

Review of Kant's Ethical Thought by Allen Wood

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Interest in Kantian ethics is flourishing. The past twenty years have provided a flood of books and articles explaining how Kant's ethics is more interesting and promising than its detractors have realised. Despite their disagreements on detail, Rawls, Hill, O'Neill, Herman, Korsgaard, and their many followers, are part of a real revival of interest in Kantian ethics. *Kant's Ethical Thought*, by Allen Wood, has both incorporated and extended many of the distinctive insights that fuel this revival. The influence of Korsgaard is perhaps the strongest here. Wood, however, goes significantly further than other interpreters in his emphasis on the centrality of Kant's conception of humanity as an end in itself and the practical importance of the formula of autonomy and the realm of ends in the derivation of duties. Unlike Korsgaard and others, he emphasises the inadequacy of Kantian universalisability procedures. Wood, however, has contempt for critics who have hastily rejected Kant's ethical theory because of the inadequacy of the formula of universalisability. Wood argues that we only discover the full promise of Kantian ethics when we move beyond the formal principle of morality and focus on Kant's conceptions of human dignity, of autonomy as the source of normativity, and of a harmonious human community.

Although Kant's conception of the dignity of humanity has received a good deal of recent attention, Wood has provided an exceedingly careful and detailed reconstruction of Kant's argument. The first half of *Kant's Ethical Thought* goes over every argument of the first two sections of Kant's *Groundwork* and seems to consider every possible objection. The result is very slow going. Although I am not sure how many people will work their way through this thicket of arguments, this first part of the book is careful, thorough, and valuable. The conclusion of these arguments is that Kant's ethics is based squarely on the absolute and unconditional value we must find in humanity and thus on the equal dignity of all persons. Wood also concludes that it is only in the idea of the realm of ends that we truly see what the formula of humanity requires and that it is only by willing as we would in a realm of ends that our autonomy is fully realised. Like Kant's critics, Wood argues that we cannot construct an adequate universalisability test without first specifying the morally relevant features of maxims (p. 105). Unlike most of Kant's critics, however, Wood considers (and rejects) the more sophisticated recent attempts to salvage the universalisability procedure. Furthermore, he shows that the concept of obligation requires a more substantive determining ground for the will than a universalisability test of maxims, alone, can provide. The requirements of morality must be based on a substantive value that moral agents must acknowledge to be an objective end. Only such an end could provide the necessary motivational basis for a categorical imperative (p. 114).

On Wood's interpretation, Kant's controversial claim that a good will is motivated by duty and that actions motivated by sympathetic feelings alone lack moral worth is much more plausible. Morally good conduct expresses the value or dignity of both ourselves and the equal worth and dignity of other persons. Beneficent actions, motivated by duty, express our respect for the humanity of another person. So, when Kant argues that beneficence motivated by duty, and not inclination, has moral worth and reflects a good will, his point is that principled beneficence express a deeper concern and caring about others. The core of the moral motive is not formal duty but a recognition of the value and importance of both oneself and others. If I

truly value humanity above all else, then I will be genuinely concerned for others and deeply affected by their plight.

Perhaps most importantly, Wood also argues, I believe convincingly, that the actual determination of human duties depends both on the pure principles captured by the formulations of the categorical imperative and “intermediate premises” that specify types of acts that fail to respect the dignity of humanity (p. 152). These intermediate premises themselves necessarily depend on our contingent human psychology, as well as particular cultural and historical circumstances (p. 154). While Wood is surely correct about this, he does not face up to the problems this raises for the Kantian project. The intermediate premises, he explains, are interpretations of which actions express respect or disrespect for the dignity of rational nature. Wood asserts that increasing enlightenment enables us to see that physician assisted suicide or enjoying sex are not necessarily inconsistent with respect for humanity. He does not provide, however, any explanation of how these intermediate premises are to be rationally defended. If I argue that physician assisted suicide is sometimes justified because respect for a person is incompatible with paternalistically overriding a person’s considered belief that continued life is incompatible with their integrity, and you respond that respect for persons can never justify intentionally destroying the person we are supposed to be respecting, how are we to settle this on the basis of reasons? It seems that instead of providing a basis for our substantive moral judgements, our substantive moral judgements determine the actions that we think respect or disrespect the dignity of persons. In recognising the necessity of intermediate premises specifying which actions do and which do not treat humanity as an end in itself, critics will charge, we tacitly acknowledge the emptiness of the pure principles of morality and thus the impossibility of basing a substantive morality on reason alone. Wood needs to explain more fully how the indeterminate requirement to respect humanity provides a rational basis for the intermediate substantive principles specifying what does and what does not respect humanity.

