

I

Introduction

1. The Paradox of Liberalism: A Preliminary Observation

Since its origins in early modernity, liberalism has always been a hotly debated issue. One charge frequently raised is that liberalism mirrors a lack of ethical substance in modern society, a society that seemingly loses its normative cohesiveness, and hence can be held together only by a set of abstract procedural rules. By providing such a formal framework for a *modus vivendi* within an “atomized society,” liberalism purportedly amounts at best to a minimalist and formalist morality, if not to an ideology of self-centered individuals who are chiefly concerned with their own physical or economic well-being.

This charge of ethical minimalism and abstract proceduralism often goes along with the allegation that liberalism also suffers from a lack of genuinely political purposes. Although, as a matter of fact, liberals have certainly been involved in politics, such political activities are said to derive primarily from nonpolitical interests – that is, private and economic interests that ultimately prevail over republican commitment. From such a point of view, liberalism appears to constitute a bourgeois ideology of “possessive individualism” rather than the joint project of citizens who share some substantial political convictions as the basis of a “strong” participatory democracy.

Finally, modern liberal individuals are often portrayed as having emancipated themselves not only from “thick” ethical and political values, but from all religious and spiritual commitment too. From

this perspective, it seems that liberalism generally goes along with a gradual breakdown of religious worldviews as well as a loss of faith and spirituality. Thus, it is contended that as a result of the modern “disenchantment of the world,” the liberal individual has more and more abandoned that comprehensive horizon of meaning that religious traditions were able to provide.

Curiously, it is not only anti-liberals who in such a way depict liberalism as a minimalist procedural framework for individuals living in an atomized society and in a thoroughly disenchanted and fragmented universe. Not infrequently, liberals themselves tend to subscribe to such a picture that, paradoxically enough, can sometimes be found also among people who actually show a strong ethical and political commitment on behalf, say, of human rights or fair treatment of minorities. One indeed gets the impression that many liberals seem reluctant to profess a comprehensive ethical and political (let alone religious) position, thus leaving the rhetoric of “values,” “virtue,” and “faith” to their political or ideological opponents. One reason for this peculiar reluctance may be the fear of moral guardianship – that is, the fear that government could claim the authority of a moral (or even religious) educator at the expense of personal freedom. Another reason may be respect for ethical, political, and religious pluralism in modern society, a pluralism whose recognition apparently requires self-restraint in the appeal to common values and worldviews. Apart from these arguments, some liberals may suspect that any invocation of virtue and values amounts in the end to nothing but self-righteousness, bigotry, and hypocrisy.

These and similar reasons for the liberal hesitancy in appealing publicly to ethical and political values may well be persuasive to a certain degree. The relative persuasiveness of these reasons, however, rests on the fact that they themselves embody a *normative commitment* on behalf of “substantial values” such as liberal rights, freedom of religion, and a democratic and pluralist civil society. One may assume that in many cases, such liberal commitment is itself actually based on a strong moral and political (and sometimes also a religious) conviction that, however, does not always find an appropriate expression. Motivated by the fear of moral guardianship, by a general respect for modern pluralism, and by a deep loathing for all sorts of self-righteousness, many liberals exercise what may be called a

deliberate self-restraint in expressing their own normative convictions. As a result of this attitude, however, the awareness that there are some fundamental normative insights underpinning liberalism might be dwindling more and more, both among non-liberals and liberals themselves.

Liberal self-restraint in expressing genuinely normative convictions can lead to practical problems and serious misunderstandings. Not only does it render liberalism vulnerable to anti-liberal polemics, it may also blur the distinction between an ethical and political liberalism, on the one hand, and an attitude of possessive individualism or skeptical indifference that often is also labeled “liberal,” on the other. In other words, what is missing is not only the conceptual and rhetorical weapons needed for liberals to defend themselves against attacks from without. Perhaps even more problematic are the misunderstandings that might arise from within – that is, from the lack of clarity in identifying the very principles on which ethical and political liberalism is normatively based.

