

AUTONOMY OF PRACTICAL REASON AND ITS LIMIT: KANT'S THEORY OF PRACTICAL INTEREST¹

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Abstract

The concept of interest is one of the least treated concepts in the studies of Kant's philosophy even though he uses this concept in every field of his philosophy. But in practical reason, Kant's philosophy faces a specific difficulty with this concept because the reason makes itself autonomic only by excluding inclinations as motives to moral activity. This paper analyses two interest concepts, both of which Kant names practical, but with different meanings: one is practical interest (1) in opposition to the pathological one; the other is also practical interest (2) but now in opposition to the theoretical or speculative one. Because of their definitions, they should be two different concepts, but I maintain they are connected very closely to each other, and it is in this connection where the autonomy of the practical reason should be ensured and at the same time, where it is exposed to its limit.

The concept of interest has many variations in Kant's philosophy, in each field of theoretical, or practical reason or the capacity of judgment.² But his uses of this concept are not always consistent, which is why it has been treated as peripheral³ or one of the "side issues".⁴ Habermas' *Erkenntnis und Interesse*⁵ contributed to the focus on this concept in the '70s,⁶ but it seems to have been forgotten in the late years.⁷

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² The concepts of the speculative and the practical interest already appear in the Antinomy of Pure Reason of the *First Critique* (B494ff.). Besides for example: the architectural interest (A475=B503); the interest in the extent and the interest in the content (A654f.=B682f.). See also: V, 271.

Apart from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, all references to Kant are to *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, herausgegeben von Königlich Preußischen (später Deutschen) Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin, 1902ff. References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* are to the standard A and B pagination of the first and second editions. I used the following English translations of Kant's works:

Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. Translated by Norman Kemp Smith. London / Basingstoke: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1970 (Reprinted).

'Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals', in H. J. Paton, *The Moral Law. Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals. A New Translation with Analysis and Notes*. London: Hutchinson & Co., 1964 (Reprinted).

'The Critique of Practical Reason'. Translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, in *Great Books of the Western World 42, Kant*. Chicago/London/Toronto/Geneva: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1952.

³ Hutter 2003, S. 1.

⁴ Paton 1946, p. 223.

⁵ Habermas 1968b, 1968a.

⁶ For example: Neuendorff 1973, Dallmayr 1974.

⁷ As exceptions: Hutter 2003, Müller-Doohm 2000.

This paper focuses on two pairs of interest concepts, which play important roles in the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. One consists of practical and pathological interests; the other consists of speculative and practical interests. Although the concept of practical interest appears in both pairs, one concept of interest is significant contrary to its counter-concept. This relativity is the essence of this concept. Therefore these two practical interests must be at first distinguished. In the *Groundwork* and the *Second Critique*, these concepts concern fundamental problems in Kant's concept of practical reason.

The first pair refers exclusively to the practical use of reason. Each of them determines the will. The practical interest in this pair means an interest, the principle of which cannot be experience, but which is a "pure interest", whereas pathological interest is empirical, and therefore not pure. On the contrary, the second pair refers to the two uses of reason. The practical interest makes the field of practical reason itself possible, in which the first pair is valid, whereas speculative interest ensures the field of theoretical reason, which was the main object of the *First Critique*. This pair enables the division of two sorts of reason, speculative reason and practical reason, which lays the foundation of Kant's critical system concept.

But, can this pair of interests be the subject of this paper, which restricts its theme to the field of practical reason? Kant says in the *Groundwork* that the subject of 'critique of practical reason' is to unify the two distinct reasons.

On the other hand, a critique of practical reason, if it is to be complete, requires, on my view, that we should be able at the same time to show the unity of practical and theoretical reason in a common principle, since in the end there can only be one and same reason, which must be differentiated solely in its application. (IV, 391)⁸

This plan of the 'critique of practical reason' should have changed later,⁹ and the solution to this problem should be postponed to the *Third Critique*. But the *Critique of Practical Reason* must solve this problem in a certain sense. These two pairs of the concept of interest refer to the two problems that Kant should solve in practical reason:

- 1) How are we motivated to act morally?
- 2) How is it possible that 'one and same reason' is both theoretical and practical?