Of course, much of the recent interest in Kantian ethics is fueled by the assumption that Kant’s ethics provides a rationale for deontological constraints and thus a clear alternative to consequentialism. Unfortunately, like many Kantians, Wood seems simply to assume that only deontological constraints express respect for the equal worth of all persons. Particular deontological constraints, however, are simply one interpretation of the structure of the intermediate substantive principles specifying the requirement to respect humanity. Wood thus needs to present an argument that explains why a consequentialist does not express a fundamental respect for the equality and dignity of persons by striving to promote, in so far as possible, the conditions necessary for the flourishing of human rational capacities and the effective realisation of ends. Of course, much ink has been spent on this question and Wood may have nothing to add, but we should be clear that nothing in Kant’s ethical thought, as presented by Wood, shows that we should follow, say, F.M. Kamm on this question rather than Shelly Kagan.

In contrast to the first half of Wood’s book, the second half is primarily exegetical. Although the focus of this second part shifts from Kant’s metaphysics of morals to Kant’s practical anthropology, his empirical psychology, and his philosophy of history, Wood’s goal is to uncover and better understand Kant’s mature view of the role of empirical theory in determining the content of morality.

Kant’s thesis of the fundamental “unsocial sociability” of human beings provides the central unifying theme for this part of the book. When it comes to our empirical psychology, Kant sees the corrupting influence of self-conceit and the will to dominate as colouring and

distorting all of our more sociable inclinations. Although he is not Hobbes and does not go as far as Nietzsche, Kant seems to have little faith in the positive social influence of the softer and kinder passions that draw us together. According to Kant, “human nature is locked into a struggle between two incompatible conceptions of human self-worth: one arising out of our nature as social beings, founded on comparison, competition, rivalry, and jealousy; the other arising from the cultivation of moral reason, enjoining equal respect for the dignity of humanity of every rational being and constraining us to act on principles which would unite all human ends into a harmonious system” (pp. 138–39). Kant also argues, however, that social discord is the means that nature uses to bring about the development and in the end the perfection of human nature. The process of history will ultimately lead to a harmonious cosmopolitan human community and perpetual peace. The ends of nature and of morality ultimately coincide.

Although Wood does much to clarify Kant’s views, he does not try to defend Kant’s substantive claims about human psychology, natural teleology, and the course of history. I take it that Wood’s aim in this part of the book is to clearly and accurately present Kant’s practical anthropology, empirical psychology, and philosophy of history. The problem with this more limited historical approach, as I see it, is twofold. First, given the philosophical defence of Kant’s moral theory that occupies the first half of the book, the reader naturally expects a more critical and philosophical evaluation of these more neglected aspects of Kant’s ethical thought. Second, Wood does not distance himself at all from his presentation of Kant’s ideas. As far as the reader can tell, Wood is not troubled by Kant’s sweeping and controversial empirical generalisations about human nature. Since Kant’s claims are often presented without any critical distance or analysis, and since Wood does explicitly reject some of Kant’s more implausible claims, Wood leaves the impression that he finds the rest of Kant’s views plausible and promising. This reader, however, found himself constantly stopping to think about obvious questions and objections. Given the effort that Wood has put into figuring out what Kant thought, one cannot but regret that he did not share more of his critical insights and evaluations of these more neglected aspects of Kant’s ethical thought. Indeed, given Wood’s thesis that Kant’s philosophical psychology and history helps us better understand Kant’s moral theory, it would seem that we must consider whether Kant’s empirical hypotheses are indeed sound and, if not, how this affects his overall moral theory.

I do confess, however, that I have learned much from Wood about the connections between Kant’s theories of psychology, history and ethics. Wood has provided a clear philosophical reconstruction of Kant’s text and revealed the influence of his empirical psychology and philosophy of history on his more familiar metaphysics of morals. Thus, although we do not here find any compelling reasons to share Kant’s vision of human nature and history, Wood’s reconstruction of Kant’s arguments will prove to be an important resource for anyone working on Kant’s ethics.

The two core features of *Kant’s Ethical Thought* are its emphasis on the moral requirement to respect the equal dignity of humanity and its portrayal of human nature as deeply social but pervasively competitive. Morality requires a commitment to equality but our natures are deeply inclined toward self-conceit and thus the domination and exploitation of others. Wood has demonstrated that this vision of the human condition underlies all of Kant’s moral philosophy.

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