Constructions of reason
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Explorations of Kant’s practical philosophy

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Preface

Kant is revered for his unswerving defense of human freedom and respect for persons, and for his insistence that reason can guide action. He is also reviled for giving a metaphysically preposterous account of the basis of freedom and an intermittently repellent and simultaneously rapid account of human obligations. Many contemporary proponents of "Kantian" ethics want the nicer bits of his ethical conclusions without the metaphysical troubles. They hope to base a "Kantian" account of justice and of rights on broadly empiricist conceptions of self, freedom and action. In these essays I have taken a different tack. I have tried to set Kant's ethics in the context of his own accounts of reason, action and freedom, to argue that these should not be read as a metaphysical extravaganza and to show that his ethical theory is neither pointlessly empty nor relentlessly nasty.

The governing idea behind this reading of the Kantian enterprise is that we must take seriously the idea of a critique of reason. From this almost everything else follows. The very standards of reason will have to be vindicated: if these are not given nor self-evident, they can have a recursive but not a foundationalist vindication. Philosophy must begin with the task of showing why any standards or procedures for orienting our thinking should have authority for us and count as standards of reason. This initial task is practical: The theoretical enterprise cannot get going unless standards of reason are established. Accordingly the principle that Kant calls "the supreme principle of practical reason" -- the Categorical Imperative -- must be central not just to his ethics but to his whole philosophy.

If the Categorical Imperative is central to Kant's thinking, we must question not only attempts to place "Kantian" ethics in an empiricist setting, but also the equally popular strategy of separating Kant's practical from his theoretical philosophy. Many of Kant's readers, from Heine to Putnam, have suspected that he kept double books. They admire his splendid critique of the metaphysical tradition but think that he regrettably lost his nerve and relegated agency and freedom to the very transcendent realm whose reality he had denied. Kant's moral philosophy then looks, as it did to Nietzsche, like an anemic and hypocritical Platonism: It is "pale, Northern, Königsbergian". Seen in this light it is a cultural albatross that should be jettisoned. Our thinking will be clearer and better if we reject Kant's accounts of freedom, agency and morality, and build on his sound attack on Platonism. I believe that the stakes are higher. If the practical use of reason is
MORE FUNDAMENTAL, WE CANNOT BRACKET ETHICS WHILE STILL HELPING OURSELVES TO
KANT’S CRITIQUE OF METAPHYSICS OR TO HIS UNDERSTANDING OF THE ENTERPRISE OF SCIENCE.
WITHOUT PRACTICAL REASON, WHICH KANT THINKS BRINGS JUSTICE AND VIRTUE IN ITS
WAKE, THEORETICAL INQUIRY IS SIMPLY DISORIENTED. OUR CHOICE IS BETWEEN STANDARDS
OF REASON THAT CAN GOVERN BOTH PRACTICE AND THEORY, AND DISORIENTED CONSCIOUSNESS.
MERELY THEORETICAL USES OF REASON APPEAR TO PROVIDE AN INSTRUMENTAL PURCHASE ON
THE WORLD; BUT THEY CANNOT GROUND VALUE-NEUTRAL KNOWLEDGE AND SCIENCE BECAUSE
THEY ARE THEMSELVES GROUNDED ON PRINCIPLES FOR GUIDING ACTION.

THIS CRITIQUE OF VALUE-NEUTRALITY WOULD HAVE LITTLE IMPACT IF PRACTICAL REASON DID
NOT BRING JUSTICE AND VIRTUE IN ITS WAKE. IF THE SUPREME PRINCIPLE OF PRACTICAL
REASON HAD ONLY A FORMAL OR CEREMONIAL ROLE IN THE CONDUCT OF LIFE, WE COULD
APPROPRIATE KANT’S CRITIQUE OF METAPHYSICS, ACCEPT THAT IT RESTS ON AN ACCOUNT OF
PRACTICAL REASON, BUT STILL VIEW ETHICS AS DISTANT TERRA INCognITA. HERE TOO KANT’S
CRITICS HAVE BEEN VOCIFEROUS. THEY CHARGE THAT THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE LEADS NO
FURTHER THAN EMPTY FORMALISM. KANT FAILED (GROTESQUELY, ACCORDING TO MILL) TO
DERIVE ANY PRINCIPLES OF DUTY FROM IT. IF THE CRITICS ARE RIGHT, WE CAN ACCEPT
WHATEVER STANDARDS OF REASON ARE NEEDED FOR THEORETICAL INQUIRY WITHOUT COMMIT-
MENT TO SIGNIFICANT CONSTRAINTS ON ACTION. KANT, HOWEVER, THOUGHT THAT THE SU-
PREME PRINCIPLE OF PRACTICAL REASON PLAYED A CENTRAL AND SUBSTANTIATIVE PART IN THE
CONSTRUCTION OF JUSTICE AND OF VIRTUE. I HAVE TRIED TO SHOW THAT THE CATEGORICAL
IMPERATIVE, ALTHOUGH IT NEVER PROVIDES A PRACTICAL ALGORITHM, SETS SIGNIFICANT
CONSTRAINTS ON ACTION. WE CANNOT EMERGE FROM DISORIENTED CONSCIOUSNESS WITHOUT
COMMITTING OURSELVES TO ETHICS.

