Human nature knows no more dangerous illusion” (2:267–68). Given the variety of Kant’s remarks, what precisely is the problem with enthusiasm?

4 | SWEDENBORG AND DREAMS OF A SPIRIT-SEER

It would help to examine a clear picture of an enthusiast, and Kant’s description of Swedenborg in the *Dreams* essay provides that picture. As we will see, Swedenborg is Kant’s prime example of the dangers of enthusiasm. Kant undertakes an investigation of the accounts of Swedenborg’s supposed paranormal powers and reviews his work—the eight-volume *Arcana coelestia*—in the latter part of the essay. Kant’s attack on Swedenborg is blistering. He calls Swedenborg’s style “dull,” claims his work is “stuffed full of nonsense,” and claims that his own readers owe him “gratitude” for reading Swedenborg’s book so they do not have to (2:360–2). Even though Kant claims that Swedenborg’s work contains “not a single drop of reason,” Kant nonetheless points out that “there prevails in that work such a wondrous harmony with what the most subtle ruminations of reason can produce on a like topic” (2:360). This alleged harmony is not unlike the way people “discover the Holy Family in irregular patterns of marble” (2:360). Here we see the same example that Kant uses in *Maladies* to explain how the fantast sees what he wants to see.

Why does Kant spend time on Swedenborg’s work and not simply dismiss him as an insane person or a crank? As Laywine (1993), Grier (2001), and Rukgaber (2018) have argued, Kant recognizes that Swedenborg’s delusions look a little too much like speculative metaphysics of the kind that Kant once did. Kant’s purpose in the first part of the *Dreams* essay seems to be to illustrate precisely how this harmony might come about.²² In the first chapter, Kant specifies the precise nature of the problem that the spirit-world presents to philosophy. The second chapter then purports to be a “fragment of occult philosophy,” which offers a theory about how spirits could interact with corporeal beings and how communion with the spirit world might be possible (2:329). The third chapter then subjects everything in the second chapter to a skeptical critique. In this chapter we see much of the same language that Kant uses elsewhere to describe enthusiasts. He divides them into “dreamers of reason” and “dreamers of sense,” but according to Kant, both groups have the same problem: “they see something which no other normal person sees; they have their own community with beings which reveal themselves to no one else, no matter how good his senses

may be" (2:342). Just as we see in the *Anthropology*, Kant uses the same language of the "waking dreamer" who is "absorbed by the fictions and chimeras hatched out of his ever fertile imagination" (2:343).

Nonetheless, Kant points out that the skeptical critique he has just done presents him with an "embarrassing difficulty" (2:347). Enthusiasm can just as easily provide an explanation for the apparent communion with the spirit-world as Kant's own fragment of occult philosophy. Kant asks, "what foolishness is there ... which could not be made to harmonize with a fathomless philosophy?" (2:348). As Laywine has argued, we can see the early stirrings of Kant's critique of metaphysics in *Dreams* (1993, 185–200). Speculative metaphysicians can often stray too far and think they can produce actual knowledge of things like the spirit world. The fact that metaphysics is a scholarly enterprise can be deceptive. We can be fooled into thinking that as long as we are doing metaphysics we are therefore licensed to think beyond what we can experience. The speculative metaphysician can assure himself that is he justified in his speculation because it is in the pursuit of higher knowledge: "The feeling of satisfaction which accompanies the extension of knowledge will very easily assume the appearance of dutifulness" (2:369). He then continues his flights into the unknown where he then "discovers" more metaphysical problems that need solving.

The *Dreams* essay shows not only that speculative metaphysics cannot be neatly distinguished from enthusiasm but that enthusiasts like Swedenborg can use the trappings of philosophy to make wild fantasies appear respectable.²³ Kant does precisely this with the occult fragment: he, a philosopher trained in metaphysics, can craft a theory of communion with the spirit world that looks like a legitimate exercise of theoretical reason. Kant complains that Swedenborg's style is dull despite the fact that he is essentially writing a ghost story; his style might be dull because it sounds academic and as such is meant to affect a kind of objectivity. Kant organizes his review of Swedenborg's work as he would any other treatise: he explicates Swedenborg's three types of visions and discusses some of his central concepts (2:362–4). Even though Kant peppers his review with barbs and insults, he switches back and forth between those and a simple exposition of the content of the work. On the one hand, Swedenborg's views are full-fledged nonsense. On the other hand, it seems they could just as easily be produced by overly ambitious metaphysicians as by the "fevered brains of deluded enthusiasts" (2:348). *Dreams* is a warning to those philosophers who are tempted to speculate beyond what they can know—if you are not careful, you might end up the next Swedenborg.

