

Kantian Naturalism

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I offer a qualified defence of Kant's natural teleological argument, that is, his inference from the (un)naturalness of an act to its (im)morality. Though I reject many of Kant's conclusions, I think the form of argument he uses to support these conclusions is not as wrong-headed as it might at first appear. I consider and answer two objections: first, that the argument is inconsistent with Kant's moral rationalism; and second, that the argument is inconsistent with post-Kantian developments in science. I argue that both objections rest on a common mistake, namely, the assumption that the account of (human) nature on which Kant's argument relies is theoretical. On the contrary, the relevant account is practical: informed by science, but not determined by it. Once we appreciate the practical character of Kant's naturalism, we can see not only that Kant can be a naturalist and a rationalist, but contemporary Kantians can be as well.

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But in the second place, should it be asked, Whether we ought to search for these [moral] principles in nature, or whether we must look for them in some other origin? I would reply, that our answer to this question depends upon the definition of the word, Nature, than which there is none more ambiguous and equivocal. (Hume 1739: 3.1.2.7)

1. Introduction

One of the most striking features of Kant's *Doctrine of Virtue* is his naturalism, that is, his open embrace of natural teleological arguments: inferences from the (un)naturalness of an act to its (im)morality. Though the most familiar instances concern sex, similar arguments appear throughout the work, and in non-carnal contexts, such as suicide and lying. The frequency with which Kant deploys such reasoning suggests that he regards it as an important part of his moral philosophical toolkit. His readers, by and large, have not agreed. It is not hard to see why. For even setting aside the normative adequacy of his conclusions—many of which have been rightly challenged—there remain serious methodological questions about the form of argument he uses to support these conclusions. After all, Kant is a moral rationalist *par excellence*, according to whom reason rather than nature is the final moral authority. Thus, if a certain act—a certain kind of sex, or manner of speech, or whatever—is morally problematic, this can't be because it runs afoul of nature's purposes. It must be because it runs afoul of reason's.

Some commentators have reacted to this difficulty by, in effect, denying the appearances (Denis 1999, Soble 2003, Gregor 1964). Though Kant seems to infer ethical conclusions from naturalistic premises, he is actually doing something else. Others accept the appearances but are no less severe in their judgment (Altman 2010, Schaff 2001). Kant simply can't do what he seems to. His rationalism forbids it. My aim in this paper is to argue otherwise. I will assume that Kant is a kind of

naturalist, just as he appears to be, and I will reconstruct an account of his naturalism that reconciles it with his rationalism.

To be clear, I am not much interested in the interpretative question of how best to read the range of Kant's texts. Rather, I am interested in the systematic and philosophical questions of how Kant's apparent naturalism relates to his rationalist conception of moral theory and what this tells us about the plausibility of this naturalism, both inside and outside a Kantian framework. To this extent, it will be enough for present purposes if there is a reading of the text that withstands critical scrutiny, one that represents what Kant could and should say about these issues, even if he doesn't clearly and consistently do so.

More specifically, I will make two points:

First, by contextualizing Kant's naturalism within his broader moral philosophical project, I aim to show that this naturalism is not merely consistent with his rationalism but actually follows from it. In this way, Kant's naturalism should not be seen as an embarrassment or even simply an oddity, an argumentative appendix to be excised without cost. On the contrary, consideration of Kant's naturalism actually serves to deepen our understanding of his rationalism, and with it his ethics more generally.

Second, I aim to show not just that Kant can be a naturalist and a rationalist. I aim to show that contemporary Kantians can be as well. This might seem implausible. For it is commonly supposed, by Kantians as well as others, that normative appeals to the natural reflect, at least implicitly, an outmoded view of the world, at odds with the results of modern science, especially evolutionary biology. Kant was, of course,

innocent of evolution, but we are not. So even if I am right that he can reconcile his naturalism and his rationalism, one might still worry whether this reconciliation has anything to offer us today. I believe it does. I will treat consistency with modern science as an adequacy condition on a defensible Kantian naturalism, and I will argue that this condition can be met by, in effect, reconceiving the nature of nature.

2. The Sexual Case

Begin with Kant's natural teleological argument against non-procreative sex. Again, I am not primarily interested in the morality of sex—or, really, the morality of anything at all. I am interested in the natural teleological form of argument, abstracted from its applications. The sexual case exemplifies this form especially clearly, as well as revealing some of its obvious limitations. It is thus a useful starting point for discussion, though I will quickly enough move beyond it.

