

Oliver Sensen, ed. *Kant on Moral Autonomy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. xii+301 pp.

Autonomy plays an essential role in Kant's practical philosophy. In metaethical contexts, it grounds the authority of moral requirements, and in metaphysical and moral contexts, it grounds the inviolable dignity of rational beings. Kant's German idealist successors enthusiastically modify and expand his conception of autonomy, though Anglo-American philosophers mostly ignore it (Mill being a noteworthy exception) until a resurgence of interest in the second half of the twentieth century. Today, autonomy is an important topic in ethics, applied ethics, and social and political philosophy, especially in debates over moral responsibility, political legitimacy, and public policy. It is quite flexible in its employment and can refer to the capacity to make one's own decisions, the right to make those decisions, or to an ideal whereby one possesses the material and psychological resources sufficient for a satisfactory life. While these contemporary conceptions of autonomy are often thought to bear a Kantian pedigree, the lineage is actually not so clear. Kantian autonomy, the capacity for rational self-legislation, has two conditions: it requires that an agent be independent from internal and external coercion and that she possess a will governed by universal, or moral, laws. Contemporary conceptions are much thinner, and typically shy away from any mention of universality.

Clarifying this affiliation and its history is one of the two primary goals of Oliver Sensen's edited collection *Kant on Moral Autonomy*. The other is to gain a better understanding of the subtly different functions autonomy serves in Kant's practical philosophy. To these ends, Sensen gathers together fifteen new essays by an international cast of highly regarded Kant scholars. The volume is divided into three sections, along with an editor's introduction and a postscript. Sensen's introduction presents the overarching themes of the book and helpfully outlines the main arguments of each essay. The first section is concerned with Kant's own conception of autonomy, as well as the scholarly debates surrounding that conception. The second tracks the pre- and post-Kantian history of autonomy, as well as the influence, or lack thereof, of Kantian autonomy on subsequent philosophers. Section three and the postscript discuss the extent to which Kant's view of autonomy is relevant to current debates in moral and political philosophy. Overall, the book is a deeply valuable collection of scholarship. It is essential reading for anyone interested in Kantian autonomy, and it merits serious attention from all those laboring on Kant's ethics. While some of the pieces presuppose a high level of facility with Kant's texts, there is something for readers of all levels of expertise. The volume's worth is further augmented by the fact that none of the essays have been published elsewhere. And Sensen is to be commended for including essays by two important German scholars, Heiner Klemme and Dieter Schönecker, whose work is not widely available in English. To my mind, these pieces alone are worth the price of admission.

The first section comprises four essays on Kant's conception of autonomy. Thomas E. Hill, Jr.'s "Kantian Autonomy and Contemporary Ideas of Autonomy" introduces a recurring theme of the book, the dissimilarity between Kantian and contemporary notions of autonomy. For Kant, autonomy is an abstract concept that refers to two properties of will – negative and positive freedom – presupposed by moral agency. But for contemporary philosophers, autonomy refers primarily to a set of concrete concepts amenable to use in

practical debates: the right to make one's own decisions, the value that underlies that right, and the ideal of a sufficient amount of control over one's life (26). Hill, alone among Sensen's contributors, expresses optimism about the possibility of bridging this gap, contending that Kant's conception of autonomy can be used both to flesh out the relevant practical concepts and to justify their standing as pressing normative concerns. In "Kant's Conception of Autonomy of the Will," Andrews Reath attempts to resolve the tension between the notion of autonomy as self-legislation and Kant's commitment to the objectivity and universal validity of moral principles. Through an incisive analysis of Kant's conception of will, Reath argues that there is a "formal aim" constitutive of willing: willing seeks to produce correct practical judgments about the good (44). This formal aim entails an internal principle of willing, the moral law, which secures the possibility of objectively valid practical judgments. What is new for Reath is his further argument that agents can be understood as "giving themselves" this law by means of a self-consciousness that accompanies all acts of volition (47). Karl Ameriks also attempts to resolve the tension between self-legislation and universal lawfulness. But "Vindicating Autonomy: Kant, Sartre, and O'Neill" begins by interpreting Jean-Paul Sartre's famous *Existentialism Is a Humanism* as preferring Kantianism to a radical existentialist (or "Luciferian" [70]) vision that places ultimate value on sheer choice. This helps Ameriks clarify the distinction between transcendental and empirical senses of "self" and "legislation," which he uses to solve the problem at hand, locating the "authorial self" of Kantian autonomy within "the general structure of what is necessarily reasonable as such" (68). Ameriks briefly comments on the possibility of a graduated sense of positive freedom (compliance with the moral law [57]), though he maintains that autonomy itself is a threshold concept. Paul Guyer strenuously disagrees with the latter point, though in "Progress toward Autonomy" he prosecutes this dispute with Onora O'Neill, taking aim at her claim that the self-legislation aspect of autonomy is all-or-nothing (71). Focusing on the *Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Guyer argues that autonomy in its "full" sense has an ineliminable empirical component: the compliance with moral law necessary for autonomy, he says, can be achieved only by gradually mastering one's inclinations and cultivating one's moral feelings (82). (Regrettably, Guyer does not mention Anne Margaret Baxley's contention that this empirical self-mastery is, for Kant, a matter of *autocracy* rather than autonomy [2010].)