I. *Practical Interest and Pathological Interest*

1.1 The Definition of Interest and the Analyticity Thesis

Kant's theories of moral law and freedom, which are ultimately indistinguishable, are characterized by their radical formality. Kantian moral law is possible only in the renunciation of materiality. The Categorical Imperative demands its fulfilment only because of itself, not of its effect, which is why Kant reproaches the moral empiricism in the *Groundwork* and the *Second Critique*.¹⁰ Only by this formality can his moral theory obtain its objectivity (although

⁸ "[T]heils erfordere ich zur Kritik einer reinen praktischen Vernunft, daß, wenn sie vollendet sein soll, ihre Einheit mit der speculativen in einem gemeinschaftlichen Princip zugleich müsse dargestellt werden können, weil es doch am Ende nur eine und dieselbe Vernunft sein kann, die bloß in der Anwendung unterschieden sein muß"

⁹ Henrich 1975, S. 60f.

¹⁰ It is a critique of the Epicureans and the school of the moral sense. Höffe 2002, S. 14, also S. 7.

it sounds paradoxical), because material goodness, such as pleasure, depends on the subject.

When we realize this fundamental concept of his moral theory, it seems impossible to introduce the concept of interest. It could make the moral law 'subjective', when one looks for the motive of moral activity in his interests; it might also fall into moral empiricism, when they were empirical. It is the reason why the inclinations ("Neigungen") are excluded from the moral activities (IV, 398f.). The interest is also once excluded, just because it would make the reason heteronomic, and oppose the third formula of the Categorical Imperative. It would make it hypothetical, when the moral activity would be motivated by the outer interest.

But on the contrary, Kant speaks of the concept of interest in its positive sense. Just after he claims no interest urges ("treibt") the I to the moral activity, he says: "but all the same I must necessarily *take* (nehmen) an interest in it and understand how this happens" (IV, 449).¹¹ Here he tries to make a distinction between the "taking an interest (Interesse nehmen)" and the "acting from interest (aus dem Interesse handeln)" (IV, 413). That distinction between the practical and the pathological interests consists in this distinction. But how is it possible?

At first, we have to confirm the definition of interest by Kant himself. He gives a couple of definitions. But the most appropriate one in our context is:

Die Abhängigkeit des Begehungsvermögens von Empfindungen heißt Neigung, und diese beweiset also jederzeit ein Bedürfnis. Die Abhängigkeit eines zufällig bestimmbar Willens aber von Principien der Vernunft heißt ein Interesse. (IV, 413, Anm)¹²

Here, the interest is defined in contrast to inclination ("Neigung"). Both are kinds of dependence, but inclination refers to the faculty of desire in general ("Begehungsvermögen"), whereas interest refers to the will. The former depends on the senses, whereas this depends on the principles of reason. He emphasizes this point in that he puts the word 'aber' before 'von Principien der Vernunft'. But we cannot understand this in such a way that the interests always depend on moral law. If so, we could not understand why he distinguishes practical interest from pathological interest. It depends on the understanding of the word 'principle,' and relates to the disputed thesis regarding the analyticity or reciprocity of freedom and morality.

This is the thesis, which we find for example in the formulation: "a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same" (IV, 447).¹³ Because this sentence can be understood in the way that every free will is good, it has been taken up and disputed in the literature on Kant's moral philosophy.¹⁴ Attaching this to the definition of interest, we would think that the pathological interest would be only a dependence on the inclination, and the practical interest would consist only in the exclusion of them as motives of action, which might mean freedom.

But the inclination in Kant's sense depends on the natural, blind necessity and belongs to the animality of human beings. In this necessity, there should be no room for the principles of reason. If there were only dualism between natural necessity and freedom/morality, we could not make a distinction between pathological interest and inclination. But Kant distinguishes

¹¹ "[A]ber ich muß doch hieran nothwendig ein Interesse nehmen und einsehen, wie das zugeht".

¹² I have to cite this passage in German. Paton's translation is: "The dependence of the power of appetite on sensations is called an inclination, and thus an inclination always indicates a need. The dependence of a contingently determinable will on principles of reason is called an interest".

¹³ "[E]in freier Wille und ein Wille unter sittlichen Gesetzen [ist] einerlei".

¹⁴ See, Paton 1946, pp. 213-219; Schönecker/Wood 2002, S.174; Allison 2000.

between subjective principles and moral law. Namely ‘principle’ is a generic term of the objective principle, which is the same as the moral law, and the subjective, which Kant names maxim (IV, 420-421), and he means only this one by the “Principien der Vernunft”. When the objective moral law is adopted as a subjective principle (maxim), the will is moral and free. But it does not exclude the possibility of adopting maxims that do not meet the objective moral law. The pathological interest indicates these principles, not inclinations itself.