I would therefore argue that liberals cannot afford simply to withdraw from a discussion of “values,” “virtue,” and “faith.” This does not mean that they should completely abandon their typical reluctance toward an all too straightforward invocation of strong convictions and common values. What is required, instead, is a *careful* language equally remote from enthusiasm and cynicism, or from dogmatism and skepticism. It may be advisable in many instances to avoid a direct appeal to strong moral convictions and, instead, to resort to *indirect* hints. And it may, moreover, generally be the case that the only way to speak about human “virtue” without immediately evoking the charge of naivety or bigotry is by using a slightly *ironic* language – that is, a language that mirrors an awareness of the insuperable ambivalence of all moral “phenomena.”

The general purpose of this book is to show that Kant's practical philosophy can help us to develop an appropriate language of liberal ethics in the broadest sense. What Kant offers is a highly sophisticated language that includes, among other things, the deliberate use of *symbols*, *analogies* and, at times, a friendly *irony*. Symbols, analogies, and irony can serve as a means of expressing *indirectly* those basic normative convictions that, at the same time, must be protected against the ever-lurking tendencies of authoritarian objectification.

2. The Unconditioned Within the Human Condition

Symbolism plays a crucial role in the architecture of Kant's philosophy. This holds especially true for his practical philosophy. As Gerhard Krüger remarks, the issue of symbolic representation is "the basic problem of [Kant's] practical philosophy in general."¹ What characterizes Kant's practical philosophy as a whole is a systematic reflection on how the unconditional claims of morality can come into sight and become effective within the contingencies of human existence.² As moral beings, we are exposed to an *unconditional* vocation that, at the same time, takes shape within the *conditions* of our insuperable finiteness. This peculiar interwovenness of the "unconditioned" and the "conditioned" manifests itself in various ways in Kant's practical philosophy.

Take, for instance, the concept of moral autonomy. On the one hand, Kant points out that a person's moral responsibility is not confined to the implementation of given moral norms, but extends to the legislative *creation* of norms. That the human being operates as an active "legislator" in the realm of morality is a specifically modern idea indicating the enlarged scope of the modern awareness of freedom in general, an awareness that comes to the fore philosophically, above all, in Kant's concept of autonomy. On the other hand, Kant emphasizes time and again that moral autonomy differs fundamentally from an attitude of supermoral complacency, because moral autonomy inevitably remains under the spell of an apodictic command – that is, the categorical imperative. Moral autonomy means the existential experience of an unconditional responsibility, a responsibility, however, that at the same time is inextricably connected with the awareness of human frailty and finiteness. Hence, autonomy in the Kantian sense proves the very opposite of any pretension of human "sovereignty" in moral matters,³ a pretension to which the concept of autonomy has at times been mistakenly equated.

The emotional impact of moral autonomy is respect before the moral law, a peculiar feeling that simultaneously humiliates and

¹ Gerhard Krüger, *Philosophie und Moral in der Kantischen Kritik* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2nd ed., 1967), p. 83.

² Cf. Johannes Schwartländer, "Sittliche Autonomie als Idee der endlichen Freiheit. Bemerkungen zum Prinzip der Autonomie im kritischen Idealismus Kants," in: *Theologische Quartalsschrift* 161 (1981), pp. 20–33.

³ Cf. Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason. Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 75–77.

elevates the human being. By confronting the individual with his or her own moral failures, respect inevitably has a humiliating effect. At the same time, however, respect raises the person above mere animal nature, and hence also has an elevating effect. Kant points out that the humiliating and the elevating aspects within the feeling of respect before the moral law are paradoxically intertwined, thus revealing once more the interwovenness of the unconditioned and the conditioned in human existence.