The five essays of the second section examine the history and influence of Kantian autonomy. Richard Velkley's "Transcending Nature, Unifying Reason: On Kant's Debt to Rousseau" argues that Kant helps himself to more than just the notion of the *volonté générale*. Velkley traces Kant's famous assertion regarding the impossibility of grounding morality on inclination back to Rousseau's belief in the self-inflicted disorder of reason and his critique of the Enlightenment idea of progress. Henry Allison's "Autonomy in Kant and German Idealism" and J.B. Schneewind's "Autonomy after Kant" look in the other historical direction. After analyzing the development of autonomy from the *Groundwork* to the second *Critique*, Allison sketches Fichte's displacement of autonomy into a pre-conscious act of self-determining, Schiller's integration of autonomy with sensible inclination, and Hegel's radical recasting of autonomy as "concrete freedom." Schneewind depicts the wide swaths of indifference to autonomy in post-Kantian English-language moral philosophy and adroitly charts the reemergence of autonomy in the mid-twentieth century, especially in philosophy of action, medical ethics, feminism, and political philosophy. He concludes by defending Kantian conceptions of autonomy against charges of historical contingency. Susan Shell's "Kant and the 'Paradox' of Autonomy" outlines the development of Kant's conception of

autonomy from the cosmological writings of the 1750s through the “moral turn” of the 1760s to the *Groundwork*. The guiding thread of her (quite interesting) interpretation is Kant’s ongoing attempt to solve the metaphysical problem of interaction among substances. Although she links the paradoxes associated with this problem to the titular paradox of autonomy (stated in *Groundwork* 4: 439), the connection never becomes entirely perspicuous. Katrin Flikschuh’s “Personal Autonomy and Public Authority,” one of the standout pieces in the collection, critiques contemporary liberal political philosophy both on its own terms and as a claimant to Kant’s political project. She argues that “the value of a rationally self-directed life” (170) privileged by contemporary theorists of autonomy cannot support the regard for others as ends-in-themselves that is central to liberal political morality. A proper foundation must include a strong dose of Kantian autonomy with its “individual-transcending dimension” (172). Flikschuh also contests the Rawlsian picture of Kant as a proto-liberal, contending that Kant does not conceive of political autonomy on the basis of moral autonomy, and therefore does not associate political autonomy with the liberal ideal of collective self-legislation.

