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Formerly "Picture of the Month"

September-October 2011  
*Kant on Rationality, Morality, and Politics*



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**A note on the convergence of Kant's concepts of rationality, morality, and politics** Over thirty years after first studying Kant in considerable detail and intensity during my Berkeley years, I have recently been reading Kant once again. He remains such an inexhaustible subject of inspiration and critical reflection! One aspect of his work that I have come to appreciate increasingly is what I see as a remarkable unity of thought in Kant's writings, a unity of thought that is often overlooked. People see in Kant the grand abolisher of metaphysics, or the revolutionary theorist of knowledge, or a rigorous moral thinker, or a political thinker of high rank, a pioneer of international law, and so on; but rarely they appreciate him for all of these achievements together. Even more rarely I find systematic accounts of the relevance that Kant's thinking in one field (say, moral theory) may have for his contributions to other fields (say, epistemology or politics).

Against such pigeonhole thinking in the contemporary reception of Kant's ideas, I suggest it might be equally fruitful and important to learn from Kant about the meaning of an integrated perspective of what is good and right and rational, a perspective that our epoch appears to have all but lost.

*The loss of an integrated perspective of the rational, the moral, and the political* This loss causes difficulties to decision-makers and professionals in all domains, for example, in the form of an apparently ever increasing complexity of the issues they face, as well as of a growing diversity of views and interests involved, in dealing with major challenges of our epoch such as world-wide poverty and malnutrition, huge economic disparities, deficits of social justice and security, insufficient education and health provision, poor infrastructure, violence and criminality, political persecution, environmental degradation and global climate change, lack of democracy, the deplorable state of human rights and civil rights in many countries, and so on. Yet ours is an epoch of unseen scientific and technological achievements, which means that the bottleneck issue in dealing with all these major problems is

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one of *moral sense* and, linked to it, *political will* rather than one of lacking *expertise*, economic resources, and instrumental rationality.

We have lost sight of Kant's lesson that reason is fundamentally two-dimensional. When it comes to acting reasonably, rationality cannot be bisected into a rational theoretical and an irrational practical part. The practical employment of reason inevitably reaches beyond the limits of what we can know empirically and explain theoretically; but even so we still can and need to think reasonably about these non-theoretical conditions of good and rational practice (Kant, 1787, Bxxv-xxx; cf. Ulrich, 2009b, p. 5f). It is in this sense that Kant, in the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, proclaimed that "I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith" (1787, Bxxx). The faith he meant was faith in the power of practical reason, but certainly not faith in a stance of irrationality or esoterics, of unfettered hedonism and utilitarianism, or of dogmatism and ultimately, skepticism.

But as I said, our epoch has almost forgotten this lesson – whence comes the futile attempt to ground rationality in a primacy of theoretical reason or "primacy of theory" only, rather than in a fundamentally two-dimensional understanding of rationality (cf. Ulrich, 2006b, pp. 7-12; 2006c, p. 5f; 2007, pp. 2-9). As a result of this loss of an integrated perspective, we observe increasingly diverging speeds of development in science and technology on the one hand and in morality and politics on the other hand. While our scientific and technological know-how grows exponentially, the capacity of securing good practice in the sense of ethically desirable and defensible action and democratically based processes of public discourse and legitimation appears to stagnate or even to diminish in the face of increasing ethical pluralism and cultural relativism. In short, we face an alarmingly widening gap of rationality between the realms of theory (based on science and technology) and practice (involving morality and politics).

*What can Kant teach us about integrative thought?* In this situation, integrative thought is imperative. Accordingly imperative it is also to examine what Kant, the integrative thinker *par excellence*, has to teach us about it. I can hardly answer this question systematically and comprehensively in a short note such as this one; but we can at least try to get a basic idea of the unity of Kant's thinking. It seems to me there is a

convergence of Kant's concepts of *rationality*, *morality*, and *politics* that is of utmost relevance for our epoch. By paying more attention to this convergence than is usually paid to it, we might gain a better basis for integrative thought, and thus for dealing with the major challenges of our epoch of which we have listed a few above. For example, we might gain a deeper understanding of the deficits of rationality involved, by focusing on the usual lack of integrative thinking in dealing with such problems.

At the same time, we might in this way also improve our understanding of specific parts of Kant's work, which in turn will benefit our understanding of the problems of our epoch. For example, we might gain a better understanding of what Kant's seemingly impossible undertaking of a self-critique of reason is all about and how it is related to his conception of an open and enlightened society. Likewise, we might learn to better understand how the apparent formalism and rigor of Kant's "categorical imperative" and deontological ethics (i.e., ethics of duty) go together with the emancipatory spirit of his enlightenment thought and wherein consists its importance today for dealing with ethical pluralism and relativism and indeed for all rational practice. Or, as a last example, we might better appreciate how Kant's vision of a cosmopolitan civil society relates to his focus on individual autonomy and how both might relate to a notion of rational practice that would be relevant and helpful today.

Again, these are big questions and I do not claim to have the answers. But the difficulty of these questions provides no excuse for ignoring them or for not thinking more carefully than is now usual about their deep underlying connections. I suggest we should make it a habit – and I have indeed tried to make it a habit of mine – to think about these connections whenever an opportunity arises. One such opportunity I find in my ongoing work about the meaning of good professional practice, and my related attempts to redefine our understanding of reflective practice and to help develop tools to support it, ranging from critical systems heuristics to critical pragmatism. But of course, this is a long-term research program, the results of which I cannot define in advance. A more immediate (and less ambitious) opportunity to consider these connections arose earlier this year, when I received an email message from Amazon.com, presumably generated automatically by its Internet server, asking me whether I would not care to review the two books I had recently bought through them, Hans Saner's

(1973) *Kant's Political Thought* and Onora O'Neill's (1989) *Constructions of Reason*.

