

Kant's political enlightenment: Free public use of reason as self-discipline

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Abstract. According to recent scholarship, Kant's *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* and the introductory section to *The Conflict of the Faculties* are masterpieces of philosophical rhetoric. The philosophical significance of these texts lies in establishing the free public use of reason as a tool to discipline political power through pure practical reason, and the rhetorical mastery consists in presenting the free public use of reason as a means to satisfy the ruler's pragmatic practical reason. Elaborating on this interpretation, I flesh out three further aspects of the writings in question. First, I examine the four types of arguments that Kant crafts in defence of the public use of reason and show how their pragmatic practical character is fully in keeping with the foundation of politics on pure practical ideas. Second, contrasting Kant's notion of the public use of reason with the classical liberal conception of free speech, I argue that the distinctive character of Kant's notion of the public use of reason consists in adding to the liberal demand for freedom from state censorship the requirement of the self-discipline of the participants in the public use of reason. Third, I contend that Kant's notion of the public use of reason goes beyond a mere non-coercive discursive procedure and conclude that, to qualify as public in the distinctive Kantian sense, publicly presented positions must uphold theoretical and moral criteria informed by critical philosophy.

Keywords: Enlightenment, public use of reason, pragmatic practical reason, pure practical reason, discipline of politics, self-discipline of the public, rhetoric

1 Introduction

In his 1784 *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, Kant defines the public use of reason as “that use which someone makes of it *as a scholar* before the entire public of the *world of readers*” and contrasts it with the private use of reason “which one may make of it in a certain *civil post or office*” (*WA*, AA 08: 37; Kant, 1996, p. 18). Thus, someone speaking in the exercise of a public function makes a private use of reason, whereas someone speaking as a private person makes a public use of reason. Kant explains this paradox in terms of

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autonomy: whereas a public official speaks in compliance with a contractual obligation and is “appointed to deliver as prescribed and in the name of another”, a private subject speaks in his own name and “enjoys an unrestricted freedom [...] to speak in his own person” (*WA*, AA 08: 38; Kant, 1996, p. 19).¹

That reasoning be public and free is a constant demand in Kant’s philosophy. Since the understanding and reason need public scrutiny to check whether the former judges under the influence of prejudices and the latter incurs dialectical illusions, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant avers that “[t]he very existence of reason depends upon this freedom” (*KrV*, A 738 / B 766; Kant, 1998, p. 643). It is the very nature of reason that causes the human being to have “thoughts and doubts which one cannot resolve oneself” and grounds “the freedom to exhibit [them] for public judgment” (*KrV*, A 752 / B 780; Kant, 1998, p. 650). In his 1786 *What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?*, Kant subjects both the quantity and quality of thinking to its being public by posing the rhetorical question: “How much and how correctly would we *think* if we did not think as it were in community with others?” (*WDO*, AA 08: 144; Kant, 2001, p. 16). In *The Conflict of the Faculties* of 1798, Kant subtly but forcefully implies that the free public use of reason is the necessary condition for the advancement of the regulative ideas of pure practical reason and asserts that reason shall be authorised “to speak out publicly” since it is “by its nature free and admits of no [...] imperative “Believe!” but only a free *credo*” (*SF*, AA 07: 20; Kant, 2001, p. 249).

As argued in recent scholarship, with *What is Enlightenment?* and the introductory section (*SF*, AA 07: 5-36; Kant, 2001, pp. 239-262) to *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant casts the political ferment of his age in philosophical terms and composes two masterpieces of rhetoric. The philosophical import consists in advocating the free public use of reason as a means to discipline politics through pure practical reason, and the rhetorical prowess consists in championing the free public use of reason by appealing to the ruler’s pragmatic practical reason. According to Michael Clarke, Kant aims to “mak[e] authority more reasonable” (Clarke, 1997, p. 71), to which end “we see him veil the fundamental justification of the public use of reason [...] beneath highly rhetorical political appeals” (*ibid.*, p. 55). On Jesús González Fisac’s reading, *What is Enlightenment?* is pervaded by a rhetorical paradox consisting in the apparent contradiction between freedom and obedience. More precisely, Kant presents two apparently contradicting terms, namely the scholar’s unrestricted freedom to make public use of his reason, i.e. “the true interest [...] of the people”, and the public official’s duty to obey, i.e. “the interest of the prince” (González Fisac, 2005, p. 40), and succeeds in showing that they actually are compatible.

