

Introduction

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Traditional histories of German philosophy often present the development of German Idealism as a linear, teleological progression from Kant, through Fichte and Schelling, to Hegel.¹ This approach originates in Hegel's own history of philosophy, which portrays the history of German Idealism as a cumulative, dialectical progression that terminates – rather conveniently – in Hegel's own absolute idealism. Over the past twenty years, there has been a growth of scholarship on the development of post-Kantian idealism, and a reappraisal of figures who were afforded only minor, supporting roles in the traditional narrative (figures such as K. L. Reinhold, S. Maimon, F. Schlegel, and Novalis).² The effects of this revisionary scholarship have been salutary: it has resulted in a more nuanced picture of the development of German Idealism that challenges the standard Hegelian narrative;³ it has led to the recovery of important philosophical arguments and insights;⁴ it has made salient previously neglected continuities with earlier traditions (e.g., the Leibnizian-Wolffian and Spinozist traditions);⁵ and it has led to a deeper understanding of the philosophies of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel by revealing their positions to be responses to hitherto unnoticed debates and questions.⁶

With a few notable exceptions, this revisionary scholarship has focused on the development of post-Kantian theoretical philosophy, neglecting the development of post-Kantian practical philosophy.⁷ This is a shame, for at least three reasons. First, the development of post-Kantian practical philosophy is

¹ The classic example of this approach is Kröner 1961.

² See Frank 1997; Henrich 2003; Henrich 2004. ³ See, for example, Beiser 2002.

⁴ See, for example, Franks 2005.

⁵ For the Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition, see Siep 2002 and Redding 2009. For Spinoza, see Förster and Melamed 2012.

⁶ It is now widely acknowledged that Fichte's conception of transcendental philosophy is in part developed in the context of a debate about the nature and significance of first principles in philosophy. Central figures involved in this debate include K. L. Reinhold, S. Maimon, G. E. Schulze, and F. Niethammer. Henrich 2003, Frank 2004, and Franks 2005 address these issues.

⁷ Two exceptions are Beiser 1992 and Maliks 2014.

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just as philosophically rich and significant as its theoretical counterpart. In tackling the philosophical and political issues with which they were preoccupied, the post-Kantians developed sophisticated arguments and positions on topics ranging from the nature of moral agency to the justification of human rights. Second, the development of post-Kantian practical philosophy has been no less subject to misrepresentation than the development of post-Kantian theoretical philosophy. Histories of post-Kantian political philosophy typically present its development as a linear movement from Kant through Fichte to Hegel, a movement that is often interpreted as a baleful descent toward authoritarianism and “organicist” theories of the state.⁸ A proper understanding of the complex and variegated development of post-Kantian practical philosophy can serve as a powerful corrective to this misrepresentation. Third, and finally, a grasp of the manifold connections and influences that constitute the development of post-Kantian practical philosophy can lead us to question and refine our understanding of those philosophers who are traditionally regarded as “central” – in other words, Kant, Fichte, and Hegel. Thus, understanding Hegel’s debt to German conservatism might lead us to question “liberal” interpretations of his thought.⁹

This edited collection aims to communicate something of the richness, diversity, and complexity of the development of practical philosophy between Kant and Hegel. Each of the thirteen chapters deals with a neglected figure or issue or a neglected aspect of a well-known figure or issue. Taken together, they offer an alternative picture of the route that leads from Kant to Hegel, a route that is perhaps best conceived of not as a “royal road” but as a network of byways. In the remainder of this introduction, we provide a brief (and necessarily selective) discussion of the themes with which post-Kantian practical philosophy was concerned (Section 2) and a brief summary of the contributions to the volume (Section 3).

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It is perhaps difficult for us to imagine the profound impact that Kant’s practical philosophy – especially his moral philosophy – had upon his early followers. Two contemporary testimonies are illuminating in this regard. In his autobiography, Johann Benjamin Erhard describes his first encounter with Kant’s second *Critique* as follows:

[A]ll pleasure that I obtained in life dwindled in comparison with the stimulation of my mind that I felt in [reading] certain passages of Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*.

⁸ For a classic critique of authoritarian tendencies in Fichte and Hegel, see Berlin 2014.

⁹ See Reidar Maliks’ contribution to this volume.