*Three related reviews* As I am sure you are aware, Amazon offers its customers a possibility to write and publish so-called "customer reviews" of books they have read and would like to recommend to other people. I have often found these comments quite useful and interesting; their quality is sometimes remarkable and in any case they always reveal different possibilities to read and appreciate the work of an author. So, in response to Amazon's request, I checked what customer reviews were available on the two books by Saner and O'Neill and, to my surprise, found they had not motivated any reader thus far to offer their comments or write a full-blown review. Given that I had already commented in quite some detail about the two books in my *Bimonthly* of May-June 2011 (Ulrich, 2011b, cf. 2011a for an introduction), only a small additional effort was required to adapt my comments so that they could stand alone; so why should I not be willing to share them with other (potential) readers? While most of them will hardly be prepared to read my rather long and demanding *Bimonthly* essays on Kant & Co., they may very well be used to have a look at Amazon's "customer reviews" as a way to inform themselves about books they consider reading, so there was a chance to provide them with a sense of what the two books have to offer and thereby, to encourage them to actually read them.

After adapting my comments about Saner and O'Neill's books, it was a consequent next step to write a third review, dedicated to Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, perhaps the most influential work on moral reasoning ever published. My main interest in reading Saner and O'Neill's books had been the opportunity they offered me to review and expand my understanding of Kant's practical philosophy in the light of his political thought or, more precisely, the political roots of his critical philosophy; so it seemed not a bad idea to return to the original source and review it in this light. Again, I had written extensively about Kant's concept of morality in an earlier *Bimonthly*, of March-April 2009 (Ulrich, 2009b), so I also went back to that earlier essay. There I had also formulated some thoughts about Kant's concept of reason in general and how it related to his concept of morality, with a view to preparing the ground for my subsequent review of the Toulmin-Habermas model of argumentation (Ulrich, 2009c). Another,

previous opportunity to review my understanding of Kant's practical philosophy had been provided by a paper I wrote for the *Interdisciplinary Yearbook of Business Ethics* about my proposed framework for grounding ethical practice, critical pragmatism, and the way it relates to Kant's principle of moral universalization (Ulrich, 2006a). Reading these earlier conjectures again, but now in the light of Saner's and O'Neill's books and of my newly awakened interest in Kant as a political thinker, I realize more than ever how much Kant's concepts of rationality (good reasoning), morality (good action) and politics (good government) converge.

*Kant's converging concepts of rationality, morality, and politics* So here I am writing about *Kant*<sup>3</sup> or the convergence of his concepts of *rationality, morality, and politics*. I will first sum up the way I currently see this convergence, by characterizing my understanding of Kant's notions of *good reasoning, good action, and good government* in a manner that should allow comparing and connecting them. Subsequently I will put my readers in a position to see and judge for themselves, by offering slightly edited versions of the three reviews in question.

**Table 1: Kant's converging concepts of rationality, morality, and politics**

Concept	Core concern	Key requirement	Vision	Convergence
<i>Rationality:</i> good reasoning in general	<i>Preserving the integrity of reason:</i> avoiding a merely private use of reason	<i>Public use of reason:</i> the principle of public scrutiny	<i>Enlightenment:</i> "a public is more likely to enlighten itself than an individual"	<i>Universal communi-cability:</i> rational is that which we can share and argue publicly (in a global community of free and reasonable beings)
<i>Morality:</i> good action	<i>Securing the universally good will of agents:</i> avoiding a merely private morality	<i>Sensus communis:</i> the principle of moral universalization	<i>Kingdom of ends:</i> "thinking in the place of others" and "consequent thought"	
<i>Politics:</i> good government	<i>Promoting a just political order:</i> avoiding a merely private use of power	<i>Republican constitution:</i> the principle of the civil constitution of legitimacy	<i>World citizenship and international law:</i> a cosmopolitan "way to peace"	

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Table 1 sums up the overarching unity of thought that I find in Kant's concepts of rationality (reasonableness), morality, and politics. We may think of the three issues in terms of these three questions:

1. Wherein consists the *rational* quality of thought and argumentation,

- that is, what is the essence of "good" reasoning?
2. Wherein consists the *moral* quality of volition and action, that is, what is the essence of a "good" will and of conforming action?
  3. Wherein consists the *political* quality of a society's public order, that is, what is the essence of "good" government?

*Good reasoning* as Kant understands it is thought and argumentation that can be maintained consistently throughout. It is, consequently, thinking that is not prejudiced by one's private conditions of thought (Kant, 1793, B157). The essence of good reasoning accordingly lies in its being able to withstand *public scrutiny*, as it is based on principles of thought and action that can be shared with everyone else, in the sense that all reasonable agents can agree without needing to claim for themselves an exception from these principles. Good reasoning thereby also preserves *reason's integrity*, in the sense that its results can at all times be maintained without accepting inconsistencies of thought or action. Due to this double quality of integrity – its freedom from prejudice and inconsistency – good reasoning can at all times be shared openly with everyone; it never needs to hide its true intentions, as it never boils down to a hidden private agenda. Its ideal and means of realization at once is the *public use of reason* (Kant, 1784, A484). The underlying vision is that of an enlightened society, and the underlying reasoning is that the public is more likely to enlighten itself than an individual (Kant, 1784, A483):

For any *single individual* to gain enlightenment is very difficult.... Therefore only a few have succeeded, by cultivating their own minds, in freeing themselves from immaturity and achieving personal competence. ...

But that *the public* should enlighten itself is more likely. It is indeed almost unavoidable, if only freedom of public expression is granted; for among the majority of those who content themselves to follow the opinion leaders, there will always be a few who, after freeing themselves from the yoke of immaturity, will begin to think for themselves and thereby will set an example to others....

Thus all it takes for a public to enlighten itself is freedom, and indeed the most harmless kind of freedom to which this term can properly be applied – the freedom to make *public use of one's reason* at every point. (Kant, 1784, A483f; my simplified transl., my italics)

Kant's understanding of rationality thus reveals itself to be very different from the kind of narrow formalism and rationalism of which people who apparently have not read him sometimes accuse him; it is grounded in an encompassing vision of a free and enlightened society. The central idea is that of the liberating force of the public use of reason, as the only alternative there is to all forms of immaturity, injustice, and despotism. We recognize here the deeply political roots of Kant's thinking that we have discussed in a previous *Bimonthly* (see Ulrich, 2011b). It comes as no surprise, then, that

this same notion of the importance of the public use of reason also informs Kant's concepts of moral and of political reasoning, to which we now turn.