Kant's discussion of sexual morality in the *Doctrine of Virtue*—more specifically, the duty not to defile oneself by lust—begins with a discussion of the natural purpose of our sexual capacities or powers: the preservation of the species. Given this purpose, Kant raises the question of whether there is a law of duty according to which we may use our sexual powers only on the condition that they serve that purpose. As he notes, this is not a question about the morally appropriate treatment of one's partner, in which duties to others are at issue. The question here is solely about the morally appropriate treatment of oneself, and whether non-procreative sexual

activities—masturbation, homosexuality, bestiality, and even casual conjugal relations in heterosexual unions—violate the humanity in one’s own person.¹

The answer, Kant thinks, is obvious: yes, they do so violate. Though he makes an apparently perfunctory reference to our treating ourselves as mere means when we engage in these activities, he quickly notes that this fact is insufficient to account for the moral horror we feel at the mere thought of them—a horror expressed in the allegedly common judgment that they are ‘contrary to morality in the highest degree’ (Kant 1797: 6:425). Indeed, Kant goes so far as to compare unnatural sex unfavourably to suicide, in which he also thinks that we treat ourselves as mere means. For, he says, at least suicide requires some degree of courage, which is not wholly at odds with self-respect. Unnatural sex, on the other hand, constitutes a

complete abandonment of oneself to animal inclination, [and thus] makes man not only an object of enjoyment but, still further, a thing that is contrary to nature, that is, a *loathsome* object and so deprives him of all respect for himself. (Kant’s emphasis, Kant 1797: 6:425)

Needless to say, this is strong stuff. But even if we set aside the extremity of Kant’s opprobrium, there remains the question of why he should think that the considerations he has adduced bear any moral weight at all. Indeed, he seems at least dimly aware of the problem here, acknowledging that ‘it is not easy to produce

¹ In the main discussion in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant seems to have masturbation in mind. In the *Lectures on Ethics*, he adds homosexuality and bestiality (Kant 1997b: 27:390-392). Looking at the casuistical questions in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, however, it is clear that Kant regards even non-procreative sexual relations in marriage as suspect, as in cases of spousal sterility (Kant 1797: 6:426).

a rational proof' for his conclusion (Kant 1797: 6:425). And though, again, his first instinct is to advert to the value of humanity, he quickly moves beyond this. In one respect, it seems that he is right to do so, since it is not at all clear how a masturbator, say, treats him or herself as a *mere* means. But, more importantly, Kant really seems to think that it is the unnaturalness of the sex act that is doing the moral work here. As he puts the point succinctly at the beginning of the casuistical questions relating to this duty: 'Nature's end in the cohabitation of the sexes is procreation, that is, the preservation of the species. Hence one may not, at least, act contrary to that end' (Kant 1797: 6:426, my emphasis).

Now, this is a somewhat weaker statement of the point; presumably, not all non-procreative sex is contrary to the end of procreation, even if it fails to advance it.² But, crucially, it still sets up nature as a moral standard. And so we may ask: whence the hence? That is, why does Kant think—or, more to the point, how could he think—that acting contrary to the natural end of procreation is even *prima facie* immoral, much less immoral in the highest degree? After all, this kind of argument seems entirely at odds with fundamental tenets of Kant's moral rationalism, and this in two ways.

First, it seems to violate Kant's view that reason constitutes the *substance* of morality: things matter morally because they bear on the functioning of reason.³ But it is hard to see how the procreativity of sex so bears. Does procreative sex, in virtue of being procreative, help the agent's rational functioning and non-procreative sex, in virtue

² The distinction is explored, for example, by Altman 2010: 324.

³ For further discussion of this claim and its ground, see §5 below.

of being non-procreative, hinder it? It is hard to see why this would be so. (Call this 'the substance problem.')

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the argument seems to violate Kant's view that reason is the *final authority* in morality: things matter morally, in the end, because reason says they do. But the argument Kant advances here grants nature the speaking role, not reason. Nature sets the end to which we must conform. But how could Kant allow this? How could he straightaway infer such a normative conclusion from such a naturalistic premise? It seems he can't. (Call this 'the authority problem.')

Now, with respect to Kant's own argument against non-procreative sex, these objections seem to me decisive. Interpretive gymnastics notwithstanding, I see no way to reconcile this instance of Kant's naturalism with his rationalism. That said, I do not think that these objections defeat every such reconciliation; that is, I believe there is a kind of natural teleological argument that is consistent with reason's being both the substance of morality and its final authority. To begin to show this, I want to consider another of the duties with which Kant groups the duty not to defile oneself by lust: the duty to refrain from stupefying oneself by excessive use of food or drink. As I shall explain, Kant's treatment of this duty suggests that it may be more amenable to rationalist interpretation.

3. The Alimentary Case

Given Kant's discussion of sex, we should expect his argument here to be straightforward. We have capacities to eat and drink — 'alimentary powers,' we may call them — and these powers have a natural purpose, namely, nutrition: the sustenance of the body, the preservation of our physical form. (Nutrition seems the

obvious analogue to procreation.) Thus, there is a law of duty according to which we may use our alimentary powers only on the condition that they serve that purpose. Non-nutritive eating and drinking, then, stand to morality as non-procreative sex does. Both are unnatural and so both are immoral.

