

## INTRODUCTION

**U**NDERSTANDING Immanuel Kant's moral theory can be a daunting task. Although Kant tried very hard to write clearly, even some of his contemporaries had difficulty figuring out what he was trying to say. In the following pages I have adopted a strategy that has not been commonly used by commentators but has proved extraordinarily helpful to my students in illuminating just those parts of Kant's moral theory that are usually the hardest for them to comprehend and appreciate.

Today we tend to approach the study of ethics from the point of view of the individual, with each person having her or his own special personal interests and relationships. Many of us, therefore, may feel more at home with a moral theory like that proposed by Sartre or Nietzsche, in which moral choices apparently cannot escape subjectivity; or with a moral theory like Aristotle's, which begins in the *Nicomachean Ethics* with the moral development of the individual person and the personal and private relationships of friends and family and only then, in the *Politics*, extends outward to the public order.

Kant's moral philosophy has also often been read (and with good reason) as concerned mainly with the moral character of individuals and of their actions. But if we approach it from that point of view, we may not have much sympathy for many of his claims, especially his insistence that our fundamental moral rules may override our personal concerns and cares. If, however, we begin with his political theory, we are better positioned to appreciate how his moral philosophy provides the

*An Introduction to Kant's Ethics*

underlying conceptual structure for a community life that can be shared by everyone. We can also understand better why he thought that the ultimate moral norm for us, even as individuals, should measure the fundamental policies on which we act for their suitability to serve as impersonal laws for everyone.

Great philosophy wrestles with perennial problems – problems that are not unique to any particular time or place but that arise again and again throughout history. So the fact that the political and moral problems Kant faced in eighteenth-century Prussia are strikingly similar to problems still occurring throughout the world confirms both his greatness as a philosopher and the enduring relevance and importance of his analyses to us today.

Since most people are introduced to Kant's ethical theory by reading his *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, references are given to that work, using the standard Academy pagination that almost all translations provide. Quotations from the *Foundations* are adapted from Lewis White Beck's translation (2d ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1990). The *Foundations*, however, does not contain Kant's entire moral theory, and we shall also discuss many doctrines that do not appear, or at least do not appear prominently, in that book. Readers may find the sources of those doctrines cited in the relevant sections of my *Immanuel Kant's Moral Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

## 1

## A BEGINNING: KANT'S POLITICAL THEORY

IF we wish to learn Aristotle's ethical theory, we can turn to his famous *Nicomachean Ethics*. To learn the fundamentals of Utilitarianism, we can read John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*. Students are usually introduced to Immanuel Kant's moral theory by reading his treatise with the strange title *Foundations* (sometimes translated as *Groundwork*) of the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Reading just this work can be misleading, however, for unlike Aristotle and Mill, Kant did not present his entire moral theory in a single book. The reason for this is that his philosophical system represented such a break with the past that it took him years to develop all its components.

If we wanted to learn everything he wrote about morality in his mature works, we would need to read his monumental *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, revised in 1787), the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), his *Critique of Judgment* (1790 and 1793), his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), and his *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) (for which the *Foundations* was an introduction), as well as *An Answer to the Question: "What Is Enlightenment?"* (1784), *On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy* (1788), and *On the Proverb: That May Be True in Theory but Is of No Practical Use* (1793). During these same years he also published a number of other important works on, among other topics, politics and anthropology, such as *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, *Speculative Beginning of Human History*, *What Is Orientation in Thinking?*, *The End of All Things, Perpetual Peace*, and *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. This

*An Introduction to Kant's Ethics*

list does not include everything he wrote, but it gives an idea of what someone would need to read in order to master all the details of Kant's moral philosophy.

Clearly a person looking only for an introduction to Kant's moral theory cannot be expected to read all these, and that is why the *Foundations* is almost always the first and only book most students read. This still leaves us with the problem of avoiding misunderstandings, and trying to alleviate that difficulty is the purpose of this volume. The strategy used to minimize misunderstandings is to approach Kant's moral theory through his political theory. We will begin by discussing some of the issues that preoccupied him as he thought about morality.

*Machiavelli.* One challenge Kant had to face originated with Niccolò Machiavelli's infamous *The Prince*, written in 1513. Today much of Machiavelli's advice may seem to be simple good sense, for example, his insistence that even in peacetime a ruler needs a large and loyal military force. But he also claimed that because politics requires the effective use of power, when necessary a ruler may and should, for example, lie and break his word. The ruler "must be prepared to act immorally when this becomes necessary."

Machiavelli's claim "I have described things as they really are" was not particularly startling, for everyone knew that moral norms had been often ignored in political life. What made his claim special was the fact that no one before him had publicly *said* immorality might be acceptable, even obligatory.

