CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-38121-5 - Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy
Onora O'Neill
Excerpt
More information

PART I

Reason and critique

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-38121-5 - Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy
Onora O'Neill
Excerpt
More information

I

Reason and politics in the Kantian enterprise

I start with two puzzles about Kant's account of reason. The first is well known. It is that the very idea of a critique of reason seems incoherent. How can critique be undertaken without presupposing some conception of reason? Yet if a conception of reason is presupposed, won't the aim of a critique of reason be vitiated by presupposing what is to be criticized?

The second puzzle is about the status of the Categorical Imperative. It can be put in this way. Kant claims both of the following:

1. The practical use of reason is more fundamental than its theoretical or speculative use.[1]
2. The Categorical Imperative is the supreme principle of practical reason.

Hence he must surely also be committed to a claim that will startle many of his readers:

3. The Categorical Imperative is the supreme principle of reason.

The two puzzles are linked: If Kant is committed to (3), any vindication of reason must vindicate the Categorical Imperative.

Yet the claim that the Categorical Imperative is the supreme principle of reason is likely to meet skepticism, if not scorn. Surely, it will be said, the supreme principle or principles of reason must be certain abstract rules of inference or practical algorithms; and surely the Categorical Imperative (if it has any standing) is the supreme principle only of morality. To see whether such skepticism and scorn are well directed I shall try to trace Kant's inquiry into the authority of reason.

I shall approach this topic by asking the rather obvious question, "Where does

1 See, for example, *CPrR*, V, 120–2, esp. "Thus in the combination of pure speculative with pure practical reason in one cognition, the latter has the primacy, provided that this combination is not contingent and arbitrary but a priori, based on reason itself and thus necessary. Without this subordination, a conflict of reason with itself would arise, since if the speculative and the practical reason were arranged merely side by side (co-ordinated), the first would close its borders and admit into its domain nothing from the latter, while the latter would extend its boundaries over everything and, when its needs required, would seek to comprehend the former within them. Nor could we reverse the order and expect practical reason to submit to speculative reason, because every interest is ultimately practical, even that of speculative reason being only conditional and reaching perfection only in practical use."

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-38121-5 - Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy
Onora O'Neill
Excerpt
More information

the *Critique of Pure Reason* begin?" In answering this question and coming to see what can and what cannot be done to vindicate reason we are, I believe, led to a reading of the first *Critique,* and indeed of the very idea of critique, that reveals why the Categorical Imperative is the supreme principle of all reasoning.

On the reading that I shall propose the first *Critique* is not only deeply antirationalist but profoundly political. Kant's rejection of rationalist views is well known, deep and systematic. It is fundamental to his account of metaphysics and religion. Yet his rejection of rationalism is also suspect. Many of his readers have thought that he eventually endorses the substantial view of the self that he ostensibly repudiates, and that his ethical writings return to the transcendent theology and metaphysics that he so convincingly put into question in earlier works. I shall argue that his antirationalism can and should be taken seriously and systematically. The deep structure of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the view of philosophical method that it exemplifies are both antirationalist and antifoundationalist.

The claim that the first *Critique* is a political work is also likely to meet skepticism and scorn, although it is not a new claim.[2] On standard views of the matter, Kant's political writings are at most a corollary of his ethical theory, whose critical grounding is suspect. I hope to unsettle this view by showing that a series of connected political and juridical metaphors constitute the deep structure of the *Critique of Pure Reason.*

I shall approach Kant's views on philosophical method, critique of reason and politics by way of an account of the macrostructure of the first *Critique* and of the claims of its two prefaces. I shall say almost nothing about the five hundred pages of the "Transcendental Doctrine of Elements", but will discuss the account of reason and method that we find in the "Transcendental Doctrine of Method", in parts of the *Critique of Judgment* and in some of Kant's overtly political essays. To provide a contrasting background for this line of inquiry I shall first rehearse Descartes's views on method. These provide a benchmark for judging how far Kant's antirationalism marks not only his metaphysical conclusions but also his view of how philosophy can be done.

