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978-1-107-11631-3 - Constructing Authorities: Reason, Politics and Interpretation in

Kant's Philosophy

Onora O'Neill

Excerpt

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*Introduction*¹

Authority and vindication

Arguments from authority have a bad reputation among philosophers. Appeals to common sense or public opinion, or to the claims of state or church, or to other supposed authorities, are widely seen as inconclusive and question-begging. Philosophers hope to break free from these authorities and to appeal to reason. But there is an uncomfortable sting in the tail of this bold rejection of authority, since little will be gained unless we can say something convincing about the authority of reasoning itself.

But can this be done? Nobody has tried more vigorously than Immanuel Kant to show that and why reasoning is authoritative. Yet his ambition may seem doomed. Surely any attempt to vindicate standards or principles of reason must fail, because nothing can count as a vindication or justification, unless it is itself reasoned. Yet if it is reasoned, it will presuppose and so cannot vindicate principles or standards of reason. But if it is not reasoned, it will fail to vindicate principles or standards of reason. It seems that any attempt to show that or why reasoning has authority leaves us in an uncomfortable place.

There are well-known ways of seeking to avoid, or at least to postpone, this discomfort. We might claim that reason is a God-given inner light that is, as Descartes had put the matter, 'complete and entire in each one of us', or perhaps embrace a naturalistic version of the same thought. However, many will not see such approaches as vindicating reason, or showing why it has authority. Alternatively we might give up, and conclude that what passes for reasoning is inconclusive, and in the end provides only jumped-up arguments from authority, that claim a bogus status.

But if principles or standards of reason cannot be vindicated, and if they lack authority, much may fall apart. Attempts to give reasons for truth claims or moral judgements, for claims about the justice or fairness of

¹ For the key to references to Kant's works see p. 8 below.

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political or other institutional arrangements, or for interpretations of texts or situations, may all prove inadequate or inconclusive. So it seems that despite misgivings about the prospects of any critique or vindication of reason, it is worth paying close attention to Kant's attempts to resolve these problems, by following his account of the ways in which the authority of reason can be constructed.

'The most difficult task'

I first began to explore these recalcitrant questions in the 1980s, and this collection contains papers written across many years about Kant's account of reason, about some of its contemporary successors, and about his closely related discussions of autonomy, of politics and of interpretation. Although I had previously worked on some of Kant's central texts, and in particular on his accounts of action and of ethics, I was struck afresh by the fact that he begins the *Critique of Pure Reason* by asking how reason can 'take on anew the most difficult of all its tasks, namely, that of self knowledge, and . . . secure its rightful claims' (*CPR* A xi). Like many others, I had repeatedly read these words, yet had shoved the questions they raise aside, thinking that there was plenty to explore and investigate without addressing them. Gradually, however, I began to appreciate that Kant's philosophy was deeply systematic, and that his attempt to vindicate principles and standards of reason lay at its core. His philosophy no doubt contained errors, false starts, and a range of claims and arguments that he subsequently discarded or revised, or that were mistaken. But an attempt to vindicate reason, and so to show what reasoning is and how and why it has authority, was evidently central to his philosophy. Yet how could this be done?

It took me a long time to work towards a coherent view of Kant's approach to the critique and vindication of reasoning: light dawned *very* gradually over the whole! I came to see that his focus in numerous passages on the critique and vindication of reason, and on the nature and limits of its authority, relies on two linked thoughts. The first thought is that reasoning is fundamentally practical: it aims to provide *standards* or *norms* that thought, action and communication can (but often fail to) meet. The second thought is that norms of reasoning must be followable by others: they must be norms that can be used by a *plurality* of agents. These two thoughts, Kant argued, set certain minimal constraints on anything that can count as reasoning. They make it possible to justify minimal principles or norms of reason by showing that they are standards that must be met if we are to offer or receive, accept or reject, revise or reconsider one another's proposals for acting, for truth claims, or for attempts to communicate.