5 | ENTHUSIASM AS INTELLECTUAL VICE

I raised the question earlier why Kant uses such strong language to condemn enthusiasm, and his criticism of Swedenborg and speculative metaphysics in *Dreams* does not make this question easier to answer. Kant is clear in several places that reason is always ready to mistake its boundaries: It is "a propensity" of reason's nature to try to reach beyond experience (A797/B825).²⁴ Even in the *Dreams* essay, Kant speaks well of the "zealousness" with which one can "pursue every curiosity" and which allows "no limits to the thirst for knowledge" (2:369). If always striving to go further is characteristic of reason and sometimes even laudable, how are we blameworthy for falling into the traps of enthusiasm? Why does Kant condemn enthusiasm as something more than folly—why is it "the moral death of reason" (6:175)?

Kant's worries about enthusiasm become clearer if we think of enthusiasm as a dangerous intellectual vice. We can begin to get a sense of what this might look like by considering Kant's remarks on the logical egoist.²⁵ In the Vienna Logic, Kant describes logical egoism as a prejudice in which "we hold the agreement of our understanding with the reason of others unnecessary" (24: 873). In the Blomberg Logic, the logical egoist believes that "he alone judges rationally, that no one else is in a position to judge something or better to be able to insight into it" (24:187). A similar description appears in the *Anthropology*: The logical egoist "considers it unnecessary also to test his judgment by the understanding of others; as if he had no need at all for this touchstone" (7:129). From these remarks, we can see that the logical egoist trusts his own private judgment so thoroughly that he feels assured he always judges clearly or better than others. As a result, he is "abandoned to a play of thoughts in which he sees, acts, and judges

not in a common world, but rather in his own world" (7:219).²⁶ Logical egoism can either be "indifference toward the judgments of others" or "conceit or arrogance, where one allots it to himself alone to make a correct judgment about a thing for all others" (24:874, emphasis original).

Kant is clearly critical of logical egoism, as he is of many of the other prejudices (24:162–194). At least in the *Logic*, however, his criticisms of logical egoism do not seem to reach the same level of intensity as his criticisms of enthusiasm.²⁷ My suggestion here is that enthusiasm might start out as the prejudice of logical egoism (the kind caused by conceit or arrogance), but left unchecked it becomes something much worse. Whereas logical egoism is a prejudice, enthusiasm is a vice. In order to defend this claim, I will reconstruct Kant's account of how we are tempted to enthusiasm. This process goes as follows: Self-conceit and reason's propensity to want to cross its own boundaries mutually reinforce each other. The enthusiast traps herself into this self-perpetuating spiral where she refuses to engage in the discipline of reason. If this goes on too long, she ends up casting off reason altogether.

First, enthusiasm is partly caused by self-conceit. Self-conceit is most frequently associated with Kant's moral philosophy, but it makes appearances in the theoretical philosophy as well.²⁸ Very broadly, self-conceit is a pernicious form of self-satisfaction. As Moran puts it, "the conceited agent insists upon her own theoretical or practical conclusions at any cost" (2014, 422).²⁹ In the theoretical context, self-conceit makes us prone to become taken with and overly invested in our own thoughts. We are likely to think we are right about our beliefs and judgments, we take pride in our own speculations and systems, and we are apt to disregard, dismiss, or minimize criticisms of our own thinking. Kant thus suggests that "it is not misfortune but arrogance which is to blame" for the enthusiast's disdain for critical reason (8:145).

Kant explicitly claims that self-conceit can be a problem in speculative thought in the Transcendental Doctrine of Method. He says that philosophy should avoid "idle pretensions" that ultimately "countermand its aim of revealing the deceptions of a reason that misjudges its own boundaries and of bringing the self-conceit of speculation back to modest but thorough self-knowledge" (A735/B763). Indeed, the entire first chapter on the discipline of pure reason is set up as a way of avoiding the "system of delusions and deceptions" that we encounter in speculation (A711/B739). Yet these delusions and deceptions are not mere errors. Kant begins the chapter with the claim that humanity has a "general lust for knowledge" (A708/B736). In light of this, Kant anticipates that his "negative judgments," which aim at the prevention of error in reasoning, will be seen as "jealous enemies of our unremitting drive straining for the expansion of our cognition" (A708/B736). Because we are keen to know more than we really can, we are prone to "dishonesty, misrepresentation, and hypocrisy even in the utterances of the speculative way of thinking" and we often "pretend to be better" at thinking than we are (A748/B776). Kant claims that it is "humiliating for human reason" to realize its own shortcomings and even more so that it "requires a discipline to check its extravagances" (A795/B823).