The essays of the third section are more loosely connected, though the section means to assess the relevance of Kantian autonomy for contemporary moral philosophy. Heiner Klemme’s “Moralized Nature, Naturalized Autonomy: Kant’s Way of Bridging the Gap in the Third *Critique* (and the *Groundwork*)” argues that Kant’s account of teleological judgment in the *Critique of Judgment* is critical for understanding his inchoate conception of the relation between nature and autonomy in the *Groundwork*. Although Klemme’s piece is the most specialized one in the collection, it will be fruitful reading for anyone interested in Kant and natural teleology. Jens Timmerman’s “Autonomy and the Moral Regard for Ends” explains how Kantian autonomy can provide a plausible defense of the moral significance of rational agency (215), succeeding where, Flikschuh says, contemporary theories fail. Timmerman also wades into the debate between intellectualists and affectivists about Kantian moral motivation, arguing that an “affective element” is needed to motivate us to respect other human beings as ends in themselves (222). “A free will and a will under moral laws are the same’: Kant’s Concept of Autonomy and His Thesis of Analyticity in *Groundwork* III,” by Dieter Schönecker, is a masterpiece of close textual analysis, and is a significant contribution to the study of the convoluted argumentative structure of *Groundwork* III. Schönecker’s analysis serves a controversial interpretive thesis: the will referred to in Kant’s famous assertion that “a free will and a will under moral laws are the same” (4: 447) is the will of holy being, for whom the moral law is descriptive rather than imperatival. Unfortunately, the connection between this thesis and the larger concerns of the collection is not as explicit as one would hope. Philip Stratton-Lake’s “Morality and Autonomy” offers a spirited dissent from what is, in the rest of the volume, a firm consensus. In his view, contemporary conceptions of autonomy are on the whole morally preferable to the conception defended by Kant and Kantians such as O’Neill, Christine Korsgaard, and Thomas Scanlon. Stratton-Lake argues that the universal legislation requirement associated with Kantian autonomy leads to the *violation* of autonomy by crowding out the “element of subjectivity” (248) characteristic of autonomous action properly construed (i.e., the capacity to form beliefs about what one is to do and to act in light of those beliefs [256]). Of course, Kant has a number of responses to this objection, one of which Sensen pursues in “The Moral Importance of Autonomy.” Sensen unpacks Kant’s claim that only autonomous moral theories can account for moral obligation, and that desire-based, intuitionist, and moral realist theories lack obligatory force. Sensen concludes by arguing that it is this obligation-grounding feature of autonomy that

grants it moral significance. Onora O'Neill's brief postscript, "Heteronomy as the Clue to Kantian Autonomy," reinforces the distinction between Kantian and contemporary notions of autonomy drawn by earlier essays (Hill, Reath, Guyer, Allison, Schneewind, Flikschuh, Timmerman, Stratton-Lake, Sensen), arguing that contemporary theories are incapable of properly distinguishing autonomy from heteronomy. After stating why she believes Kant is successful in this regard, O'Neill allows that actualizing autonomy and choosing to act on a lawful principle for its own sake can seem "impossible" (285). She tries to ameliorate this worry by construing Kantian autonomy as the negative demand to avoid relying on arbitrary assumptions in practical deliberation.

Kant on Moral Autonomy is at its best, which is quite excellent indeed, when it tackles the difficult textual and philosophical puzzles surrounding the role of autonomy in Kant's practical philosophy. Even those specializing in Kant's ethics will find a wealth of insight and analysis within. The essays exploring the history and development of autonomy are helpful and informative, though Allison and Schneewind move through so much material that their chapters serve mainly as trustworthy guideposts to additional reading. The collection is less successful in demonstrating the relevance of Kantian autonomy for contemporary philosophy. In fact, though the introduction asserts that moral autonomy is one of "Kant's central legacies for contemporary moral thought" (1), Flikschuh, O'Neill, and Stratton-Lake argue quite forcefully that this legacy is merely apparent. And Hill, Reath, Guyer, Allison, Schneewind, Timmerman, and Sensen express sympathy with this view, though none of them explicitly defend it. To be sure, Hill, Sensen, and to a lesser extent, Reath, Guyer, and Timmerman make a case for Kant's relevance by arguing that autonomy *ought* to be understood in a Kantian fashion. But Hill is the only one to address the concrete practical questions motivating contemporary discussions of autonomy. (Reath and Timmerman touch on these questions by arguing that our dignity as ends-in-ourselves must be cashed out in Kantian terms.) And while these essays make a good *Kantian* appeal on behalf of the relevance of Kantian autonomy, I am not sure that philosophers indifferent to, or on the fence about, Kant's moral theory will be very much persuaded.

I have two nits to pick. In an ideal volume, the contributors would have engaged with each other's views. There are many interesting and potentially enlightening points of convergence (Flikschuh and O'Neill against the "individualism" of modern conceptions of autonomy) and divergence (Hill, Ameriks, Guyer, and O'Neill on autonomy as a threshold concept, Reath and Ameriks on self-legislation) that readers will wish had become explicit points of discussion. Also, as even my brief synopses indicate, the section organization is somewhat puzzling; Klemme and Schönecker's essays are better suited for the first or second sections, and Flikschuh's is more appropriately placed in the third. But these are minor issues, and neither they nor the third section's falling short of its ambitions should obscure the fact that Sensen's book is an impressive collection of top-flight scholarship on Kant and autonomy. A careful reading will be of great profit to anyone interested in these important matters.

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References

Baxley, Anne Margaret. 2010. *Kant's Theory of Virtue: The Value of Autocracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.