Along this line of interpretation, I intend to point out three additional aspects of the writings in question. First, Kant’s arguments in favour of the free public use of reason, albeit couched in terms of political pragmatism, are fully consistent with the foundation of politics on pure ideas. Second, the specific feature of Kant’s notion of freedom of the public use of reason surpasses the classical liberal demand for freedom from state censorship by adding to it the requirement of the self-discipline of the participants in public reasoning. Third, to qualify as the public use of reason in the strong Kantian sense, publicly expressed positions must meet specific criteria of a moral nature.

2 Pure ideas and pragmatic appeals: The philosophical consistency of Kant’s political rhetoric

Throughout his writings, Kant assigns to the free public use of reason a role that could not be any more formidable. The free public use of reason is the condition upon which the very

¹ Consequently, whereas a public official in the exercise of his functions must abide by his employment contract and abstain from making public use of his reason, he may, as a private person, freely express his thoughts in his own name and thus make public use of his reason.

existence of reason depends and the site designated to advance the regulative ideas of pure practical reason. Yet, the arguments employed in *What is Enlightenment?* and *The Conflict of the Faculties* to advocate the free public use of reason before the ruler are not pure practical but pragmatic practical. I will first review these arguments and then argue that their pragmatic character is fully consistent with Kant's foundation of politics on pure ideas.

Kant's appeals to the ruler fall into four types of arguments: flattery, safeguard, reassurance and benefit.

Appealing to the ruler's vanity, Kant paints the flattering picture of a ruler who leaves "human beings [...] complete freedom" to make public use of their reason and becomes "praised by a grateful world and by posterity as the one who first released the human race from minority" (*WA*, AA 08: 40; Kant, 1996, p. 21).

Speaking to the ruler's pride, Kant intimates that the ruler who tries to influence public debates "exposes himself to the reproach *Caesar non est super grammaticos*" (*WA*, AA 08: 40; Kant, 1996, pp. 20-21) and incurs humiliation since he challenges experts "who [...] deal impartially with everyone who meddles in the sciences" (*SF*, AA 07: 19; Kant, 2001, p. 249). Conversely, freedom of public reasoning as the absence of state interference serves to safeguard the ruler's dignity.

Addressing the ruler's fear of unrest, Kant reassures him that the free public use of reason strengthens the citizenry's loyalty to the government and even prevents revolutions since the ruler who releases "the human spirit from its chains [...] deserves all the more willing obedience" (*SF*, AA 07: 5; Kant, 2001, p. 239) and "in freedom there is not the least cause for anxiety about public concord" (*WA*, AA 08: 41; Kant, 1996, p. 21). Most importantly, through the free public use of reason, the ruler and the citizens come to realise that their interests converge because the "calling to *think* freely [...] gradually works back upon the mentality of the people [and] the principles of *government*, which finds it profitable [...] to treat the human being [...] in keeping with his dignity" (*WA*, AA 08: 41-42; Kant, 1996, p. 22).

Finally, turning to the ruler's benefit, Kant denounces the fact that scholars and practitioners of theology, law and medicine misuse their office to their advantage and the ruler's detriment. Whereas it lies in the ruler's interest to count on citizens who are moral, just and healthy, his appointed scholars and practitioners aim at retaining their influence on the citizens by keeping them in constant need of their expert assistance and thus in a state of moral, legal and physical immaturity. Accordingly, Kant warns the ruler that his officials might spread doctrines in tune with the people's tendency to "accommodate their duties to their inclinations", thus duping the government into sanctioning a system of teachings that arises "from calculations of the influence their practitioners can exert on the people" (*SF*, AA 07: 31; Kant, 2001, p. 259). Instead, a free public use of reason would enable the ruler to expose these fraudulent teachings and replace them with new ones, capable of promoting moral, legal and physical maturity.