*Good will and conforming action* in Kant's conception of morality is the orientation of an agent's volition and actions towards ends and principles that respect the freedom, dignity and integrity of other agents and for this reason can at all times be *shared* with the community of all those interested or concerned. And since we cannot usually delimit that community in advance with certainty, except in the case of merely private action, good volition or action can be said to be based on principles that are *universally* valid. The essence of moral reasoning accordingly lies in the universality of the principles of action it assumes. Due to this quality of universality, moral reasoning can at all times be defended rationally against all objections by people who see their interests questioned by it; it never needs to hide its true intentions, as it never boils down to a merely "private use of reason" or even a hidden private agenda. Therein consists its deep affinity to good reasoning (or rationality, "reasonableness") in general. Its ideal and means of realization at once is the *sensus communis* (Kant, 1793, B157f, cf. my previous discussion in Ulrich, 2009b, p. 10). The underlying vision is that of a universal moral community of agents who freely coordinate their actions according to these three maxims of well-understood common sense:

- The maxim of *unprejudiced* thought: *Think for yourself!* That is, take responsibility for your actions rather than just relying on the views of others or allowing your private conditions of thought to distort your judgment.
- The maxim of *enlarged* thought: *Think in the place of all others!* That is, consider the perspectives of all others concerned rather than just using other people for your ends.
- The maxim of *consequent* thought: *Think consistently!* That is, think and act so that your premises could serve as general principles of your and everyone's thinking, rather than claiming special cases or exceptions from such principles.

In Kant's words:

Under the *sensus communis* [i.e., well-understood common sense] we must include the idea of a sense *common to all*, that is, an ability of reflection that considers the ways all other humans may think ... [rather than] allowing one's private conditions of thought, which one might easily mistake for objective, to distort one's judgment...

The following maxims of common human reasoning ... may serve to elucidate the basic propositions [that I associate with well-understood common sense].

They are: (1) to think for oneself; (2) to think [as if one found oneself] in the place of everyone else; and (3) to always think consistently with oneself. The first is the maxim of *unprejudiced* thought; the second of *enlarged* thought; the third of *consequent* thought. (Kant 1793, B157f, my simplified transl., abridged from Ulrich, 2009b, p. 10)

The underlying vision is that of a world-wide moral community in which all rational beings are treated as ends-in-themselves rather than just being instrumentalized for the ends of others (e.g., those who hold power and/or pursue private interests). Kant describes this ideal as a *kingdom of ends* or, as we might prefer to say today, a commonwealth of citizens who regard themselves and all others as ends-in-themselves and act accordingly. They will act *as if* they were universal legislators accountable for the welfare of that commonwealth, that is, they will make sure the premises of their actions could be general principles of action (or "laws") for everyone. At the same time, they will accept that as members of that commonwealth they are themselves bound by such principles, which is to say, their sovereignty is limited by the equal sovereignty of all other members. In this double sense moral agents will understand themselves as both sovereigns and members of "a systematic union of different rational beings under common laws" (Kant, 1786, B433, cf. B438f), beings who recognize their differences but nevertheless respect their shared dignity as free moral agents in a kingdom of ends. The moral core of Kant's practical philosophy thus reveals itself as being deeply connected to his political vision of a world-wide community of sovereign, self-legislating moral agents.

**Good government** accordingly is for Kant a form of government that allows those governed to use their reason freely and publicly, *as if* they were members of a kingdom of ends. That is, in more contemporary terms, good political reasoning is based on the notion that the ultimate source of a legitimate public order, regardless of whether its form is that of a monarchy, an aristocracy, a democracy or any combination of these, is the citizenry; its underlying vision is a society of free and active citizens who together coordinate matters of common concern on the basis of reason and public discourse rather than force and secrecy. The essence of good government thus lies not in its external form but in the way (and spirit) in which it is exercised, that is, in its intrinsic compatibility with a *republican constitution* and with the basic civic rights that go with it, rights such as the right of free expression, of active political participation, of personal integrity and



protection from arbitrary persecution, and so on. At an international level, regarding the relation among states, this republican notion of good government translates into a *cosmopolitan* conception of international law and human rights. Its vision is *world citizenship*, understood as a self-governed community of reasonable and sovereign beings. Within such a community, all issues become subjects of *world interior politics* (von Weizsäcker, 1963, pp. 9 and 11f), which is to say there is no room for war and violence among nations but only for mutual cooperation and (at least temporary) hospitality. Kant's concept of good politics (or good government) thus also embodies his vision of a cosmopolitan *way to peace* (see Kant, 1795; for short extracts, cf. Ulrich, 2005).

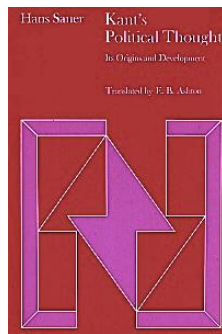
We have already quoted Kant's conviction that the public domain is key for the development and preservation of an open and enlightened society, and indeed that such a development is "almost unavoidable, if only freedom of public expression is granted" (Kant, 1784, A483). Consequently, what is vital for protecting the integrity of reason in general and for the theoretical employment of reason (i.e., the human quest for knowledge and expertise) in particular, is equally indispensable in the moral and political employments of reason, the two most important uses of practical reason (i.e., the human quest for a good and right way to live):

Reason must in all its undertakings subject itself to criticism; should it limit freedom of criticism by any prohibition, it must harm itself, drawing upon itself a damaging suspicion. Nothing is so important for its usefulness, nothing so sacred, that it may be exempted from this searching examination, which knows no respect for persons. Reason depends on this freedom for its very existence. For reason has no dictatorial authority; its verdict is always simply the agreement of free citizens, of whom each one must be permitted to express, without let or hindrance, his objections or even his veto. (Kant, 1787, B766f; for discussion see Ulrich, 1983, p. 310; 2009b, p. 15)

Considering that this powerful plea for "the veto of free citizens" is taken from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant's examination of the foundations and limits of theoretical reason, whereas the previous quotes have been taken from his political and moral writings, the deep unity of thought in his concepts of good reasoning (rationality), good action (morality), and good government (politics) could hardly be more obvious. They all converge in the core idea that *the public use of reason is constitutive of rationality in all its employments*. Different as these uses of reasons are, claims to rationality always depend on the possibility of public scrutiny and of free and unhindered public criticism and debate. Where such debate is hindered in

any way, reason "must harm itself, drawing upon itself a damaging suspicion." *In an open and enlightened society, the rational is that which we can share with everyone concerned without entailing any need for secrecy, for accepting inconsistencies, or for raising claims to exception.*

**The reviews** After this preliminary characterization of the convergence of Kant's ideas on rationality, morality, and politics, I would now like to give you the details as it were, in the form of the three (slightly edited) reviews that provided the occasion for this "note of convergence."



