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Redefining Kant's Legacy

Kant's Politics: Provisional Theory for an Uncertain World, by Elisabeth Ellis. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005. 272 pp. \$40 cloth.

Kant and the Culture of Enlightenment, by Katerina Deligiorgi. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005. 272 pp. \$70 cloth.

The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath, by Robert B. Pippin. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. 380 pp. \$75 cloth.

I

What is Immanuel Kant's legacy for contemporary political and intellectual life? In the mid-twentieth century, Kant scholars such as Lewis White Beck, Mary Gregor, and Hans Paton chose to focus on the categorical imperative, Kant's concept for the supreme principle of morality. In their seminal studies, Beck, Gregor, and Paton traced how Kant formulated and justified the categorical imperative and how it could be applied to current political questions. In the wake of this revival of Kantianism, communitarians such as Alasdair MacIntyre, pragmatists such as Richard Rorty, and feminists such as Annette Baier criticized the categorical imperative's emptiness, rigorism, or cruelty. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, few philosophers or theorists advocate the concept of the categorical imperative, at least in its initial formulation in the *Groundwork* as the principle of universal law.

Elisabeth Ellis, Katerina Deligiorgi, and Robert B. Pippin are part of the recent wave of Kant scholars who think that debates about the sufficiency and legitimacy of the categorical imperative are "stale" (Ellis). Rather than denounce the Kantian legacy *en toto*, they redefine it to defend it against its sharpest opponents and to identify the salvageable core. Kant's greatest accomplishment, according to the authors, is a theory of provisional politics (Ellis), the idea of a culture of enlightenment (Deligiorgi), or the ideal of bourgeois subjectivity (Pippin). Each author discards outdated elements of Kant's practical philosophy to isolate elements worth preserving and endorsing in the academy and the larger world. The books under review

ought to be read by Kant scholars and political theorists interested in Kant's legacy.

The strengths of the books are how they illuminate dark corners of Kant's philosophy, often by analyzing underappreciated books and essays (such as *Conflict of the Faculties*), and reconceptualize Kant's legacy to take into account insights made by Kant's readers over the past two centuries, such as Friedrich Schiller and Hegel. Ellis, Deligiorgi, and Pippin also show how Kantian concepts can help us grasp ongoing developments in our world, e.g., how the mechanism of publicity advances human rights. The authors, however, sometimes posit a tight link between reading Kant correctly and possessing an adequate political theoretical framework. This moment in their work signals that the process of redefining Kant's legacy has come to an end. In this review, I indicate why this attitude is unwarranted and why the Kantian legacy, to flourish, ought to welcome future revisions.

II

Many Kant scholars, Ellis explains in *Kant's Politics*, share a tacit understanding of Kant: he is an "idealist," that is, someone who participates in the Platonic tradition of fashioning ideal republics. One consequence of this interpretation is that political scientists, interested in the "real" world, categorize and ignore Kant as a dreamer. Ellis shows, however, that this standard interpretation of Kant obscures the most useful elements of his philosophy for contemporary politics. Kant does formulate a timeless theory of a perfectly just republic; more interestingly, he constructs "a provisional theory" to bring our "uncertain world" closer to it. Kantian politics, in contrast to Kantian ethics, "is a mid-range, dynamic theory of the preconditions of possible (though not inevitable) transition from less freedom to more freedom" (p. 184).

To explicate and defend Kant's political theory, Ellis places it in the context of Kant's critical philosophy, the social contract tradition, and eighteenth-century debates about civil society. Kant's political theory addresses a problem raised by the three Critiques: how to bridge the gap between freedom and nature, i.e., how ideals of reason can have concrete political effects. Rather than look backward, to the supposed origins of society, or stare at the heavens, at the *respublica noumenon*, Kant investigates the means by which human beings progress to more perfect governance. Ellis traces the development of Kant's accounts of the politics of transition: she examines Kant's

concepts of the public sphere in "What Is Enlightenment?"; the moral, intellectual, and political preconditions of self-rule in "Theory and Practice"; the formal principles of publicity in "Perpetual Peace"; provisional right in the *Metaphysics of Morals*; and the judging public in *Conflict of the Faculties*.

