

**Robert Stern**

*Understanding Moral Obligation: Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 277 pp. ISBN 9781107012073 (hbk). \$84.00.

In *Understanding Moral Obligation*, Robert Stern argues that Kant's central contribution to the development of modern ethics has been widely misunderstood. In its place, he offers a novel interpretation of Kant's conception of autonomy and the philosophical problem Kant intended to solve. According to Stern, that conception was not intended to replace moral realism as a solution to the problem of moral value, as the standard account would have it, but rather to replace divine command theory as a solution to the problem of moral obligation. Stern goes on to re-interpret the trajectory of modern ethics on the basis of this re-reading, showing how Hegel and Kierkegaard each sought to rework the conception of moral obligation bequeathed to them by Kant. Stern goes on to compare these three conceptions in detail, arguing that each enjoys insuperable advantages over the others. He concludes that the problem of moral obligation remains at an impasse, and that the challenge of adequately theorizing this important dimension of moral life remains open.

Stern's book has two distinct aims. The first is thoroughly exegetical. Stern seeks to show on textual grounds alone that his account of a central strand in the history of modern ethics is to be preferred to the standard story. The second – and, on my reading, secondary – aim of the book is to shed light on the fundamental issues that beset any philosophical account of moral obligation, issues Stern hopes to illuminate through a detailed comparison of the historical views on offer.

The book is overwhelmingly given over to the exegetical project, which succeeds brilliantly. Stern is a sensitive and meticulous reader of texts, and his case for reinterpreting the standard story of Kant's influence is strong. Although present constraints forbid me from exploring the complexity of Stern's arguments in detail, I shall outline a few of his most striking moves.

According to the standard interpretation popularized by Rawls and his inheritors, Kant rejects value realism in favor of a 'constructivist' approach to moral value, on the grounds that only the latter, and not the former, is compatible with human autonomy. On this account, Kant considers *any* form of value realism a threat to autonomy, and this is what prompts him to develop his constructivist account of value. As Stern persuasively argues, however, this interpretation faces serious exegetical and philosophical problems. Most pressing, Kant himself never explains why a rational intuitionist approach to value realism would be incompatible with autonomy, and it remains exceedingly difficult to see why realism, so construed, would indeed pose such a threat.

(If we are able to intuit an independent order of value using reason alone, and to legislate on the basis of those values, why should heteronomy of any kind be thought follow?) Stern's account avoids this problem entirely. According to that account, Kant never explains why a rational intuitionist approach to value realism would threaten autonomy precisely because he did not regard it as doing so. Indeed, as Stern argues persuasively and at length, Kant himself was a value realist. He held that rational freedom provides us with an antecedently given order of value. The threat to autonomy Kant was concerned to overcome lay not in realist approaches to value as such, but rather in divine command style approaches to obligation. On pain of heteronomy, the obligatoriness of moral actions cannot stem from an alien lawgiver, argues Stern's Kant, but must instead stem from human self-legislation. On Stern's reading, then, Kant is a constructivist about the obligatory, whilst remaining a realist about value. Drawing on the full range of Kant's texts, and dealing persuasively with a host of plausible objections, Stern does an impressive job of building his case.

Stern's reinterpretation of the ensuing ethical tradition is also compelling, if less exhaustively argued. On the standard story, the principal moral difficulty Kant bequeaths his inheritors is the 'paradox of self-legislation'. According to this paradox, a self-legislative will that relies on no antecedent order of value finds itself in the paradoxical situation of having nothing to legislate through its actions. This, of course, is the famous 'empty formalism' charge Hegel is credited with having brought against Kant. Here, too, Stern does an impressive job of debunking the standard story. According to Stern, Hegel's appeal to the social is not meant to solve the alleged emptiness problem, since the legislating subject, whether construed as an I or a we, *remains* empty unless it can appeal to an antecedent order of value. Stern's Hegel is also, then, a value realist. He aims not to solve the putative paradox of self-legislation, but rather to account for moral obligation whilst avoiding the unattractive dualism implicit in Kant's account of rational agency.

