Owen Ware, *Kant's Justification of Ethics*, 2021, Oxford, 192 pages, ISBN: 9780198849933

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Kant's views on the foundations of morality are still subject to lively discussion in present-day Kant scholarship, ethics, and metaethics. Debates about whether Kant was a metaethical constructivist, constitutivist, realist, or something else altogether, as well as about the significance of his idea of autonomy of the will, seem to reach ever new heights of subtlety and maturity (see, e.g., Bacin and Sensen 2019, dos Santos and Schmidt 2019, Kleingeld and Willaschek 2019). Yet, an issue that has received relatively little sustained attention is what *kind of justification* Kant seeks to provide for morality.

Owen Ware's insightful book addresses this issue head-on. It is therefore mandatory reading for anyone who seeks to understand the argument structure and metaethical commitments of Kant's foundational moral theory, as laid out primarily in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and *Critique of Practical Reason*. But it will also be of interest to anyone who wonders what we, as human beings, can legitimately expect from moral philosophy, and indeed philosophy in general.

The book's five core chapters draw upon previously published articles. The "Introduction" and "Conclusion" chapters make up the only entirely original parts. Ware uses them to provide a helpful sketch of the overarching picture of Kant's justificatory goals and strategy that the book as a whole is meant to advance. Yet, the book would live up to the monograph format even more fully if the core chapters contained more frequent references to this overarching picture as well.

So, what's the overarching picture? In the Introduction, Ware helpfully characterises his book as addressing three questions that, according to Bernard Williams, every "justification of ethical life" needs to answer: "To whom is it addressed? From where? Against what?" (p. 13; citing Williams 1985, p. 23).

Ware's answer to the first question is that, while Kant's foundational moral theory is anti-skeptical, it does not seek to refute the kind of skeptic who stands outside the moral life, so to speak. Instead of addressing the amoralist's question, "Why be moral?", Kant aims to provide an antidote to a tendency in *us*, ordinary human beings who are committed to morality, to *rationalise* against the moral law.

Ware locates Kant's position between two approaches to moral justification, both of which have been attributed to Kant in the literature. On the one hand, more ambitious approaches to moral justification try to derive moral normativity from thin premises, such as a conception of rational agency. On the other hand, more modest approaches start from thick premises, which already presuppose moral normativity, and merely try to illuminate the relation between various moral concepts.

Regarding Williams's second question, "From where?", Ware again portrays Kant as taking up a middle position. On the one hand, instead of revealing entirely new principles by means of speculative philosophy, Kant's moral theory ventures out from the standpoint of common human reason. On the other hand, since it ultimately seeks to *vindicate* the moral concepts contained in this standpoint, it attempts a critical investigation of reason itself, separating the pure elements of moral judgment from its empirical elements. In this way, Kant assigns a new role to metaphysics in moral theorising. Indeed, Ware characterises Kant's approach as "a new model of philosophy", namely "philosophy as justification" (p. 5).

Ware's answer to the third question, "Against what?", is that Kant is not concerned with putting all *doubts* about morality to rest. Instead, his chief concern is to ward off the threat of *despair* in the face of the conflicting claims that morality and happiness make on us. By analysing our moral concepts and revealing their connection to our freedom and our membership in an intelligible world, he wants to make us more *intelligible* to ourselves, in a way that "restores *trust*" in our "higher vocation" as moral agents (p. 14). Ware also labels Kant's approach "anti-error theory" (p. 12).

Ware presents the first four core chapters of his book as corresponding to four *methods of justification* that he ascribes to Kant. This presentation provides a helpful roadmap for these chapters—although, as will emerge shortly, I'm not always sure how closely they match it.

Chapter 1 corresponds to "the *skeptical method*, or the method of doubting a claim [...] in order to motivate inquiry into its sources or origins" (p. 7). Ware argues that Kant employs this method to transition from one section to the next in the *Groundwork*. By raising skeptical questions, Kant *ascends* along the *analytical* path. Once we've identified the principle of autonomy as the supreme principle of morality, we can *descend* along the synthetic path, reassembling the elements of the common idea of moral duty. The unique benefit of this method is that it enables a new insight: that morality's source lies within us.

