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The Autonomy of Reason: A Commentary on Kant's "Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals" (review)

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with Diderot, in 1773, did not generate any excitement on either side: Diderot found the philosopher far less interesting than the patroness; Hemsterhuis, for his part, thought Diderot in person a disappointment, after reading his works.

I wish I could say that I found Hemsterhuis an exciting thinker, as he is presented in Moenkemeyer's useful and informed study. I cannot. On the other hand, this quiet philosopher from Holland stood at one of the great crossroads in the history of European thought. In his struggle against the Atheism he saw emerging from the French Enlightenment, in his stress on essences, known and unknown, as opposed to the atheistic concept of matter, in his doctrine of total personality rather than faculty psychology, in his idea of perfectibility and the Golden Age that he likened to the afterlife—in these he had found a way out of the sterile impass confronting the disciples of Diderot and d'Holbach. In short, this is a figure of undeniable consequence historically, and he has been too long ignored by American students of philosophy. We should be grateful both to the author and to the publisher for making him known to us in this monograph, the first comprehensive study of Hemsterhuis ever published in English.

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The Autonomy of Reason: A Commentary on Kant's "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals." By Robert Paul Wolff. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975. Pp. x + 228. \$12.50)

The Autonomy of Reason reflects Wolff's determination to get out of Kant's system what is good and to get out of Kant's system for good. It thus burns with the conflicting passions of a devoted student who has learned much from a reserved teacher but who now finds it imperative to break with him for precisely the reasons that attracted him initially. This explains why much of the book reads like a declaration of independence yet is based on a sympathetic, even immanent, critique of Kant addressed to Wolff himself. Although he is addressing himself, others may share and will certainly benefit from Wolff's two decades of intense study of Kant.

Without question Wolff has written a provocative and important book. Contrary to its title, however, it is not really about the autonomy of reason; and contrary to its subtitle, it is only partly a commentary on Kant's *Groundwork*. It serves, rather, as a propaedeutic to Wolff's own moral and political views. I believe this at least accounts for some of the puzzling features of the book: its highly personal nature, its style of philosophical commentary, and its devastating introduction.

Wolff does not see his task as one of either historical exegesis or philosophical criticism. In the place of both Wolff proposes a "philosophical reconstruction" of the text. This is both desirable and necessary, he says, because "of all the great philosophers, there is none so rich in insights and so plagued by inconsistency as Kant" (p. 4). The resulting reconstruction will be worthwhile provided that affirmative answers can be given to two questions: "Does the interpretation developed here illuminate the text, so that at least some of what Kant says is clearer and more plausible in the light of it; and, more important still, does the interpretation result in an argument whose independent philosophical merit justifies the effort spent grappling with Kant?" (p. 5).

A third question suggests itself: would Kant recognize himself as the author of the reconstructed text? This question one must answer in the negative, for the *Groundwork* that emerges, although certainly Kantian, does not accurately reflect Kantianism. To the extent that this is a criticism, it is so only because the book advertises itself as a commentary. In short, Wolff's book is similar to Strawson's *Bounds of Sense* in that the value of both lies in salvaging something of worth from the sunken hulk of Kantianism.

Wolff's Introduction is particularly revealing, for it consists of a sustained attack on several

of Kant's central metaphysical claims, an attack which, if successful, undermines much of his ethics. As an introduction to a commentary, it prejudices the outcome; as an introduction to a philosophical criticism, however, it merits careful scrutiny.

According to Wolff, Kant postulates four selves: phenomenal, noumenal, transcendental, and moral. This presents the insurmountable problem of determining "the relations among the several selves, or functions of the self, which people his theory" (p. 9). Given that Hume had difficulty discovering even one self, this is indeed a serious charge. But Kant never overpopulated his theory: he was a firm believer in one man, one self. One's noumenal self is the very same self that presents itself to empirical intuition (phenomenal self), except that as noumenal it is considered apart from its relation to inner sense. Kant is his own best spokesman on this point: "I, as a being that thinks, am one and the same subject as myself, as a being of the sense. However, in so far as I am affected within by sensations of time, whether simultaneous or successive, as an object of inner empirical intuition, I have knowledge of myself only in the manner in which I am presented to myself, not as a thing in itself" (*Anthropologie*, § 7).

Wolff further argues that Kant's thoroughly critical philosophy absolutely precludes any application of the categories to noumena and thus ruins his attempt to reconcile free will and determinism, for resolution of that conflict depends on hypothetically applying the category of causality to noumenal action. In destroying his attempted reconciliation Kant necessarily undermines the foundations of his entire ethical system.