The key to understanding Kant's politics, according to Ellis, is the concept of provisional right. Most Kant readers are familiar with the concept of "conclusive right," the application of ideal norms, i.e., the categorical imperative, to political life. Ellis believes that conclusive right may help courts pronounce on absolute principles, but that it does not much help citizens navigating the gray areas of daily political life. Provisional right, which "calls for judgment according to the maxim of preserving the possibility of progress toward the just state" (p. 70), helps political actors distinguish between injustices that must be corrected immediately and those that may persist for a while. In "Perpetual Peace," Kant provides a timely example of the difference between conclusive and provisional right. Conclusive right states unconditionally that there is to be no war. Provisional right distinguishes between practices that are simply unjust and those that foreclose the possibility of moving toward global peace. War, although unfortunate, is sometimes unavoidable for just democratic states. Assassination, however, destroys a nation's credibility, endangers its own officers, and brings the world closer to a Hobbesian state of nature than a just global order. States guided by Kantian political right would oppose "assassination as a foreign policy weapon . . . not because assassination is immoral but because under the regime envisioned by Kant the use of assassination would have negative practical consequences for the state" (p. 140).

Kant's Politics succeeds in highlighting the worldly, pragmatic, and engaged side of Kant's work. Ellis carefully and clearly elucidates some of Kant's most difficult yet relevant ideas to contemporary political life. She also shows how Kantian concepts complement the work of empirical political scientists, such as Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, on the political effects of principled ideas.

Ellis ultimately aims to persuade political theorists to take up Kant's political thought "as the base from which productive and descriptive theories of contemporary collective life may spring" (p. 41). Perhaps I may state my concern in Rawlsian terms. Kant constructs a comprehensive moral doctrine that touches upon a wide range of topics with a deep set of commitments. Ellis illuminates many of those topics bypassed by traditional Kant scholarship. What she has not addressed, however, is the "problem of reasonable pluralism." In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Ellis explains, "Kant

will attempt to base his arguments on conclusions drawn from a few rationally defended premises, such as the moral necessity of freedom and the ‘fact of reason’” (p. 123). How does Kant (and Ellis) justify the concept of provisional right to those who doubt that moral distinctions are derived from pure practical reason? To formulate a political theory of justice in a pluralistic society, Rawls looked for concepts that could be endorsed by Kantians, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and so forth. Ellis fills out our picture of Kant’s comprehensive moral doctrine, but she has not yet explained how Kant’s political thought can provide the “base” for contemporary political thinking in a deeply pluralistic society.

III

Deligiorgi, like Ellis, writes both to clarify Kant’s legacy and to contribute to ongoing political debates. The title, *Kant and the Culture of Enlightenment*, contravenes an old but persistent interpretation of Kant. Johann Georg Hamann and Johann Gottfried Herder, in the eighteenth century, and Hans-Georg Gadamer and Alasdair MacIntyre, in the twentieth, distinguish culture (*Bildung*) and enlightenment (*Aufklärung*). Culture, on this account, is the rich life-world of family, society, and state, to which the critical attitude of enlightenment blinds us. Kant’s defenders, according to Deligiorgi, have conceded too easily the opposition of culture and enlightenment. Onora O’Neill, for example, argues that Kant constructs a maxim of “publicizability,” ensuring that rational communication is, in principle, accessible to the world at large. Yet O’Neill “underestimates the importance of the *practice* of ‘making public’” (p. 64; italics in original).

Deligiorgi extricates the idea of a culture of enlightenment from Kant’s “What Is Enlightenment?” and locates it within eighteenth-century debates in Germany and France about the social roles of the intellectual and the authority of reason as well as within Kant’s critical philosophy. Contra Moses Mendelssohn and Karl Leonhard Reinhold, Kant maintains enlightenment requires public argument rather than solitary introspection and, thus, is an open invitation for debate to the “common mass of people.” Contra Diderot and Rousseau, Kant thinks that skepticism about the claims of reason requires a new conception of reason rather than its abandonment. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant maintains that reason’s authority issues from the freedom of publicly conducted criticism. In his essay on enlightenment, he pulls these insights together to describe a culture of enlightenment “in which people are free to make public use of their reason”

(p. 71). Such a culture is inclusive, egalitarian, and tolerant, and, most importantly, fosters “enlightened social practice, a culture of free debate” (p. 75). Deligiorgi thematizes a point missed by many of Kant's critics and defenders: Kant wants to change the world concretely, by pressing us to “envisage what it would be like *truly* to recognize that *sapere aude* concerns each and all” (p. 76; italics in original).