Both the inclinations and the moral law are, if indeed in different ways, objective; on the contrary interests are always subjective. We can consciously choose principles dependent on the inclination or other principles dependent on moral law. The analyticity thesis must be understood under this distinction. Kant himself was not always careful about it. But when Kant defines Evil (“das Böse”) in his *Religion*, he is very conscious about it: The Evil does not consist in the inclination, but in the freedom to chose to subordinate the moral law to it (VI, 36).

1.2. The Practical Interest as a Moral Feeling

So Kant classifies interests into “the practical interest in the action” and “the pathological interest in the object of the action”. That is the dependence of the will on the principle of reason itself; this is also the dependence on the principle of reason, but “at the service of inclination (zum Behuf der Neigung)” (IV, 413). What this distinction means is already clear for us after we know the pathological interest is not the same as the inclination. It was not this but the pathological interest, that the formula of autonomy excludes out of the will. The aim of Kant’s description is rather practical interest. But how is it possible that free will depends on interest? Kant finds the solution to this problem in the concept of “the respect for moral law” (“die Achtung auf das moralische Gesetz”).¹⁵ It is a feeling, but a “purely moral (rein moralisch)” one (IV, 413), the feeling, which the reason itself brings about. Reason has “a power to infuse a feeling of pleasure or satisfaction in the fulfilment of duty” (IV, 460).¹⁶ Kant already talks about this theme in the *Groundwork* I, but it has systematic status only in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, in the third Chapter of Analytic, which is called the “Aesthetic of Pure Practical Reason” by Beck.¹⁷ I have to be motivated only by the moral law itself, which I set. I propose to call it ‘practical self-affection’, though it isn’t the affection of the inner sense as experience like the theoretical one (V, 80). Its specific features have already been discussed in the *Groundwork*. Respect as such a feeling “means merely consciousness of the subordination of my will to a law without the mediation of external influences on my senses” (IV, 401).¹⁸ It is this moral feeling that enables the famous distinction between morality and legality.

There are two questions regarding this Kantian theory of moral feeling: It might be firstly asked, whether the motive of the moral action is the moral law itself or the respect for this. But

¹⁵ The word “Achtung” can be translated to the reverence as well as to the respect. It includes these two meanings. But I use this word because its meaning is weaker. Walker 2000, S. 97.

¹⁶ “Um das zu wollen, wozu die Vernunft allein dem sinnlich-afficirten vernünftigen Wesen das Sollen vorschreibt, dazu gehört freilich ein Vermögen der Vernunft, ein Gefühl der Lust oder des Wohlgefallens an der Erfüllung der Pflicht einzufüßen”.

¹⁷ Beck 1995, S. 197.

¹⁸ “[Achtung bedeutet] bloß das Bewußtsein der Unterordnung meines Willens unter einem Gesetze ohne Vermittelung anderer Einflüsse auf meinen Sinn”.

as we have just seen, the interest or motivation is always subjective, whereas the moral law is objective. It is impossible that the moral law itself is the motivation for the moral action, but simply the moral feeling affected by this, although Kant himself sometimes expresses otherwise.¹⁹ Secondly, we may ask whether this theory really maintains the autonomy of the practical reason.

Kant ensures it by his claim of the reversibility between the respect for the moral law and the humiliation (“Demütigung”) or the intellectual depreciation (“die intellektuelle Verachtung”) of inclinations. The categorical imperative commands to despise the inclinations. The respect consists in this despising. The “Achtung auf das Gesetz” and the “Verachtung der Neigungen” are two sides of the same coin. So it is possible to speak of practical interest without spoiling the autonomy of the will.

1.3. The Limit of Practical Reason and Interest

Since Habermas determined the interest as a Concept of Limit (Grenzbegriff), it has been usual to connect it to Kant's claim regarding the limit of practical reason.²⁰ Kant really talks about the inexplicability of this concept both in the *Groundwork* and the *Second Critique*. Besides Kant claims that this inexplicability is inseparable from the inexplicability of freedom, which is the heart of Kant's moral philosophy. But it has been ignored that there is a difference between Kant's positions in the *Groundwork* and in the *Second Critique* regarding this point. We will examine his assertions in these texts.