From these remarks, we can see that self-conceit in speculation is similar to self-conceit in the practical realm. Kant describes self-conceit as "satisfaction with oneself" in the second *Critique* (5:73). Self-conceit causes us to think highly of ourselves in terms other than our moral agency; it is "esteem for oneself" that precedes our valuing of ourselves as moral persons (5:73). I might, for example, value my wit or talent and think well of myself in light of it. Yet this way of valuing myself is trivial or farcical when compared with my moral worth.³⁰ This is why Kant thinks self-conceit is "humiliated" by the moral law: All other ways of valuing ourselves are shown to be "null and quite unwarranted" when compared with our moral value (5:73). Similarly, the power of our own thinking is humiliated in the face of Kant's critical project. We thought we could, by the power of reason alone, prove that God exists or discover the ultimate foundations of the universe. Yet once we engage in the critique that Kant asks of us, we are forced to admit that reason is unable to do these things. Our lofty aspirations are brought back down to earth, and we find this experience painfully humbling.

Because of the self-conceit of speculation, we are tempted to refuse to discipline ourselves the way Kant recommends and instead indulge in uncritical thinking. Indulging ourselves in this way leads to enthusiasm. Kant describes this very process in the *Orientation* essay:

First genius is very pleased with its bold flights, since it has cast off the thread by which reason used to steer it. Soon it enchants others with its triumphant pronouncements and great expectations and now seems to have set itself on a throne which was so badly graced by slow and ponderous reason, whose language, however, it always employs. Then its maxim is that superior lawgiving reason is invalid—we common human beings call this enthusiasm (8:145).

Disciplined reason seems only to expose our limitations, and we are eager to understand the mysteries of life and the universe. The pride we feel when we take too much pleasure in our own thinking leads us to be frustrated by our own inabilities. In particular, the enthusiast decides he is better off without the limitations of reason, and he treats slow and careful reason with contempt. The problem, of course, is that rejecting the limitations of reason means rejecting reason altogether. The enthusiast is then left with nothing but “his own inspiration” (8:145). Rejecting the careful and disciplined use of reason in favor of inner inspiration only exacerbates the enthusiast's self-satisfaction. The enthusiast's insight into the universe's mysteries comes from his private fantasies, which cannot be subject to questioning or criticism. Because no one can question him about his inner inspiration, he can never be found in error. He then feels more satisfied with himself and more contemptuous of reason.

The same self-conceit is present in enthusiasts like the devout person and the hypochondriac, though perhaps in a more mild form. They also fall into this self-reinforcing spiral because they trust their own thinking too much. The devout fantast and the hypochondriac find a certain kind of satisfaction (though not necessarily happiness, in the case of the hypochondriac) in these spirals of thought.³¹ The devout person can convince herself that her ability to see the Trinity in marble is communication with the divine; she can use the fact that others do not see it as proof that God communicates especially with her. Hypochondriacs are notorious for being skeptical of medical interventions they seek. If test results come back negative, they use the threat of a botched test as further reason to be anxious. Both the devout person and the hypochondriac trust the authority of their own reasoning to such an extent that they explain away or reinterpret countervailing reasons and contrary evidence. What underlies their enthusiasm is the fact that they are so taken with their own ways of thinking that they refuse to take seriously any challenges, objections, or counters. As Kant claims, their motive is ultimately vanity or self-conceit: Facing the possibility of being wrong would require them to give up the self-satisfaction of their own reasoning.

Enthusiasm presents a particularly serious problem for Kant's epistemology because self-conceit works together with reason's natural tendency to want to mistake its own boundaries. Kant is clear in the first *Critique* that as thinkers we will never be satisfied merely knowing that we cannot know things (A795/B823; A797/B825). We are always tempted to try to form new hypotheses of pure reason and “to invent or to opine” where Kant thinks we can only “enthuse” (A770/B798). Not only are we tempted to flex our cognitive powers beyond their abilities, but also part of the very project of the Enlightenment is learning to think for oneself. As Merritt has argued, becoming enlightened requires that we “express a certain self-determination of the mind” (2009, 998). We thus find ourselves in a precarious position in Kant's epistemology. We have to learn to be independent thinkers if we are to participate in the project of Enlightenment; we are supposed to emerge from our “self-incurred minority” (8:35). We should be forming our own thoughts and ideas rather than simply taking received opinion or dogma for granted, but that same striving for independence and originality can lure us into the trap of the self-conceit of speculation. I can become seduced into thinking that my wild speculations show how original a thinker I am and that those who disagree with me are stubbornly mired in tradition or dogma. This is how enthusiasm becomes such a serious danger. Reason itself “tacitly indulges” the “naturally self-seeking tendency in man” (8:389).