***Kant's way to peace: a review of Hans Saner's (1973) Kant's Political Thought*** Saner's rather neglected book on Kant's political thought must be the most detailed and careful exegesis ever written of the roots of Kant's political thought as it developed throughout his work, from the precritical writings to the three *Critiques* and on to his late anthropological, historical, juridical, and political writings.

To be sure, Kant did not write about politics in the way we would understand it today; he is not a modern-day political theorist. Systematic political analyses are rare in his work – the main exception is his treatise on *Perpetual Peace* of 1795 – and they have received scant attention, the main exception being Karl Jaspers' chapters on Kant in the first volume of *The Great Philosophers* (1962, German original 1957). Yet as anyone knows who has read Kant, political and judicial figures of speech can be found throughout his writings. Saner (p. 3) refers to them as basic "thought structures" or "thought forms," patterns of analysis and argument that Kant consistently employs to describe the nature and scope of his project of a systematic (self-) critique of reason.

A major political thought structure that Saner uncovers is what he describes as "the basic problem of Kantian thought" (p. 4), Kant's persistent attempt to find in all fields of philosophical reflection a way from diversity (or antagonism and disorder) to unity (or consistency and order) of thought and action. Kant makes reason the guardian of this way. As Saner demonstrates in considerable detail (pp. 5-68), this basic line of thought slowly emerges as a figure of speech in Kant's early natural-scientific and metaphysical writings (the precritical writings) and subsequently gains importance in the three

*Critiques.* A mere analogy at first, it helps Kant to formulate the problems of order in nature and of the self-constitution of reason's own order. It keeps recurring and slowly becomes a basic scheme of progress from "diversity" (antagonism in nature, antagonism in society) via a "road to unity" (physical community and reciprocity in nature, a law-governed social order in society) to final "unity" (e.g., of the noumenal and phenomenal worlds, of the universal history of nature and human culture, and of a cosmopolitan constitution of government and civil society that would secure peace, freedom, and justice for all). By the time Kant embarks on his later writings on practical, legal, and political philosophy, the scheme has become more than a means to the end; it now is part of the end itself, of reason's self-set task of securing what I am tempted to call cognitive and political peace at once. Both in his theoretical philosophy (metaphysics and science) and in his practical philosophy (ethics, law, and politics), Kant makes reason the big peacemaker that paves the difficult way to unity of thought and action.

Unity is always in danger of being pursued in the wrong ways, by shortcuts that rely on non-argumentative means; but for Kant, such unity is worthless. The only kind of unity he wants is unity in freedom; a unity that is compatible with free will, free argument, and mutual fairness - essential conditions of true peace - as well as with reason's peace with itself (cf. pp. 215-313). This is the "way to peace" that Saner (pp. 3 and 312) identifies as a major political theme in Kant's thinking. It is ultimately also the essential leitmotif of Kant's plea for reason in general. The free and public use of reason - in Kant's cosmopolitan ideal: a worldwide expansion of reason - requires peace and at the same time embodies the only possible way to (worldwide) peace (pp. 252-261). That makes it such a difficult, yet necessary way.

Kant is the philosopher of that way. He is not a pacifist of metaphysics – after all, he rejects certain forms of peace – but in a profound sense, he more than any other thinker, may be the philosopher of peace. (Saner, 1973, p. 312)

Kant's philosophizing thus becomes for Saner "a propaedeutic for political thinking," although, to be sure, "not merely such a propaedeutic" (p. 312f). Indeed, I would like to add, isn't Kant's philosophizing at the same time also the most meaningful kind of general philosophical propaedeutic we might imagine; a primer to the proper use of reason - not only by philosophers but also by citizens - that has nothing to do with the narrow rationalism and formalism of which Kant is so often accused quite superficially? As Saner's

remarkable book suggests to me – and the evidence it compiles is strong indeed – Kant's entire philosophizing, drawing on its political root metaphor but reaching far beyond, may ultimately be subsumed under the one central theme of reason's quest for peace with itself. "All his philosophizing," Saner writes, "is understood by him as being *en route* to the peace of reason." (p. 312)

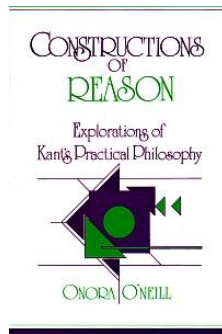
Saner's book is an inspiring guide for anyone who wishes to explore Kant's understanding of reason thoroughly, both in theoretical and practical philosophy, in ways that reach far beyond the more common accounts of Kant as a narrow formalist of reason.

To be sure, the book is outdated in that for obvious reasons, it does not say anything about the more recent revival of Kant's thought in contemporary political and moral theory, and particularly in Jurgen Habermas' work on "deliberative democracy" and "discourse ethics." But what it has to offer is far from being outdated; it is, in the best sense of the word, a basic introduction to the political roots of Kant's concept of reason.

If you are looking for a more up-to-date exploration of some of the political roots and implications particularly of Kant's practical philosophy, I would recommend Onora O'Neill's (1989) *Constructions of Reason* to begin with (see the review of this book below). In a way though, Saner's book still goes deeper; it really goes to the roots of Kant's political thought, whereas O'Neill's equally admirable book deals more with its contemporary relevance and application. I found Saner's book to be an outstanding propaedeutic and companion to O'Neill's account. Note that both books require some prior familiarity with Kant's writings, otherwise they might provide tough and unproductive reading. In any case, studying either book will demand quite some perseverance. Saner's book, due to its detailed and partly almost biographical account of Kant's personal way from metaphysics to critical philosophy and cosmopolitan thinking, demands a particular effort; but in the end the reader is rewarded by valuable insights into the deep affinity of Kant's concept of reason to his political thought.

