Rationally Determinable Conditions & Kant's Agent

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> Everything in nature works in accordance with laws. Only a rational being has the capacity to act *in accordance with the representation* of laws

Groundwork II, 4:412
Immanuel Kant

1 What is it to Act Rationally?

- **Q**: How should we understand the notion of rational activity, and more broadly, of what it is to be a rational being?

1.1 Rationally Determinable Conditions

A	B
Intending to go the club	Having tinnitus
Knowing that one is 41	Being 41
Judging that one is tired	Feeling tired
Experiencing the window's shattering by the ball	Hearing a crash
Attending to the evidential ground of a judgment	Having one's attention drawn by a loud noise

- These lists include acts, events, and states of various kinds; Let's use the term "condition" to denote any act, event, or state.

- All of the entries in (A) have (or typically have) a rational basis. This is not so for the entries in (B). What explains this difference?[1]

- Why are some conditions such that there can be a rational basis for them, but other conditions not? Why are some conditions 'rationally determinable' while others are not?

  - Neta talks of RDCs in terms of acting 'in light of' a reason. What does it take to act in light of a reason?

[1] All of the items on the left-hand list are conditions that have the following property: there can be a reason in light of which the agent is in that condition. But none of the items on the right-hand list have that property: there can be a reason why the agent suffers from tinnitus, or feels tired, but no reason in light of which she suffers from tinnitus, or feels tired, etc. I will henceforth use the phrase "rationally determinable conditions" to denote all of the conditions that go on the left-hand list, i.e., all those conditions which are such that there can be a reason in light of which the agent is in them. (Neta 2018, 289)

– Rephrasing our initial answer Neta claims that a rational being is one at least some of whose conditions can be determined *in light of* reasons rather than (at most) merely *for* reasons.

- Common features of RDCs:

  1. Active
  2. Agency (i.e. 'doings' as opposed to 'happenings')
  3. Fundamental responsibility
  4. Deontic modal status (permission and requirement)

- RDCs are activities performed by agents, for which they are ultimately responsible, and which are subject to deontic norms of requirement or permissability

1.2   *The Kantian Approach*

- Kantian approaches are distinctive in requiring that self-consciousness be involved (in some sense) in any RDC, such that the following condition holds.

Self-Consciousness: Necessarily, any being with the capacity for rational determination is a being with the capacity for non-observational self-consciousness, and the two capacities are non-accidentally linked

- However, there are a variety of different ways of understanding this self-consciousness condition, both as to the nature of the self-consciousness requirement itself, and as to the fundamentality of the requirement.[2]

Reflection theories: RDCs are marked by the role that *reflective* self-consciousness plays in bringing about, sustaining, and extinguishing them[3]

Mesh theories: RDCs are those that stand in the right sort of *non-causal* relation to other mental states/acts/etc., such that they "mesh" in an appropriate way

- Such instances of proper mesh include

  – Higher-order identification with lower-order volitions (Frankfurt)
  – Harmony between one's evaluative judgments and one's desires (Watson)
  – Reflective endorsement of lower-order states (Korsgaard)
  – Governance of lower-order plans and intentions by a hierarchy of self-governing policies of practical reason (Bratman)
  – Compatibility of particular desires with the 'master desire' to act in accordance with one's reasons (Velleman)

- One question we'll try and work out an answer to over the course of the seminar is whether Kant himself should be read as advancing some form of

[2] The fact that the human being can have the "I" in his representations raises him infinitely above all other living beings on earth. Because of this he is a *person*, and by virtue of the unity of consciousness through all changes that happen to him, one and the same person – i.e., through rank and dignity an entirely different being from things, such as irrational animals, with which one can do as one likes (Kant 2006, 15; 7:127)

[3] our capacity to turn our attention on to our own mental activities is also a capacity to distance ourselves from them, and to call them into question. I perceive, and I find myself with a powerful impulse to believe. But I back up and bring that impulse into view and then I have a certain distance. Now the impulse doesn't dominate me and now I have a problem. Shall I believe? Is this perception really a *reason* to believe? (Korsgaard 1996, 93)

a mesh view, or whether he has something else in mind in his characterization of rationality

- CLAIM: For Kant, the rational determinability of one's condition and the capacity for self-consciousness are non-accidentally related by a more fundamental *causal* capacity, one which explains *both* the capacity for self-consciousness and the rational determinability of one's condition