Wolff's conclusions may be sound, but not, I think, for the reason given. Kant asserts over and over that the categories are applicable to noumena: it is simply that empirical knowledge cannot be had of them. Typical of Kant's view is a note at B166 of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: "for thought the categories are not limited by the conditions of our sensible intuition, but have an unlimited field. It is only the *knowledge* of that which we think, the determining of the object, that requires intuition."

Wolff is perfectly familiar with such passages but ignores them for two closely related reasons. First, he maintains that on Kant's thoroughly critical view categories are *nothing but* "rules for the organization of a manifold of sensibility" (p. 7). Although Wolff does not argue this point here, he extensively defends it in his *Kant's Theory of Mental Activity*, especially pages 214-218. While his claim merits careful consideration, it is far from conclusively established. It might be tested, for instance, against the analysis D. P. Dryer offers in *Kant's Solution for Verification in Metaphysics*, especially chapters 6 and 11. From a reviewer's standpoint, however, it is disturbing that a devastating charge against Kant's entire ethical theory is drawn from a book not under consideration and is taken as established. Wolff is led to such excesses, I think, because of his adherence to the patchwork thesis. In his earlier book he states that the patchwork theory, though no doubt bad history, is eminently reasonable as a reconstruction of Kant's argument. Adherence to this theory permits Wolff to discard anything that does not (apparently) square with what he takes to be Kant's "deeper" and more thoroughly critical investigation. It is the philosophy of "as if" with a vengeance! Readers of this commentary must therefore be on guard against a Kant that is "reconstructed" and sometimes "reconstituted."

Nowhere is this more evident than in Wolff's discussion of the autonomy of reason itself. As the title of his book indicates, Wolff believes that the notion of autonomy provides the key to Kant's moral philosophy. And in the following passage, Kant gives what Wolff considers "the classic explication of the concept of autonomy" (p. 178): "The will is therefore not merely subject to the law, but is so subject that it must be considered as also *making the law* for itself and *precisely on this account* as first of all subject to the law (of which it can regard itself as the author)" (*Groundwork*, Ak. 431, second emphasis added by Wolff). The words emphasized, Wolff asserts, "are the heart of the concept of autonomy," and from them "flow the most far-reaching consequences for politics as well as for ethics" (p. 178).

Those familiar with Wolff's *In Defense of Anarchism* will know that the consequences are far-reaching indeed. There he stresses that to be autonomous one must be self-legislating, that is, give laws to oneself. Since authority is the right to command and, correlatively, the right to be obeyed, an irresolvable conflict arises between individual autonomy and state authority. Wolff's construal of Kant therefore leads inexorably to the doctrine of philosophical anarchism.

Fortunately, Kant construes his words differently, as Wolff ruefully acknowledges: "The argument for the formula of autonomy turns on the notion of legislating disinterestedly, that is to say, legislating independently of or in abstraction from the particular interests of the agent" (pp. 178-179). Though this is true, there is even more to Kant's notion of autonomy. Perhaps the clearest statement of his own understanding of autonomy occurs at the beginning of Chapter 3:

What else then can freedom of will be but autonomy—that is, the property which will has of being a law to itself? The proposition "Will is in all its actions a law to itself" expresses, however, only the principle of acting on no maxim other than one which can have for its object itself as at the same time a universal law. This is precisely the formula of the categorical imperative and the principle of morality. Thus a free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same. (*Groundwork*, Ak. 447)

Autonomy is essentially the freedom of reason: one is free only when one's actions are determined by the objective, universalizable requirements of reason. Because rationality distinguishes man from brutes, in acting rationally one's actions are free, autonomous, and self-determined. For Kant, there is no irresolvable conflict between freedom and reason or between autonomy and authority. For Wolff, on the other hand, autonomy is essentially the freedom from reason: one is free only when one's actions are determined by self-willed principles, principles that in themselves are neither rational nor irrational.

Wolff's position is not far from Hare's. Both hold that, in the end, we simply choose a set of principles that specify a way of life and try to live by them. Both place great emphasis on free choice, choice unfettered by anything other than consistency. Both arrive at existential Kantianism, I think, because both are convinced by Hume that ends and substantive moral principles are not amenable to rational evaluation. It is no accident that both Wolff and Hare believe that freedom and reason are difficult to reconcile.