Now that we see how we are tempted to enthusiasm, it becomes clear why it is a vice. I will say more about the relationship between intellectual virtue and moral virtue in the following section, but first let me provide an explanation of Kant's general account of vice. In the practical philosophy, there are two opponents to virtue: a “negative lack of virtue (moral weakness)” and “vice” (6:384). Vice is virtue's “real opposite” (*ibid.*). In the *Religion*, Kant distinguishes vice as moral weakness “coupled with ... dishonesty in not screening incentives” (6:37). On Kant's view, vice involves an *active opposition* to virtue. We are vicious not because we are too weak to heed the moral law, but because we

try to weasel our way out of the demands of morality.³² We try to justify our actions, find ways to mitigate the demands of the moral law, or convince ourselves that we have better moral character than we do. As Kant puts it, vice involves throwing “dust in our own eyes” (6:37). We see the same dynamic of “tacit indulgence” of reason in both Kant's account of vice in the practical philosophy and in enthusiasm. Just as reason colludes with our frailty to produce vice, reason colludes with our speculative self-satisfaction to produce enthusiasm. Reason “prefers to indulge in enthusiasm” (*schwärmt*) rather than accept its own boundaries (8:335). Yet once the enthusiast becomes impervious to her limitations, her reason destroys itself because it gives up its universal validity (fn 8:146). Reason's pleasure in its own flights of fancy ends up undermining the only authority to which it can lay claim. Without its guiding thread, reason becomes indistinguishable from “inner inspirations” (8:145), “the voice of an oracle” (8:405), or “wild figments of the imagination” (2:366). Enthusiasm is not mere stupidity or derangement. It is an intellectual vice we develop when we trust the power of our minds too much.

6 | KANTIAN INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE: A SKETCH

What follows from my arguments that enthusiasm is, for Kant, an intellectual vice? If Kant has an account of a serious intellectual vice, I want to suggest we can work backward from his warnings about enthusiasm and reconstruct the beginnings of an account of intellectual virtue. In this concluding section, I would like to make more explicit the general picture of intellectual virtue that emerges. As I mentioned in the introduction, several Kantians have explored the normative dimensions of belief in Kant's work. Here I wish to add to that literature by sketching an account of intellectual virtue that dovetails with his account of moral virtue.³³

Much has been written on Kant's conception of moral virtue, but here I will limit my discussion to Kant's arguments about virtue as strength in the face of internal obstacles.³⁴ The basic picture of Kantian virtue is moral strength: “Now the capacity and considered resolve to withstand a strong but unjust opponent is *fortitude* (*fortitudo*) and with respect to what opposes the moral disposition within us, virtue (*virtus*, *fortitudo moralis*)” (6:380). According to Kant, we are able to discern that strength by the obstacles it overcomes. He writes, “Strength of any kind can be recognized only by the obstacles it can overcome ... which can come into conflict with the human being's moral resolution” (6:394). There is debate in the literature regarding precisely what the obstacles are that Kant refers to.³⁵ As Grenberg points out, he could mean natural inclinations (such as strong emotions), or he could mean reason itself (2010, 153–158). Grenberg argues convincingly that there is good reason to favor the latter interpretation, not just because of the textual evidence but also because it renders Kant's account of virtue consistent between the *Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Religion* (2010, 155–157). The account of intellectual virtue that I sketch here will offer support for Grenberg's interpretation—reason itself provides the obstacles that we are meant to overcome.

The claim that virtue is strength is relatively uncontroversial, but Kant's theory of virtue becomes more complicated when we examine the two primary places where he discusses it: the *Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Religion*. These two works present an account of virtue that seems to have two components: a *revolutionary* component and a *gradualist* component.³⁶ As Allison (1990, 169–170) and Biss (2015, 3–4) have argued, both aspects show up in both works, but each work emphasizes one aspect more than the other. The revolutionary component is emphasized in the *Religion* and is captured by Kant's famous claim that becoming a good person requires a “change of heart” and a “*revolution in the disposition*” (6:47, emphasis original). The gradualist component, which is emphasized in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, is captured by Kant's claim that virtue “is always in progress,” which can “never settle down in peace and quiet with its maxims adopted once and for all” (6:409). So virtue for Kant requires both (i) a basic orientation toward morality and (ii) striving for incremental moral progress. Although Kant's discussion is complex and at times obscure, we can make the account more intuitive by imagining an agent who wants to try to be virtuous. In order to develop virtue, she has to commit to the project of trying to be a good person—she has to decide once and for all to make the concerns of morality central in her life. Absent this fundamental orientation, she would not undertake the necessary steps to gradually improve her character. Yet simply making this choice does not make her a good