Finally, human finiteness manifests itself in the fact that human beings cannot ultimately comprehend the unconditional moral vocation under whose spell they find themselves. Morality in general remains beyond the scope of both empirical demonstration and theoretical speculation. The unconditional “ought” inherent in moral consciousness reveals itself as a “fact of reason,” as Kant puts it. This “fact of reason” is the existential reality of the moral vocation, a reality of which we are certain in moral *practice*, even though we ultimately fail to comprehend (let alone prove) it in *theory*. We thus again confront the inextricable interconnectedness of the unconditioned and the conditioned. Practice and theory remain different, and practical and theoretical use of reason can never be one and the same thing. It is only *indirectly* that they form a unity. That is, the practical certainty of the moral vocation opens up a horizon of meaning that stretches far beyond the realm of human cognition in the scientific sense. Within that comprehensive horizon of meaning, we can reflect philosophically on the guiding principles of moral and legal practice as well as raise the fundamental questions of philosophy of history, religion, and metaphysics. The answers that we may find, however, differ from scientific propositions in that they typically have a merely *symbolic* sense. Rather than presenting direct objects of human cognition, practical insights based on the consciousness of our moral vocation need to be mediated through symbols and analogies that *indirectly* point to a dimension that remains outside of the realm of the objectifying sciences.

3. Symbolic Representation in Kant's Works

Symbolic representation has a crucial function in Kant's practical philosophy. In the academic literature on Kant, however, the role of symbolism has not received much attention. Many authors do not even mention it. The number of studies that deal in some detail

with Kant's symbolism is relatively small.⁴ This widespread neglect can partly be explained by the fact that Kant himself, although repeatedly alluding to the topic, does not elaborate it systematically. As Gerhard Krüger writes: "It is unfortunate that Kant never analyzes *indirect* representation in the same detailed way in which he analyzes *direct* representation."⁵

In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant devotes a short and complicated section, titled "On the Typic of Pure Practical Judgment," to the problem of symbolic representation. However, apart from the few pages of that section, the relevant passages are found primarily outside of Kant's moral philosophy. Most important is the section "On the Final Aim of the Natural Dialectic of Human Reason" in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* also contains some hints at the significance of symbols. Perhaps the most systematic explanation of the difference between direct ("schematic") and indirect ("symbolic") representation is given in the *Critique of Judgment*.

⁴ Cf., for instance, Erich Adickes, *Kant und die Als-Ob-Philosophie* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1927); Gerhard Krüger, *op. cit.*, pp. 83ff.; Lewis White Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 154ff.; John R. Silber, "Der Schematismus in der praktischen Vernunft," in: *Kant-Studien* 56 (1965), pp. 253–273; Johannes Schwartländer, *Der Mensch ist Person. Kants Lehre vom Menschen* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1968), pp. 154ff.; Michel Despland, *Kant on History and Religion* (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1973); Gerhard Luf, *Freiheit und Gleichheit. Die Aktualität im politischen Denken Kants* (Vienna and New York: Springer, 1978), pp. 30ff.; Friedrich Kaulbach, *Das Prinzip Handlung in der Philosophie Kants* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1978), pp. 63ff., 84ff.; Heinrich Böckerstette, *Aporien der Freiheit und ihre Aufklärung durch Kant* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1982), pp. 325ff.; Hans-Michael Ferdinand, *Einhelligkeit von Moral und Politik, Zu Kants kritischer Bestimmung des Friedens* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Tübingen, 1987), pp. 156ff.; Paul Guyer, *Kant and the experience of freedom. Essays on aesthetics and morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Guido Löhrer, *Menschliche Würde. Wissenschaftliche Geltung und metaphorische Grenze der praktischen Philosophie Kants* (Freiburg/Germany: Alber, 1995), pp. 217ff.; Claus Dierksmeier, *Das Noumenon Religion. Eine Untersuchung zur Stellung der Religion im System der praktischen Philosophie Kants. Kant-Studien Ergänzungshefte* 133 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1998), pp. 40ff. It is surprising that Ernst Cassirer, whose philosophical work more than that of any other twentieth-century philosopher is devoted to exploring the manifold functions of symbols in the human mind and in human culture and who, as a former student of Hermann Cohen's, has a strong neo-Kantian background, scarcely touches on the role of symbolism in Kant's practical philosophy. The main reason for this neglect might be the fact that Cassirer is primarily interested in questions of theoretical rather than practical philosophy.

⁵ Krüger, *op. cit.*, p. 86 (emphasis added).