Tears of the highest bliss fell from me onto this book, and afterwards even the memory of those happy days of my life moistened my eyes and consoled me every time adverse events and a sorrowful cast of mind obstructed any joyful outlook in this life. (*DW*, 20–1)

In a well-known fragment of a letter to Weißhuhn written in 1790, J. G. Fichte describe the effects wrought on him by reading Kant's second *Critique*:

I have been living in a new world ever since reading the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Propositions which I thought could never be overturned have been overturned for me. Things have been proven to me which I thought never could be proven – for example, the concept of absolute freedom, the concept of duty, etc. – and I feel all the happier for it. It is unbelievable how much respect for mankind and how much strength this system gives us! (*EPW*, 357; *GA*, III: no. 6)

As Fichte's letter intimates, the impact of Kant's moral philosophy – its ability to open new intellectual vistas – was due in part to its reflections on the nature of human freedom and moral duty. At the risk of oversimplification, the development of post-Kantian practical philosophy might be profitably understood as a series of attempts to work out the philosophical and political implications of Kant's account of human freedom and moral duty. For the purposes of this introduction, we can identify three broad classes of implications that exemplify (but do not exhaust) the concerns of the early post-Kantians.

The first class of implications relates to the metaphysical debate between freedom and determinism and to issues concerning the ascription of moral responsibility. C. C. E. Schmid argued that Kant's claim that an action is free only if it is done from duty creates a problem for the ascription of responsibility for immoral actions since such actions would not, strictly speaking, be free, and moral responsibility presupposes freedom. Schmid also attributed to Kant the position of "intelligible fatalism," which holds that moral action is determined by the causality of the noumenal will. Intelligible fatalism was held to be problematic because it fails to appreciate the distinction between acting based on practical reason and acting based on one's own free, arbitrary choice. The attempt to respond to such worries led philosophers such as K. L. Reinhold and J. G. Fichte to offer alternative accounts of freedom and moral agency. For example, K. L. Reinhold, in response to Schmid, introduced the distinction between *Wille* and *Willkür* in his popular work *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*.¹⁰

¹⁰ See the 8th Letter in *BKP*. Daniel Breazeale's contribution to this volume addresses the "intelligible fatalism" debate, and Katerina Deligiorgi's contribution discusses J. A. H. Ulrich's deterministic critique of Kant. See also Guyer 2017 for an examination of "intelligible fatalism" that argues that Kant was committed to the *Wille/Willkür* distinction prior to Reinhold's intervention.

The second class of implications relates to legal and political philosophy (the “philosophy of right”). By the early 1790s, Kant had published only minor, albeit significant, works on legal and political issues. Absent a full, definitive statement of Kant’s philosophy of right (Kant’s *Metaphysics of Morals* was published in 1797), the early post-Kantians endeavored to work out the implications of Kant’s account of freedom and duty for legal and political philosophy. A central concern in these endeavors is the nature of the relationship between right and morality: Are the principles and norms of right (where these norms include human rights – *Menschenrechte*) to be derived from moral principles or norms? Or are they rather to be derived independently of morality (as, say, necessary conditions of the possibility of self-conscious human agency)? In attempting to resolve this issue, the early post-Kantians developed several innovations that exerted a profound influence on subsequent thinkers and are still relevant today. Perhaps the most famous of these is the thesis, first articulated by J. G. Fichte in his 1796–7 *Foundations of Natural Right*, that a norm-governed interpersonal relationship (the relationship of mutual recognition) is a necessary condition of self-consciousness and individuality.

The third class of implications, intimately related to the second, concerns the relationship between Kant’s account of freedom and morality and the French Revolution. Although Kant himself had rejected a right to revolution, early post-Kantians such as J. B. Erhard, J. G. Fichte, and J. A. Bergk drew upon Kant’s moral philosophy and early political writings to justify human rights and a right to revolution. In his 1793/4 *Contribution to the Correction of the Public’s Judgment of the French Revolution*, Fichte construed the people’s right to revolution as its right to change its “state constitution [*Staatsverfassung*]” (*B*, Ch. 1). Such a right is justified, Fichte claimed, because morality requires that each individual possess the inalienable right to unilaterally terminate any contract he enters into, including the contract that founds a state constitution. In addition to defending the right to revolution, Fichte also provided a rhetorically powerful characterization of the opposing standpoints in the debate over the legitimacy of revolution: Defenders of the revolution occupied the standpoint of the critical philosophy, and had a lively sense of their own freedom and spontaneity. By contrast, the conservative critics of revolution (thinkers such as A. W. Rehberg) occupied the standpoint of empiricism and conceived of themselves as merely passive recipients of experience (*B*, Introduction).¹¹