person in one fell swoop. A person who cares about morality tries to do the right thing but is still perfectly capable of failing to do so. In addition to making the resolution to be a good person, she also has to commit to the practice of virtue, which is always in progress. Kant's moral agent never reaches a point when she can simply sit back, relax, and enjoy her good character. As Kant puts it, "Assurance of [one's good character] cannot of course be obtained ... neither via immediate consciousness nor via the evidence of the life he has hitherto led" (6:51). A moral agent cannot simply inspect her own heart to know if she is a good person—she is too prone to fool herself. As Kant puts it: "one is never so easily deceived than in what promotes a good opinion of oneself" (6:68). Nor can she rest on the good moral actions she has done in the past. She might have done the right thing up until now, but what will happen if she finds herself in a more difficult situation tomorrow?

Given this picture, we can see why Kant characterizes virtue as strength to overcome internal obstacles. We can see evidence of our commitment to virtue, not by mere introspection or by appealing to our track record but rather by our abilities to resist temptations. We can evaluate our strength when it is tested. As Kant puts it, "strength is required, in a degree which we can assess only by the magnitude of the obstacles that the human being himself furnishes" (6:405). What does this strength to resist temptation look like? If we accept Grenberg's arguments that reason itself provides the obstacles we are to overcome, how precisely does this happen? It would help to have a more accurate picture of what this sort of temptation looks like so that we can see strength more clearly.

Kant provides glimpses of this temptation in the *Groundwork* and the *Religion*. Kant argues that human beings experience the commands of morality as forceful and stringent. Yet this experience gives rise to the following response: "But from this there arises a natural dialectic, that is, a propensity to rationalize against those strict laws of duty and to cast doubt upon their validity, or at least upon their purity and strictness, and where possible, to make them better suited to our wishes and inclinations" (4:405). Confronted with moral demands that promise us nothing in return for adhering to them, we try to figure out ways to call them into doubt or at least mitigate what they actually demand. Likewise, Kant writes in the *Religion* that in the face of the demands of virtue, "reason, which by nature finds moral labor vexing, now conjures up, under the pretext of natural impotence, all sorts of impure religious ideas" (6:51). In other words, Kant thinks we are happy to invent specious theological claims, which state that human beings are incorrigibly bad, in order to avoid doing the hard work of self-improvement. As Biss argues, what Kant describes here is a familiar form of rationalization and self-deception "by which reason betrays itself with uncanny precision" (2015, 13).

This dialectic should seem familiar. We see the same "rebellious attitude" of reason in the epistemic case (6:36). In the previous section, I explained how someone arrives at enthusiasm as Kant describes the process in the *Orientalion* essay (8:145). Reason has a natural propensity to want to know more than it can, so it sets off looking to make discoveries about the unknowable. Yet reason soon discovers its limitations as it tries to venture past its abilities. The enthusiast, spurred by the self-conceit of speculation, simply decides to ignore these limitations and instead embrace her confidence in her own thinking. The enthusiast convinces herself through rationalizations that she is right, that others know less than her, or that her inner inspirations are a better guide than "slow and ponderous reason" (8:145). This process begins because reason confronts its own limitations in engaging in critique. As Kant writes, the call to the critique is "humiliating for human reason" (A795/B823). Yet Kant is clear that reason "can never refuse critique" (A738/B767). We thus experience the demands of critique and the demands morality as forceful and stringent. And, both in the moral and in the theoretical realm, rationalization and self-deception begin because of reason's rebellious response to this experience. We can see why Kant claims that "it is the human being *himself* who puts these obstacles in the way of his maxims" (6:394, emphasis original). Reason plays devil's advocate against the demandingness we experience. In both the moral and intellectual case, we have to develop strength to resist these temptations.

The strength required for intellectual virtue parallels moral virtue in having both a revolutionary and a gradualist component. With regard to the revolutionary part, one of our main challenges is to submit ourselves to the laws whose demands we initially reject (6:36–6:39; 6:379–6:383).³⁷ Moral virtue requires that we resolve to prioritize moral commands and not subordinate them to our other interests. As a result, virtue is a kind of self-constraint: We

make a resolution to follow the moral law *knowing* that we will face temptations to ignore and resist it. Specifically, virtue is “self-constraint through the mere representation of one’s duty in accordance with its formal law” (6:394). Kant argues that the three formulations of the moral law he introduces in the *Groundwork* comprise the “supreme principle of the doctrine of virtue” (6:395).