Exegetes will find a formidable opponent in Stern. His textual case for reinterpreting Kant is strong, and his arguments concerning Hegel and Kierkegaard are also careful, methodical and tightly argued. The strictly analytical dimension of the book, however, which is confined to the conclusion, succeeds less well in my view, if only because it is significantly less developed. With respect to the success of the book as a whole, then, I wish to raise three critical points.

The first concerns Stern's divided approach to the book's aims. Developing an exegetical argument of such significant scope and originality is no mean feat, and Stern's strategy of bracketing off his own critical engagement certainly helps to keep the case tidy. The laudable clarity Stern thereby achieves,

however, comes at a price: his discussion lacks the depth and urgency that only critical engagement can bring. And while the critical analysis Stern finally delivers in the conclusion is interesting and well considered, it cannot possibly – for reasons of space alone – discharge the extensive analytical debt Stern accrues over the course of his wide-ranging discussion. Had he entered the philosophical fray sooner, the book would have been more engaging to read.

My second criticism concerns the ‘hybrid’ view of moral obligation Stern attributes to Kant. According to that view, although the content of morality is given independently of us, we ourselves give that content its obligatory form. How, exactly, do we do this? Quite passively, it turns out. As Stern explains:

So, on Kant’s account, this obligatoriness is just the way in which what is right and wrong presents itself to us, from our human... perspective; from the perspective of a divine will... there is no duty and obligation, but only what is right and wrong, because the divine will has none of the non-moral inclinations which... means that what is right is presented to us in the guise of duties and obligations.... (p. 90)

Obligatoriness is thus a mere appearance generated by the limitations of the human perspective. Because we can always be tempted by desires that run contrary to reason, the right appears to us under the *guise* of obligation.

While Stern presents good reasons for thinking that this was indeed Kant’s view, I worry that the position itself is weaker than Stern appreciates, and that this weakness undermines the three-way tie he finds between Kant, Hegel and Kierkegaard. While it is true that hybrid style anti-realism about the obligatory allows Kant to safeguard autonomy whilst avoiding the ‘queer’ idea that the world itself makes demands on us, the view seems to veer too far in an anti-realist direction. For by making obligatoriness nothing but a function of the human perspective, the hybrid explanans displaces the original explanandum. What we wanted from Kant was an explanation of why morality is *genuinely* obligatory for us, and what the hybrid view delivers is merely an account of why morality *appears* obligatory from our point of view. Though one could argue that this is in fact sufficient, that it is all we should want or may hope for, Stern does not provide such arguments, and nor does he indicate where we might find them in Kant. A fuller discussion of this apparent weakness in Kant’s view would help make Stern’s three-way tie more credible.

The final issue I wish to raise concerns the conclusion, in which Stern argues that the three views on offer are indeed on a par, since we lack decisive considerations for or against any one of them. It is no surprise that Stern cannot hope to adjudicate such a complex dispute in so short a space, but for the very

same reason his claim that the dispute is all but immune to adjudication fails to convince. The problem, I think, is that Stern's efforts to break the impasse feel contrived to preserve the dialectical equilibrium he has so painstakingly constructed. In seeking to determine which, if any, of the views ought to be preferred, Stern asks:

How far should considerations of autonomy drive one from a divine command theory to a Kantian hybrid theory [of moral obligation]? How far should considerations of dualism drive one from a hybrid theory to a Hegelian social command theory? And how far should considerations of complacency drive one from a social command theory to a Kierkegaardian divine command theory? (p. 220)

In seeking answers to these questions it is little surprise that Stern is driven round and round the dialectical circle, since he himself never fixes the terms of the debate. Most crucially, by not taking a stand on the concept of autonomy, Stern all but ensures that the questions he asks remain open. I suspect, however, that this criticism is less than fair. Stern is clearly an exegete. His primary interests – and extraordinary talents – lie in solving problems of philosophical interpretation. It can hardly be right to blame him for failing to break an impasse he himself scarcely appears interested in breaking.

*Understanding Moral Obligation* makes a significant contribution to the history of modern ethics, and especially to contemporary Kant interpretation. Moreover, anyone interested in the philosophical problem of moral obligation will benefit enormously from this book. Although Stern's own take on the problem is too cursory to merit sustained attention, the re-interpretation of modern ethics he offers provides more than enough riches to compensate.

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