Ware argues that Kant employs the skeptical *method* because Kant thinks that a more dogmatic approach "plays into the hands of" a skeptical *position* (p. 27). This seems to suggest that Kant

entertains, for the sake of argument, the kind of skepticism which, according to Ware, he wants to combat: the kind that emerges from our rationalisation against the moral law and leads to despair about our higher vocation. Yet, curiously, Ware does not return to the doubt/despair distinction until Chapter 5. And he rightly observes that, when Kant briefly discusses two kinds of skepticism at the beginning of *Groundwork* II—one challenging the rational authority of morality, the other our ability to follow it—Kant's criticism "is aimed not so much at skepticism but at a moral theory that subscribes to an empirical method" (p. 29).

Chapters 2 and 3 together make up Ware's most significant exegetical argument. Ware advances a continuity reading of Kant's fact-of-reason argument in the second *Critique* and his earlier argument in *Groundwork* III. For Ware, both arguments rely on a *normatively thick premise*: our consciousness of being bound by the moral law and our idea of ourselves as members of an intelligible world, respectively.

Ware associates Chapter 2, focusing on Kant's fact-of-reason argument, with "the *experimental method*, or the method of illustrating a claim by way of a thought experiment" (p. 7). Ware offers textual evidence, both from Kant himself and from his 17ᵗʰ and 18ᵗʰ century predecessors, for reading Kant's argument as much more akin to a natural-scientific *experiment*, revealing a *fact* (in the sense of 'matter of fact'), than some scholars have suggested. Yet, Ware emphasises, while Kant's fact of reason does therefore not play the role of an unanalysable 'given', it can only be reproduced in the practical standpoint of common human reasoners, not proven third-personally.

Ware associates Chapter 3, which advances his interpretation of *Groundwork* III, with "the *polemical method*, or the method of defending a claim by countering 'dogmatic denials' of it" (p. 8). Ware reads Kant as arguing that neither a proof nor a refutation of the causality of pure practical reason is possible, but we can *defend* our moral convictions by appealing to the normatively loaded idea of an intelligible world associated with such a causality.

While I find Ware's continuity reading compelling, I wonder how it squares with his association of the polemical method with *Groundwork* III and the experimental method with the second *Critique*. Perhaps §3.9, titled "Real Differences", is Ware's attempt to reconcile these claims. Here, Ware suggests that, while *Groundwork* III contains a relatively long and elaborate analytic dissection of moral judgments into their pure and empirical parts and a relatively short "synthetic return" to the standpoint of common human reason, the emphasis is reversed in the second *Critique* (p. 97). However, Ware does not explicitly say whether this explains the difference in method.

Chapters 2 and 3 are also meant to support Ware's claim, advanced in the Introduction, that Kant's approach is located between more ambitious and more modest justificatory strategies. As I understand Ware, what he takes to distinguish Kant's approach from more modest approaches is that, while Kant starts from normatively thick premises, he intends his argument from these premises to, ultimately, also lend some measure of support to these premises. Yet, it is questionable whether this constitutes a genuine departure from some of the authors that Ware puts in this camp, including John Rawls. As Ware seems to admit, his characterisation of Kant as employing the polemical method in the service of "philosophy as justification" seems strikingly similar to Rawls's characterisation of Kant as practicing "philosophy as defense" (p. 5, fn. 17; cp. Rawls 2000: 324).

Chapter 4 is associated with "the *phenomenological method*, or the method of reflecting on a claim as it appears in consciousness" and focuses on Kant's investigation of moral sensibility in the third chapter of the second *Critique* (p. 8). According to Ware, this investigation forms part of the second *Critique*'s longer and more elaborate 'synthetic return' to common human reason. In particular, Kant's aim here is to show "that the moral law binds our hearts and not just our heads" (p. 101). Thus, Ware thinks that Kant is still addressing skeptical questions here.

