

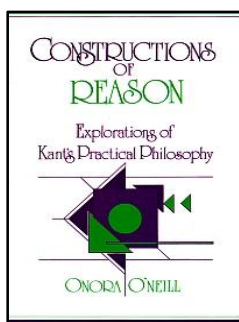
# *Kant's Public Construction of Reason*

A Review of Onora O'Neill's *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

**WERNER ULRICH**

*Ancien Professeur Titulaire,*

Faculty of Arts & Humanities, University of Fribourg, Switzerland.



**ABSTRACT.** This second of three reviews dedicated to Kant's practical philosophy is inspired by Onora O'Neill's 'Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy' (1989). The focus is on the book's first part, which uncovers deep connections between Kant's notions of reason and politics. In addition to the theme of order in nature and in reason, which we already encountered in the first review, the theme of social and political cooperation emerges and unfolds into Kant's fundamental conception of the public use of reason.

**KEY WORDS:** Immanuel Kant, Kant's practical philosophy, Kant's political philosophy, political thought, history of ideas, rationality, practical rationality, practical reason, critique of pure reason, Kant's ethics, Kantian ethics, Kantian constructivism, constructivism in ethics, Onora O'Neill, Kantian moral theory, argumentation, justice, civil society, global civil society, participatory culture

**Source:** An earlier, shorter version of this review article was part of: Ulrich, W. (2011): What is good professional practice? Part 2: The quest for practical reason. *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, May-June 2011, *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, May-June 2011, [http://wulrich.com/bimonthly\\_may2011.html](http://wulrich.com/bimonthly_may2011.html) and [http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly\\_may2011.pdf](http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly_may2011.pdf), pp. 21-27. A previous adaptation was made available as an *Amazon Customer Review* (Ulrich, 2011b).

**Suggested citation:** Ulrich, W. (2015). Kant's public construction of reason: a review of Onora O'Neill's *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Available from *Werner Ulrich's Home Page*, Downloads section, <http://wulrich.com/downloads.html>, and from the author's page in *Academia.edu*, Reviews section, <https://unifr.academia.edu/WernerUlrich>.

## **Introduction: Reason's Self-Constructive Enterprise**

Kant's revolutionary view of reason, according to his well-known "Copernican" hypothesis (1787, Bxvi), is that reason must construct the world after a plan of its own. More than that, it also must construct itself: to secure for itself the legitimacy and authority that no external force can give it, it has no choice but to define its own principles and then also 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 (1787, 1788, 1793)

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 and cooperation*: 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.

### **Reasoning means Sharing**

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*, that is, 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? With O'Neill (p. 25f) and in line with my own earlier account (Ulrich, 2009, esp. pp 10-15 and 27-34) of what I find essential in Kant for contemporary practical philosophy, an account that was not yet informed by O'Neill's work, we may refer to Kant's (1793, B157f) well-known maxims of enlightenment:

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

Only those who think for themselves have a contribution to make; this contribution will be shareable to the extent it considers

the views of everyone else concerned and moreover does not claim an exception for itself. In this way, the three maxims specify and explain the self-discipline of reason to which I have been referring above. As O'Neill puts it:

[Kant] does not deify reason. The only route by which we can vindicate certain ways of thinking and acting, and claim that those ways have authority, is by considering how we must discipline our thinking if we are to think or act at all. This disciplining leads us not to algorithms of reason, but to certain constraints on all thinking, communication, and interaction among any plurality. In particular we are led to the principle of rejecting thought, action or communication that is guided by principles that others cannot adopt, and so to the Categorical Imperative. (O'Neill, 1989, p. 27f)

### **Reason's Authority and the Public Use of Reason**

Kant's maxims are powerful rules of disciplined 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 public 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. Universalization secures shareability. By contrast, a merely private use of reason instrumentalizes reason for particular purposes that cannot be shared with everyone concerned; 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).

### A Standard of Critique

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.

### Recommendation

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 and its ultimate orientation towards peace. I have found Saner's book a useful propaedeutic reading (cf. the short review within this trilogy, in Ulrich, 2015).

As a last comment, 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 aha experiences in which the scales fall from your eyes and you suddenly realize how much Kant still has to tell us today.