Philosophical method in Descartes

At the beginning of his *Discourse on the Method* Descartes tells us that "reason or sense . . . exists whole and complete in each of us" (p. 112): He can look into *himself* to discover what reason is. The project of introspection was begun when Descartes was "completely free to converse with myself about my own thoughts" (p. 116), and was rewarded with the discovery of a method of rightly conducting the mind that moves from methodic doubt, through analysis of problems

2 See, for example, Hans Saner, *Kant's Political Thought: Its Origins and Development;* and Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy.*

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-38121-5 - Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy
Onora O'Neill
Excerpt
More information

into their most elementary constituents, to the systematic reconstruction of human knowledge on the secure foundations of indubitable constituents. Descartes claims that he has "reaped such fruits from this method that I cannot but feel extremely satisfied with the progress I have made in the search for truth" (p. 112). The conception of reason as innate in each of us vindicates the sequence of topics in the *Discourse on the Method* and in the *Meditations:* Secure biographical continuity permits introspective meditation, which is the context for systematic doubt and for discovering the method of reason; method is the basis for metaphysics and metaphysics for science. It is wholly appropriate to this vision of the relation of self, method and metaphysics that the literary form of both works frames science in metaphysics, metaphysics in method and method either in autobiography or in equally first-personal meditation.[3]

The coherent structure has a cost. Descartes's method is discovered in the course of introspection. Introspection and meditation require the meditator's continuing life. Descartes exempts his own life and continuity from radical doubt: He assumes that practical and theoretical uses of reason can be kept entirely distinct. If he did not assume this, the radical doubt his method prescribes would undermine the conduct of his own life and so the context of his meditation, the disclosure of method and the basis for metaphysics and science. If practical and theoretical uses of reason cannot be kept separate, the unvindicated categories of the autobiographical context in which reason is disclosed may be projected onto and perhaps color the supposed methods of reason. Method will then fail to provide a presuppositionless foundation for all knowledge, and so reason will not be vindicated. On the other hand, if thought and action can be held separate, as Descartes supposes,[4] meditation and autobiography may permit the disclosure of methods of (theoretical) reasoning, which will provide foundations for metaphysics and science. The separation of thought and action is not itself grounded, but is indispensable to Descartes's work. It preserves a vantage point from which to discern the methods of (theoretical) reason and to use them to probe beliefs; it preserves life and politics from the corrosive, perhaps revolutionary, effects of radical doubt; it mediates (although it does not vindicate) the transition from the perhaps fleeting certainty of "cogito ergo sum" to the continuing mental life that warrants "sum res cogitans". In Descartes's work the grounding of reason is closely linked to its political impotence. Only the repudiation of politics, and more generally of criticism of action, allows him a meditative perspective from which to discern and deploy the methods of reason without self-stultification.

3 Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, "The Structure of Descartes' *Meditations*"; L. Aryeh Kosman, "The Naive Narrator: Meditation in Descartes' *Meditations*"; Jonathan Rée, *Philosophical Tales,* Chap. 1.

4 For evidence, consider Descartes's adoption of provisional maxims to secure an ordered life during the project of pure inquiry (*Discourse* 3) and his repudiation of political revolution at the moment he affirms the project of theoretical revolution (*Discourse* 2), as well as the references in footnote 3 above.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-38121-5 - Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy
Onora O'Neill
Excerpt
More information

Kant's philosophical enterprise evidently follows quite a different route. I shall take as my starting point a striking *textual* difference. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* the discussion of method is not preliminary, as foundations have to be. It takes place only *after* the main work has been completed, in the "Transcendental Doctrine of Method". How can we make sense of this traditional but anti-foundationalist textual strategy? What is Kant's actual starting point? His prefatory claims offer certain clues that are picked up retrospectively in his discussions of method and of the authority of reason at the end of the first *Critique*. I shall consider these in turn.

The motto and prefaces of the first *Critique*

The *Critique of Pure Reason* begins with a motto that Kant added to the Second Edition. The motto is taken from the last paragraph of Bacon's preface to his *Instauratio Magna*.[5] Bacon's preface contains many thoughts that are paralleled or extended (and some that are repudiated) in Kant's work. It seems to be a reasonable guess that Kant chose this passage, in which Bacon makes certain requests of his readers, as a motto because it encapsulates what is basic to his own work, and possibly because it conveys something that could not readily be communicated in the body of the work, and that perhaps had not been fully expressed in the First Edition. The passage runs as follows (Kant quotes the parts italicized):

Postulata autem nostra quae afferimus talia sunt. *De nobis ipsis silemus: de re autem quae agitur petimus, ut homines eam non opinionem sed opus esse cogitent: ac pro certo habeant non sectae nos alicujus, aut placiti, sed utilitatis et amplitudinis humanae fundamenta moliri. Deinde ut suis commodis aequi,* exutis opinionem zelis et praejudiciis, *in commune consultant;* ac ab erroribus viarum atque impedimentis, nostris praesidiis et auxiliis, liberati et muniti, laborum qui restant *et ipsi in partem veniant. Praeterea, ut bene sperent; neque Instaurationem nostram, ut quiddam infinitum et ultra mortale, fingant et animo concipiant: quum revera sit infiniti erroris finis et terminus legitimus* . . . (quum) nos omnem istam rationem humanam praematuram, anticipantem, et a rebus temere et citius quam oportuit abstractam, (quatenus ad inquisitionem naturae) ut rem variam et perturbatam et male extructam rejiciamus. Neque postulandum est ut ejus judicio stetur, quae ipsa in judicium vocatur.