The limit of practical reason is the main theme of the last part of *Groundwork III*, which is named “The Extreme Limit of Practical Philosophy (Von der äußersten Grenze aller praktischen Philosophie)”.²¹ Here Kant says: “Hence for us men it is wholly impossible to explain how and why the universality of a maxim as a law — and therefore morality — should interest us” (IV, 460).²² This passage includes two questions of “How” and “Why”. They are both unexplainable, because these problems bridge two distinct fields, Noumena and Phaenomena. We cannot therefore apply the Categories, which are applicable only to this field, especially the one of causality, only by which we can explain (“erklären”) something, to this case. But this assertion is not sufficient to ensure the inexplicability, because Kant gives some *a priori* explanations for example regarding the duties or the Categorical Imperative. Why is there no room for an *a priori* explanation for practical interest? We can find some modifications in his arguments in the *Second Critique*, and he is inclined to admit the possibility of *a priori* explaining only about the “How”-problem:

“[I]n this we have the first, perhaps the only, instance in which we are able from *a priori* considerations to determine the relation of a cognition (in this case of pure practical reason) to the feeling of pleasure or displeasure”. (V, 73)²³

¹⁹ Beck 1995, S. 208f.

²⁰ Habermas 1968b, S. 249.

²¹ Henrich calls the *Groundwork III* a dark chapter (Henrich 1975).

²² “[S]o ist die Erklärung, wie und warum uns die Allgemeinheit der Maxime als Gesetzes, mithin die Sittlichkeit interessire, uns Menschen gänzlich unmöglich”.

²³ “Hier haben wir nun den ersten, vielleicht auch einzigen Fall, da wir aus Begriffen *a priori* das Verhältniß eines Erkenntnisses (hier ist es einer reinen praktischen Vernunft) zum Gefühl der Lust oder Unlust bestimmen konnten”.

We, the human beings, can so hardly answer the question: “how can moral law itself be directly the motive for moral activities?” as another one: “how is a free will possible?”. That “How can”-problem is not a “How”-problem, but actually a “Why”-problem (V, 72). We cannot answer the question regarding the reason of interest, but we can do so for the one on how practical interest works or what effects interest has in the mind (“Gemüt”), and we can do it *a priori* (V, 72). It is the respect for the moral law that answers this question.

The ‘Ought-to (Sollen)’ in the *Phaenomena* is the ‘Willing (Wollen)’ in the *Noumena* (IV, 449). The members of the noumenal world, our personalities, *will* obey the moral law. But for us as members of the phenomenal world, as beings under the sensual condition, moral law has an ought-to-character, and the form of the Categorical Imperative. Respect for moral law is the feeling, which accompanies the moral law when it is supposed as duty (V, 72). But it remains in itself unexplainable for our finite reason.

II. *Speculative Interest and Practical Interest*

2.1. The aims of the *Groundwork* and the *Second Critique*

It is obvious that this distinction between speculative interest and practical interest matches the one between theoretical reason and practical reason. But it is very important to realize that there are not two reasons, but two uses of the same reason, which are dependent on these two kinds of interest.²⁴ It is very suggestive that Kant announces the structure of his critical system by three questions in the “Canon of Pure Reason” of the *First Critique*. They are the questions: 1. “What can I know?” 2. “What ought I to do?” and 3. “What may I hope?” (A 805=B833). The *First Critique*, especially its *Dialectics* as discipline dealt with the first question. The second question is assigned to the moral theory. Therefore it is not treated there. But as for the third question, which is both practical and theoretical at the same time, he picks it up there, because it can help answer the theoretical, and the speculative questions.

Section II of the Canon, which deals with the third question, anticipates the *Dialectics* of the *Second Critique*. It is also the task of the *Groundwork*, especially of its II and III to answer the third question.²⁵ As we know, Kant says in the preface to the *Groundwork* that the “Critique of Practical Reason” deals with the unification of two distinct uses of reason. It is this third question to which it gives the answer. We can say therefore the main aim of the *Critique of Practical Reason* consists in its *Dialectics*, which gives the answer to the question in a certain way, too.

2.2. Primacy of Practical Reason / Priority of Practical Interest

It is easy to realize “the Highest Good (das höchste Gut)” as the unity of virtue and happiness, which is the object of the *Dialectics* of Practical Reason, belongs both to speculative interest and to practical interest, for the virtue as obedience to the duties belongs to practical interest, to causality as freedom, while happiness as sensual belongs to the natural causality as

²⁴ Hutter 2003, S. 30.

²⁵ Höffe 2002a.

blind necessity. The Categorical Imperative does not promise this happiness, and therefore neither the Highest Good.

