

Paul Guyer, *Kant on the Rationality of Morality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 74 pages. ISBN: 978-1-108-43881-0 (pbk.).

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This volume is the sixth installment of Cambridge University Press’s ‘Elements in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant’ series. The Cambridge Elements series as a whole is designed to offer short texts, that is, ones that are somewhere between a book and a journal article in length, that provide ‘comprehensive coverage’ of certain key topics in a given discipline. In line with this aim, Paul Guyer’s *Kant on the Rationality of Morality* seeks to concisely explain the multiple ways in which reason is central to Kant’s moral philosophy. In the following I will briefly summarize the content of the volume before offering some critical remarks.

The volume is 67 pages in length and consists of eight sections: an introduction and conclusion and six substantive sections, each of which is around 10 pages long, on average. In the first section, the Introduction, Guyer states the main ways in which reason is central to Kant’s moral philosophy: it provides the fundamental principle of morality, it determines the proper object or goal of morality, and it influences our volition and action. In the second section, ‘Reasons, Reasoning, and Reason as Such’, Guyer contrasts his own approach in the book, which is to interpret Kant as deriving morality from the principles of *reason in general*, with that of others who see Kant as deriving morality from conceptions of *practical reason* in particular. Guyer examines the views of Christine Korsgaard, Allen Wood, and Onora O’Neill, all of whom conceive of the requirement of universality as a fundamental standard of reason and which in turn constrains what can count as ‘reasons’ or ‘reasoning’ for us. For Guyer, the requirement of universality does not suffice: we also need the concept of a person as capable of setting their own ends, as well as the even more fundamental principles of noncontradiction and sufficient reason, and the demand for systematicity. It is the combination of these elements, Guyer argues, that can explain Kant’s account of the fundamental principle and proper object of morality.

In section 3, ‘From Noncontradiction to Universalizability’, which at 22 pages is the longest in the volume, Guyer focuses on the fundamental principle of morality and argues that the

categorical imperative can be derived from two things: the fact that human beings are capable of setting their own ends and the principle of noncontradiction (PNC). It is here that Guyer presents his argument for the claim that the requirement of universal validity is not Kant's first principle of reason. Rather, this requirement is grounded in more fundamental principles, the first of which is the PNC. Guyer argues that Kant's fundamental principle of morality arises from this basic demand of reason. In order for the PNC to yield results in a practical context, however, Guyer argues that we need to presuppose the fact that human beings are rational agents capable of setting their own ends. An immoral maxim, on Guyer's reading, is therefore "one that commits a self-contradiction in both asserting and denying that one, some, or all human beings are such rational agents." (p. 14) Although Guyer himself does not extensively engage with the large secondary literature on this issue, his interpretation presents an interesting alternative to those that read the contradiction involved in immoral maxims as, in essence, a logical contradiction (see e.g., the work of Richard Galvin), as a distinctively practical contradiction (see e.g., Korsgaard and Pauline Kleingeld), and those that see the contradiction as involving teleological considerations (see e.g., L.W. Beck and H. J. Paton).

The next two sections (4 and 5) focus on demonstrating how three other central elements of Kant's moral philosophy follow from the most fundamental principles of reason: Kant's conception of the highest good (section 4), his system of duties (section 5, first half), and the system of nature and freedom, i.e., the unification of theoretical and moral philosophy (section 5, second half). In section 4, Guyer argues that Kant's second principle of reason is the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), and that it plays a central role in Kant's argument that the highest good, namely universal happiness combined with and in proportion to morality, is the complete object of morality. Guyer argues that, for Kant, the PSR takes the form of seeking the unconditioned for every condition. (see p. 34) As the only thing with unconditional value, morality serves as the unconditional condition on the pursuit of individual happiness. In a different way, universal happiness is the complete and unconditioned object or purpose of morality. Guyer then describes how these lead to some of Kant's postulates of pure practical reason: the former requires postulating immortality as a necessary condition of realizing happiness in proportion to morality, and the latter requires postulating the existence of God.

Section 5 suggests that the ideal of systematicity is part of Kant's conception of reason and that this ideal serves as a goal of reason in the practical sphere in two main ways: 1. in the attempt to derive a complete and systematic array of all particular duties from the single fundamental principle

of morality and, second, in the attempt to form a single system of freedom and nature, which is the end point of Kant's philosophy.

Sections 3, 4, and 5 are the main sections of the book, since it there that Guyer accomplishes his main aim of illustrating that central elements of Kant's moral philosophy can be derived from the fundamental principles of reason in general. Section 6 and 7 treat two additional topics: 'Reasons as Motivation' and 'Kantian Constructivism' respectively. As its title suggests, section 6 explains Kant's claim that pure reason is practical, i.e., that reason can determine the will on its own. Section 7 is a brief comment on Kant's methodology or metaethics, where Guyer defends what he calls a 'semantic moral realism' reading of Kant's metaethics in general, but 'ontological moral realism' at the level of the fundamental principle of morality, and constructivism about particular duties. (see p. 62n) Guyer includes a discussion of these complicated issues in order to explain the metaethical implications of the interpretation he has offered in the previous sections, and to show how his interpretation is to be understood in contemporary terminology.

This slim volume attempts a very ambitious task: Guyer has sought to explain very briefly some of the most complicated and controversial aspects of Kant's moral philosophy. How we are to best interpret Kant's account of moral motivation, for example, is an issue that has generated an enormous amount of literature, and which could easily be the subject of a Cambridge 'Element' itself. That Guyer can explain so many complicated topics in so few pages is an admirable feat.

One of the most interesting contributions that the volume makes is somewhat hidden in the background: in arguing that central features of Kant's moral philosophy can be derived from the principle of reason in general, Guyer has implicitly offered an interpretation of what Kant's fundamental principles of reason are in the first place. On Guyer's reading, there are three: the PNC, the PSR, and the ideal of systematicity. This is a controversial view on its own. Guyer is correct, of course, that Kant stands in a line of thinkers (including Leibniz, Wolff, Baumgarten, and Meier) who think that the PNC and the PSR in particular are fundamental, but it is not clear that Kant's view is as similar to these figures as Guyer suggests. (see p. 14-15) Marcus Willaschek, for instance, has recently argued that Kant has his own unique new versions of the PNC and the PSR and that, properly speaking, the fundamental principles of reason are those of universality, systematicity, and consistency. (see 'The Structure of Normative Space: Kant's System of Rational Principles' in Camilla Serck-Hanssen & Beatrix Himmelmann (eds.), *The Court of Reason: Proceedings of the 13th International Kant Congress*. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), pp. 245-266.)

Finally, a more general remark. The Elements in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant series is advertised as having two principal objectives: 1. to provide ‘an up to date summary of the results of current research’ that will ‘furnish an accessible guide to the main issues raised by the aspect of Kant’s philosophy’ that the author has chosen to discuss, and 2. ‘each author will be encouraged to present their own distinctive view of the main questions raised and to draw original conclusions’. Guyer’s volume focuses overwhelmingly on the second objective. Thus, despite being written in an accessible way that is welcoming to beginners, readers who are not yet familiar with the current research on the topics in this volume might be disappointed that there is little by way of a summary or guide to the other interpretive options in the literature. Nonetheless, the volume does a good job of presenting Guyer’s interpretation of many central elements of Kant’s moral philosophy, which will interest students and scholars alike.

Michael Walschots
Seminar für Philosophie
Martin Luther University
Halle (Saale), Germany
mhwalschots@gmail.com