Again, this is what one should expect. But, this is not what one finds. When Kant condemns, for example, acts of gluttony and drunkenness, he does not condemn them on the grounds that they are non-nutritive. Indeed, he doesn't even seem to appeal to nutrition here at all, except for his reference to food and drink as 'means of nourishment' (Kant 1797: 6:427). Rather, what he says is this: 'Brutish excess in the use of food and drink is misuse of the means of nourishment that restricts or exhausts our capacity to use them intelligently' (Kant 1797: 6:427). Notice that the purpose by reference to which we evaluate the use or misuse of our alimentary powers is not nutrition *per se*. Instead, it is the further purpose of making intelligent use of our powers.

The phenomenon to which Kant is pointing is clear. As he says, 'when stuffed with food [a human being] is in a condition in which he is incapacitated, for a time, for actions that would require him to use his powers with skill and deliberation' (Kant 1797: 6:427). For example, think how hard it is to negotiate sensitive political discussion or chase a child through a room full of toys immediately after a holiday dinner. Similarly, if I am drunk, I cannot think straight. Lost in an alcoholic haze, I am clumsy in my selection of ends and choice of means. Things that are clearly bad—like driving to an ex's house at three in the morning, demanding to know where things went wrong—might appear good, and I will lack the presence of mind to know the difference.

These are familiar facts, with obvious moral significance. For there is little doubt that the functioning of our rational powers, and so the possibility of effective moral agency, depends on the functioning of our non-rational ones.⁴ We cannot reason and so act well unless we eat and drink well—or, at least, eat and drink well enough so as not to impede the operations of reason within us. Thus, it is the relation of our alimentary powers to rationality and not nutrition *per se* that determines the conditions of their correct use.

The centrality of rationality becomes even more evident once we consider the fact that Kant approves of at least some clearly non-nutritive uses of our alimentary powers. For example, in the casuistical questions, Kant seems open to allowing drinking ‘bordering on intoxication,’ since it ‘enlivens the company’s conversation and in so doing makes them speak more freely’ (Kant 1797: 6:428). Again, the phenomenon is familiar. Alcohol is a social lubricant, easing interactions among people by helping them overcome their natural reserve and so opening them to conversation, which conversation, Kant is clear, is a ‘moral end beyond mere physical well-being’ (Kant 1797: 6:428). And so, as he claims in the *Anthropology*, we have a permission ‘for the sake of social pleasure, to go beyond the borderline of sobriety for a short while’ (Kant 1798: 7:171).

⁴ This is a theme in Lara Denis’ excellent discussion of the role of our animal nature in generating Kantian duties (Denis 1999). It also plays a leading role in Helga Varden’s wonderfully rich reconstruction of Kantian sexual ethics (Varden 2020). But accepting this dependence is not the same as accepting naturalism. Denis, for example, is clear that granting natural teleology this limited role is consistent with holding that ‘the fact that a manner of acting is unnatural neither entails that it is wrong nor explains, if it is wrong, why it is wrong’ (Denis 1999: 236). She is right about this. But she is wrong to suggest that the stronger claim is un-Kantian. Or so I am arguing.

The lesson I want to take from Kant's discussion of food and drink should be clear. For in this case, unlike in the sex case, Kant seems to make what is a recognizably Kantian argument. Though our alimentary powers sustain both body and soul, it is the latter relation rather than the former that sets the conditions of their morally correct use. We use these powers correctly when we use them in a way that helps rather than hinders our rational functioning. Plausibly, this will be enough to establish some presumption in favour of nutritive uses of those powers, since the sustenance of the body is usually necessary in order to sustain rational functioning. But, as we have seen, this presumption can be defeated, since such functioning can sometimes be better served by non-nutritive alimentary acts, for example, drinking to intoxication. This is not mere indulgence. It is a morally appropriate use of our powers, a way of enlisting the body in the service of reason.

Now, one might worry that by privileging rationality in this way, Kant is thereby abandoning naturalism. After all, and again, the obvious candidate for a natural purpose in the alimentary case would seem to be nutrition, to which Kant does not obviously appeal and against which he seems to transgress in his pro-drink argument. But this is not so. Kant is clear that our alimentary powers do have a natural purpose, and that this purpose sets a moral standard. For, as he tells us in his introduction to this class of duties, just as nature aims at the preservation of the species through the use of the subject's sexual powers, so does it aim at the 'preservation of the subject's capacity to use his powers purposively' through the use of his alimentary powers (Kant 1797: 6:420). Thus, the appeal to rationality here is not an alternative to naturalism. It is an instance of it. Natural alimentary acts are just those acts that support and sustain rational functioning.⁵

⁵ Again, though I am not interested at present in the normative adequacy of the argument, it is worth noting that it is not necessarily as restrictive as it might seem. For one, as I have already explained, it

What all this suggests, I think, is that Kant's naturalism is not quite as crude as it might at first appear. In particular, though Kant associates appeals to our specifically human nature with appeals to our animality, he obviously does not mean by this to exclude our rationality. For, he evidently thinks, we are by nature rational animals. As this formulation suggests, I think Kant is aligning himself with the traditional view that human nature is an integrated teleological system with reason at the top. (Call this 'the rationalist conception of human nature.')