It is here where the antinomy of practical reason appears. Practical antinomy consists in the opposition between two propositions, one that to seek for happiness is virtue (Epicureans) and the other that to obey duties is happiness (Stoics). Kant takes up the concepts of interest once more in his claim of the primacy of practical reason, which is one solution to this antinomy of practical reason beside the postulate theory. He says:

From this solution of the antinomy of practical pure reason, it follows that in practical principles we may at least conceive as possible a natural and necessary connection between the consciousness of morality and the expectation of a proportionate happiness as its result, though it does not follow that we can know or perceive this connection. (V, 119)²⁶

The theory of primacy of practical reason as the solution to the antinomy is immediately in our power (“unmittelbar in unserer Gewalt”), whereas the postulate theory is not in our power, (ibid.).

Kant explains his claim of the primacy of practical reason with the concepts of interest in the following way:

In a narrower practical sense it [primacy] means the prerogative of the interest of one in so far as the interest of the other is subordinated to it, while it is not postponed to any other. (V, 119)²⁷

Namely the primacy of practical reason over theoretical reason means the priority of practical interest to theoretical interest. But his explanation regarding this claim is insufficient. He tries to justify it with another assertion: “all interest is ultimately practical” (V, 121)²⁸ and says: “even that [the interest] of speculative reason is conditional, and it is only in the practical employment of reason that it is complete” (ibid.).²⁹ But he cannot justify it.

There are at least three implicit hypotheses behind this claim for the priority of practical interest. They are very important not only for understanding Kant's moral philosophy, but also for his concept of the critical system as a whole: The first is that only practical reason can ensure the reality of the ideas (“Ideen”), which are the objects of the Transcendental Dialectic, and of the Postulates of Practical Reason: the immortality of soul, freedom, and God. From that point of view, the claim of the primacy of practical reason depends on the other solution of the antinomy by the postulates in the Practical Dialectics. It for itself cannot hold the possibility of the ideas and gives no answer to the last of those three questions: “What may I hope?”. But it is a *conditio sine qua non* of the solution of the antinomy. Secondly, he assumes

²⁶ “Aus dieser Auflösung der Antinomie der praktischen reinen Vernunft folgt, daß sich in praktischen Grundsätzen eine natürliche und nothwendige Verbindung zwischen dem Bewußtsein der Sittlichkeit und der Erwartung einer ihr proportionirten Glückseligkeit, als Folge derselben, wenigstens als möglich denken (darum aber freilich noch eben nicht erkennen und einsehen) lasse”.

²⁷ “In engerer, praktischer Bedeutung bedeutet es [das Primat] den Vorzug des Interesse des einen, so fern ihm (welches keinem andern nachgesetzt werden kann) das Interesse der andern untergeordnet ist”.

²⁸ “weil alles Interesse zuletzt praktisch ist”.

²⁹ “[weil] selbst das [Interesse] der speculativen Vernunft nur bedingt und im praktischen Gebrauche allein vollständig ist”.

without any justifications the ontological primacy of the intelligible world, which is the object of practical reason, over the sensual world, only to which the theoretical reason can refer.³⁰ The “Phaenomena” are only an appearance of things in itself. Only as members of this world are we real (eigentlich), as Kant says, “the law interests us because it is valid for us as men in virtue of having sprung from our will as intelligence and so from our proper self” (IV, 461).³¹ Thirdly (it relates also to the first point) this priority of practical interest is concerned with the aim of Kant’s entire critical project, at least of the two first *Critiques*. It is by practical interest that “a pure practical faith of reason (ein reiner praktischer Vernunftglaube)” is established (V, 146). We can refer to his assertion in the preface to the second edition of the *First Critique*: “I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith” (B XXX).³² We can expect (hoffen) the Highest Good (das höchste Gut) only under this belief. It is the aim of the critique to guarantee room for the belief, and it is possible by the inexplicability of practical interest.

It discloses that the inexplicability of the moral law as the “Fact of Reason (Faktum der Vernunft)”³³ is the same as the one of practical interest as a motive for the moral activity. When it is true, we have reached the point, where we can mediate two sorts of practical interest, which are at first distinguished. For the question “how is pure reason practical?” we already have an answer in the respect for the moral law as the moral feeling. Kant says actually we could not claim the primacy of practical interest over theoretical interest, if that were only pathological (V, 120). Practical interest as moral feeling provides the foundation for the other practical interest, which leads us to the other more important field of the reason than one of the theoretical reason.

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³⁰ Schönecker/Wood 2002, S. 197ff.

³¹ “So viel ist nur gewiß: [...] daß es [das moralische Gesetz] interessirt, weil es für uns als Menschen gilt, da es aus unserem Willen als Intelligenz, mithin aus unserem eigentlichen Selbst entsprungen ist”.

³² “Ich mußte also das Wissen aufheben, um zum Glauben Platz zu bekommen”.

³³ See, e.g. V, 31.

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