Fichte’s defense of the right to revolution proved highly influential and secured his reputation as a radical political thinker. It is, however, vulnerable

¹¹ This characterization of opposing standpoints clearly foreshadows Fichte’s later distinction between idealism and dogmatism in *IW*.

to criticism on several points.¹² An alternative, and arguably more sophisticated, defense of the right to revolution was provided by J. B. Erhard in his *On the Right of the People to a Revolution*, which was written in 1794 and published in 1795. Erhard argues that a people has a right to revolt if the basic, most fundamental laws of the state engender human rights violations (where the human rights that can be violated includes a human right that belongs collectively to the people – the right to enlightenment).¹³

Having provided a brief illustration of some of the themes that shaped and animated the development of post-Kantian practical philosophy, we now turn to an overview of the contributions to this volume.

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The first two chapters, by Paul Guyer and Katerina Deligiorgi, deal with Kant's early critics. A well-known objection to Kant's moral philosophy is that the categorical imperative is merely formal and empty. The objection alleges that the categorical imperative, understood as a formal procedure of universalizing maxims, cannot generate moral norms by itself, but must surreptitiously rely on historically and socially conditioned moral norms and principles (such as, for example, the principle that there ought to be private property) or on some claim about human nature. Although this objection is usually associated with Hegel, Guyer contends that it was first advanced by Pistorius in his review of Kant's *Groundwork*. Pistorius criticizes Kant for failing to ground his moral theory on a theory of human nature that recognizes the importance of happiness in explaining the interest that subjects have in acting morally. Guyer argues that Kant has a response to Pistorius (formulated in the *Critique of Practical Reason*), a response that turns on Kant's views about the primacy of pure practical reason within human nature. *Pace* Pistorius, it is not the case that Kant disregards human beings' interest in happiness; it is simply that he does not grant interest in happiness primacy over reason's interest in morality. Pistorius offered a rejoinder to Kant's response in a review of the second *Critique*, and Guyer charts this development and considers how Kant might have replied.

In the second chapter, Katerina Deligiorgi engages with Johann August Heinrich Ulrich's critique of Kant's theory of transcendental freedom. Ulrich

¹² A trenchant critique of Fichte's defense of the right to revolution was provided by J. B. Erhard in his 1795 review of Fichte's book. Among other things, Erhard objected to Fichte's contractarian account of revolution, questioning the coherence of a conception of a contract as an agreement that can be unilaterally terminated at will. See Erhard's critique of Fichte in *RF*.

¹³ Erhard's account of revolution is discussed in Michael Nance's contribution to this volume.

is committed to metaphysical determinism, and he criticizes Kant's theory of transcendental freedom on the grounds that it is unable to explain why, in any given case, an agent chose to act in one way rather than another. Given this inability, the fact that the agent chose to act as she did would seem to be a matter of indeterminism or chance. In opposition to Kant, Ulrich outlines a naturalistic and deterministic ethics that, he claims, is able to capture the absolute and categorical nature of moral imperatives. Deligiorgi identifies several flaws in Ulrich's ethical naturalism and provides a defense of Kant's conception of transcendental freedom.

The third chapter, by Timothy Quinn, considers the influence of Moses Maimonides and Kant on Salomon Maimon's ethical thought. Quinn argues that Maimon draws upon Maimonides to criticize and radically transform Kant's moral philosophy. At the heart of Maimon's critique is a claim concerning the status of theoretical reason. Whereas Kant had insisted on the "primacy" of practical reason, Maimon follows Maimonides in insisting on the primacy of theoretical reason. For Maimon, as for Maimonides, the highest good is intellectual perfection, and practical reason and morality are merely instrumental to its pursuit. According to Quinn, Maimon also departs from Kant in embracing eudaimonism and in developing a theory of motivation in which a drive (*Trieb*) for cognition plays a central role.

