

Oliver Sensen, Kant on Human Dignity, Berlin/Boston 2011

A necessary clarification

by

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The author undertakes the commendable and, by and large, successful attempt to take a very close look at the "splendid isolation" or, less kindly, the intellectual inbreeding of Anglo-Saxon literature on Kant's moral philosophy. He shows in detail how many prominent and influential authors (e.g. Christine Korsgaard, Allen Wood, Paul Guyer ...) miss Kant's point.

Anyone familiar with the Kant literature written in Kant's mother tongue will, however, be somewhat tired and bored after reading the flood of arguments and counter-arguments.

Basically, these authors are not discussing Kant at all, but the "solutions" they themselves have found. Kant is only the keyword provider. Accordingly, the exegesis often concerns the literature on Kant, not Kant's own texts. What is worse is that Kant is usually interpreted by presenting seemingly suitable quotations. The argument that Kant, for reasons of principle, could not possibly have meant something or must necessarily have meant something in this way is not met.

The self-confident conviction with which one of the authors involved in this discussion often presents his or her interpretation of Kant as if it were a new find or a surprising discovery can perhaps be explained by the fact that there has only been an intensive examination of Kant's philosophy in the USA for a good half-century, meaning that the authors themselves are pioneers breaking new ground, so to speak, especially since the secondary literature written in Kant's native language for over two centuries has hardly been taken into serious consideration. Unfortunately, even the author of this book, who has a complete command of German, does not deal with the relevant German-language literature, which often differs greatly from the results presented.

Anyone who is interested in the many facets of this discussion and wants to know how the imagination of scholars is capable of flourishing in relation to Kant, can expect a book rich in material and instruction, but unfortunately also rich in endless redundancies, the elimination of which could certainly have pleasantly shortened the text by a third.

Finally, a word on the position taken by the author himself: after presenting many cogent arguments against his "opponents", he uses the same method as them to arrive at his own "reading" and consequently also fails to achieve his goal of understanding Kant's second formula. Instead of taking a principled approach, he searches for "appropriate" passages wherever he can find them (in Kant's texts whenever published, in lecture transcripts, in reflections), compares them with each other, considers what Kant might have meant and what might fit, and thus arrives at a puzzle of results.

It is not possible here to show in detail the numerous errors he makes in the process. I will therefore only mention one particularly typical and serious one, in which the bad habit rampant in Anglo-Saxon Kant literature of using the shrunken form labeled "universalizability" instead of Kant's categorical imperative has, as it were, its revenge. Instead of asking, for example, whether the maxim of a murderer is fit for a universal law, the author poses, in terms of Kant's principles, the wrong question: whether others could adopt this maxim. The entirely un-Kantian justification of his (negative) answer to the wrong question is: because the other person has the duty to preserve his life. Kant's justification of his (negative) answer to the right question, on the other hand, would be: because to kill anyone else at will (independently of the will of others!) is not a maxim through which one can at the same time will

that it become a universal law, since that would mean the complete abolition of one's own will as independent of the will of others. Willing the maxim of the murderer as a universal law thus leads to a self-contradiction. So even the murderer cannot will his maxim as a universal law.

In order to support his interpretation of the second formula and especially the term "humanity as an end", the author repeatedly refers to Kant's remarks on certain duties of virtue. However, the formula concerns duties in general, and using "always at the same time as an end" does not, as the author seems to think, refer to the "respect" dealt with in the Doctrine of Virtue. His long-winded discussions about the fact that no concrete duties can be derived from the general formula are irrelevant here, because the second formula requires something quite different from the "duties of virtue toward other human beings arising from the respect due to them" dealt with in the Doctrine of Virtue.

Of course, the book also contains a lot of correct information. But it is almost always self-evident and long-said.

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