Ware argues that, while Kant is *not* addressing the skeptical question of how pure reason can have effects on our sensibility at all (which is unanswerable on principled grounds), he *is* addressing the skeptical question of "how the *effects themselves* are suited to motivate us from a deliberative point of view" (p. 106). The problem, according to Ware, is that if consciousness of the moral law "only ever effects a pain-like feeling when we restrain our egoistic tendencies", it is unclear how it "could play a positive role in moral motivation proper" (p. 105).

To solve this problem, Ware provides an insightful and innovative account of how Kant reflects on the phenomenology of our consciousness of the moral law to highlight that it involves, not only the pain-like feeling of self-love being infringed upon and self-conceit being struck down, but also the pleasure-like feeling of *self-respect* as "we come to have a proper understanding of our relationship to the moral law itself, namely, as a law we give to ourselves" (p. 115). This pleasure-like feeling, then, forms the basis of our interest in the moral law, as "the law of our higher vocation as persons" (p. 117).

Ware's reconstruction of the connection between duty, the moral law as a principle of autonomy, our elevated standing and higher vocation as persons, and self-respect is the part of his book that I find most compelling and insightful. It raises new questions that Ware does not discuss, such as: Why do we identify with pure practical reason as our true *self*, and thus come to see

ourselves as the source of the moral law? And why does this identification come with an acknowledgement of the moral law as constituting our *higher* vocation? But this needn't be seen as a shortcoming of his book. It indicates that Ware has hit upon an aspect of Kant's moral theory that deserves more scholarly attention.

My only critical remark on Ware's argument in Chapter 4 is that I don't quite see how it addresses a *skeptical* question. How exactly respect motivates seems more like a philosophical puzzle that emerges within Kant's motivational psychology than something that could threaten our conviction "that the moral law binds our hearts and not just our heads". After all, that conviction was supposed to be cemented already by the argument of *Groundwork* III and the fact-of-reason argument.

Chapter 5, which contains Ware's innovative and intriguing ideas concerning self-knowledge and conscience, is the only chapter that's not explicitly associated with a distinctive *method*. Ware nevertheless assigns it a role in his overarching framework: to illustrate the threat of *despair* that Kant's moral justification aims to avert.

Ware argues that "the question of moral self-knowledge [...] asks how we as individuals can have assurance that our moral progress is genuine", and thus how we can maintain hope that our higher vocation is practicable (p. 133). He identifies two distinct types of *opacity* as obstacles for self-knowledge. Type-1 opacity is due to the *unknowability* of the ground of our maxims. Type-2 opacity is due to our tendency to *self-deceive,* by passing off selfish motivations as pure ones. In addition to posing the threat of despair, these kinds of opacity also threaten to contradict Kant's duty to acquire self-knowledge; after all, ought implies can.

Ware's solution is that we can gain insight into our moral progress by consulting our conscience. This solution involves two steps. First, Ware argues that moral progress is to be assessed *comparatively,* i.e. by attending to the difference between our past and present conduct. Second, Ware argues that, while our conscience can err regarding whether our conduct has *actually improved*, it cannot err regarding whether we've *sincerely examined* the comparative quality of our conduct. As a result, we can gain a justified *conviction,* though not certain *knowledge*, that our moral progress is genuine.

As promising and ingenious as Ware's solution is, especially as an interpretation of Kant's views, I'm not sure if it works. To support the claim that we cannot err regarding whether we have sincerely examined our conduct, Ware cites Kant's plausible statement to the effect that, even if my belief that p may be mistaken, I cannot be mistaken about whether I believe that p (p. 152). But it seems that all we can infer from this, regarding conscience, is that I cannot err about

whether I believe that I've sincerely examined my conduct. And it seems that this belief may very well be mistaken, especially given type-2 opacity. Indeed, if my assessment of my own honesty could not err, why would type-2 opacity exist in the first place?

Ware's book will hardly have the last word on the many philosophical and exegetical debates it addresses (as if any book on Kant could!), but it moves these debates forward in a productive way. Ware's overarching picture of Kant's justificatory ambitions and strategies is informative and compelling. And while the details of his arguments can be challenged, they direct our attention to important, and sometimes neglected, aspects of Kant's foundational moral theory.

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