Put in Kant's own terms, the human being, like other living beings, is an organized being, in which the parts are for sake of the whole, and the whole is for the sake of itself, in the sense that the whole functions to maintain its own existence: where, distinctively among terrestrial beings, the relevant form of existence is, in the end, a rational one.⁶ So understood, the natural purpose of all aspects of human nature—whatever they are—is, ultimately, to serve reason, to support and sustain rational functioning. In this case, the kind of natural teleological argument that Kant appears to give in the alimentary case is exactly the kind of natural teleological argument we should expect him to give. For, with respect to human nature, *la raison d'être* just is *la raison*.⁷

allows for intoxication, at least in the context of conversation. But more generally, I would argue, it allows for cases, social or solitary, in which alimentary acts are simply enjoyable. After all, such enjoyments are a primary means by and through which we relax, recharge our batteries, so to speak, and so sustain more serious endeavours. The relation between the use of the body and the exercise of reason is no doubt complex. Nothing in the Kantian account should be thought to deny this.

⁶ Kant's privileging of rationality in his account of human nature is evident throughout his work. See, for example, Kant 1784: 8:18-19, Kant 1785: 4:395-6, Kant 1793: 6:26-28, Kant 1798: 7:321-322.

⁷ If there are sex acts that support and sustain rational functioning—as sources of innocent pleasure or opportunities for social engagement, say—then, despite Kant's own animadversions against such acts, his natural teleological argument can be read to recommend them. Of course, Kant has other worries about sex, e.g., the objectifying nature of sexual desire, but these would have to be considered

4. Authority and Evolution: Problems

Again, as I have said, Kant's original deployment of his natural teleological argument in the sexual case seems to fail on account of its inconsistency with his rationalism. But the argument I have drawn from the alimentary case appears to do better. In particular, it seems to avoid what I called 'the substance problem.' For if the rationalist conception of human nature is true, then Kant's claim that only natural uses of those powers are permissible is obviously consistent with things' mattering morally because they bear on the functioning of reason.

But while we can in this way solve the substance problem, other difficulties remain. First and most obviously, what I called 'the authority problem' still looms. After all, this new and improved argument, no less than the old and defective one, involves an inference from a natural teleological premise to a moral conclusion: the natural purpose of our powers is to serve reason; therefore, one may only use them in a way that is consistent with that purpose. But if so, then it seems that it is nature to which we are ultimately answerable. Nature, not reason, tells us what to do, even if what nature tells us to do is to serve reason. Thus, it seems, though this argument is, in one clear sense, more rationalistically respectable than Kant's original, it still falls short. For it is inconsistent with things' mattering morally, in the end, because reason says they do.

on their independent merits. For discussion, see Herman 1993a, Korsgaard 1996, Wood 2008, Langton 2009.

But even apart from the authority problem, another difficulty has come into view. For the key claim on which the argument relies—again, the rationalist conception of human nature—is likely to strike many of us as simply false, at odds with post-Kantian developments in biology, in particular, the Darwinian revolution. And not just because of the uncertain status of teleological claims in evolutionary explanation.⁸ But, more interestingly and worryingly, because the particular teleological claims, whatever their status, that evolution might be taken to support are so evidently at odds with Kant's own. For, it seems, in a Darwinian world, the natural hierarchy has been turned upside down. Put crudely, we do not, as Kant believes, consume and copulate in order to think; on the contrary, we think in order to consume and, especially, copulate. Put less crudely, biologically speaking, the final purpose of all organisms is to survive long enough to reproduce and pass on their genes. And so, ironically in the present context, procreation is, in effect, not merely the purpose of our sexual powers. It is the purpose, in the end, of all our powers, and so, *a fortiori*, of our rational ones.⁹ (Call this 'the evolution problem').

In what follows, I will argue that the two problems of authority and evolution admit of a single solution. Key to this solution is the rejection of what seems to me the underlying assumption on which both problems rest, namely, that the account of human nature to which one appeals in natural teleological arguments is theoretical, of the sort delivered by our best biological science. On the contrary, I claim, the account need not be theoretical. It can be practical: informed by biology, to be sure,

⁸ Contemporary biology is replete with teleological claims, though there remains a robust debate about how to understand them. See Garson 2016 for a useful overview.

