Freedom and Anthropology in Kant’s Moral Philosophy

This book is the first comprehensive account of Kant’s theory of freedom and his moral anthropology. The point of departure is the apparent conflict between three claims to which Kant is committed: that human beings are transcendentally free, that moral anthropology studies the empirical influences on human beings, and that anthropology is morally relevant. Frierson shows why this conflict is only apparent. He draws on Kant’s transcendental idealism and his theory of the will and describes how empirical influences can affect the empirical expression of one’s will in a way that is morally significant but still consistent with Kant’s concept of freedom.

As the first work on Kant to integrate his anthropology with his philosophy as a whole, this book will be an unusually important source of study for all Kant scholars and advanced students of Kant.

Patrick R. Frierson is an assistant professor of philosophy at Whitman College, Washington.
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PATRICK R. FRIERSON
Whitman College
for J.C.
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From my earliest exposure to Kant’s moral theory, I was drawn to his emphasis on the centrality of freedom but bothered by the apparent abstractness of the moral law. Thus when I first approached the Anthropology many years ago, I did so with excitement. I hoped that Kant would incorporate all the rich details of human life that I found lacking in his Grounding, and that he would show how these details fit with the distinctive focus on freedom that attracted me to his moral theory. At first, the Anthropology seemed more amusing than philosophically satisfying. However, as I came to appreciate the details of Kant’s Anthropology and as more neokantians incorporated anthropological insights into moral theory, I saw that Kantians could provide as rich and concrete a moral theory as anyone.

During graduate school, especially as a result of interaction with neo-Aristotelian ethical theories and more recent neokantian accounts, I became interested in Kant’s treatment of the cultivation of moral character. In parts of Kant’s anthropology he seemed to suggest that there could be empirical influences on moral development, and these showed that Kant could provide the sort of nuanced theory of human nature that often made Aristotle attractive. But I was still puzzled about the compatibility of these new (for me) aspects of Kant’s account with the treatment of freedom that initially attracted me to Kant.

This puzzle led me to write my dissertation on Schleiermacher’s critique of Kant’s Anthropology, in which Schleiermacher argues that transcendental freedom is incompatible with a robust anthropology. And Schleiermacher’s critique finally led to this book, which is my attempt to show how Kant’s moral theory can incorporate the anthropology that I
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have grown to appreciate into the theory of freedom that first drew me to Kant.

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