The comparison between Kant's foundation of politics on pure practical ideas and the pragmatic practical character of his appeals to the ruler may raise a suspicion of inconsistency. However, a close examination of Kant's concept of politics dispels such suspicion because it reveals that Kantian politics is prudence informed by pure practical ideas or, in other words, morally informed pragmatism. In the "Appendix" of *Toward Perpetual Peace*, Kant defines the concepts of politics and the moral politician in a way that shows that politics comprises both a pure and a pragmatic side and grounds the contention that there exists a Kantian way to steer politics through pragmatic arguments while remaining committed to pure ideas.

Kant defines politics as "*ausübende Rechtslehre*" (*ZeF*, AA 08: 370), i.e. as 'the exercise of the doctrine of right', and derives from this definition the characterisation of the moral politician as one "who takes the principles of political prudence in such a way that they can

coexist with morals” (*ZeF*, AA 08: 372; Kant, 1996, p. 340). As for the pure side to politics, it is conveyed by the notions of morals and doctrine of right. More precisely, the doctrine of right is the cognition of what pure practical reason commands any body politic and yields the pure practical ideas of freedom, dignity and equality. Complementarily, the notion of morality refers to these pure practical ideas as controlling what is permissible to set as an end and to employ as a means. As for the pragmatic side to politics, it is implied in the notion of ‘exercise’ and patently addressed as ‘political prudence’, i.e. pragmatic ability. The notion of exercise does not mean the mere implementation of a theory as a ready-made tool but rather the ability to employ the right means to the right ends in the face of changing circumstances and in compliance with reason’s pure practical ideas. This ability is pragmatic since it cannot be given *a priori* rules but can only be cultivated through “great experience practised through many courses of life” (*IaG*, AA 08: 23; Kant, 2007, pp. 113-114). Thus, as Volker Gerhardt (1995, pp. 146-185) stresses, Kantian politics means acting in pursuit of pragmatic ends within the framework of pure ideas.

Since Kantian politics is morally informed pragmatism, pragmatic efficacy, as long as it upholds or does not violate pure practical ideas, is both required from the ruler in the exercise of his institutional function and permissible for the philosopher engaged in tuning the ruler in favour of the free public use of reason.

Consequently, as long as an end accords with the ideas of pure practical reason, there is no contradiction between the foundation of politics on pure practical ideas and the pragmatic practical nature of the arguments for the philosopher’s advocacy and the ruler’s promotion of the end in question. And this is precisely the case when the end to be pursued is freedom of the public use of reason, since Kant intends it as the necessary condition for shaping ethics and politics according to the regulative ideas of pure practical reason.

To understand why Kant ascribes to the public use of reason such a prominent role requires understanding the very specific Kantian notion of freedom when referred to public reasoning. In the next paragraph, I will outline what constitutes Kant’s strong notion of freedom of the public use of reason and highlight the aspect of self-discipline.

3 Reason’s self-legislation: Freedom as self-discipline

Kant’s concept of freedom of the public use of reason is best understood, not along the line of the freedom of speech championed by classical liberalism,² but in analogy with the concept of autonomy that Kant sets forth in his moral philosophy. According to the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (*GMS*, AA 04: 446-447; Kant, 1996, pp. 94-95), the will is not free insofar as it is not heteronomous, i.e. not determined by external laws, but insofar as it is autonomous, i.e. determined by its own laws. Following Onora O’Neill (2015, pp. 56-68), I maintain that the same applies to Kant’s concept of freedom of the public use of reason. The public use of reason is free insofar as it is a) not heteronomous, which excludes the limitations imposed by state censorship,³ b) not lawless, which excludes the licence publicly to say just anything⁴, and c) autonomous, which means lawful according to reason’s laws. Consequently, Kant’s concept of freedom of public reasoning makes the normative demand that the public use of reason be subject (only) to reason’s self-legislation.