Before him, philosophers had held that the center of human moral life lay within the circle of one's intimates – one's family and friends – so that moral enlightenment meant extending the standards of morality first to larger groups such as one's community, then to the state. Therefore, the same values held for a person both at home and in the public forum, and a good ruler was expected to be a moral paradigm for the people he

*Kant's Political Theory*

ruled. But Machiavelli rent public life apart from private life. However, since people are always impressed by appearances, he also added that the prince needs to be concerned about how he is *perceived*. He needs to cultivate a *reputation* for compassion, good faith, integrity, and religious devotion.

*Frederick the Great*. The second set of problems was defined for Kant by the fact that he lived all his life under tyrants, most of it under Frederick the Great, who ruled Prussia from 1740 to 1786. While still a prince himself, Frederick studied Machiavelli's book, and with some encouragement from Voltaire, he even wrote a work "refuting" Machiavelli. (Voltaire believed that Machiavelli would have advised a prince-disciple to write a book publicly attacking him.) When he unexpectedly inherited the throne just as his book was being published, Frederick asked Voltaire to destroy all the copies of the book he could find!

As king, Frederick showed he had learned a good deal from his study of Machiavelli. He turned Prussia into a vast army camp that he supported by a program of economic development and taxation. He so enlarged Prussia by seizing neighboring land that today he is known as the founding father of modern Germany. Machiavelli would have smiled, had he been able to hear Frederick quoted as saying: "If there is anything to be gained by being honest, let us be honest. If it is necessary to deceive, let us deceive."

Life under Frederick was harsh. He regarded all those under him as his chattel, to be used as he liked. Publicly he held that the sovereign should be the "first servant" of the people; privately he had only contempt for what he called the "rabble." The nobles fared a little better than the peasants, but Frederick still allowed them only one choice of occupation: to serve as officers in his army.

Although Frederick's power was absolute, he still followed Machiavelli's advice about cultivating a reputation as a benev-

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*An Introduction to Kant's Ethics*

olent and tolerant ruler, a reputation that survives to this day. His biographers tell us that although he secretly despised the clergy, he cynically tolerated them because they preached the divine right of the king to the people's obedience. He also tolerated theological and philosophical controversies as long as the disputants still did what he ordered.

Kant never referred to Frederick's youthful foray into political philosophy.<sup>1</sup> When he did mention Frederick, he praised him as an enlightened ruler who allowed freedom of discussion, quoting him as saying, "*Argue* as much as you want and about what you want, *but obey!*" Kant's praise was not entirely misplaced, for Frederick William II, who ascended the throne in 1786, was far less tolerant of freedom of opinion than his father. Kant knew Frederick William's censors would be reading whatever he wrote,<sup>2</sup> and so he adopted an uncharacteristically self-deprecatory tone in his later political writings, suggesting at least to a superficial reader that his proposals (which could have been interpreted as treasonous) should not be taken seriously. He did this so successfully that even today the importance of his political writings is often not recognized.

*The Enlightenment.* Kant's intellectual world was also shaped by the Enlightenment, an intellectual movement promoted by profound advances of the "new" Newtonian science. Although Frederick had proclaimed himself a champion of the Enlightenment, it repudiated doctrinaire authoritarianism, whether political or religious. It put its faith instead in the power of reason, believing that reason would create a future of unending progress in the human condition. Kant's thinking was not only influenced by the Enlightenment; he was one of its leaders in Germany. As he later wrote, learning to make the decisions for oneself on the basis of one's own thinking is much more easily described than done, because it is so much easier to be lazy and let others do one's thinking for one. Renouncing a lifetime of

*Kant's Political Theory*

“immature” dependence on authority and beginning instead to stand on one’s own feet require a good deal of courage.

KANT’S LIFE

The relevant details of Kant’s biography take little space. He was born in 1724 in Königsberg, the capital of East Prussia and one of Frederick’s garrison towns. Kant knew what it was like to live as a peasant, since he came from peasant stock himself. (His father was a harness maker.) Because he showed such promise, Kant was able to attend a school called the Collegium Fredericianum, an institution run by Pietists. Pietism was an eighteenth-century fundamentalist movement within German Protestantism (similar to Methodism in the English-speaking world), to which Kant’s parents also subscribed, that minimized the authority of the church and stressed individual moral conduct. He then attended the University of Königsberg, also staffed mainly by Pietists. The influence of this religious background is reflected in Kant’s beliefs in the existence of God, in the dignity of each person, and in a universal moral code.

Kant spent most of his adult life on the faculty of the University of Königsberg. When he died in 1804, his countrymen flocked to his funeral, honoring him for the political ideals he had championed even while living under an absolute, militaristic monarchy, such as the equality of everyone before the law and the nobility of a just international peace. Today he remains one of the most influential philosophers of the “modern” period.