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Kant's approach to the requirements of reasoning draws on an account of what we may call (by analogy with Hume's account of the *circumstances of justice*) the *circumstances of reasoning*. Kant sees those circumstances as arising when a plurality of potential reasoners finds that their communication and interaction are not antecedently coordinated (for example, by instinct, divine plan, pre-established harmony or other sorts of authority). Uncoordinated agents who may disagree with one another can at least *offer* one another reasons for believing their claims or following their proposals for action. But they can do this only if they put forward considerations that (they take it) others *could follow in thought*, so understand, or *could adopt for action*. In the event – indeed very frequently – those to whom reasons are offered cannot or do not actually follow them, or adopt them. So the basic thought is simply that we do not even *offer* reasons for belief unless we aim to be intelligible to them, and do not even *offer* reasons for action unless we make proposals that they could take up. Norms of reasoning, as Kant sees them, articulate necessary conditions for the possibility of sharing knowledge, of recommending or coordinating action, and of communicating content among a plurality of agents whose agreement is *not* presupposed. This approach provides a minimal starting point for an account of the authority of reason, but does not settle questions about the reach and power of reasoning. Can this spare and modal account of the authority of reason offer enough? Can it provide a discipline or orientation for knowledge, for action or for interpretation?

Kant's constructivism

Kant repeatedly likens the task of reasoning to the task of constructing a building using only the limited materials that are available, and relying on an initially uncoordinated 'workforce', who may not even agree about what they are trying to build. Kant takes it that the standards and norms of human reasoning must be built or constructed from the meagre resources and capacities that are actually available to human beings, which he describes in some passages as 'just enough for the most pressing needs for the beginnings of existence' (*IUH* 8:19–20).

These modest starting points cannot, he thinks, sustain or revive classical philosophical ambitions to build vast metaphysical structures on reason alone:

although we had in mind to build a tower that would reach the heavens, yet the stock of materials was only enough for a dwelling house, just roomy

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enough for our task on the plain of experience and just high enough for us to look across the plain . . . we have to plan our building with the supplies we have been given and also to suit our needs. (*CPR* A 707 / B 735, trans. OON)

The anti-metaphysical implications of Kant's position have found wide acceptance. His criticism of 'our dogmatically enthusiastic lust for knowledge' and his barbed comment that it 'could not be satisfied except through magical powers in which I am not an expert' (*CPR* A xiii) have been echoed by many philosophers. Many consequently applaud his refusal to try to reoccupy 'the battlefield of these endless controversies . . . called metaphysics' (*ibid.*). But their applause for Kant's rejection of certain classical metaphysical ambitions often reflects a generalised enthusiasm for empiricist positions, rather than a considered view of the principles or standards for reasoning that he put forward, or any endorsement of his approach to vindicating them.

As Kant depicts it, we reason only if we act, think or communicate in ways that (we judge) make it possible for others to understand, to accept or to reject our claims or proposals. If we merely assert, or assume, or appeal to 'authorities' that others do not (sometimes even cannot) follow, we fail to offer them reasons. Reasoning is therefore a matter of using our limited capacities and resources to construct and vindicate claims and standards, institutions and practices, *without* depending on claims and standards that have only the backing of happenstantial 'authorities' – such as church or state, 'common sense' or personal preference – that some accept but others reject.

Kant's repeated use of metaphors of *construction* and *collaboration* in his discussions of reasoning make it natural to speak of his approach and method as *constructivist*, and of his aim as the *construction* of reason's authority, and thereby of a basis for offering others reasons for truth claims and moral claims, reasons for favouring some rather than other interpretations of texts and situations, and reasons for pursuing some rather than other practical and political aims.

This line of thought lies behind the quite meagre substantive claims that Kant makes about reasoning. If we are to reason in ways that others can follow, we must in the first place ensure that our reasoning is followable by others: it must exhibit patterns that others can in principle discern and follow and so be *lawlike*. Some uses of reason – which Kant spoke of as 'fully public' or 'autonomous' – are not merely lawlike in form, but appeal only to assumptions that all others can follow: they aim to provide reasons to all and any others, and are fundamental to offering reasons both for

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truth claims and for moral standards that are intended to have universal scope. Other uses of reason – which Kant calls variously ‘conditional’, ‘private’ or ‘heteronomous’ – are also lawlike in form, but depend on further claims and assumptions that may be accepted by some, but rejected by or inaccessible to others. Such conditional reasoning may variously appeal to established ‘authorities’ such as the edicts of church and state, received views, or personal preferences, or to what are seen as the facts of a given situation, but without offering any vindication of those appeals.