**Source:** Amazon customer review (Ulrich, 2011c), slightly edited, originally adapted from W. Ulrich (2011b): "What is good professional practice? Part 2: The quest for practical reason." *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, May-June 2011.

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***Kant's public construction of reason: a review of Onora O'Neill's (1989) Constructions of Reason***

Kant's revolutionary view of reason, according to his well-known "Copernican" hypothesis, is that reason must construct the world after a plan of its own. More than that, it also must construct itself: to provide itself with the legitimacy and authority that no external force can give it.

Reason therefore has no choice but to define its own principles and to constitute its own critical tribunal, as a way to make sure it lives up to these principles. To these two well-known challenges of Kant's undertaking of a (self-) critique of reason, Onora O'Neill adds a third, less well-known challenge: because reason, according to its own principles, must not rely on any external authority, it needs to construct not only its own *cognitive order* (or cognitive constitution) but also some just *political order*, a basic social constitution that allows the free use of reason by human inquirers and agents. The two problems of constructing cognitive and political order are interdependent; neither can be solved without the other. As O'Neill explains:

[Kant] sees the problems of cognitive and political order as arising in one and the same context. In either case we have a plurality of agents or voices (perhaps potential agents or voices) and no transcendent or preestablished authority. Authority has in either case to be constructed. (O'Neill, 1989, p. 16)

To put it differently, in Kant's thinking *reason and justice originate in the same, ultimately political source* (p. 16). Neither reason nor justice is given naturally to mankind; both require for their development and preservation constructive acts of interpersonal cooperation and (self-) legislation. Both also respond to the existential need of human agents to coordinate their views and interests in ways that promote collaboration and peace rather than disorder and discordance. Just as the human *zoon politicon* (Aristotle) depends for its survival and welfare on the constitution of some societal and political union with others, each plurality of human agents or inquirers depends for their free and peaceful coordination on that peculiar force which we call reason. In Kant's view, therefore, reason had to emerge in the natural and cultural history of mankind as the only entirely non-coercive force that can coordinate human agents or inquirers in freedom. Or, in

O'Neill's beautiful words, reason is the one force that allows us *to share a possible world*, that is, to establish and maintain both cognitive order and political order:

Reason and justice are two aspects to the solution of the problems that arise when an uncoordinated plurality of agents is to share a possible world. Hence political imagery can illuminate the nature of cognitive order and disorientation, just as the vocabulary of reason can be used to characterize social and political order and disorientation. (O'Neill, 1989, p. 15f, similarly pp. 20-23)

In my own words: reason and justice are inseparable because at bottom, mankind's never-ending quest for knowledge and understanding – How can we master the world we live in? – shares its roots with the equally unending quest for conviviality: How can we live together well and peacefully? The common condition for solving both tasks consists in the political task of securing the personal freedom of all humans to use their reason and to express their free will publicly; the common promise, in releasing the cooperative potential of mankind, that is, its capability of dealing peacefully with matters of collective concern, based on principles of reason rather than just the law of the stronger.

If reason is to help us realize this cooperative potential, it must adhere to argumentative principles and standards of both truth and rightness that can be shared. Or, as O'Neill (p. 56) puts it, reason must limit itself to "principles that do not fail even if used universally and reflexively." Otherwise both its integrity (the quest for cognitive order) and its cooperative potential (the quest for political order) are at peril. By its own insight, reason is therefore impelled to reject all strategies of argumentation that risk turning its public use into merely private use or which may undermine the possibilities of cooperation in other ways.

The most fundamental principle of reason must therefore be *to rely on principles of thought and action that can be shared*. But of course, the community of those who may want to share is never known with certainty in advance. Hence, to make sure our personal maxims or subjective principles of thought and action are sufficiently shareable, Kant requires them to be *generalizable*, shareable with anyone actually or potentially concerned. This is the case, as Kant puts it, if the maxims in question can be conceived to constitute "universal laws" (of cognitive and political order, that is) without either undermining the possibility of peaceful cooperation or leading into argumentative contradictions, thereby damaging reason's own integrity and

credibility. Reason's fundamental principle of self-discipline, as I am tempted to call it, accordingly reads:

The possibility of sharing principles is to be left open.... The fundamental principle of all reasoning and acting ... is to base action and thought only on maxims through which one can at the same time will that they be universal laws. (O'Neill, 1989, p. 22f)

One may, but need not, read the reference to "universal laws" as intending the categorical imperative. More in line with the present discussion is to read it as standing for shareable principles of thought and action in general, that is, as a fundamental principle of both theoretical and practical reason. What, then, does it mean to say that good reasoning should aim at propositions or proposals that can be shared? O'Neill (p. 25f) refers to Kant's well-known maxims of enlightenment:

- - "Think for yourself!"
- - "Think from the standpoint of everyone else!"
- - "Always think consistently!"

These are powerful rules of sound reasoning, to be sure; but the constructivist perspective that O'Neill proposes reaches further. It is at its best when it comes to grounding rather than just applying reason as Kant understands it; that is, when our interest is in reason's ultimate source of authority rather than its methods of proper thought and justification. As O'Neill's book made me appreciate more than any other exploration of Kant's thought that I have encountered before, this ultimate source lies in what Kant calls the public use of reason. Kant constructs reason on the fundament of public scrutiny! He does not say it in these words, to be sure, nor does O'Neill. The phrase Kant and O'Neill (p. 17) use is a negative one: reason must reject its merely "private" use. Reason is merely "private" when it is deprived of public scrutiny and therefore risks being impoverished, partial, lacking the credibility and authority that only its public use can give it. Kant's construction of reason builds on the public use of reason as the antidote to its merely private use. In both its theoretical and its practical employment, reason consequently aims at *relying on principles of thought and action that can be defended publicly*. This is the case to the extent we can share the maxims (subjective principles) that underlie our claims and actions with everyone actually or potentially concerned, universally.