The fourth and fifth chapters, by James A. Clarke and Michael Nance, explore the practical philosophy of a neglected, yet highly significant, thinker – Johann Benjamin Erhard. Clarke's chapter examines Erhard's account of the relationship between right and morality. Fichte cites Erhard approvingly when presenting his own account of the relationship between right and morality in the *Foundations of Natural Right*, and it is often thought that Erhard's position is a hesitant precursor of Fichte's (*FNR*, 12; *SW*, III: 12). Clarke argues that Erhard's position is much more complex and sophisticated than is commonly assumed, and that it merits philosophical attention in its own right. Clarke also considers Erhard's position in the context of the debate between legal positivism and natural law theory, arguing that Erhard's position constitutes a compelling form of natural law theory.

Michael Nance's chapter focuses on Erhard's Kantian defense of the right to revolution. Erhard aims to establish that there are conditions under which a person is morally permitted, and hence justified, in instigating revolution. Nance reconstructs these conditions, scrutinizing them and assessing their plausibility. Nance emphasizes the centrality to Erhard's theory of the dangerous unpredictability of revolutionary action as a problem for the moral justification of revolution. Erhard's insight into the epistemic difficulties associated with consequentialist justifications of revolution is both interesting in itself, and the source of some puzzles about his theory of revolution, which Nance discusses in the second half of his chapter.

The sixth chapter, by Reed Winegar, continues the theme of political resistance by examining Elise Reimarus' account of rebellion. Reimarus' political writings were published prior to Kant's and it has been argued – by Lisa Curtis-Wendlandt – that they anticipate Kant's views on freedom and rebellion. In opposition to Curtis-Wendlandt, Winegar argues that Reimarus' position differs significantly from Kant's in offering a defense of rebellion on consequentialist grounds. Although this defense resembles Achenwall's consequentialist defense of revolution (a defense criticized by Kant), it differs from it in one crucial respect: the value to be promoted is not happiness, but freedom. Winegar suggests that Reimarus' position might prove attractive to political philosophers who endorse Kant's emphasis on freedom but are chary of his views on rebellion and his non-consequentialist approach to political philosophy.

In the seventh chapter, Daniel Breazeale explores the topic of freedom and duty in Kant, Reinhold, and Fichte. The starting point for this exploration is C. C. E. Schmid's critique of Kant's moral philosophy, which argues that Kant's claim that an action is free only if it is done out of respect for the moral law makes it hard to understand how agents could be held responsible for immoral actions; this is so because immoral actions are not, *ex hypothesi*, free, and an action's being free is plausibly thought to be a condition of an agent's being held responsible for it. Breazeale considers how Reinhold, Fichte, and Kant himself, respond to this criticism by refining and developing their conceptions of freedom, practical reason, and duty.

The eighth chapter, by Owen Ware, offers a novel interpretation of Fichte's moral philosophy. Rejecting popular interpretations of Fichte's practical philosophy that either emphasize the communitarian or individualist strands of his thought, Ware opts for a "mystical" Fichte – that is, an interpretation of Fichte's ethics that explains what it means for the subject to merge with the unity of pure spirit. Ware characterizes Fichte's position as "ethical holism," where this is the view that duties derive their material content from the social whole. Ware's interpretation helps to explain how Fichte's ethics avoids an empty formalism objection and how Fichte is able to incorporate a theory of the natural drive into his Kantian-inspired ethical system. A further, important upshot of Ware's interpretation is that it highlights the social dimension of Fichte's ethics.

The ninth chapter focuses on F. H. Jacobi. Benjamin Crowe argues that Jacobi's conception of nihilism has a practical dimension as well as a theoretical one. In its practical dimension, nihilism involves advocating a formal ideal of practical rationality and abstracting from the "way of sensing [*Sinnesart*]" that informs each agent's moral judgment and reveals the morally salient features of particular situations. This way of sensing is the source of individuality, and it is shaped and formed by social relationships. Drawing

upon Jacobi's treatises and epistolary writings, Crowe shows how Jacobi's account of practical nihilism is a response to "Enlightenment" thinkers (Kant, Fichte, and the French *philosophes*) and to the French Revolution.