This may be rendered, again with Kant's selections italicized:

However, I make the following requests. *Of myself I shall say nothing: but on the matter at issue I ask that men should think it not an opinion but a task; and that they should be confident that I seek to support not some sect or doctrine but the basis of human greatness and well-being. Next* [*I ask*] *that they should deal fairly with their affairs* and set aside their staunchly held views and presuppositions and *discuss together;* and being freed and secured from the errors and obstacles of these ways [of thought] by the supports and assistance that I offer, *they should involve themselves in the tasks that remain. Moreover* [*I ask*] *that they should be of good hope, and that they should not*

5 Francis Bacon, *Instauratio Magna*, pp. 132–3.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-38121-5 - Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy
Onora O'Neill
Excerpt
More information

> *imagine that my Instauration is something unlimited and beyond mortal powers when in truth it is the end and rightful stopping point of infinite error . . .* I reject all that premature, anticipating human reasoning that abstracts from things rashly and faster than it should (so far as the inquisition of nature is concerned) as something that is unreliable, distorted and ill built. It cannot be demanded that I should be placed under the judgment of that which is itself on trial.

Nothing, it seems to me, could provide a more explicit contrast with the starting point of the Cartesian enterprise. Bacon refuses to speak of himself. His undertaking is not solitary: He invites his readers to join in a common task. The first step is to discuss and plan together. The task is not superhuman. It promises practical rather than theoretical benefits. It should not be judged by unvindicated standards. Kant embraces and extends these Baconian themes.

Kant too says nothing about himself. Autobiography provides no framework for the discovery of method. However, repudiating a Cartesian approach is a delicate matter. To reject an autobiographical starting point explicitly in the text would backfire, since it would emphasize, and so tacitly endorse, that starting point. Explaining why one is not going to talk about oneself is self-defeating. Kant resolves this problem deftly by quoting Bacon's requests to his readers. He says nothing of himself; even what he says about speaking of oneself is said by another and said outside the text. Mottoes are hors d'oeuvres. This is a first step in setting Cartesian beginnings at a distance.

In the First Edition Kant does not, I think, fully repudiate a Cartesian starting point. There he claims that

> I have to deal with nothing save reason itself and its pure thinking; and to obtain complete knowledge of these, there is no need to go far afield, since I come upon them in my own self. (*CPR*, Axiv)

This perspective has vanished in the preface of the Second Edition, where the first paragraph makes it clear that the problem of vindicating reason is a shared one, which arises

> if the various participants are unable to agree in any common plan of procedure. (*CPR*, Bvii)

Reason may be (in whole or in part) "in" each participant, but it cannot be discovered by introspection: Kant insists that we are opaque, not transparent, to ourselves (*G*, IV, Chap. 1; *R*, VI, Pt. I; *DV*, VI, 446). The motto fits this un-Cartesian starting point. Kant will tell us nothing about himself; he will talk about the task. Autobiography is not the starting point. This is not just authorial modesty or self-effacement: Kant tells us about problems that he, Immanuel Kant, has had in writing, as well as hopes that he has for his project. Sometimes he is quite boastful about the advances he has made. Yet if he rejects an autobiographical starting point, the vindication of reason cannot be achieved by its

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-38121-5 - Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy
Onora O'Neill
Excerpt
More information

disclosure in introspection and meditation. The starting point has to be somewhere else.

Where does Kant start? If he can't begin by vindicating philosophical method, where can he begin? The motto offers the clue that we must see the enterprise as practical: It is a task, not a body of opinions, and moreover a task that has to be shared. The first move must then presumably be to recruit those others who will form the task force.[6]

Accordingly, both prefaces begin with a discursive, indeed time-honored and attention-compelling, conversational gambit. In the First Preface we are told some scurrilous (and, unsurprisingly, sexist) gossip. There is a scandal! And in high places too! The Queen of the Sciences, Metaphysics, is not all that she is supposed to be. In the Second Preface even stronger aspersions are cast on the would-be queen. She prevaricates, and so "ever and again we have to retrace our steps, as not leading us in the direction in which we desire to go" (*CPR,* Bxiv). The frustration is palpable: "The procedure of metaphysics has hitherto been a merely random groping, and, what is worst of all, a groping among mere concepts" (*CPR,* Bxv). Here reason "not merely fails us, but lures us on by deceitful promises, and in the end betrays us!" (*CPR,* Bxv). Our speculative passion is frustrated: "it embraces not Juno, but a cloud" (*CPrR,* V, translator's introduction, xv).