This is the "positive" application of Kant's construction of reason, or as Kant

scholars say more traditionally: of Kant's principle of universalization. The principle is often associated with the *categorical imperative* only, that is, with Kant's moral theory, but O'Neill's constructivist reading of Kant highlights its role as a *constitutive principle of reason in general*. We thus gain a new, helpful understanding of the abstract and somewhat bloodless idea of (moral) "universalization": *universalization is really about ensuring the public use of reason*, as the only guarantee there is against its merely private use, its becoming deprived and partial rather than complete and universal. By making sure that our propositions and proposals can be shared with everyone else, we also make sure that we can at all times argue them, that is, support them by good reasons. This is what universalization means, and why the public use of reason is Kant's major construction principle as it were. By contrast, a merely private use of reason instrumentalizes it for particular purposes that cannot be shared; such private agendas deprive reason of its true potential (of enabling cooperation) as well as of its ultimate source of authority (its relying on principles of thought and action that can be shared).

The "negative" application is no less important: the public use of reason and its instrumentalization for merely private agendas do not go together well. Hence, whenever some merely private use of reason threatens to dominate what counts as rational thought and action, it is always a relevant idea to put ourselves in the place of Kant and ask ourselves how he might have seen the situation, and whether from his perspective we could still think and argue consistently. Kant's concept of reason then becomes a standard of critique that examines whether a proposition or proposal can be shared, that is, relies on principles that we would find ourselves able to defend publicly. It is always a relevant idea, for example, to examine claims to expertise and rightness – our own ones as well as those of others, whoever raises them – as to whether they can be argumentatively shared with all those potentially concerned. Without adhering to this minimal standard, reason risks losing both its integrity (impartiality, non-partisanship) and its authority (credibility, arguability) and thereby its solidity as a basis on which we can rely in constructing a world to share.

Another implication that I would like to point out here, although O'Neill does not discuss it particularly, is that theoretical and practical reason are much more closely intertwined than our contemporary concepts of rationality



assume. Since claims to (empirical) truth as well as claims to (moral) rightness depend for their credibility on their being shareable, treating everyone's possible concerns or objections with equal respect and care is indispensable – a deeply moral core of rationality. It follows that both in its theoretical and in its practical employment, the authority and force of reason resides in its impartiality, its not taking side with any private agenda, its refraining from any partisanship except for its own integrity.

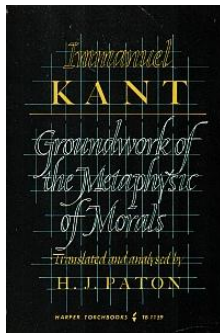
This, in short, is the essence of what I think this book has helped me to understand better than I did before. To be sure, putting it this way simplifies O'Neill's detailed and nuanced account considerably; it even simplifies my own reading experience considerably. But simplification is imperative in this case, given the richness and scholarly ambition of the book. I can only try to do some justice to it by explaining what I found most inspiring and relevant in it. This also explains why this review has focused on the first and, in my opinion, most original and insightful part of the book, titled "Reason and Critique." There are two more parts, dedicated to discussions of Kant's concepts of "maxims" and "obligations" (Part 2) and of Kant's ethics (Part 3); but they move on more traditional and familiar grounds and have not had a comparable impact on my understanding of Kant.

Finally, you may wonder, to whom do I recommend the book? Basically, to everyone interested in a modern understanding of Kant's conception of reason; more particularly, to all readers who (like myself) are interested in recovering the lost practical dimension of reason, that is, its normative core. I would not, however, recommend reading this book without some previous familiarity with Kant's critical philosophy, at least at an introductory level. Without such preparation the book will hardly "speak" to its readers. Some readers might also find it useful first to have a look at Hans Saner's (1973) book on *Kant's Political Thought*, as a way to familiarize themselves with the political roots of Kant's concept of reason. I have found Saner's book a useful propaedeutic reading (see the review of this book above). Further, potential readers might want to be aware of the circumstance that O'Neill's book assembles twelve essays that have been written over a number of years and which for this reason do not, taken together, offer a concisely developed argument beginning with an introduction and ending with a conclusion. Rather, as the book's subtitle points out quite accurately, O'Neill offers "explorations" that come in plural forms, go into different directions and

occasionally tend to be somewhat repetitious. But these "explorations" nevertheless move at a high level of insight and scholarship, and they reward the reader with some of those precious moments of Aha! in which the scales fall from your eyes and you suddenly realize how much Kant still has to tell us today.

**Source:** Amazon customer review (Ulrich, 2011d), slightly edited, originally adapted from W. Ulrich (2011b): "What is good professional practice? Part 2: The quest for practical reason." Ulrich's Bimonthly, May-June 2011.

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***Kant's rational ethics: a review of Immanuel Kant's (1786) Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*** Kant's *Groundwork*, despite its forbidding name and demanding content, is perhaps the most eloquent and thought-provoking book on the foundations of rational ethics (or more precisely, moral reasoning) ever published. It certainly is the most influential and revolutionary essay ever about the subject.

Unfortunately though, Kant's *Groundwork* is also one of the most difficult texts of moral philosophy ever written and for this reason lends itself to different interpretations and translations. I recommend relying on the classical translation by H.J. Paton (1964), which comes with a useful "Analysis of the Argument" by the translator (pp. 13-60). In addition, I find B.E.A. Liddell's (1970) modern version of the *Grundlegung* quite helpful.

Kant begins his argument with these famous words, which immediately get us to the heart of the matter:

It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will.... A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes – because of its fitness for attaining some proposed end; it is good through its willing alone - that is, good in itself. (Kant 1786, B1-3)

The crux of the problem of grounding ethics – the core problem of practical reason – consists in the question of how reason can identify and justify an action as "good" (i.e., as the right thing to do). There are only two ways in which this is conceivable, Kant tells us: either, because the action serves to

accomplish some other good that is presupposed to be good, or else because this way of acting is good in itself, that is, it has an unconditional quality of being right, in the sense that it may be said to be good under all circumstances. Only this second way can furnish a sufficient foundation for ethics; for anything else would mean to try to ground ethics in mere expediency, that is, in an action's usefulness with a view to some other good. That would not only beg the question of what constitutes good action; it would indeed make ethics redundant. Expediency – instrumental efficacy – serves whatever ends and means we choose, regardless of whether we are guided by a good will. Against such plain relativism, Kant maintains that there must be some less subjective and self-serving form of reasoning about the ends and means of justified action. In my words: "Drop the ego!" is perhaps the most basic intuition underlying all ethics, including rational ethics and its quest for grounding good will in reason. This is how I would basically translate Kant's central concept of "good will" into contemporary terms.