⁹ Or, at least, it is the purpose of all those powers that have a purpose. Kant thinks that basically everything in an organism is purposive—indeed, maximally well-suited to its purpose (Kant 1785: 4:395; Kant 1790: 5:376, Kant 1787: B425). Contemporary biology disagrees.

but ultimately ethical in character. In order to explain this conception and its service in solving our problems, I want to step back and consider Kant's moral philosophical methodology more generally. Only by situating appeals to human nature in the broader context of Kant's project can we understand how they might work.

5. Two Concepts of Human Nature

We can approach the issue by considering why Kant is talking about human nature here at all. This might well seem puzzling. For it is often assumed that, as a rationalist, Kant thinks that ethics is concerned with what is true of all rational beings and not merely human ones. Or, at least, what is true of human beings has no bearing on the laws of ethics, the system of duties. At best, it bears on how those laws are to be implemented, those duties fulfilled, in beings such as us.

This assumption is mistaken. Though Kant does think that ethics begins with rational nature, he does not think it ends there. Indeed, he is clear in the introduction to the *Metaphysics of Morals* that

[J]ust as there must be principles in a metaphysics of nature for applying those highest universal principles of a nature in general to objects of experience, a metaphysics of morals cannot dispense with principles of application, and we shall often have to take as our object the particular *nature* of human beings, which is cognized only by experience, in order to *show* in it what can be inferred from universal moral principles. (Kant 1797: 6:216-7, Kant's emphasis)

Explaining in detail how this application proceeds is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to be clear about its outline, since it matters to the Kantian account of human nature. His view, in brief, is this.¹⁰

The metaphysics of morals has two parts. The first part of the metaphysics of morals, executed in the *Groundwork*, starts with the *a priori* concept of a rational being and derives an account of the fundamental law that governs beings of that kind, the first principle of ethics. In sum, this principle tells all rational beings to act only in ways that protect and promote rational functioning, their own and others. But, Kant thinks, it does not yet tell such beings how to do this, which ways of acting actually meet this condition. In order to know this further fact, we must fix the kind of rational being in question. And so, in the second part of the metaphysics of morals, executed in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant takes this fundamental law, applies it to the empirical concept of a particular kind of rational being—in our case, the human being—and derives an account of the fundamental laws that govern beings of that kind, the second principles of ethics. The result is an anthropocentric specification of the generic rational end of rational functioning, limning the shape of a distinctively human rational life.

If this is right, then there should be nothing puzzling about Kant's appeal to human nature. Indeed, it is exactly what one should expect, since it is only by appealing to such a nature that Kant can arrive at any determinate account of our duties at all.

¹⁰ Similar interpretations are suggested by Wood 1999 and 2002, as well as Herman 1993b and 2021. I offer my own elaboration and defence in Elizondo 2022. To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that Wood or Herman would accept what I say here about Kant's naturalism. I note differences with Wood below.

But, for present purposes, it matters not just that human nature enters the story. It also matters how it enters. For it tells us something important and perhaps surprising about the Kantian account of what we are.

Recall, we already know the rudiments of this account. For as we saw in our discussion of Kant's alimentary argument, which belongs to the second part of metaphysics, he seems to accept a rationalist conception of human nature, according to which human nature is an integrated teleological system with reason at the top. It is this conception that allows him to identify as natural those acts that support and sustain rational functioning. The important question for us, then, is not what Kant thinks but why he might think it.

Given Kant's remark that we cognize human nature empirically, it is natural to suppose that he accepts the rationalist conception because he thinks that is what our best natural science tells us. So understood, Kant is treating the human as just another natural object, subject to the same forms of investigation and explanation as any other.¹¹ Thus, though the moral philosopher must make essential use of a concept of human nature, it is not for her to tell us what that nature is; that is outside her remit. It is for the natural scientist, the biologist.

But this isn't quite right. While empirical investigation is certainly relevant—indeed, essential—to our understanding of human nature, it is not the only source of insight that we have. In particular, it is not our only ground for accepting the rationalist

¹¹ Such forms are ultimately mechanical but, as in the case of all living things, teleological too. The relation between the mechanical and the teleological in Kant is complicated. But the complications won't interest us here. It's enough that Kant thinks we must think of living things teleologically.

conception. To see this, consider again Kant's reason for introducing human nature into ethics in the first place, namely, to specify the generic rational end of rational functioning. But if so, then the only concept of human nature that is fit to play this role is one that represents the human being as a rational being, all of whose relevant features bear, instrumentally or constitutively, on its rational functioning. Any other concept would be otiose. But that is just to say, I think, that the rationalist conception is not empirical but *a priori*. It is not derived bottom-up from experience. It is derived top-down from the philosophical function of the concept of the human in the metaphysics of morals.

