

Kantian Autonomy

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1. Introduction

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me...* The first begins from the place I occupy in the external world of sense and extends the connection in which I stand into an unbounded magnitude with worlds upon worlds and systems upon systems, and moreover into the unbounded times of their periodic motion, their beginning and their duration. The second begins from my invisible self, my personality, and presents me in a world which has true infinity but which can be discovered only by the understanding, and I cognize that my connection with that world (and thereby with all those visible worlds as well) is not merely contingent, as in the first case, but universal and necessary. (Kant 1996a: 269-70/CPrR 5: 161-2)

Whether we search for truth about what exists in the universe—the starry heavens above—or try to figure out what we should or should not do—what the moral law commands of us—our ability to use reason to find necessary, universal laws, Kant proposes, is at the heart of our activities. More specifically, when we look for truths about the scientific world, we start with hypotheses (that centrally use the category of “causality” of “the understanding”) about possible, necessary

relations that can explain (features of) events in spacetime and then we use empirical facts and experiments to investigate the plausibility of these hypotheses. Our aim is to discover laws that can explain why a type of event proceeds as it does; each time we succeed at finding plausible candidates for such a law, we add to our scientific knowledge.

In addition to our ability to engage the universe through scientific investigations, Kant maintains, we are rational in that we can set and pursue ends of our own. In other words, we participate actively in the universe by setting ends of our own, and our reason enables us to do so responsibly. When we use our reasoning powers in this practical (rather than theoretical) way, instead of starting with a hypothesis, we start with a maxim (a subjective rule of action) that specifies which end we would like to pursue. We then use our reasoning powers to investigate whether acting on this maxim could hold as a universal law for all rational beings. More specifically, if our maxim could hold as such a law, then our reason judges the proposed action to be morally permissible (i.e., it is consistent with our perfect duties); moreover, if a proposed action is supportive of bringing about a more rational world, then reason judges it to be a morally estimable maxim (i.e., it fulfills our imperfect ethical duties). For example, I am not morally justified in setting ends that involve physical violence to another human being, since if I do, then by definition—in using physical violence against another—I make it impossible for that other human being to set and pursue ends of their own (since they have to focus their energy on defending themselves against my aggression). Hence, if I think about whether it is morally permissible to do this, my mind says “no” because my reason cannot think this maxim as a law for rational beings. Finally, because I can be motivated by my reason, I can refrain from engaging in activities, such as acting aggressively, even if I can feel that I want to. I can, in Kant’s language, act “from duty,” meaning I can do something just because it is the right thing to

do and I cannot do something because it is wrong. This entry provides a short overview of how Kantians in the English-speaking world have engaged Kant's writings on self-governance or autonomy in the last few decades as well as identifies some current trends in the scholarship.

2. Kantian Autonomy—Rawls and Nozick

For a long time, Kantian autonomy—self-government through practical law—was understood in the sense sketched in the previous paragraph. It was a reading that focused primarily on Kant's writings on (meta-)ethics, such as the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. For example, this is how John Rawls (1971/1999, cf. 2000) understood Kantian autonomy in *A Theory of Justice*, which is why he thought the concept of Kantian autonomy must be broadened and re-envisioned in order to capture what justice requires of us (including through the state), and it is also why Robert Nozick (1974) famously disagreed with him. To make a rather long story short, if the above interpretation of Kant's theory is correct, then the state's proper function is only to stop people from acting on maxims that conflict with our perfect duties toward others, such as stealing and murdering (Varden 2016, forthcoming a). Importantly, the state must refrain from any institution-building activities that involve more proactively or positively creating a just and good world suited not merely for rational beings but rational, vulnerable *human* beings (imperfect duties). In other words, the result can be seen as a libertarian minimal state, which is exactly what Nozick defended. In contrast, Rawls (1971/1999) reconceived the Kantian approach by constructing his "original position," which was a theoretical device that enabled us to identify two principles of justice—the principles of justice as fairness—that rational agents with certain, distinctly human needs (the list of primary goods) hypothetically would choose as the foundational ones for their public,

legal-political institutions. Much of the dispute in the literature in the 1970s onwards consequently focused on issues of redistributive justice, and, simplified, those who were not convinced by Nozick's right-wing libertarian approach found it more tempting to follow Rawls's basic lead of trying to develop a theory of justice from scratch—either their own or working with Rawls's theory—and in a way that takes into account human vulnerabilities and needs.

In his later work, Rawls (1996) re-envisioned his theory of justice as fairness as one of a family of liberal, political conceptions of justice that can be seen as identifying the normative basis for the basic structure of public, legal-political institutions in modern, liberal democracies. These states are characterized by a reasonable pluralism, meaning that the citizens of such states would differ fundamentally about how to live a good life but also agree that these differences are valuable and must be respected. Rawls also supplemented this analysis of modern, liberal democracies with a conception of a law of peoples—modeled on Kant's idea of “perpetual peace”—that envisioned how liberal and other, “decent” (non-liberal) peoples could live peacefully together autonomously (side by side) without shared governance through a world state. Naturally, also Rawls's conception of global justice has inspired a lot of engagement, including discussions of to what extent Rawls's Kantian theory is philosophically similar to or different from Kant's own approach. (For an entrance to the related, earlier literature, see Axinn (1998), Carson (1988), Cavallar (1999), Dodson (1993), Doyle (1983), Habermas (1997), Höffe (2006), Kokaz (2007), Maus (2006), Mikalsen (2011), Nagel (2005), Pogge (1988; 1994), Varden (2011), Williams (2006). For an entrance to where many of these discussions currently stand, see Kleingeld (2012) and Ripstein (2021).)