Of course, a great deal of reasoning is not and need not be ‘public’ in the demanding sense that Kant defines as *fully* public uses of reason. It can quite properly be conditional on numerous assumptions for which no explicit or complete reasons are given. This is obvious in the case of technical and prudential reasoning, where specific aims and constraints not merely may but must be assumed, but is also true of a great deal of everyday practical reasoning, including ethical reasoning that relies on received social, cultural or political assumptions. *Conditional* or *heteronomous* reasoning can convince those who accept the assumptions on which it is conducted: but it may not reach, let alone convince, others. Kant contrasts such reasoning, with reasoning that is *not* conditional on contingently shared assumptions, so is fit to reach ‘the world at large’, which he counts as *fully* public reasoning. Without the possibility of some fully public reasoning, all reasoning will have restricted scope: even if it is lawlike in form, it will lack universal reach.

Contemporary constructivisms

Many of the terms Kant used in discussing the vindication of reason and connected themes have acquired new life in recent decades. Contemporary discussions of individuals and their rights constantly invoke conceptions of *autonomy*; contemporary discussions of justice and democracy often make claims about *public reason*. Many contemporary philosophers, in particular political philosophers, follow Kant in proposing *constructive* arguments, and in seeking to build philosophical and political conclusions on parsimonious (but not too parsimonious!) assumptions. However, as I see it, the lines of thought explored by contemporary constructivists differ in various ways from those that Kant proposed. For the most part they propose less exacting – and in my view less exciting – views of autonomy, and of public reason, than those Kant thought important. For example, most discussions of autonomy in recent decades have been resolutely individualistic, and are variably, and in some cases very tenuously, connected to accounts of reason.

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The renewed discussion of public reason – including the influential discussions by Rawls and Habermas – focus on discourse and agreement among *actual* publics with their specific inclusions and exclusions, rather than on the necessary conditions for the possibility of discussion or communication among an unrestricted audience. These discussions of conceptions of public reason are closely linked to discussions of democracy, in particular of participatory or deliberative democracy, but do not attempt any wider vindication of reason.

Equally, many contemporary discussions of interpretation say almost nothing about the role of reason in interpretation, which is often simply contrasted with reasoning. Contemporary constructivists writing on politics also often say little about the justification of their framing assumptions about the circumstances of justice, such as existing boundaries or existing categories of social or political life, and offer little by way of justification for these fundamental claims. In my view, the Kantian ancestor of contemporary constructivisms seeks to do more with less. So one of the aims of this collection of essays is to articulate and explore some of the differences between Kant's constructivism and the influential quasi-Kantian constructivisms developed in the late twentieth century.

Reason, autonomy, politics and interpretation

There are many cross-cutting connections between the papers, and they could have been arranged in various ways. I have put them into four groups that reflect their central themes.

The papers in the first group deal with conceptions of reason and with attempts to support them by constructivist methods and approaches. Some of them concentrate on Kant's development of these ideas; others contrast his approach with those taken by leading contemporary constructivists, and in particular with the forms of constructivism that John Rawls developed at various times in arguing for his conception of justice.

The papers in the second group deal mainly with conceptions of autonomy. They focus on some of the deep differences between Kant's view of autonomy and contemporary accounts of autonomy. Kant proposed an account of *principled autonomy* that is closely linked to his account of reason. Most contemporary writing on autonomy focuses on various conceptions of *individual autonomy* that assume (at most) limited accounts of reason, and says nothing about the vindication of reason.

The papers in the third group deal mainly with the interesting connections and analogies that Kant drew between reasoning and politics. His

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writing on political themes – under which he groups not only questions about justice in and beyond states, but questions about history, hope and human destiny – always focuses on action. As Kant sees it, deep connections between reasoning and politics arise because both are activities in which a plurality of participants needs to engage with one another's thought and action, yet find that the very terms of coordination and interaction are disputed. Both in reasoning and in political life, coordination and shared assumptions have to be constituted or constructed rather than assumed.