A comprehensive reading of Kant’s critical production reveals that reason’s legislation entails norms that place on the participants in public reasoning specific constraints and

² This is especially stressed by Katerina Deligiorgi (2005, pp. 86-87) and Günter Zöller (2009, p. 90).

³ Cf. “[C]ivil compulsion [...] wrenches away people’s freedom publicly to *communicate* their thoughts” (*WDO*, AA 08: 144; Kant, 2001, p. 16).

⁴ This corresponds to Kant’s indictment of what he terms “lawlessness in thinking” as “liberation from the limitations of reason” (*WDO*, AA 08: 145; Kant, 2001, p. 17).

pursues the establishment of ethical and political communities committed to the regulative ideas of pure practical reason. I term these norms discursive self-discipline. The adjective ‘discursive’ refers to the context of public communication and the noun ‘discipline’ to the aspect of normativity. The prefix ‘self-’ specifies that this discipline is not enforceable by positive law but requires the voluntary commitment of the participants in public reasoning.

As for its contents, reason’s self-legislation stems from the results of the critical enterprise. From the theoretical point of view, critical philosophy concludes that the pure concepts of the understanding are only applicable to objects of possible experience. From the practical point of view, the critical enterprise yields that the only valid grounds of ethical and political practice are the regulative ideas of freedom, dignity, and equality. In the light of these results, reason’s self-legislation indicates what arguments are theoretically valid and practically permissible in public reasoning. For instance, an argument intended to intimidate or seduce is practically impermissible since it violates the regulative ideas of freedom and dignity, and an argument based on the cognition of God is theoretically invalid since it violates the condition of the applicability of the understanding to objects of possible experience.

Reason’s self-legislation also informs the agenda of public discourse, recommending giving priority to topics that advance the regulative ideas of pure practical reason. For instance, Kant urges not discussing “figments of the brain” (*WDO*, AA 08: 137; Kant, 2001, p. 11), i.e. supersensible objects whose examination does not advance morals. He invites giving up investigating “the mechanical element in the human being” (*Anth*, AA 07: 214; Kant, 2001, p. 319) because such discussions do not yield any finding upon which human beings can act. In several other places, he urges theologians not to dwell on discussing divine rewards and punishments because such depictions engender a false conception of morality.

In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant contrasts the non-critically informed public use of reason (by the scholars of theology, law, and medicine) with the critically informed public use of reason (by the scholars of philosophy). The result is that the former violates both the ruler’s interest and reason’s demands, whereas the latter meets both reason’s demands and the ruler’s interest.

Systematically reconstructed, Kant’s argument proceeds as follows: at the outset, he tunes the ruler in favour of the free public use of reason by stating that the ruler, the common people and reason agree as to what welfare consists in, namely in being happy after death, having one’s possessions guaranteed and enjoying a healthy life. The public use of reason, if conducted in freedom under reason’s laws, would reveal that the only way to achieve these ends is a moral, just and healthy life conduct, which in turn requires living according to the regulative ideas of pure practical reason. The upshot is, from a pure practical point of view, that individuals enlightened by a critically informed public use of reason would lead a moral, just and healthy existence, thereby, from a pragmatic point of view, satisfying the ruler’s need for a well-behaved, law-abiding and productive citizenry. By contrast, a non-critically informed use of reason runs counter to both reason’s laws and the ruler’s interest. In his most compelling argument against a non-critically informed use of reason, Kant states that the non-critical scholar does not teach how to lead a moral, just and healthy life, but rather how to wallow in immorality, injustice and immoderateness and still get away with it through theological, jurisprudential and medical trickery (*SF*, AA 07: 30-31; Kant, 2001, pp. 257-258).