The relevant section, however, is relatively short. After briefly touching on the subject, Kant desists from a closer scrutiny, although he at least emphasizes the importance of further investigation: “This function [of judgment] [i.e., the symbolic function, H.B.] has not been analyzed much so far, even though it very much deserves fuller investigation; but this is not the place to pursue it.”⁶ Finally, Kant’s *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* contains many examples of the use of symbols in religious faith. Again, what is missing is a systematic analysis of the subject.⁷ In this book, I will bring together Kant’s various hints, allusions, and brief explanations of the role of symbolic representation. My purpose is to highlight systematically the importance of Kant’s symbolism for a comprehensive understanding of his practical philosophy.

4. Toward a Critical Metaphysics

The reflection on the significance of symbolic representation provides us with a golden thread that runs through the various parts of Kant’s practical philosophy, thus binding them together into a complex whole and showing that Kant’s philosophy is far from being “dualistic.”⁸ On the contrary, it can be understood as a “careful holism.” The conceptual distinctions that Kant introduces – for instance, between freedom and nature, duty and inclination, ethics and aesthetics, morality and religion – serve as devices designed to clarify the *open interconnectedness* between various validity claims that make up human experience as a whole. Thus, clear conceptual *distinction* and systematic *connection* are two sides of the same coin. The importance of symbolic representation can be seen not least in its function of facilitating an understanding of the (frequently only indirect) interconnectedness of the various dimensions that together constitute the fabric of human “experience” in the broader sense of the word.

⁶ Critique of Judgment, p. 227 (5: 352).

⁷ Cf. Despland, *op. cit.*, p. 261, who sees in Kant’s *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* “only the beginnings of a systematic theory of symbols.”

⁸ This charge of “dualism” has often been raised against Kant. It can be found even with scholars who generally profess a critical sympathy for Kant, such as, for instance, Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 131.

Such a comprehensive perspective also opens up the possibility of understanding Kantian metaphysics. Despite the fact that he is the harshest critic of the dogmatic metaphysics of the philosophical schools, Kant is convinced that metaphysics remains a legitimate purpose of philosophical reflection. He even praises metaphysics as the final and highest end of human reason. The way in which human beings pose metaphysical questions and seek answers, however, has substantially changed in modern times. Kant's philosophy may be the most evident manifestation of that fundamental transformation. For Kant embarks on a systematic and critical investigation of the dogmatic propositions that are typical of traditional metaphysics (and that can still be found in the metaphysical edifices of pre-Kantian enlightenment). He relentlessly undermines the purportedly scientific foundations of metaphysical propositions by which finite human beings pretend to be able to achieve an "objective" knowledge of the order of being. Torn as he is between admiration and fright, Moses Mendelssohn therefore calls the author of the *Critique of Pure Reason* the "all-destroying Kant."⁹

With his systematic criticism of dogmatic metaphysics, Kant pursues two purposes: an epistemological one and a practical one. On the one hand, he attempts to define precisely the scope and limitations of objectifying human cognition in order to foster epistemological and methodological clarity in the sciences. Hence the critical refutation of a dogmatic metaphysics that ignores the limits of human understanding and thereby undermines the integrity of scientific research. By cutting back the pretensions of vain metaphysical speculation, Kant, on the other hand, broadens the scope for the practical awareness of freedom whose inherent unconditionality has often been obscured by excessive claims of theoretical knowledge. If human beings pretend to have a comprehensive insight into the cosmic order of things, the course of human history, or the will of the divine creator, they will not be able to fully realize their unconditional moral vocation. Moral practice is practice of freedom. It cannot ground itself immediately on a purportedly objective knowledge, say, of a given teleological order of nature or a divine plan of salvation. It is hence also

⁹ Moses Mendelssohn, "Morgenstunden oder Vorlesungen über das Daseyn Gottes" (1785), in: *Werke*, Vol. III/2, ed. by Leo Strauss (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1974), p. 3.

on behalf of moral autonomy that we have to clarify the difference between theoretical knowledge (including metaphysical speculation) and the claims of morality. A critical investigation into the scope and limits of human cognition will therefore help to sharpen both the epistemological awareness within the sciences and the practical awareness of morality and moral freedom.