One might immediately object that this contradicts Kant's assertion that we cognize the particular nature of human beings only by experience. But distinguish two claims: first, that we must observe the human in order to determine that it is a particular kind of rational being; and second, that we must observe the human in order to determine the particular kind of rational being that it is. Kant, I believe, is committed to the latter but not the former. We know in advance of experience that the human is an integrated teleological system with reason at the top. But we require experience in order to know what the elements of this system are, which particular parts constitute this particular whole. Put in more familiar terms, while reason provides us the form of human nature, only experience provides the matter. They are individually necessary but only jointly sufficient to yield a determinate, practical account of what we are.

I emphasize: this tempered rationalism about human nature applies only to practical philosophy. It does not apply to theoretical philosophy, in which human nature does not play the same metaphysically privileged role. Thus, I am not denying that there is a thoroughly empirical, natural scientific (biological) concept of human nature in Kant. Nor, consequently, am I denying that natural scientific investigation

of the human proceeds independently of practical-*cum*-moral concerns. I am simply denying that this concept, and so this investigation, is at issue in the metaphysics of morals.¹²

As this suggests, I read Kant as at least implicitly distinguishing two different (but equally legitimate) concepts of the human bound up with two different (but equally legitimate) interests one might have in human nature.¹³ On the one hand, there is a *theoretical* concept of the human, which we employ when we aim to understand the human's place in the natural order: how it instances natural laws. On the other hand, there is *practical* concept of the human, which we employ when we aim to understand the human's place in the moral order: how it instances moral laws.

¹² According to Wood, the relevant account of human nature is and can only be theoretical, one that understands 'humanity as a biological species in the same way other animals are to be understood' (Wood 1999: 207). He thinks must be the case, lest one be involved in a vicious circularity, since 'the ends of morality are first to be determined by applying the principle of morality to practical anthropology. So at this stage of inquiry they are not yet available to anthropological research' (Wood 1999: 207). If by 'ends of morality' Wood means here the obligatory ends that are elements of the second part of metaphysics, he is no doubt right. But there is an 'end of morality' that is prior to this, the generic rational end of rational functioning, that belongs to the first part of metaphysics. I don't see how appealing to this end, as, in effect, an *a priori* constraint on the concept of human nature at issue, need involve any circularity at all.

¹³ So far as I know, Kant never explicitly makes the distinction. That said, it is at least suggested in the *Anthropology*, where Kant distinguishes physiological from pragmatic anthropology: the former concerning 'what nature makes of the human being' and the latter concerning what the human being 'as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself' (Kant 1798: 7:119). In any case, I think the distinction is presupposed by Kant's actual philosophical practice, and so is credibly Kantian, even if Kant himself does not explicitly endorse it.

To be clear, though these concepts differ in their functions, defined by the kinds of inquiries in which they figure, they need not differ in their contents. This makes it especially easy to overlook the distinction between them and so especially important to take care in interpreting anthropological claims.

Two points here:

First, though it is hard to say for sure, Kant seems to think (at least sometimes) that the contents of these concepts do not in fact differ.¹⁴ More specifically, he seems to think that whether we understand the human as a natural object or as a moral object, we will converge on the view that human nature is an integrated teleological system with reason at the top. But even if he were right about this, it would remain, so to speak, a happy accident. For while the rationalist conception is, on the practical side, an *a priori* claim, its truth settled by the function of the concept in the metaphysics of morals; on the theoretical side, it is an empirical claim, its truth settled by the course of natural scientific investigation. These settlements might converge. But then again, they might not.

Second, if we individuate these concepts according to their function rather than their content, then it will not be possible to infer the function from the content. In particular, it will not be possible to examine, in isolation, any given teleological claim about human nature—including, of course, the rationalist conception itself—and straightaway know whether it employs a theoretical or practical concept. It

¹⁴ Since Kant never explicitly makes the distinction, it is hard to know what he is saying when. But see again the citations in note 6. At least some of these, e.g., in the Universal History essay, strike me as plainly theoretical.

could be the one, the other, or both. The only way to figure this out is to contextualize the claim by determining the kind of inquiry to which it belongs. For again, it is the inquiry that defines the function.

6. The Practical Concept of Human Nature

By emphasizing the distinctiveness and centrality of the practical concept of the human, I do not mean to suggest that natural scientific (biological) investigation is irrelevant to our present concerns. After all, and again, though we know in advance of experience that the human, practically conceived, is an integrated teleological system with reason at the top, we nonetheless require experience in order to know what the elements of this system are, which particular parts constitute this particular whole.