### References

- Kant, I. (1787). *Critique of Pure Reason*. 2nd ed. [B] (1st ed. [A] 1781). Transl. by N.K. Smith. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965 (orig. Macmillan, New York, 1929). German orig.: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1st ed. [A] 1781, 2nd ed. [B] 1787, in: W. Weischedel (ed.), *Werkausgabe Vols. III and IV, Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (2 vols.), Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp 1977 (orig. 1968).

- Kant, I. (1788). *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*. Transl. by L.W. Beck. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1949. German orig.: Kritik der praktischen Vernunft, 1st ed. [A]. In: W. Weischedel (ed.), Werkausgabe Vol. VII, Kritik der praktischen Vernunft, Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten, Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1977, pp. 105-320.
- Kant I. (1793). *Critique of Judgment*. 2nd ed. [B] (1st ed. [A] 1790). Transl. by T.H. Bernard. New York: Hafner, 1951. German orig.: Kritik der Urteilskraft, in: W. Weischedel (ed.), Werkausgabe Vol. X, Kritik der Urteilskraft, Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1977.
- O'Neill, O. (1989). *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Saner, H. (1973). *Kant's Political Thought: Its Origins and Development*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press (German orig.: Kants Weg vom Krieg zum Frieden, Vol. 1: Widerstreit und Einheit: Wege zu Kants politischem Denken, Munich: Piper, 1967).
- Ulrich, W. (2009). Reflections on reflective practice (5/7): Practical reason and rational ethics: Kant. *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, March-April 2009.  
[HTML] [http://wulrich.com/bimonthly\\_march2009.html](http://wulrich.com/bimonthly_march2009.html)  
[PDF] [http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly\\_march2009.pdf](http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly_march2009.pdf)
- Ulrich, W. (2011). What is good professional practice? Part 2: The quest for practical reason. *Ulrich's Bimonthly*, May-June 2011.  
[HTML] [http://wulrich.com/bimonthly\\_may2011.html](http://wulrich.com/bimonthly_may2011.html)  
[PDF] [http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly\\_may2011.pdf](http://wulrich.com/downloads/bimonthly_may2011.pdf)
- Ulrich, W. (2011a). Kant's way to peace. Short review of Hans Saner's *Kant's Political Thought: Its Origins and Development*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1973. *Amazon Customer Review*, 5 July 2011.  
[HTML] [http://www.amazon.com/review/R1PD9ML0IFGMK/ref=cm\\_cr\\_pr\\_pam?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0226734757&modelID=&tag=&linkCode=](http://www.amazon.com/review/R1PD9ML0IFGMK/ref=cm_cr_pr_pam?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0226734757&modelID=&tag=&linkCode=)
- Ulrich, W. (2011b). Kant's public construction of reason. Short review of Onora O'Neill's *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989. *Amazon Customer Review*, 6 July 2011.  
[HTML] [http://www.amazon.com/review/R2XTG2LUO4E9DW/ref=cm\\_cr\\_pr\\_pam?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0521388163&modelID=&tag=&linkCode=](http://www.amazon.com/review/R2XTG2LUO4E9DW/ref=cm_cr_pr_pam?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0521388163&modelID=&tag=&linkCode=)
- Ulrich, W. (2011c). Kant's rational ethics. Short review of I. Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, transl. by H.J. Paton, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964. *Amazon Customer Review*, 7 July 2011.  
[HTML] [http://www.amazon.com/review/R3QF7O0M22FSS8/ref=cm\\_cr\\_pr\\_pam?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0061311596&modelID=&tag=&linkCode=](http://www.amazon.com/review/R3QF7O0M22FSS8/ref=cm_cr_pr_pam?ie=UTF8&ASIN=0061311596&modelID=&tag=&linkCode=)
- Ulrich, W. (2015). Kant's way to peace. A review of Hans Saner's *Kant's Political Thought: Its Origins and Development*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1973. *Werner Ulrich's Home Page*, Downloads section, and *Academia.edu*, Reviews section.  
[PDF] [http://wulrich.com/downloads/ulrich\\_2015b.pdf](http://wulrich.com/downloads/ulrich_2015b.pdf)  
[PDF] <https://unifr.academia.edu/WernerUlrich/Reviews>

25.04.2015 / UI

\*\*\*