



Sticker, M. (2018). Kant's transition project and late philosophy: Connecting the *Opus postumum* and *Metaphysics of Morals*. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2018.1510376>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1080/09608788.2018.1510376](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2018.1510376)

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Oliver Thorndike: “Kant’s Transition Project and Late Philosophy. Connecting the *Opus postumum* and *Metaphysics of Morals*”, London, et.al.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, pp.xviii + 258. £91.80 (hb.). ISBN: 9781350050310

The goal of Thorndike’s book is to start a conversation about the transition between the a priori/pure/necessary parts of Kant’s philosophy and its empirical/applied/contingent parts and the forms such a transition can take. He closes his book with the claim that if he managed to “have convinced the reader of the necessity of a Transition Project, this book has reached its goal” (242). This goal, I believe, he accomplishes. Moreover, Thorndike’s book is much richer than what he himself indicates here. Apart from establishing that Kant’s metaphysics and ethics require a transition, Thorndike’s book also enhances our understanding of many elements of Kant’s philosophy that are intimately linked to the contentious relation between a priori laws and concrete cases.

Thorndike’s main point is that just as Kant believes that there must be a transition from the most abstract and a priori principles of physics to its applied and empirical parts, there must also be a transition in ethics. There can be no proper philosophical system without bridging the gap between the a priori and the empirical. Thorndike’s main idea is to exploit the “hitherto unacknowledged parallel between Kant’s late writings on practical philosophy and the *Opus postumum*” (1) in order to gain a better understanding of the transition project. In the first third of his book, he argues that from the very beginning of his critical project Kant was aware of the need for a transition between a priori laws of physics and the empirical aspects of natural science. In his late *Opus postumum*, Kant tries to make good on this desideratum. He is here “searching for an elementary system of mediating concepts that demonstrates the systematicity of physics as a science” (93). These mediating concepts are the *schemata*, which are not empirically derived but stem from our judgement and they are necessary preconditions for the empirical determination of matter. It is ultimately the rational structures of our judgements that are supposed to afford the transition.

In the second part of his book, Thorndike turns to Kant’s ethics. Grounding duty in autonomy, a structure that precedes everything contingent and empirical, raises the question of how we can determine our practical judgement in concrete cases. Thorndike believes that agents can only distinguish their agency from physical causation if they have organized their maxims into a complete system. If our maxims would not reach all the way down to specific actions then our agency would break down for these cases, and we could not understand ourselves as the author of our actions anymore. Now, even if we are sceptical of the idea that every concrete case must be exhaustively determined by our system of maxims (as I am, see below), we can still see why we would need a transition in ethics. After all, we certainly do want it to be the case that Kant’s abstract principles can be applied to at least *some* concrete cases, such as to those cases about

which we have clear intuitions that we expect can be grounded in a priori principles as well as to difficult cases that we hope can be tackled better with the help of ethical theory.

Once more, judgement takes centre stage for the transition. That judgement is the bridge between abstract principles and specific cases is of course unsurprising, but the way Thorndike spells this out is highly innovative. According to Thorndike, the parallel to the (attempted) transition in the *Opus postumum* suggests that we find the schemata that can afford a transition in ethics in section XII of the *Doctrine of Virtue's* Introduction. This section's *aesthetic concepts* should be understood as mediating concepts between the a priori and the empirical. This proposal differs notably from the two most common interpretations of the aesthetic concepts that ascribe to them either a motivational or an epistemic function. One particularly interesting and provocative upshot of Thorndike's reading of the aesthetic concepts is that it requires us to rethink the status of feeling in Kant. According to Thorndike, moral concepts and feelings are absolutely central to human moral agency. They are the way in which agency is present to us: "Lack of affective attitude indicates lack of moral commitment, because moral feelings are necessary expressions of moral maxims. [...] The cold-hearted 'benefactor' who merely complies with the letter of the law fails morally because he does not act from duty" (209).