The intellectually virtuous agent engages in self-constraint in a way that is similar to the morally virtuous agent. She adopts a law and prioritizes it over her own speculative interests. What will the law of intellectual virtue be? As several Kantians have argued, the three maxims of reason are central to the normative aspects of Kant’s epistemology.³⁸ Those maxims are: “To think for oneself,” “To think in the position of everyone else,” and “Always to think in accord with oneself” (9:57, 5:294, 7:228). As Merritt puts it, taken together, the maxims provide an “ideal of sound cognitive disposition” (2011, 231). Intellectual self-constraint requires that we make the three maxims of reason the “supreme principle” of intellectual virtue. As O’Neill has argued, “Reason, the discipline of all disciplines, can only be and must be *self-disciplined*” (1989, 57, emphasis original). Reason’s self-discipline requires that we bind ourselves to the three maxims even though we will face temptation to cast them off in favor of the pleasures of enthusiasm. Refusing to make this commitment is “*declared lawlessness in thinking (of a liberation from the limitations of reason)*” (8:145, emphasis original). The person who declares lawlessness in reasoning is the enthusiast. Recall the example of Swedenborg. Swedenborg declares himself an expert in a system he created from (on Kant’s view at least) his own unbridled imagination. Swedenborg refuses to play by reason’s rules. Once Swedenborg abandons the guiding maxims of reason, he abandons reason altogether: “And so freedom in thinking finally destroys itself if it tries to proceed in independence of the laws of reason” (8:146).

Intellectual virtue will also have a gradualist component. In the case of moral virtue, we make progress through self-awareness (Grenberg 2010, 158–165) and being able to recognize and thwart our temptations to rationalize away our moral duties (Biss, 2015, 13–18). Self-awareness about our temptations is equally important in the epistemic realm. In *Dreams*, *Superior Tone*, and the first *Critique*, one of Kant’s messages is that philosophy should bring “the self-conceit of speculation back to modest but thorough self-knowledge” (A735/B763). There are numerous specific challenges that we will face in trying to be better thinkers. For example, we must take care to avoid common prejudices that Kant identifies in the logic lectures (Merritt, 2009, 991–994). We are often tempted to accept the truth of a claim on subjective rather than objective grounds (Chignell, 2007: 331–333). Relevant to the dangers of enthusiasm is the temptation to ignore the criticism of others. A naïve reading of Kant will likely place him in the tradition of philosophers who believe that solitude enhances our ability to reason and that our intellectual powers are sufficient for us to come to truth or clarity without the aid of other people, yet Kant is clear that this will not ensure we think well. By contrast, Kant thinks that someone with a healthy reason seeks corroboration from others about her perceptions and her experiences.³⁹ Kant claims that thinking with others requires a commitment to “restrain our understanding by the *understanding of others*, instead of *isolating* ourselves with our own understanding” (7:219 emphasis original).⁴⁰ Kant is not arguing that we are supposed to think the same things that everyone else thinks; that conclusion would conflict with the independence of thought needed for enlightenment. Rather, in communicating our thoughts to others, we are following the second maxim of reason and checking to see if any thinker could come to the same conclusions. By contrast, enthusiasts “build castles in the sky in their various imaginary worlds, each happily inhabiting his own world to the exclusion of others” (2:342). They refuse to subject their thinking to the “test” of others’ judgments. Additionally, just as in the case of moral virtue, we are never safe to rest on our intellectual laurels. In the same way that we can only ever make progress toward perfect moral character, we will never achieve perfect intellectual virtue. The temptations we face in thinking will always be there. Referencing his own famous dogmatic slumber, Kant claims that the point of critique is not for “arranging a peaceful retirement for reason” but rather for “awaking it from its sweet dogmatic dreams” (A757/B785).

Much more could be said about Kantian intellectual virtue. My hope is that this brief sketch and the arguments that I have provided here license three conclusions. First, contrary to common perception, Kant can be added to the list of figures in the history of philosophy who can be thought of as precursors to virtue epistemology. Second, Kant thinks of enthusiasm as a central and serious intellectual vice. Finally, we can reconstruct an account of intellectual

virtue in Kant's epistemology that is consistent with his account of moral virtue. Kant's epistemology clearly has normative dimensions, and my arguments here help to show further evidence of those dimensions. For Kant, enthusiasm is a serious intellectual vice that confronts all of us as we try to become independent thinkers. Just as we must resist our rebellious temptations in developing moral virtue, we must resist the temptations to fall too much in love with the chimerical hatchlings of our own minds.⁴¹