The papers in the last section deal with connections between reason and interpretation, including the interpretation of sacred texts. Many writers of the European Enlightenment hoped that deism would provide a reasoned foundation for the core of Christian belief. Kant devoted many pages of the *Critique of Pure Reason* to undermining the forms of rational theology on which deists drew, and proposed a wholly different way of approaching sacred texts and traditions, that remained 'within the limits of reason'. He argued that since we are committed to the possibility both of knowledge and of action, we must see the natural world as open to change by our action, so have reason to hope that we can shape the future for the better. On Kant's account, a reasoned orientation to the future is possible only if we are committed to hope that human action can insert the moral intention into the world, hence only on a certain view of human destinies. Commitments to theoretical and practical reason and to the ways in which they can shape knowledge and action are coherent only if linked to reasoned hope for a future in which they can be coordinated.

On the surface this approach may seem remote from religious traditions and their interpretations of their sacred texts. Traditional religions typically rely on supposedly authoritative interpreters, whose reading of sacred texts (at best) relies on 'private' reasoning. He contrasts such approaches to interpretation with that of reasoned interpretation. Reasoned interpretation will not be literal, and may even seem forced, but in taking the demands of morality as the key to interpretation they can offer interpretations that lie 'within the limits of reason', rather than deferring to supposed 'authorities'.

This collection is one of three to be published by Cambridge University Press that brings together papers that I have written on a range of themes over many years. The papers in the other two volumes, *Justice across Boundaries: Whose Obligations?* and *From Principles to Practice: Normativity and Judgement in Ethics and Politics*, draw less, and much less explicitly, on Kant's philosophy. My hope is that the papers in the three volumes form a coherent whole.

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Bibliographical note on quotations from and citations of Kant's work

Quotations from Kant's writings mainly cite the texts of the Cambridge edition of the works of Immanuel Kant, which were published by Cambridge University Press beginning in 1996. Abbreviated titles are given parenthetically in footnotes and citations, as indicated in Part 1 of this bibliographical note. Page references cite the standard volume numbers and pagination of the Prussian Academy edition of the works of Immanuel Kant, which is included in the margins of these and most other editions and translations.

Where a chapter was first published before the relevant texts appeared in the Cambridge editions, quotations cite older translations. These are listed in Part 2 of this Bibliographical Note. In cases where the Prussian Academy pagination is not included in the older translation, the relevant page number is cited.

Where I have offered my own translations of a passage, this is indicated parenthetically.

Part 1: Cambridge edition of the works of Immanuel Kant

- I. Kant, 1781, *Critique of Pure Reason* [CPR], trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1996)
- I. Kant, 1784, *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* [WE], trans. Mary J. Gregor, in *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1996)
- I. Kant, 1784, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim* [IUH], trans. Allen W. Wood, in Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology, History and Education* (Cambridge University Press, 2007)
- I. Kant, 1785, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* [G], trans. Mary J. Gregor, in *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1996)
- I. Kant, 1786, *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* [CB], trans. Allen W. Wood, in *Anthropology, History and Education* (Cambridge University Press, 2007)
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Part 2: Older translations of Kant's writings

- I. Kant, 1781, *Critique of Pure Reason* [CPR], trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933)
- I. Kant, 1784, *What Is Enlightenment?* [WE], trans. H.B. Nisbet, in Hans Reiss (ed.), *Kant: Political Writings*, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54–60
- I. Kant, 1784, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim* [IUH], trans. H.B. Nisbet, in Hans Reiss (ed.), *Kant: Political Writings*, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 41–53
- I. Kant, 1785, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* [G], in *The Moral Law*, trans. H.J. Paton, London: Hutchinson, 1953)
- I. Kant, 1786, *Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History* [CB], trans. H.B. Nisbet, in Hans Reiss (ed.), *Kant: Political Writings*, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 221–34
- I. Kant, 1786, *What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* [WOT], trans. H.B. Nisbet, in Hans Reiss (ed.), *Kant: Political Writings*, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 237–49
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- I. Kant, 1795, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* [*PP*], trans. H.B. Nisbet, in Hans Reiss (ed.), *Kant: Political Writings*, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 93–130
- I. Kant, 1798, *The Conflict of the Faculties* [*CF*], trans. Mary Gregor (New York: Abaris Books, 1979)