Elizabeth Millán Brusslan's contribution, in the tenth chapter, explores the social and political philosophy of the early German Romantic philosopher, Friedrich Schlegel. Although German Romanticism is sometimes associated with reactionary conservatism, Millán Brusslan argues that Schlegel's pluralistic conception of philosophy (and his conception of the relationship between philosophy and literature) led him to adumbrate a progressive social and political philosophy, which sought to include women and other traditionally excluded groups. Millán Brusslan discusses Schlegel's treatment of women in his fragments, correspondence, and his novel *Lucinde*, and considers his critique of Kant's condemnation of democracy in *Toward Perpetual Peace*.

The eleventh chapter, by Douglas Moggach, considers the influence of the Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition on post-Kantian political thought. Since Kantian liberals traditionally seek to defend the state's neutrality on questions of the good life, the perfectionist ethics of Leibniz and Wolff appears to conflict with Kantian liberalism. Moggach argues that if the good to be perfected consists in the conditions (both institutional and intersubjective) required for free self-determination, the appearance of conflict disappears. This conception of the good is, Moggach claims, characteristic of a post-Kantian perfectionism. Moggach explores the development of post-Kantian perfectionism by examining the debate between Wilhelm von Humboldt and Karl von Dalberg on the role of the state in promoting a perfectionist conception of the good. The central question concerns the extent to which the state should interfere in promoting perfectionist ends, with Dalberg assigning the state a prominent role, and Humboldt, an opponent of the tutelary state, recognizing that the promotion of moral perfection depends on the freedom of individuals. Moggach concludes with some remarks on how the debate influenced Fichte's economic and political thought.

The last two chapters, by Reidar Maliks and Karen Ng, offer new perspectives on Hegel's philosophy of right. Maliks adopts a "contextualist" approach to Hegel's philosophy of right, situating it within the context of a debate between the German Burkeans (a group of conservative thinkers that included Gentz, Rehberg, and Möser) and Kant and the "radical" Kantians (thinkers such as Erhard, Fichte, and Bergk). Whereas Kant and the radical Kantians championed the role of reason and a priori principles in practical philosophy, the German Burkeans condemned it, arguing that abstract theories and principles had led to the excesses of the French Revolution. Political philosophy should, they maintained, be grounded in convention, tradition, and historical experience. Maliks considers the influence of the German Burkeans on Hegel's

reception of the French Revolution, and argues that Hegel's position can be read as an attempt to reconcile ("sublate," in Hegel's terminology) the two sides of the debate. This reading, Maliks argues, serves as a corrective to liberal interpretations of Hegel and sheds new light on Hegel's infamous *Doppelsatz*: "What is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational."

Karen Ng interprets Hegel's philosophy of right through the lens of critical theory. Adorno and Habermas both suggest that Hegel's account of public opinion in the *Philosophy of Right* shows that Hegel deployed a concept that is central to critical theory – the concept of ideology. In the first two parts of her essay, Ng vindicates this suggestion by arguing that Hegel's account of public opinion is an account of a form of ideological false consciousness. She further argues that a distinctive (and, indeed, attractive) feature of this account is that it conceives of ideology as embedded in social practices and social institutions. In the third part of her essay, Ng explores the origins of Hegel's social and political methodology in his 1802/3 essay on natural right. She argues that Hegel's critiques of formalism and empiricism reveal methodological commitments that constitute a nascent critical theory. Ng's interpretation provides fresh insight into the development of practical philosophy between Kant and Hegel, and sheds new light on the history of radical social philosophy.

As interest in post-Kantian philosophy grows, with new studies on Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel appearing with some regularity, there is also a quickly burgeoning interest in many of the lesser-known figures who shaped the trajectory of German Idealism and post-Kantian philosophy. Our hope is that this volume contributes not only to a better understanding of the practical philosophy of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, but also to a greater appreciation of the contributions of neglected philosophers such as Pistorius, Ulrich, Maimon, Erhard, E. Reimarus, Reinhold, Jacobi, F. Schlegel, Humboldt, Dalberg, Gentz, Rehberg, and Möser, to name only the figures central to the chapters herein. We can only hope that scholarship on these figures and the many others we do not address will continue to flourish. It will undoubtedly enrich our understanding of the historical period, and in some cases, it might even illuminate our own moral and political predicament.