LIBERALISM

Kant’s political writings have affinities with those of a group of writers whose philosophical thought underlies the fundamental documents of the American Republic. They included David

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*An Introduction to Kant's Ethics*

Hume and Adam Smith in Scotland, John Locke in England, Edmund Burke in Ireland, Friedrich Schiller and Wilhelm von Humboldt in Germany, Baron de Montesquieu and Alexis de Tocqueville in France, and James Madison, John Marshall, and Daniel Webster in what became the United States of America.

Common to these men was the conviction that absolutist governments, whether tyrannies or monarchies, intrude much too far into the citizens' lives: Ordinary people have no voice in determining their own destiny and no power to control that destiny if they have a voice. This criticism holds true not only for rulers with little or no concern for their people but also for paternalistic governments that benevolently but still despotically assume responsibility for the happiness of their citizens. Such states only exacerbate natural human tendencies to selfishness and sloth, thereby encouraging dependence and servility.

What people living in a totalitarian state lack above all is freedom, the freedom to pursue their lives and happiness as *they* see fit. According to liberalism, then, liberalism as opposed to the illiberality of tyranny, the proper function of government should be limited to protecting life and liberty.<sup>3</sup> This political philosophy, therefore, is committed to what is often called the "neutrality principle"; it recognizes that each person has the freedom, the capacity, and the responsibility to form his or her own conception of happiness and to seek that happiness, each in his or her own way, so long as this is done in a lawful fashion. Consequently, it is not the function of the state to try to balance the interests of different groups so as to promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number of its citizens. (That would later be the view of Utilitarians such as John Stuart Mill.) Rather, the role of civil laws conforming to that principle is to protect each person's freedom from interference by others. Laws are mainly concerned with happiness only insofar as they limit what anyone may do in its pursuit to the



*Kant's Political Theory*

condition of allowing all others the same freedom to pursue their ideas of happiness.

In a series of essays that appeared throughout his career, Kant set out his proposals for a liberal state. John Gray has summed up the four main philosophical tenets underlying liberalism in his book with that title:

1. It is *individualistic*, in that it asserts the moral primacy of the person against the claims of any social collectivity.
2. It is *egalitarian*, inasmuch as it confers on all . . . the same moral status.
3. It is *universalist*, affirming the moral unity of the human species and according [only] a secondary importance to specific historic associations and cultural forms.
4. It is *meliorist* in its affirmation of the corrigibility and improvability of all social institutions and political arrangements.<sup>4</sup>

These four characteristics give us an admirable way in which to organize Kant's political theory.

THE RATIONALE FOR THE STATE

We can best approach Kant's political theory by asking: Why do we need a government at all? Why do we need laws? As Kant saw it, the most basic answer is: because people are always inclined to act egoistically, always wanting what is in their own interest, however that might affect others. History shows again and again that humans can and do act in the most reprehensible ways toward one another, treating each other merely as things, merely as a means of satisfying their own inclinations. For Kant, this lesson of history was reinforced by his religious background, for Pietism stressed the doctrine of Original Sin, with its emphasis on the dark, barbarous side of

*An Introduction to Kant's Ethics*

human nature. We all have what he called “an inextirpable propensity for evil”: we all are tempted to pursue our own desires, whatever the cost to others. This is not a belief Kant was alone in holding. Although they did not all connect this view with religious doctrines as Kant did, most other political thinkers, both before and after him, agreed with his estimation of human nature and of the consequent need for civilizing political structures.

Like Thomas Hobbes, Kant recommended that we think of what life would be like in an “original state of nature,” a lawless situation in which there would be no government and in which everyone could pursue his or her own desires without any constraints on how that might be done. The result? All would be at war with all, for everyone would be forced to live in a constant status of hostility toward and fear of others. Kant was well aware that states typically arise out of armed conflict, but he still suggested that, like Hobbes and Rousseau, we at least initially think of the state as if it had arisen out of a social contract with its citizens. If people actually had once lived in a state of nature, they would finally have been motivated, if only out of fear of even more awful evils, to leave this condition of constant conflict and enter into a social contract for a society that could protect their lives and their property as well as provide a peaceful tribunal for resolving disputes.

True to the liberal tradition, then, Kant regarded the fundamental task of government as negative, as imposing those constraints that are necessary to protect and promote each person's freedom. The legal system of the state must constrain both the power of the sovereign and the citizens' unregenerate desires in order to establish the conditions under which people can live together in peace as a community. The basic laws of the legal code therefore should set out negative obligations, *duties* prohibiting people from interfering with the freedom of their fellow citizens. (Few terms have more importance than