Thus, the public use of reason should be free in the twofold sense of independence from state censorship and autonomy under reason’s laws. The pure practical upshot is that such public use of reason advances reason’s regulative ideas. The pragmatic practical upshot is that only the ruler’s commitment to non-interference and the people’s commitment to discursive self-discipline can serve both the ruler’s and the people’s interest.

The consequences in terms of political legitimacy and popular sovereignty are the object of the next paragraph.

4 Political legitimacy and public opinion: Autonomy and the inescapability of reason

Reason's normativity implies that not all publicly expressed opinions may claim validity. Accordingly, not just any publicly expressed opinion, however widespread it may be, qualifies as public opinion or, in politically operative terms, as the people's will. To qualify as such, it needs to meet specific conditions stemming from the proper understanding of political practice.

Some scholars interpret Kant's public use of reason as a discursive procedure designed to achieve agreement without coercion. The ensuing objection is that any outcome of a public debate conducted according to a participative and non-coercive procedure should count as binding – however morally dubious it may be. If participation and non-coerciveness fully described Kant's concept of public reasoning, then this objection would be justified. However, besides the procedural aspect, it is essential to Kant's notion of public discourse and opinion that specific ends be pursued and specific outcomes be reached. This is what Kant means when, in *On the Common Saying*, he writes that reason commands "to give [...] laws in such a way that they *could* have arisen from the united will of a whole people [...] even if the people is at present in such a situation or frame of mind that [...] it would probably refuse its consent" (*TP*, AA 08: 297; Kant, 1996, pp. 296-297). This passage presents the apparent paradox of a public consent that is binding, whether it is given or refused. This consent that decides about political legitimacy, whether it is given or refused, speaks precisely to the extra-procedural aspects of Kant's notion of the public use of reason. Reason's normativity places on politics substantial, not merely procedural, demands. The compliance or non-compliance with reason's legislation decides on the legitimacy of the exercise of both political power and popular sovereignty. The consent in question does not describe any common opinion whatsoever but rather a critically qualified one or, in other words, the enlightened will of an enlightened citizenry.

The Austrian legal philosopher Hans Kelsen (1920; 1953) warns against a relativistic drift of a merely procedural understanding of the people's will and raises the question of whether the commitment to popular sovereignty requires accepting that a scoundrel like Barabbas be pardoned by plebiscite over a just man like Jesus. A Kantian reply could be that a public opinion contrary to specific principles may not claim validity. Applied to contemporary democracies and populisms, Kant's lesson is that political decision-makers who limit themselves to recording a critically unqualified common opinion are only simulating legitimacy. Conversely, citizens who value freedom need to cultivate free public reasoning and the cognitive and moral self-discipline it requires.

5 Conclusions

Kantian reason leaves some scholars worried that its outcome, if not its very nature, might take a despotic turn. My understanding of Kant's notion of the public use of reason might even reinforce such worries since I contend that reason's normativity both prescribes specific premises and outcomes and informs the topics and arguments of public discourse.

Yet, it is its demanding character that makes Kant's notion of reason capable, to quote Onora O'Neill (2015, pp. 13-37), of vindicating reason, namely of justifying its legislative authority and subsequent demands. It does so by showing that reason is inescapable for individuals and communities who aspire to coordinate their practice on the ground of an

autonomous consensus, namely a consensus that is free in the twofold Kantian sense of free from external coercion and subject to a universally sharable set of rules.

In *What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* Kant declares that “if reason will not subject itself to the laws it gives itself, it has to bow under the yoke of laws given by another [...] since reason alone can command validly for everyone” (*WDO*, AA 08: 145; Kant, 2001, pp. 16-17). Paraphrasing these words, I think it is in Kant’s spirit to say that if individuals and communities do not discipline their discursive practices according to reason’s self-legislation, they will have to bow under the yoke of lawless authorities who are disrespectful of their freedom and dignity.

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