This popular, gossipy starting point introduces a deeper theme. Reason's betrayal constitutes a crisis in the foundations of the European sciences – in the rationalist enterprise – that threatens our thinking with complete disorientation: "it precipitates itself into darkness and contradiction" (*CPR,* Aviii); "ever and again we have to retrace our steps" (*CPR,* Bxiv). Amid this disorientation Kant has to reach for some audience. Who is supposed to listen? Who is invited to become a fellow worker on the shared task?

Kant's intended initial audience is not hard to discern. He locates the frustrations of metaphysics historically. Reason's betrayal is a crisis for those who have some idea of the history of European metaphysics and science. The points of reference are the ancient philosophers, rationalists and empiricists, logic, geometry and modern science. (The history of European philosophy, seen now in a sharper critical light, is also where the first *Critique* ends.) No definition of audience is explicitly argued: Starting points cannot be explicitly argued. Rather, a series of gestures and allusions to shared points of reference is used to constitute and welcome an audience, and in the Second Preface to invite new readers to join in an enterprise that has already drawn to it various critics and fellow workers.[7]

6 From a Cartesian or other foundationalist perspective the strategy will appear perverse; but for nonfoundationalists it need not. Plenty of Kant's predecessors did not place method at the beginning of their enterprise. See the discussion of Bacon's method in James Stephens, *Francis Bacon and the Style of Science.*

7 Since autobiography is irrelevant, Kant does not name, but only thanks, these critics (*CPR,* Bxliii), and expresses his appreciation of "these worthy men, who so happily combine thorough-

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-38121-5 - Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy
Onora O'Neill
Excerpt
More information

The approach is perhaps comparable to Aristotle's way of adducing what the many, the wise and others say. We are not to take it that the starting point of the prefaces is the foundation of Kant's argument. It is simply a matter of assembling some modes of discourse as material from which to begin. The task of recruiting new fellow workers to the task is central to both prefaces, its success more confidently anticipated in the second.

What is missing in the prefaces of the first *Critique?*

This discursive starting point and its strategies for forming an audience, indeed a task force, of critics who will become fellow workers omits a great deal. It does not show how a critique of reason could avoid begging questions, although Kant seems confident that it can do so. It certainly does not vindicate the Categorical Imperative. All that we get initially is a gesture toward the thought that a critique of reason must be a *reflexive* and *political* task:

> It is a call to reason to undertake anew the most difficult of all its tasks, namely, that of self-knowledge, and to institute a tribunal which will assure to reason its lawful claims, . . . but in accordance with its own eternal and unalterable laws. This tribunal is no other than the *critique of pure reason*. (*CPR*, Axi–xii)

I shall return to the juridical and political metaphors in which reason's task is here described. For the present I merely note that describing a critique of reason as a reflexive and (quasi-) juridical or political task shows very little about whether or how the task is to be done. It does, however, offer a clue to the absence of an account of method in the prefaces. If the task of critique of reason is in some way analogous to a tribunal's reflexive review of its own procedures, the vindication of reason cannot come first. Tribunals can pass judgment only when they have been constituted. The task of constituting a "tribunal" must come earlier on the agenda. But if we lack indubitable foundations, we will not initially have any way of judging what reason is. We will remain unsure whether there are any principles that should have authority in orienting our thinking and would deserve to be thought of as principles of reason.

We should not then be surprised at the silence about method in the prefaces; but we might expect a promissory note. In the First Preface we are merely warned that the task of a critique of reason is difficult and not yet complete. The Second Preface is a little more revealing; it suggests that a plan is needed, but that it cannot be borrowed from anywhere else. Kant surveys the successes of logic,

ness of insight with a talent for lucid exposition – which I cannot regard myself as possessing – ". At the end of the First Preface he had written, defensively, that "this work can never be made suitable for popular consumption" (*CPR*, Axviii); at the end of the Second Preface his (perhaps misplaced) hopes for the now-shared task have risen: "if men of impartiality, insight, and true popularity devote themselves to its exposition, it may also, in a short time, secure for itself the necessary elegance of statement" (*CPR*, Bxliv).

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-38121-5 - Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy
Onora O'Neill
Excerpt
More information

mathematics and science and claims that in each case the source of success lay in having a *plan* of inquiry: "reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own" (*CPR*, Bxiii). The first stage of our task is not introspection but *planning*.