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Merritt notes Kant's absence from this tradition (2018, 126–127). Some philosophers have appealed to aspects of Kant's moral philosophy in constructing various positions in virtue epistemology. See, for example, Elgin (2013), Audi (2014), and Greco (2014). None of the arguments claim that Kant is a precursor to or is committed to any kind of virtue epistemology. Montmarquet's (1993) virtue epistemology incorporates many Kantian commitments. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.
- ² Turri, Alfano, and Greco (2017).
- ³ Pozzo argues that references to Aristotle's intellectual virtues appear in Kant's work (2005).
- ⁴ O'Neill (1989), Gelfert (2006), Chignell (2007), Merritt (2009, 2011, 2018), Cohen (2014), Moran (2014), and Pasternack (2014a, 2014b) have all argued that Kant's epistemology has normative dimensions.
- ⁵ Kant's writings on logic are the subject of much discussion in the literature. See Lu-Adler (2018) for an extensive treatment of the texts and their place in the historical context.
- ⁶ Engstrom (2002) and Merritt (2009) have pointed out this connection.
- ⁷ I am using "thinking" here in the broad colloquial sense, not in a technical sense.
- ⁸ Merritt argues that enlightenment requires independence of thought (2009, 988–991).
- ⁹ Both Zuckert (2010, 295–297) and Clewis (2009, 4–5) translate *Schwärmerei* as "fanaticism." One of the main reasons to use "fanaticism" is to distinguish it from *Enthusiasmus*, which seems to have a different meaning. Zuckert points out, however, "fanaticism" in English tends to have a narrower connotation (2010, 296). Additionally, Zuckert shows that *Schwärmerei* in Kant's theoretical philosophy shares some things in common with Locke's account of enthusiasm (2010, 299–303). Kant clearly has Locke in mind in his discussions of theoretical enthusiasm as he claims that Locke "opened the gates to enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*)" (B128). To avoid the narrow connotation and to stay in keeping with Locke, I have chosen to use "enthusiasm."
- ¹⁰ Other passages that blur the distinction include the following: (5:85; 5:157; 7:202; 7:254; 25:528; 25:530). All references to Kant are taken from the *Akademie* volume.
- ¹¹ This passage is likely a reference to Kant's views about the revolution. Clewis' Chapter Six has a discussion of the role of *Enthusiasmus* here (2009, 169–199).
- ¹² As Zuckert argues, in the 18th century, the term "enthusiasm" was "considerably broader and less defined" in both its English and German uses (2010: 293–294). Wieland and Herder in the mid-1770s and Garve in the early 1790s produced essays contesting the distinction as well as the definition and extent of the harm of enthusiasm. La Vopa has a thorough discussion of the uses of the terms in the German Enlightenment (1997). Prior to the 18th century, enthusiasm was contested as well. Even Martin Luther, who coined the term *Schwärmerei*, struggled along with his contemporaries to fix its meaning and causes (Heyd, 1995, 15–26).
- ¹³ Exactly how to understand *Enthusiasmus* is a topic unto itself. It is difficult to claim that Kant operates with a fixed definition of *Enthusiasmus* because several of the passages where he discusses it conflict with each other. For example, in the *Anthropology* lectures, where the discussion closely mirrors the passage from the third *Critique*, Kant claims that the enthusiast takes "the ideal for something real" (25:528). Kant gives the example of the ideal of friendship: The enthusiast mistakenly thinks that the ideal of friendship is something she can find in the world (25:530). The enthusiast in the third *Critique*, however, makes no such mistake; she simply feels exhilarated (perhaps too much) by an ideal. In *Observations*, Kant claims that we must distinguish *Enthusiasmus* from fanaticism (fn 2:251), but in the *Anthropology* lectures he describes enthusiasts (*Enthusiasten*) as "fantasts in principles" (25:1287). Although Kant classifies *Enthusiasmus* as an affect in the third *Critique*, Kant claims in the *Anthropology* that it "must be attributed to the faculty of desire and not to affect" (7:254) (earlier in the *Anthropology* Kant specifies that affects belong to the faculty of feeling whereas passions belong to the faculty of desire (7:235)). Also in the *Anthropology*, the enthusiast (*Enthusiast*) is a person who "neglects to compare his imaginings with the laws of experience (who dreams while awake)" and engages in this activity "with affect" (7:202). Yet in the third *Critique*, we see no mention of the waking dreamer.