3. Kantian Autonomy—Onora O'Neill, Sharon Byrd, Joachim Hruscka, Ingeborg Maus

An early challenge to Rawls's basic understanding of Kant's or Kantian autonomy came from one of Rawls's students, namely Onora O'Neill (1989; 1999; 2000). In her view, both of Rawls's versions of justice as fairness lost some of the philosophical strength of Kant's position because Rawls (in different ways) "idealized" certain ways of life rather than "abstracted" relevant, shared human features that could yield a basis for moral Kantian theories of virtue and justice. A central interpretive move for her as she was developing her own theory of justice was to turn away from Kant's (meta-)ethical writings to Kant's Doctrine of Right in the *Metaphysics of Morals* and then complement this theory with ideas found in his Doctrine of Virtue in the same work to make space for human vulnerabilities. (For a feminist approach to Kant that also follows O'Neill's lead in making imperfect duties important to how we conceive of justice, see Hay (2013).)

This change in focus from Kant's (meta-)ethical writings to those of his on right and justice soon became prominent among Kant scholars. (This move to Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* was not original with O'Neill. A pioneer in the English-speaking world here was Mary Gregor (1963).) Importantly too, the first readings of the Doctrine of Right typically attribute to Kant a legal-political philosophical position, according to which the structure of Kant's theory is legal positivist (à la Hobbes), libertarian (à la Locke), or liberal participatory democratic (à la Rousseau). O'Neill, for example, viewed Kant's own theory as having a legal positivist character (while Hans Kelsen (1992) famously developed such a Kantian account on the basis of Kant's (meta-)ethical writings). The most influential, libertarian interpretation is that of Sharon B. Byrd and Joachim Hruscka (2010), and the most influential democratic one is that of Ingeborg Maus (1992)—an inheritance Macarena Marey (2018) has recently taken up and developed further. (For more on these interpretive approaches, see Flikschuh (2008) and Varden (2008, 2010).)

4. Kantian Autonomy—Julius Ebbinghaus, Ernest Weinrib, and Arthur Ripstein

Another type of approach to the basic question of Kantian autonomy originally arrived in the English-speaking world through the work of Julius Ebbinghaus (1953), though it really took off with the related writings of Ernest Weinrib (1995) and Arthur Ripstein (2009). This approach incorporates important features of the approaches discussed above, but it integrates them in a new way that can be labelled a liberal republican approach. According to the liberal republican approach, Kant agrees with Hobbes that justice is impossible in the state of nature, with Locke that not all law-organized uses of coercion constitute a legitimate public authority, and with Rousseau that a people have a right to transform their state into a democracy. In addition, on the approach, constitutive of reforming a state into a more flourishing legal-political institutional whole is for citizens to develop an ability to engage in public reasoning by means laws of freedom—and, so, in this regard, they view Kant as agreeing with Rawls's general emphasis on public reason. (For more on this, see Deligiorgi (2012), Peterson (2008), and Ripstein (2006). Liberal republican interpretive Kantians are furthermore sympathetic to O'Neill's worries about the idealization rather than abstraction in Rawls's theories of justice as fairness, though they worry about her invoking considerations of virtue when developing a theory of justice. Kantians of this interpretive stripe also strive to stay consistent with Kant's general claim that when we move from virtue to right, we move from a sphere that is inherently impossible to enforce to one that is enforceable—and, so, maxims and moral motivations (virtue) are necessarily out of reach. (For more on this point, see Varden (2015).) It is fair to say that this liberal republican interpretive approach is the most dominant today, though as the literature focused on Kant's

legal-political philosophy matures, the debates between the different interpretive strands will likely also deepen and become increasingly interesting.

5. Kantian Autonomy—Human Nature, Feminism, Philosophy of Care, Philosophy of Race

The above theories of Kantian autonomy—in all the interpretive traditions—have been steadily complemented by non-ideal Kantian theorizing, from general theories on human (as distinct from merely rational) nature to theories that aspire also to address our human tendency to dehumanize and make it impossible for everyone to participate in active self-governance through laws of freedom. In the English-speaking world, Robert Louden (2000) paved the way for a more general interpretation of Kant's account of human nature, while attention to the problem of dehumanization—entailed, for example, in racism, sexism, and ableism—unsurprisingly tended to come from groundbreaking works by women and non-white scholars, such as Annette Baier (1993; 1996), Marcia Baron (1985; 1995; 1997), Robin S. Dillon (1992a; 1992b; 1992c; 1992d; 1997; 2001; 2003), Virginia Held (2006), Barbara Herman (1993a; 1993b), Thomas E. Hill Jr. (1991; 1992), Bernard Boxill and Thomas E. Hill Jr. (2001), Eva Kittay (1991), Pauline Kleingeld (1993), Jane Kneller (1993a; 1993b), Christine Korsgaard (1996), Rae Langton (1992), Charles Mills (1999), Susan Moller Okin (1989), and Onora O'Neill. (For an overview of the entrance of women into Kant scholarship and much of the existing feminist Kantian literature, see Varden (2020).) This literature was tremendously important not only in drawing attention to related failings in Kant's own texts but also to those in the Kantian interpretive tradition and the canon of Western philosophy as a whole.

Conclusion

Many Kant scholars today strive to continue the effort at humanizing Kant and the Kantian philosophical tradition. (For an overview of much of the literature on Kant, race, and care, see Varden (forthcoming b).) We are currently witnessing, in countries around the world, a reckoning with how inherited legal-political institutions and cultures channel and participate in oppression of various social groups and make it impossible for them to live autonomously—as private persons and as citizens engaged in public self-governance through public reason. Insofar as we are able to progress rather than regress, and insofar as critical reflection on the oppression wrought by those institutions and cultures deepens and expands, we will likely see more Kantian non-ideal theory as well as more complete Kantian theories that integrate ideal and non-ideal theories in the years to come.

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