THE ESSAYS DIVIDE QUITE NATURALLY INTO THREE GROUPS. THOSE IN PART I, “REASON
AND CRITIQUE”, ARE THE MOST TEXTUAL BUT ALSO THE MOST SPECULATIVE AND EXPLORATORY.
THEY OFFER AN ANTIFOUNDATIONALIST, CONSTRUCTIVIST ACCOUNT OF THE KANTIAN ENTER-
PRISE. TAKEN TOGETHER THEY SET THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE IN A SOMewhat UNUSUAL
LIGHT. THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE IS OFTEN PRESENTED AS A BARE, FORMAL DEMAND ON
ACTION THAT REMAINS WHEN WE ABSTRACT FROM DESIRES AND INCENTIVES. THIS IS, OF
COURSE, A ROUTE KANT SOMETIMES TAKES IN ARGUING TO THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE.
IT IS AN APPROACH THAT HIDES WHY HE THINKS THAT THIS IS THE SUPREME PRINCIPLE OF
PRACTICAL REASON. THE ALTERNATIVE ROUTE THAT I EXPLORE REVEALS WHY HE LINKS HIS
VINDICATION OF SELF TO AUTONOMY AND MORALITY.

THE ESSAYS IN PART II, “MAXIMS AND OBLIGATIONS”, TRY TO SHOW THAT THE CATEGORI-
CAL IMPERATIVE IS BASIC NOT ONLY TO REASON, BUT TO ACTION AND TO ETHICS AS WELL.
THESE ESSAYS MOVE ONTO THE FAMILIAR TERRAIN OF KANT’S ETHICAL THEORY. I OFFER AN
ACCOUNT OF KANT’S THEORY OF ACTION, IN PARTICULAR OF THE PIVOTAL NOTION OF A MAXIM,
THAT ENABLES ONE TO CONSIDER HOW AND HOW FAR KANT’S ETHICS CAN GUIDE ACTION.
KANT, I ARGUE, DERIVES PRINCIPLES OF OBLIGATION BY WAY OF A STRICT, MODAL READING
OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE, WHICH DOES NOT REFER TO AGENTS’ DESIRES AND PREFERENCES,
NOT EVEN TO THE REFINED PREFERENCES OF IDEALIZED AGENTS. THIS RATHER AUSTERE
READING OF SOME OF THE MOST FAMILIAR KANTIAN TEXTS BOTH BYPASSES MUCH OF THE COM-

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munitarian critique of abstraction in ethics and affords glimpses of neglected, and I believe fertile, domains of practical reasoning. I argue that the traditional (and incompatible) allegations of empty formalism and rigid prescriptivism are both misplaced. Kant offers an ethic of principles rather than of rules; he stresses obligations rather than rights; despite the cultural myopia of his notorious example, his reasoning requires rather than rejects sensitivity to context.

The essays in Part III, "Kant’s ethics and Kantian ethics", explore differences between Kant’s ethics and some recent, would-be Kantian ethical positions. These discussions take up the importance of imperfect obligations, the nature of deliberation and judgment and some of the contrasts between Kant’s constructivism and recent "Kantian" accounts of justice. I believe that the discussions in Parts II and III suggest that contemporary divisions between defenders of "abstract" rights and justice who are “agnostic about the good for man” and advocates of "communitarian" (or feminist) accounts of traditions of virtue are misleading. A convincing theory of justice for finite rational beings is completed rather than challenged by a doctrine of virtue.

The essays have been written over a five-year period. Although some of the earlier ones have been slightly revised to correct what now seem to me mistakes, there are no doubt still discrepancies. The level of scholarly responsibility also varies. The chapters in Part I are the most textual but also the most adventurous. Those in Part II till well-ploughed fields, and the relative absence of controversy masks considerable dependence on recent debates. The essays in Part III are informed by, but do not explicitly contribute to, the task of interpreting Kant’s enterprise.

Many friends and colleagues have helped me in many discussions of these topics over recent years. A mere list of names would trivialize what I owe. They will see the philosophical weight and inevitability of this debt acknowledged and articulated in the first two chapters. I add my thanks.
Abbreviations

References to and citations of Kant’s writings are given parenthetically in the text, using the following abbreviations:

A    Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View
CF   The Conflict of the Faculties
CJ   Critique of Judgment
CPR  Critique of Pure Reason
CPrR Critique of Practical Reason
DV   The Doctrine of Virtue (Pt. II, Metaphysics of Morals)
FI   First Introduction to the Critique of Judgment
G    Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals
IUH  Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View
L    Logic
MEJ  The Metaphysical Elements of Justice (Pt. 1, Metaphysics of Morals)
MM   The Metaphysics of Morals (for citations of the introduction only; see MEJ, DV, for other citations)
PP   Perpetual Peace
R    Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone
SRL  On a Supposed Right to Lie out of Benevolent Motives
TP   On the Common Saying: This May Be True in Theory, but It Does Not Apply in Practice
WE   An Answer to the Question: “What Is Enlightenment?”
WOT  What Is Orientation in Thinking?

Citations for the Critique of Pure Reason use the standard “A” and “B” pages of the First and Second editions. Those for other works give the volume and page number for the Prussian Academy edition (e.g., [G, IV, 424]). Where the English translation referred to lacks these page numbers in the margins, a further page number referring to the translation listed in the references is included (e.g., [IUH, VIII, 19–20; 43–4]). For full bibliographical details see the References.