- ¹⁴ See Shell (1996, 217–219), Sorensen (2002, 119–120), Kneller (2007, 109–111), Clewis (2009, 178–183), and Zuckert (2010, 295–296).
- ¹⁵ Zuckert (2010) is a clear exception. Neiman discusses it briefly (1994, 164–171). Kneller discusses it in the context of the dangers of imagination (2007, 99–115).
- ¹⁶ I rely on the pre-Critical work and the Critical work in this reconstruction. I think Kant's concerns about enthusiasm are consistent throughout the body of his work. Arguments that support this interpretation can be found in Laywine (1993), Grier (2001), and Rukgaber (2018).
- ¹⁷ I do not mean to suggest that there are two types of enthusiasm here; there are simply two ways of being an enthusiast.
- ¹⁸ For a helpful discussion of abnormal psychology in Kant see Frierson (2014), especially Chapter 6.
- ¹⁹ For places where Kant claims fanatics are enthusiasts, see (25:528–531; 25:1287–8; 2:267–68; fn 2:251; 5:157).
- ²⁰ For a more detailed discussion of this passage and the relationship between enthusiasm and imagination, see Kneller (2007: 108–110).
- ²¹ For more information about Kant's knowledge of Swedenborg, see the translation introduction (1992: lxvi–lxviii).
- ²² My reading here follows Shell's interpretation (1996, 106–132).
- ²³ Rukgaber (2018) has a similar reading of the *Dreams* essay.
- ²⁴ Grier makes this point clearly regarding the interpretative difficulties with the Transcendental Illusion (2001). We should also note that Kant uses the term “propensity” in the first *Critique*, which may be related to his discussion of propensities in the *Religion*. Both Sussman (2005, 157–158) and Papish (2007, 132–135) have helpful discussions of propensity.
- ²⁵ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for asking me to clarify the relationship between logical egoism and enthusiasm. For further discussions of logical egoism, see Pozzo (2005), Gelfert (2006), Moran (2014), and Pasternack (2014a). We should note Meier's influence on Kant with regard to logical egoism as both Pozzo (2005) and Pasternack (2014a) explain.
- ²⁶ The language in the logical egoist passage (7:129) resembles almost exactly the language at the end of the section on the weaknesses of the cognitive faculty (7:219). Kant talks about enthusiasm in the latter section.
- ²⁷ Kant does claim in one place that logical egoism is “most contrary to real humanity” (24:151).
- ²⁸ Moran (2014, 423–424) and Pasternack (2014b, 80) have made this connection.
- ²⁹ Moran's definition is more complex than this. She argues that the self-conceited agent also wants to appear as though she is abiding by the norms of practical and theoretical reason. As such, self-conceit is a kind of delusion (2014, 422). Although I am sympathetic to Moran's account, I wish to remain agnostic about this further claim.
- ³⁰ Thomason argues for this account of self-conceit (2013, 230–233).
- ³¹ In the *Religion* Kant refers to the “the sweetness...of enthusiasm” (6:68).
- ³² Moran (2014) and Biss (2015) describe this process well.
- ³³ My account is not meant to challenge Merritt's (2018) recent account of Kantian cognitive virtue. It seems to me the difference between us is one of emphasis: She focuses more on epistemic weakness (see especially Chapter 5) whereas I focus on epistemic vice. She also argues for the specification thesis: “moral virtue is specification of general cognitive virtue, and general cognitive virtue goes by the name of ‘healthy understanding’” (2018, 125). This claim is stronger than the one I offer here.
- ³⁴ See especially Allison, 1990, Engstrom, 2002, Grenberg 2010, and Biss, 2015.
- ³⁵ See, for example, Sussman (2005) and Wood (2010) for accounts that differ from Grenberg's.
- ³⁶ I take these terms from Biss (2015, 3). I use “component” here to avoid questions about whether these represent two stages or steps in the development of virtue. I wish to remain agnostic about this claim.
- ³⁷ For arguments for this claim, see Allison (1990, 169–171), Engstrom (2002, 302–305), and Grenberg (2010, 157–160).
- ³⁸ See, for example, O'Neill (1989, 45–48), Gelfert (2006, 640–641), Merritt (2009, 989–991; 2011, 231–237; 2018: 55–58), and Cohen (2014, 318–321).
- ³⁹ See especially O'Neill (1989, 32–39).
- ⁴⁰ For further discussions, see Gelfert (2006) Frierson (2014), Cohen (2014) Pasternack (2014a) and (2014b).
- ⁴¹ A very early version of this paper was presented at the 14th meeting of the Eastern Study Group for the North American Kant Society in Washington D.C., and I thank all of the presenters and attendees for their helpful comments. I received very detailed and valuable feedback from Emily Carson, Katharina Kraus, Jacqueline Mariña, Janum Sethi, Jessica Williams, and Rachel Zuckert at the North American Kant Society Junior Women Workshop in November 2017. Many thanks also to the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and suggestions.

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