This intuition of holding back the ego (which is not the same as denying it) makes it understandable why classical ethics was preoccupied with psychological and educational questions of character and thus was conceived primarily in terms of virtue ethics. To this preoccupation with character – the classical example is Aristotle's (1976) *Nicomachean Ethics*, although rational deliberation does play a role in it (cf. Ulrich, 2009a) – the Medieval scholastics later added religion (i.e., faith) as a basis for explaining the binding character of the moral idea, which in effect moved ethics even further away from a grounding in reason. But just as a theological grounding of ethics is helpful only for those who believe, as it presupposes faith without being able to create it, virtue ethics as a methodological (though not as an educational) approach similarly tends to presuppose what it aims to produce: moral character and good will. As a theory of good practice, it ultimately relies on an appeal to the good will (or in Aristotle's framework, to the good character) of agents; for whether or not an agent will in a given situation act virtuously depends on his being goodwilled – an act of faith that cannot be grounded any further but at best be encouraged through education and custom.

Kant's solution to this difficulty is ingenious: he places the origin of a good will within the nature (or concept) of reason itself. To avoid a possible

misunderstanding, by reason's nature he does not mean its empirical state or development in the individual but rather, those general structures and requirements which characterize it by inner necessity (i.e., *a priori*), in the sense that reason cannot operate without them ; for example, reason cannot help but regard itself as free (1786, B101). In other words, he refers to the nature of pure reason – the sheer idea of reasonableness regardless of its empirical occurrence in individuals. Unlike all previous ethics, including Aristotle, Kant does not assume that the binding force of the moral idea needs to reside in some external psychological or religious condition such as character, faith, or virtuous action. Rather, he understands it as residing in one of the most fundamental conditions of reason itself, the requirement of consequent (or consistent) thought. Living up to its own intrinsic requirements is what Kant calls a "pure" interest of reason or "interest of pure reason" – an interest that has no other aim than preserving the possibility of reason itself.

The implication of this new concept of pure reason is powerful indeed: in its practical no less than in its theoretical employment, reason is itself in charge of the conditions of its successful operation. We can only recognize as true, both in an empirical and in a moral sense, what our mind creates itself; or in the famous words of the Introduction to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant, 1787, Bxiii): "Reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own." It is to this shift of perspective that Kant referred as the "Copernican revolution" of speculative philosophy, or as we would rather say today, of epistemology. Copernicus was the first astronomer to recognize very clearly that counter to the observed (phenomenal) movements of the planets around the earth, their true (noumenal) movements were ellipses around the sun. He was able to achieve this revolution of our worldview because he "dared, in a manner contradictory of the senses, but yet true, to seek the observed movements, not in the heavenly bodies, but in the spectator." (1787, Bxxii note). A similar shift of perspective now is to inform Kant's revolution of practical philosophy. Kant himself does not say so – he refers to the Copernican revolution only in his critique of theoretical reason – but I would argue that the notion of a Copernican revolution of ethics provides a very immediate and helpful key to the core of Kant's concept of rational ethics: the reason why we ought to act morally is not because some external authority obliges us but simply because we recognize

such action to be reasonable. The moral force resides in our will to be reasonable!

For a moment though, Kant appears to lose sight of this consequence of his own "Copernican" approach when in the last chapter of the *Groundwork* (1786, B113ff), we find him searching for some mysterious absolute source of the binding force of the moral idea, a source that would explain why pure reason, before and beyond all empirical motives, is compelled to be moral. Such a force, if it really existed, would need to be independent of all human willing and reasoning and thus external to our mind, if not external to all nature (transcendent) – an implication that runs counter to Kant's core idea of grounding ethics in reason. Lest we fall into this trap of searching for an absolute, transcendent source of morality beyond all human willing and reasoning, I propose we better understand "pure" reason as a mere limiting concept; as an admittedly unreal (nonempirical) ideal-type of reason that serves Kant to undertake his great experiment of thought, the experiment of submitting reason in its practical (moral) no less than in its theoretical (empirical) employment to its own tribunal. Thus seen, Kant's ultimate and vain effort of finding an absolute source of universal moral obligation is a remarkable testimony to his relentless self-critical determination to push his inquiry to its utmost limits, even if such an effort is ultimately bound to fail:

But how pure reason can be practical in itself without further motives drawn from some other source; that is, how the bare principle of the universal validity of all its maxims ... can by itself ... supply a motive and create an interest which could be called purely moral; or in other words, how pure reason can be practical - all human reason is totally incapable of explaining this, and all the effort and labour to seek such an explanation is wasted. (Kant, 1786, B124f)

But Kant's effort is far from wasted. Without apparently being fully aware of it, he actually uncovers that there is no need at all for such an explanation. The fact that a reasonable agent wants to act morally (i.e., to act out of good will) is quite sufficient for saying he ought to do so; for anything else would undermine the integrity of reason. It belongs to the peculiar force of reason in its "pure" form, that whatever it makes us want, we ought to do. Hence, if as a reasonable being I want to act morally, I ought to do it; and conversely, if reason tells me I ought to do it, as a reasonable being I want it. The moral "ought" is really a call to reason:

"I ought" is properly an "I will" which holds necessarily for every rational being. (Kant, 1786, B102).

This, then, is the core idea of a rational ethics as Kant conceives it: the force

of the moral idea resides at bottom in the power of reason, and that must be quite good enough for us as reasonable beings. The moral idea is an immanent rather than a transcendent idea of reason. It is in this sense that it is "necessary" (indispensable) and "categorical" (unconditional) for any rational agent.

We arrive, then, at the most fundamental contribution that Kant has made to practical philosophy, I mean his formalization of the moral idea in terms of the principle of moral universalization or, as he calls it, the categorical imperative: "Act according to a maxim that you could want to become a universal law" (B52 and B81, my simplified transl.). Or still simpler: "Act only on a premise that can be everyone's premise" (my free transl.).