2   Kant — Biographical Overview

- Lived & died in Königsberg, Prussia (1724-1804)
- Attained professorship at the University of Königsberg in 1770
- Wrote the "critical" philosophical works relatively late in his career (c. 1781-1790)[4]
- Some relevant contemporaries

  - John Locke (1632–1704)
  - G. W. Leibniz (1646–1716)
  - Christian Wolff (1679–1750)
  - David Hume (1711–1776)
  - Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778)
  - Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762)
  - Christian August Crisis (1715–1775)

3   Kant's Critical Project

1. Set metaphysics on the "secure path of science"
2. Explain how rational or "proper" science is, in general, possible
3. Explain how propositions making claims of universality and necessity about the empirical world could be known to be true
4. Explain knowledge of universality & necessity by virtue of knowledge concerning our own mental faculties of cognition, desire, and feeling[5,6]

- Kant's strategy is answer (1) and (2) by means of (3), and (3) by (4)

3.1   The Agent & Its Powers

Substance: A metaphysical or 'final' subject in which properties inhere

- Substances 'substand' in the sense of being subjects of properties
- Substances 'subsist' or are 'independent', in the sense of not inhering in anything else

Force: The relation (*respectus*) that a substance bears to the accidents whose existence it causes

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[4] **Kant's Major Critical Works**:

- *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/87)
- *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as a Science* (1783)
- 'Idea for a Universal History With a Cosmopolitan Aim' (1784)
- 'What is Enlightenment?' (1784)
- *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785)
- *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786)
- 'Conjectural Beginning of Human History' (1786)
- 'What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?' (1786)
- *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788)
- *Critique of (the Power of) Judgment* (1790)
- *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793)
- *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797)
- *Anthropology From a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798)

[5] all human insight is at an end as soon as we have arrived at basic powers or basic faculties for there is nothing through which their possibility can be conceived, and yet it may not be invented and assumed at one's discretion. (CPrR 5:46-7)

[6] there are three faculties of the mind: the faculty of cognition, the faculty of feeling pleasure and displeasure, and the faculty of desire. In the Critique *of Pure* (theoretical) *Reason*, I found a priori principles for the first of these, and in the Critique *of Practical Reason*, a priori principles for the third. I tried to find them for the second as well, and though I thought it impossible to find such principles, the analysis of the previously mentioned faculties of the human mind allowed me to discover a systematicity…This systematicity put me on the path to recognizing the three parts of philosophy, each of which has its a priori principles, which can be enumerated and for which one can delimit precisely the knowledge that may be based on them: theoretical philosophy, teleology, and practical philosophy (Letter to Reinhold, C 10:514-15 [December 28 and 31, 1787])

Act: The realization of substantial force (through the exercise of a substance's
causal power(s)) through which some 'accident' (i.e. 'property' or 'determi-
nation') is the effect[7]

- Kant's basic conception of activity is that of a substance whose causal powers
  allow it to bring about, through an exertion of force, change in itself or
  another being. *Agency* is that causal power of a substance to bring about
  change in oneself or another through (or via) its representations

3.2   Kant's Anatomy of the Rational Mind

- Two Fundamental Mental Capacities:[8]

Receptivity: Capacity of the mind to receive representations via affection from
something distinct from itself
Spontaneity: Capacity of the mind to generate representations from itself
without any external influence

- Three Forms of Mental Activity:

Cognition: Objective representational capacity that depends on the existence
(or reality) of its object
Desire: Objective representational capacity that brings about the existence (or
reality) of its object
Feeling: Non-objective (representational?) capacity to promote or hinder the
representational acts of the other capacities

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[7] Action [*Handeln*] and effect [*Wirkung*] can only be ascribed to substance. Action is the determination of the force [Kraft] of a substance as a cause of a certain accident [*accidentis*]. Causality [*Causalitas*] is the characteristic of a substance insofar as it is considered as the cause of an accident [*accidentis*] (*Metaphysik Pölitz* 28:564-5 (1790/1)).

[8] Our cognition arises from two basic sources of the mind, of which the first is to receive the representations (the receptivity of impressions), the second the faculty of cognizing an object through these representations (spontaneity of concepts); through the first an object is given to us, through the second it is thought in relation to that representation (as mere determination of the mind). (A50/B74)

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