However, Kant's critique of speculative metaphysics is by no means meant to abandon metaphysical questions in general. What is at issue in his critical project is not a destruction, but rather a transformation, of metaphysics. The unconditional command of the categorical imperative – and hence the consciousness of human freedom – provides the basis for a new and *critical* metaphysics – that is, a metaphysics that does not pose as science but instead amounts to a practical faith. It is with this intention that Kant formulates his famous statement in the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: “Thus I had to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*.”¹⁰ The idea of freedom that remains beyond the grasp of scientific knowledge opens up the possibility of addressing the old metaphysical questions in a new way.¹¹ Kant's answers to these questions do not claim the status of scientific findings but constitute a practical faith that finds expression in the *language of symbols*.

One cannot leave aside Kant's interest in metaphysical questions without neglecting an essential component of his philosophy, as Gerhard Krüger rightly warns.¹² This admonition, which Krüger three generations ago formulated with regard to a neo-Kantianism chiefly interested in epistemology, continues to be relevant. It holds equally true with regard to those “postmetaphysical” transformations of Kant's philosophy that have recently been proposed in discourse ethics¹³ – that is, if these transformations are meant to be *post-metaphysical*, they

¹⁰ Critique of Pure Reason, p. 117 (3 :19/B XXX).

¹¹ Cf. Max Wundt, *Kant als Metaphysiker. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutschen Philosophie im 18. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1924), p. 198: “The renewal of metaphysics is the task which critical philosophy has established and the purpose to which it aspires.”

¹² Cf. Krüger, *op. cit.*, pp. 6–7.

¹³ Cf. the programmatic title in the essay by Karl-Otto Apel, “Diskursethik als Verantwortungsethik – eine postmetaphysische Transformation der Ethik Kants” [= Discourse Ethics as an Ethics of Responsibility – a Postmetaphysical Transformation of Kant's Ethics], in: Gerhard Schönrich and Yasushi Kato, eds., *Kant in der Diskussion der Moderne* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996), pp. 326–359.

will, at the same time, also be *post-Kantian*. Indeed, they go beyond Kant, not only in that they develop some of his insights further, but also in that they abandon an essential part of Kant's philosophical project.

If philosophy remains mute vis-à-vis the metaphysical questions of the human being, however, the danger arises that metaphysics will become the reserve of an esotericism that leaves no room for critical thought. This would certainly be unfortunate. Herbert Schnädelbach is right in insisting that metaphysical reflection is not a relic of bygone ages, but continues to constitute an important part of human self-understanding, and hence should remain worthy of philosophical investigation: "I still consider metaphysical questions as inescapable because they are imposed upon us by reason itself (Kant). And if certain types of answers are no longer acceptable this does not mean that those questions cannot be raised any more."¹⁴

5. Overview of the Book

The theme of this book is not a special "domain" within Kant's practical philosophy. Instead, my purpose is to reconstruct the role that symbolic representation plays in the *entire architecture* of Kant's practical philosophy. My claim is that a systematic account of symbolic representation can facilitate, among other things, a better understanding of how the various parts of Kant's practical philosophy – moral philosophy (in the narrow sense), legal philosophy, philosophy of history, and philosophy of religion – are essentially interwoven.

Before embarking on a detailed analysis, I give a short *characterization of Kant's way of philosophizing* about practical matters in general. In Chapter II, titled "Kant's Socratic Enlightenment," I describe his approach as a modern form of Socratic "midwifery," because his intention is merely to bring to light the normative principles that, in a way, have always operated as guidelines for moral judgment. The need for philosophical clarification of those principles arises from a "sophistic" tendency within human reason itself – namely, to obscure

¹⁴ Herbert Schnädelbach, "Metaphysik und Religion heute," in: *Zur Rehabilitierung des animal rationale. Vorträge und Abhandlungen 2* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992), pp. 137–157, at p. 137.