As is well known, Kant proposes a variety of different formulations of the categorical imperative; but their fundamental concern is the same. It says that to judge the moral quality of an action, we should first ask ourselves what is the underpinning maxim. In Kant's language, a maxim is a subjective rule or norm of action (i.e., in the terms of my simplified translation above, a personal premise), while a principle is an objective, because generally binding or "necessitating" rule or norm of action (i.e., a premise that everyone may be expected to make the basis of their actions). Kant's point in distinguishing the two is that he does not want us to presuppose that our individual premises are naturally in harmony with principles that everyone could hold; quite the contrary, the problem of practical reason emerges from the divergence of the two perspectives (cf. B37-39 and B102f). It is because individual and collective premises do not usually converge that Kant asks us to consider what our personal premises are and to what extent they might be the premises of all others concerned. Insofar, the categorical imperative, counter to what is often assumed, cannot be said to be idealistic.

Once we are clear in our mind as to what is the underpinning maxim of an action, the consequent next issue is whether this maxim could hold as a principle of action, in the precise sense just defined. To answer this question, we may assess it against the categorical imperative in its different formulations. If our maxim runs counter to any of these imperatives, it is not an adequate principle, for it cannot be properly universalized. This makes it understandable why Kant calls his three variations "equivalent" despite their apparent differences.

Kant's preferred way of describing the idea of moral universalization is by analogy with "the law." He wavers a bit between the law of the state (legal norms), in the so-called "Formula of Universal Law" (B51f), and the law of nature (natural laws) in the "Formula of the Law of Nature" (B52). In accordance with the political roots of Kant's concept of reason (see the reviews of Hans Saner's *Kant's Political Thought* and Onora O'Neill's *Constructions of Reason* above), I suggest to take legal norms as the basic metaphor and natural laws as a derived, more illustrative metaphor (for metaphors they are both, just like the concept of "duty" that Kant derives from it and which similarly stands for an unconditional obligation legislated by our own will). As Kant sees it, the principle of moral universalization obligates us not unlike the way a legal norm obligates everyone under its jurisdiction. The difference is that a legal norm obliges us only conditionally, namely, to the extent that we belong to the community of individuals that have given themselves such legislation (and further, to be precise, to the extent that there is no applicable legislation of superior authority that poses different demands). By contrast, a moral norm (or now, for Kant: a "moral law") applies unconditionally or categorically for any rational agent – it is the ultimate source of obligation beyond which we cannot refer to any other, supposedly superior source of obligation.

My own preferred way of thinking of the unconditional moral thrust of the universalization principle is in terms of never treating others merely as a means for one's own ends: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means but always at the same time as an end" (the "Formula of the End in Itself," B66f). As I tend to translate it for myself: "Do not instrumentalize other people!" or even simpler: "Respect other people!" To be sure, only in combination with the other two Formulas does this imperative of non-instrumentalization fully capture the moral thrust of "universalization"; but for me the notion of non-instrumentalization embodies a humanistic core that comes closest to a truly universal norm of human conduct for our epoch. Furthermore, to overcome any anthropocentric bias one might object against, we may apply it not only to people but equally to animals and all living nature: "Do not instrumentalize other living beings!"

Despite all simplification – a core difficulty remains: We do not and cannot

usually act in ways that do justice to everyone. Universalization is an ideal rather than a practical premise. Nor does the universalization principle tell us anything about what our premises should be; necessarily so, as these depend on the situation. Hence, while the suggested reformulations make Kant's intent a bit easier to grasp, they do not tell us how to act accordingly. Kant is therefore often accused of the impractical and abstract, apparently merely formal character of his notion of rational ethics. Yes, it is true, his categorical imperative is not a norm that we can immediately put into practice. But it is the nature of the problem rather than Kant's failure to do justice to it that makes it so difficult. Expecting an immediately practical norm – a recipe for moral action – would be to misunderstand the nature of the problem and worse, it would leave no room for moral reasoning. Moral reasoning is about moral imperfection, not about moral perfection. That is, it is precisely because moral perfection is not usually achievable by human agents that moral reasoning is important. Moral reasoning means to handle the unavoidable moral imperfection of all our claims and actions "with reason," and Kant's *Groundwork* explains what that implies. No other author before and after Kant has thought more thoroughly and rigorously about the problem. And nobody else has arrived at a more fundamental and important conclusion: there exists a deep, inextricable link between morally tenable action and consistent reasoning! This is the great lesson that Kant's practical philosophy can teach us – a lesson that certainly is as pertinent today as it has ever been.

If you would like to read more about this lesson, you may wish to consult the source indicated at the bottom. However, this review is not meant to promote my own writings on practical philosophy, much less to impose my view of the eminent relevance of Kant's practical philosophy for our epoch; rather, it is meant to encourage you to go to the source and read Kant himself. The *Groundwork* probably remains the best place to start exploring this great lesson of which I am talking and which our epoch, it seems to me, has all but forgotten. I would certainly recommend Paton's translation, as in my view it remains the best edition in English language. It is difficult reading, to be sure, but I do not think it is beyond what the so-called general intelligent reader (though perhaps with a dose of not so general perseverance) can handle. For moral reasoning is not and cannot be the privilege of philosophers, certainly not the way Kant understands it. Try it. Read it.



Reflect on it. And try again. And if at times you find its language indigestible and its content complicated (rightly so), the above comments and the personal reading they express are meant to put you back on track, by reminding you of the core idea that matters, the deep link between reasonableness and morality. Acting morally, Kant teaches us, means to try and *act on principles that we can share* with all others who may be concerned about our ways of acting. Kant's categorical imperative, then, is asking for no more than what every reasonable agent is capable of; but, and this is the difference it makes, it also asks for no less.

**Source:** Amazon customer review (Ulrich, 2011e), slightly edited, originally adapted from W. Ulrich (2009b): "Practical reason and rational ethics: Kant." Reflections on reflective practice (5/7). *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, March-April 2009.

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*September-October, 2011*



*The public use of reason: Swiss "Landsgemeinde"*

„Reason has no dictatorial authority; its verdict is always simply the agreement of free citizens, of whom each one must be permitted to express, without let or hindrance, his objections or even his veto.”

(I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1787, B766f)

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