Wolff is explicit in his denial of any substantive moral principles that are objectively binding.

I am persuaded that moral obligations, strictly so-called, arise from freely chosen contractual commitments between or among rational agents who have entered into some continuing and organized interaction with one another. Where such contractual commitments do not exist, cannot plausibly be construed as having been tacitly entered into, and cannot even be supposed to be the sort that *would* be entered into if the persons were to attempt some collective agreement, then no moral obligations bind one person to another. (P. 219)

There are no substantive principles of action which are objectively binding on all rational agents. Substantive obligations can arise only from free acts of commitment by which groups of rational agents collectively bind one another to a set of principles of action. (P. 51)

Wolff's philosophy of commitment has some strange implications. What is it, for instance, that makes murder wrong? Murder is wrong, we are told, because "it is an instance of killing someone who has not accepted a practice of mutual hostility and could not reasonably be expected to accept it if offered a chance a choose" (p. 51). Kant, along with nearly every other major moral philosopher, would hold that murder is wrong even if everyone explicitly consented to live in a society which did not forbid the taking of lives when it suited one. Can it be true that what makes rape, torture, and murder wrong is simply that the victim did not

consent to suffer or die? Consent, contractual obligations, and free acts of commitment certainly have a place in a complete ethical theory. But do they have the *only* place?

If Wolff has consigned certain of Kant's central theses to the deep, he also has managed to salvage and restore others. In *The Right and the Good*, for instance, Ross argues that it is logically absurd to suppose that we ought to act from a sense of duty. But Wolff argues convincingly that "what Kant actually says is that our acts have *moral worth* only insofar as they are done from a certain motive (namely, respect for the law). Their rightness is quite independent of their motive. We have, according to Kant, an obligation to do what is right. We do not have an obligation to perform morally meritorious acts" (p. 81). Wolff also manages to shed light on Kant's analysis of rational agency and the nature of will. He enables us to see more clearly than Kant himself does that "will" does not name a faculty but rather has a home in such phrases as "to have a will" which, in turn, "simply means to be capable of being moved by reason rather than by natural causes. . . . To be free is simply to be moved by reason" (p. 216).

Despite its flaws as a commentary, *The Autonomy of Reason* contributes significantly to our understanding of Kant and the problems he addresses. Wolff's critique is especially valuable because it attempts to relate Kant's ethics to his metaphysics and epistemology in more than a superficial manner. If it does not always succeed, it never ceases to be provocative, imaginative, and well-argued. *The Autonomy of Reason* offers us a fresh opportunity not only to grapple with the central problems of Kantian ethics but to face the central issues of contemporary ethics as well.

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Philosophie als System bei Fichte Schelling und Hegel. By Adolf Schurr. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann, 1974, Pp. 192. DM 58)

Fichte and Schelling often seem to have existed merely to serve as a bridge between the genius of Kant and Hegel. Whether or not they deserve better can here be left unanswered, but in any case Schurr's study has supported this common conception. It begins with a "Kantian" Fichte, passes through a confused Schelling, and ends with a young and confident Hegel.

The particular topic developed by Schurr is the attempts made by Fichte and Schelling to forge a unitary system from the brilliant yet fundamentally unresolved conceptions of the Kantian legacy. The study was initially prepared as Schurr's *Habilitationschrift* at Regensburg University, and it evidences all of the virtues and vices of these advanced forms of doctoral dissertations: it is orderly and firmly documented, virtues that when pressed pass into the vices of a deadening style and an uninspired recital of textual references. Perhaps the best single term encompassing these virtues and vices is "conscientiousness." The study should arouse neither speculative enthusiasm nor scholarly disdain, being principally a direct and uncomplicated exposition of some central principles found in the philosophy of Fichte, the thought of young Schelling, and a single text of Hegel. It covers the brief historical period from Fichte's review of Schulze's *Aenesidemus* in 1794 to the appearance of Hegel's 1801 study *Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems der Philosophie*.

The work, then, is naturally divided into three chapters of uneven length. Were the reader to rely upon pagination alone to determine importance, Fichte leads by far, and Hegel is the least, being granted only nineteen pages. Insofar as each philosopher is confined to his chapter, the length allowed seems more than usually significant. In this regard, as the final chapter on Hegel can hardly be said to touch directly upon Hegel's own conception of a system, the title of Schurr's work could be misleading to anyone more closely interested in Hegel.