This seems no more than a way of displacing the problem; for how are we to know *which* plan counts as reason's own? In the prefaces Kant does not claim that we can recognize reason's plan. We can only make a proposal, rather than judge its success. The plan proposed for the reform of metaphysics is the famous "Copernican" hypothesis: We are to conduct a *trial*.

> We must therefore make trial [*Versuch*] whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge. (*CPR*, Bxvi)

Kant does not prove; he *proposes*. The proposal must be tested. It is tempting to jump to the conclusion that since he proposes that we should "make trial," he assumes at this stage that a certain sort of trial, with analogues to political institutions such as courts, tribunals and laws, is to be conducted. However, at this point he does not rely on political and juridical metaphors. I think the reason is plain enough. Laws and tribunals are only one way of "making trial"; even if they turn out to be the appropriate way, they must be instituted before legal proceedings can begin; so we cannot yet judge reason. All that can be done at an early stage of an enterprise is to suggest or propose a plan. Kant's proposal for the critique of reason does not assume or assert that we must adopt a modification of rationalist methods; rather it is "put forward in this preface as an hypothesis only" (*CPR*, Bxxii,n).

We can respond in various ways. We could complain: The omission of a method and its vindication is glaring and vitiates Kant's enterprise. Without reason even the assumptions about audience are unjustifiable, indeed incommunicable. We need to know right away what a critique of reason would be. We can denounce Kant's still-unvindicated faith in "criticism" and deny that it will banish bad and bogus metaphysics (*CPR*, Bxxxiv) or show that "the labours of reason can be established on a firm basis" (*CPR*, Bxxxv). We can get impatient when we are told that critique does not oppose the dogmatic procedure of reason, but only *dogmatism*, which is "the dogmatic procedure of reason, *without previous criticism of its own powers*" (*CPR*, Bxxxv), and that what went wrong with Wolff's work was lack of "critique of the organ, that is, of pure reason itself" (*CPR*, Bxxxvii). We can be unsatisfied because understanding of reason's self-criticism is just what seems illusory.

Or we can wait. Kant makes us wait for a long time. He does not return to these topics until far on in the first *Critique*, when he has completed both the constructive account of transcendental idealism and his criticism of metaphysical

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-38121-5 - Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy
Onora O'Neill
Excerpt
More information

illusions. What can be the point and purpose of discussing method when the task is near complete? If a method has been needed, shouldn't it have been presented beforehand? If it has not, why should it be presented now?

Should we complain or wait? Perhaps it depends on what we think would be the better plan. I shall make trial of the thought that it is worth waiting, at least until we have examined the moves Kant makes in the "Transcendental Doctrine of Method".

The cottage of Immanuel Kant

The "Transcendental Doctrine of Method" follows the completion of many of the philosophical tasks Kant sets himself. Many of the implications of the Copernican hypothesis are worked out in the "Transcendental Doctrine of Elements". However, the account of method is no mere appendix; for nothing has been said about the vindication of reason. Kant's central arguments, and the entire account of transcendental idealism, will be radically incomplete unless he can say something about the postponed vindication of reason. In the "Doctrine of Method" Kant briefly summarizes what he has done, reminds us why the task is not completed and proceeds to an account of what it would be for certain ways of conducting thinking to have authority and to count as principles of reason.

He turns immediately to queries about starting points and procedures. Once more a contrast with the Cartesian picture is his point of departure:

> If we look upon the sum of all knowledge of pure speculative reason as a building for which we have at least the idea within ourselves, it can be said that in the "Transcendental Doctrine of Elements" we have made an estimate of the materials, and have determined for what sort, height and strength of building they will suffice. Indeed, it turned out that although we had in mind a tower that would reach the heavens, yet the stock of materials was only enough for a dwelling house – just roomy enough for our tasks on the plain of experience and just high enough for us to look across the plain. The bold undertaking had come to nothing for lack of materials, quite apart from the babel of tongues that unavoidably set workers against one another about the plan and scattered them across the earth, each to build separately following his own design. Our problem is not just to do with materials, but even more to do with the plan. Since we have been warned not to risk everything on a favorite but senseless project, which could perhaps exceed our whole means, yet cannot well refrain from building a secure home, we have to plan our building with the supplies we have been given and also to suit our needs. (*CPR*, A707/B735, trans. O. O'N.; cf. A319/B376)

Here we find more explicit comments on topics on which the prefaces said little. Like Descartes, Kant uses metaphors of construction to explain his view of philosophical method; but he starts with a more down-to-earth view of building projects. The result is a quite different vision of philosophical procedures. We are

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org