To this extent, we can represent the construction of a determinate, practical account of human nature as a multi-stage process. First, we determine, through practical reason, the practical form of human nature in the guise of the rationalist conception. Second, we determine, through experience, the possible matter in which this form can be realized or instantiated. Third, we determine, through the collaboration of reason and experience, which elements of this possible matter actually realize or instantiate the relevant form. Then and only then will we cognize the particular nature of human beings in the manner necessary to complete the metaphysics of morals.

Now, if natural scientific investigation really did deliver a rationalist conception of human nature, then this process would be straightforward. After all, if the scientifically determined, natural purpose of this or that empirically discernible part really were to serve reason, then we could straightaway import this result and put it

to practical work. For what is natural to the human, theoretically conceived, and what is natural to the human, practically conceived, would be one and the same.

But, again, things might not be so simple. If natural scientific investigation did not deliver a rationalist conception of human nature, then we could not straightaway import its results. Nonetheless, we could still make use of them.

To see how this might go, consider a perhaps surprising analogy: evolutionary reasoning in biology.¹⁵ To take a familiar example, the peacock's tail is an empirically discernible feature of the peacock. Observing this feature, the biologist asks after its function or purpose, where this is understood in terms of the role it plays in the peacock's reproductive fitness. Famously, this is difficult to discern, since a large tail seems like a liability. But the standard answer, appealing to the theory of sexual selection, is that this cost is offset by a benefit: the signal the tail sends to the peahen about the peacock's genetic quality. So, though the tail may not seem to have a natural, biological purpose, it really does, insofar as it really supports the peacock's fitness.

What interests me here is not, of course, the content of this reasoning but its structure—in particular, the fact that the biologist determines the purpose of an empirically discernible part of the organism by looking to the purpose of the whole. Faced with the peacock's tail, the biologist examines how it serves the peacock's reproductive fitness; and in so doing, she determines its role in the peacock's life and

¹⁵ I set aside many obvious complications, involving units of selection, adaptationism, etc. Even if what I say here is not exactly correct, I think it captures a familiar way of representing biological reasoning, one that serves my analogical purposes.

so its natural purpose. In this way, the whole-organism purpose of reproductive fitness controls, to speak, the biologist's teleological inquiry: framing her questions and delimiting their answers.

The practical anthropologist, I claim, can be understood as doing something similar. She is determining the purpose of an empirically discernible part by looking to the purpose of the whole. But where the evolutionary biologist, on theoretical grounds, identifies this purpose with reproductive fitness, the practical anthropologist, on practical grounds, identifies it with rational functioning. The idea, then, is that faced with this part, the practical anthropologist will examine how it serves reason; and in so doing, she determines its role in human life, and so its natural if only practical purpose. In this way, the whole-organism purpose of rational functioning controls the practical anthropologist's teleological inquiry: framing her questions and delimiting their answers.

So, say, presented with our empirically discernible communicative powers, like the power of speech, the practical anthropologist will ask how they serve reason. More specifically, she will look for patterns in the relation between these powers and rational functioning, for example, how the use of those powers bears on that functioning by allowing for the expression of thought, the engagement of reason, etc. If these patterns are sufficiently general and persistent, common to enough humans across a wide range of circumstances, then she will judge that our communicative powers are aspects of the empirical infrastructure supporting rational functioning in beings such as us. And this, I claim, will be enough to conclude that, from the

practical point of view if not from the theoretical, this is what these features are for, their purpose in the teleological system of human nature.¹⁶

Unfortunately, Kant doesn't seem to make such arguments, at least not explicitly, and so his own account of human nature remains obscure. One can infer aspects of his outlook from various discussions, but it is no mean feat to figure out what he thinks or even should think; both because it is difficult to discern, in the present terms, what in his views belongs to theory and what to practice, and because the deliverances of experience, shaped by science, remain in flux. Nonetheless, the methodological necessity of the practical account, as a condition of completing the metaphysics of morals, is enough, I think, to show Kantian naturalism in a new light.

7. The Natural Teleological Argument, Practically Construed

Return, then, to the natural teleological argument. Take the duty not to stupefy oneself by excessive use of food and drink. Recall, I read the argument roughly as follows. The natural purpose of our alimentary powers is to support and sustain rational functioning. Eating or drinking to stupefaction hinders rational functioning. So, eating or drinking to stupefaction is unnatural and therefore immoral.

Now, the first premise may seem to come out of nowhere or, more generously, from an off-stage biological theory on which Kant implicitly relies. But if what I just said about the role of human nature in the metaphysics of morals is correct, this is not so. For if the argument instances the logic of this metaphysics, the premise must make

¹⁶ Something like this thought underlies Kant's natural teleological argument against lying (Kant 1797: 6:429).

use of a practical rather than a theoretical concept of the human. And according to this concept, if something is a genuine feature of human nature, then it must have the purpose of supporting and sustaining rational functioning.

