Practical Reason and Its Principles

Human practice is not only controlled and regulated by forms of possibility, necessity, and contingency, there is also an internal element of normativity as well. Normativity is involved with the issues of what should be done, and how they should be done. Normative questions are related to practical reason, which deals with the relationship between existence, human ideals, and reasonable human needs. Practical reason is expressed in many different areas, from formal appropriateness to substantial goodness, and from value contents to the method of implementing values. It therefore involves desires and needs, as well as what is actual, what should be the case, and what is necessarily the case. These are expressed through the principles of rightness, of pursuing what is good, and of effectiveness.

6.1 Practical Reason: A Broader Perspective

Aristotle distinguishes between different types of thinking and knowledge, namely theoretical, practical, and productive knowledge. He writes, “For the end of theoretical knowledge is truth, while that of practical knowledge is action.” Kant moves a step further by separating pure reason from practical reason. He then goes on to investigate each of them, arguing that pure reason is a theoretical function whereas practical reason has to do with pragmatic functions. For Kant, practical reason is primarily linked to the realm of morality, which he investigates in terms of the principles of duty. Accordingly, practical reason lays emphasis on what should or ought to be the case and the difference between practical and theoretical reason is understood as the difference between what should be the case and what is the case.

Furthermore, Kant thinks that practical reason is linked to the faculties of the mind. In the third chapter we’ve already seen that he mentions three faculties, “The faculty of knowledge, the feeling of pleasure and pain, and the faculty

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of desire.” The faculty of knowledge has to do with thought activities, the faculty of desire expresses itself through the requests that the will makes of the self, and the feeling of pleasure or pain is linked to emotional acknowledgment and acceptance of ends in the realm of aesthetics. So the faculty of desire is primarily involved with practical reason. When Kant discusses the practical function of reason, he says that it is related to the individual’s desires. Later we will analyze how desires in the realm of practical reason are primarily displayed in the will’s self-rule, which is what establishes a difference from emotional desires.

Aristotle and Kant both differentiate between various types of reason on multiple levels, according to function, method, etc. But the practical manifestation of reason is involved with their respective interpretations of practice. The type of practice that Aristotle discusses is limited to social ethics, politics and other public spheres. He distinguishes practice from production, saying that practice is found in social ethics or political action. Kant basically follows this trend (which began with Aristotle and had been carried down in much of western philosophy), in linking the practical and the moral realm. But this understanding of practice ignores much of its rich content. As a basic function of human existence practice is expressed in the social realm as human interaction, and it unfolds as a human function amongst other things, including natural objects. This latter aspect influences and changes humans as well as their inner world. Practice not only helps humans achieve themselves but also the world. In fact, practice can also be seen as the process of achieving an actualization of oneself or of the world. Taking this as the main orientation for practice, practical reason becomes the condition for these types of achievements.

The method of practical reasoning is also different from theoretical reason in that it is expressed through the relationship between humans and the world. For theoretical reason the important question is whether or not human understanding is in accord with external existence; including whether or not this understanding is accurate. In this way its orientation is the opposite of practical reason, where the challenge is to have existence fit in with human ideals or rational needs. This means that existence must somehow be changed through human practice and activity. This directionality means practical reason becomes concentrated on the process of human action or activities. It is through norms that action and practice can make objects conform to human ideals or reasonable needs, which is a major characteristic of practical reason. This also

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