The third part of Thorndike's book is dedicated to discussing how the four aesthetic concepts can serve to accomplish the transition. Thorndike stresses that the aesthetic concepts are both empirical and noumenal and connect the *noumenal* and *phenomenal* sides of the human being. Their function becomes most apparent in Thorndike's discussion of benevolence, which "can be seen as a bridge figure between the impartiality of autonomy and the partiality of empirically situated agents" (197). It is noteworthy that whilst on Thorndike's reading benevolence and the other aesthetic concepts help us understand how an impartial abstract principles and partial role obligations can be mediated, it remained unclear to me which, if any, room this would leave for partiality to *myself*. The examples Thorndike gives concern special regard for people near and dear to me or people I share a history with. It is not clear that this would ever leave me any room to pursue *my* personal goals at the expense of role obligations. Our pursuits might thus be wholly exhausted by moral obligations.

Thorndike closes his book on a critical note: "Kant's attempts to systematically link the mediating concepts to the table of the categories remain mere stipulations in the time period of 1796–8. Kant fails to show how particular schemata are connected to the various categories or classes of categories. [...] The 1796–8 Transition Project thus fails" (241). This comes somewhat as a surprise for the reader, since Thorndike's discussion throughout the book was very sympathetic to Kant, though he closed his discussion of the transition in physics on a similarly critical note (109). It would have been good to do more to prepare this *aporia* throughout the book. In particular, I was left wondering whether Thorndike, as someone who has obviously carefully thought through the problems of a transition, has suggestions on how to improve on Kant's project and maybe save him. Thorndike's book is clearly intended to start a discussion about the transition

project, and he succeeds at this. It is not intended to settle the debate about the specific form of such a transition.

Thorndike brings very different themes of Kant's philosophy into fruitful dialogue with each other and he makes valuable contributions to a number of pressing issues. Yet, let me make a critical remark. Whilst Thorndike could maintain that his project is purely scholarly and that he merely intends to faithfully represent and explain Kant's view, I do think that the conception of *agency* he attributes to Kant should give us pause, even though Thorndike provides textual and historical evidence to back up his interpretation. It is unclear how *moralistic* this conception is. Thorndike expresses sympathy for a version of Hill's latitudinarianism: Morality is; "at the empirical level", determined "by an agent's local web of maxims, which takes into account the kind of relationships we are committed to, the needs and interests of those with whom we engage, our own capacities, and so on" (214), and we can, within limits, decide freely between moral and non-moral options as long as we have a "*reason* for foregoing or not foregoing an opportunity to act on a morally required end" (ibid.). However, Thorndike also believes that, "for Kant, what *determines* the content of maxims must ultimately be a *moral concern*" (216) and that "striving for moral perfection and supporting the happiness of others are the two constitutive metaphysical first principles of what it means to be an autonomous agent" (230).

It seems that Thorndike does want to side with a version of latitudinarianism, but his own systematicity does not allow for this. For him, the guide for judgement is morality. This makes it very difficult to understand how on this framework morality could be anything but all-consuming. Do obligatory ends always win out over personal (non-moral) projects, and, if not, what story has Kant to tell about the status of our personal ends? The issue of agency and moralism, and the role of our personal (non-moral) projects would be a fruitful venue for further enquiry. It would particularly be interesting to work out whether the conception of agency Thorndike finds in Kant can be attractive for Kantian ethics or should rather give us pause to endorse Kant wholeheartedly.

Thorndike's book displays impressive scholarly engagement and offers a breadth of material: from Kant's pre-critical to very late phases, to his intellectual surroundings, such as Wolffian *philosophia naturalis* and Newtonian physics, Stoic ethics, Kant's letter exchanges, etc. It is clearly the result of many years of deep and serious engagement with the material. It does cast a fresh light on many central and controversial issues such as Kant's alleged rigorism, the worry that a formal principle cannot be action guiding, etc. This book deserves a wide reception among Kant scholars. One very interesting and important follow-up project would be to work out whether a transition project, based on the clues Thorndike gives us, could be made to work at all on Kant's framework.