So understood, the first premise might seem to border on the trivial. But this isn't quite right, since it is not trivial that our alimentary powers belong to human nature. Put another way, the interesting question to ask here is not: given this feature of human nature, what is its purpose? So long as we restrict ourselves to the practical concept, the answer is obvious, rational functioning. The interesting question is: is this really a feature of human nature? And this question, again, is not answered by the biologist. It is answered by the biologically informed practical anthropologist.

It is a consequence of this, I think, that the first premise is not as independent of the second as it might seem. Or, at least, the kinds of considerations that would support the second premise are the same kinds of considerations that would support the first. For the discovery that how we eat and drink affects how we reason—and so, that eating and drinking beyond a certain point can impair our reasoning—reveals exactly the sort of empirical pattern that should lead the practical anthropologist to conclude that our alimentary powers are elements of human nature, practically construed.

This brings us to the conclusion, which has two parts: first, that eating and drinking to stupefaction is unnatural; and second, that because eating and drinking to stupefaction is unnatural, it is immoral. The first part, I take it, follows straightaway from the previous premises. But what about the second part? Why would Kant think that he can immediately infer immorality from unnaturalness?

Well, if the relevant concept of human nature is practical, this turns out to be a rather easy inference. For, contrary to appearance, morality doesn't only enter at the end of the argument. It is there from the beginning, underwriting the initial assignment of purposes. Thus, the concluding inference is less impressive than it seems. It is not a mysterious transition from a biological to a moral order, as it would be if it relied on a theoretical concept of human nature. On the contrary, it is simply spelling out what it is already implicit in the premises.

This is not to say that there is no point in running out these arguments. For they make plain, I think, that the basic structure of human morality mirrors the basic structure of human life. That is to say, for every kind of empirically discernible human activity that bears on rational functioning—eating and drinking, having sex, speaking, etc.—we can expect there to be a corresponding duty charged with regulating that activity, distinguishing good, that is, reason-supporting, and bad, that is, reason-undermining, instances. In this way, the practical account of human nature in effect provides a principle for the individuation of our duties. This, I suggest, is what the natural teleological arguments help us see: the specific ways in which activities that are natural to humans can be rendered rational, venues through which reason expresses itself in us and so the world.

8. Authority and Evolution: Solutions

If this reading of the natural teleological argument is plausible, then I think we are at last in a position to solve our outstanding problems: authority and evolution. Take each in turn.

With regard to the authority problem, the worry was that Kant's natural teleological arguments involve an inference from a naturalistic premise to a moral conclusion.

But this seems to make nature rather than reason the final moral authority; in the end, nature tells us what to do, not reason, even if what nature tells us to do is to follow reason. But if the naturalistic premise makes use of a practical rather than theoretical concept of human nature, then there is no problem. For since the practical concept is framed by practical reason for the purpose of specifying its end, appealing to it is already, implicitly, appealing to reason. So, to say, for example, that we should not drink to incapacitation because doing so is contrary to the natural purpose of our alimentary powers is not to say that something other than reason is telling us what to do. Rather, it is reason itself, since the natural purpose of our powers is, in the way I have described, already determined by reason. In this way, Kantian naturalism is consistent with Kantian rationalism.

With regard to the evolution problem, the worry was the rationalist conception of human nature, on which the cogency of the natural teleological argument relies, is at odds with our best biological science. For according to this science, the final purpose of all organisms, and so their constituent powers, is not rational functioning but reproductive fitness. But if the relevant concept of human nature is practical rather than theoretical, then there is no problem. For, as I have explained, the two concepts bear fundamentally different relations to the rationalist conception in virtue of their different functions. Consequently, even if the rationalist conception turns out to be false of the human, theoretically speaking, it can still be—and indeed is—true of the human, practically speaking. In this way, Kantian naturalism is consistent with modern science.¹⁷

¹⁷ Again, to the extent that we require experience to discern the matter of human nature, natural science will be relevant. That said, not all matters can realize all forms. And so, even if the rationalist conception is consistent with modern science, such science could nevertheless reveal a creature so chaotic that there is no way of fitting its various parts together into a compossible whole, united in

To be sure, many questions remain, especially about the fit between the abstract form of argument I have defended and its more concrete applications, both in Kant and in life. Key to these applications will be the practical account of human nature, which, as I have noted, requires much more development than Kant provides. That said, if my argument is correct, then such development is of the first importance. For despite the widespread tendency to dismiss or deride the naturalistic elements of Kantian ethics, there are sound systematic and philosophical reasons to take them very seriously indeed.

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the service of reason. (See Williams 1995 for discussion.) The consequence of such a conclusion would be profound. For it would mean, in effect, that there is no such thing as human nature, practically construed, and so no way of completing the metaphysics of morals. I don't think this is what the science reveals, but the issue deserves independent discussion.

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