Deligiorgi fleshes out Kant's idea of a culture of enlightenment to help our own thinking about civil society. Kant's idea, of course, has been criticized from a variety of perspectives for the past 200 years. Deligiorgi acknowledges and appreciates this fact: “The question, what is enlightenment? cannot continue to remain ‘live’ without the challenges posed by the critics of enlightenment” (p. 9). To defend Kant's idea, Deligiorgi considers arguments advanced by romantics (Schiller), critical theorists (Horkheimer and Adorno), poststructuralists (Foucault), and feminists (Gilligan). Compared to Kant scholars who only read Kant, the authors Kant mentions, and other Kantians, Deligiorgi is remarkably broad-minded.

Deligiorgi states that engaging with Kant's critics “might enable us to develop and modify our understanding of the project of rational autonomy we have analyzed here” (p. 161). Deligiorgi, however, does not much modify Kant's ideas to account for criticisms of them. Her encounter with Horkheimer and Adorno, in particular, is glancing. Kant's idea of a culture of enlightenment, she explains, provides “the positive notion of enlightenment, which Adorno and Horkheimer clearly use as a regulative ideal, but fail to communicate” (p. 166). Deligiorgi focuses on one text by Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and does not cite authors, such as Romand Coles and Morton Schoolman, who think that Horkheimer and Adorno do communicate, albeit elusively, a positive notion of enlightenment. What would Deligiorgi say, for instance, to Coles's suggestion that Adorno's notion of enlightenment as “receptive generosity” presses us to listen to voices—say, of animals—that do not “reason”? The conversation between Kantians and critical theorists over the legacy of the Enlightenment, begun admirably by Deligiorgi, can and ought to be intensified.

IV

In *The Persistence of Subjectivity*, Pippin extols “bourgeois philosophy,” which enjoins the individual to steer the course of his or her own life and calls on the state to maximize and protect this freedom. This philosophy, as the term “bourgeois” suggests, arose at a particular moment in the history

of the West and now permeates our thinking about economics, marriage, the role of the state, the cognitive authority of science, and so forth. The core of this philosophy is a notion of the person as “a free, rational, independent, reflective, self-determining subject” (p. 5). The first and finest philosophical expression of this notion of subjectivity is Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (p. 2). In the opening chapters, Pippin explains Kant’s accomplishment and Hegel’s revision of it by situating subjectivity in a particular historical and social milieu.

The bulk of the book takes aim at authors in “the Kantian aftermath” who detest bourgeois philosophy. Pippin dedicates chapters to several mid-twentieth-century German philosophers who question the theoretical grounding and practical implications of Kantian subjectivity: Heidegger, Gadamer, Adorno, Strauss, and Arendt. Pippin argues that these authors misread Kant and Hegel and that their (mis-)interpretations unfortunately form the official account of both philosophers. Pippin proposes “a rediscovery, reanimation, and perhaps even renarration of the normative elements” of the history of German Idealism (p. 18). He thus “grades” philosophers on the accuracy of their commentaries and, more promisingly, shows how a different take on German Idealism illuminates aspects of contemporary life.

The chapter on Strauss, for example, problematizes Strauss’s appeal to classical natural right. Pippin shows that Strauss confronts numerous difficulties in trying to recover the “ordinary experience” of politics. One is that moderns seem to be as “screened” from a deep understanding of the classical texts as they are from the ordinary experience of antiquity. Another, more decisive one is that our experience of politics is always mediated by the form of life in which we live, and our form of life differs from that of the ancient Greeks.

The transition in the Western language (and ‘experience’) of self-understanding from roughly ‘soul’ to the ‘self’ . . . seems to capture a wholly different experience of ourselves, not anticipated in antiquity and one that casts doubt on any general appeal to the ancient ordinary. (p. 143)

For Pippin, Kant and Hegel comprehend our time in thought better than do Plato and Aristotle.

Pippin advocates the reconstruction of German Idealism “to address its sharpest modern critics” (p. 23). Yet he virtually ignores French poststructuralists (such as Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze) and American post-Nietzscheans (such as Butler and Connolly) who marry a critique of the transcendental subject with a democratic sensibility. Pippin addresses

French poststructuralism obliquely in a chapter on Manfred Frank, an analytic philosopher who judges this movement “shallow” and who calls it “neostucturalism,” a term that “would be fiercely resisted by all of the authors under discussion” (p. 172). Pippin does not consider the strongest arguments by postmodernists in their own voice. This approach goes against the Kantian critical spirit. More substantively, it hinders future generations from redefining Kant's legacy to address their own challenges and concerns.

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