

Notes on Rosen Chapter 5
Dunster House Faculty Dean Residence
2nd Floor Office
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6:00 a.m.

To begin with, here's an outline of the sections in chapter 5.

5. Kantian Ethics and the Ethics of Kant	(103-143)
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Overview

This chapter looks at contemporary projects in Kantian ethics. It considers the positive development of such projects in the work of figures like John Rawls, Onora O'Neill, Allen Wood, Barbara Herman, and Chris Korsgaard, as well as the rejection of these kinds of projects in figures like Iris Murdoch, Alasdair MacIntyre, Elizabeth Anscombe, and Bernard Williams. Rosen finds both those inspired by Kant and those repulsed by him to have interpreted him wrongly, and in similar ways. Both groups aim to find in Kantianism a "decision procedure for ethics" (109) that is based on a secularized reading of Kant's project. The reading is secularized not least because it aims to eliminate the importance of both God and the noumenal realm. Rosen agrees with the critics of this form of Kantian ethics that it cannot succeed. But he thinks that both critics and defenders of Kantianism, by reconstructing Kant as a "radically anthropocentric" (107) and therefore "paradigmatically *modern* ethical thinker" (109), have misunderstood Kant entirely. On Rosen's reading of Kant, by contrast, "the connection between the human and the divine is essential" (107), and the notion of human beings as metaphysically free is a crucial move in making sense of that connection. This leads Rosen to reprise an earlier strand of Kant interpretation – evident in figures like H. J. Paton, A. R. C. Duncan, T. C. Williams, and T. M. Greene (Rawls' teacher at Princeton) – that "emphasized the role of "intuition" in Kant's account of moral judgement" (108). Rosen finds in Kant's discussion of common human reason (*die Gemeine Menschenvernunft*) a notion of the *intuition for right* that is "within the grasp of every single human being, regardless of education or culture" (143) (For discussion of *die Gemeine Menschenvernunft*, see esp. pp. 126-129.) Whereas the idea that we can find in Kant a "decision procedure for ethics" is anachronistic – it is "to enlist him in a project that is ours, not his" (109) – the form of intuitionism that Rosen reconstructs in Kant makes sense of the theological questions that he finds actually to motivate the Kantian project. Moreover, Rosen's reconstruction makes sense of various problem cases for Kantian ethics – like his stark retributivism (112-113), as well as his interpretation of the duty we have to ourselves as read through the cases of lying (115-

116, 138) and suicide (115, 135-138) – that Kant says explicitly are at the center of his project, but that contemporary Kantian ethicists have to place at the margins.

5.1 The Appeal of Kantian Ethics (103-109)

Summary

Contemporary Kantian ethicists (such as Rawls, O'Neill, Wood, Herman, and Korsgaard), like their critics (such as Murdoch, MacIntyre, Anscombe, and Williams), see Kant to be the “paradigmatically modern ethical thinker” (109). The modernity of Kant’s project, on their reading of him, lies fundamentally in the irrelevance to his view both of God and of anything having to do with the noumenal realm. In essence, the Kant they admire is a fundamentally secular thinker. But the modernity of Kant’s view, on this reading of it, is also found in the goal they see Kantian ethics to be aiming at. Its basic ambition, they say, is to find “a decision procedure for picking out morally acceptable principles” (O’Neill, quoted at 104) that could arise through various universality tests following from the categorical imperative. Rosen argues that Kantian ethics, understood in this sense, “does not succeed” (108). Accordingly, the account that Rosen offers is “very different” (107). Rather than a secular and “radically anthropocentric” (107) project, Rosen sees in Kant a project that depends fundamentally on “the connection between the human and the divine” (107). Furthermore, Kant’s ambition, on Rosen’s reading of it, is not to “embody a procedural account of moral reasoning” (108). Rather, it arises out of a commitment to a form of moral “intuition” that was emphasized by an earlier generation of Kant interpreters (such as Paton, Duncan, T. C. Williams, and Greene). At least one virtue of Rosen’s reading of Kant, he claims, is that it “explains why Kant adheres so fiercely to elements of his moral thought (retributivism and the absolute prohibition on suicide, for example) that modern liberals find repellent” (109).

Interesting Passages Cited

1. I first came to think about acting on principle on the rebound from a brief and strong enthusiasm for utilitarianism. I was impressed with the scope, fertility and precision of that ethical theory; then distressed by its strong and implausible premises. The very precision which had beguiled me now seemed spurious and hence dangerous. But I remained sure that a moral theory which was not fruitful, which could not guide action, was pointless. [104, O’Neill, *Acting on Principle*, p. i]
2. Kantian ethics is answerable not to textual accuracy or exegetical standards of Kant interpretation but to the right standards of thinking about ethical theory and ethical issues. [105, Wood, *Kantian Ethics*, p. 1]
3. ... my interest is less in exegesis than in argument. It is only because I believe I have found in Kant’s ethics a theory which is fruitful and detailed and useful that I think I have a good reason for writing a book on ethics. [105, O’Neill, *Acting on Principle*, p. xiii]
4. The centre of this type of post-Kantian moral philosophy is the notion of the will as the creator of value. Values which were previously in some sense inscribed in the heavens and guaranteed by God collapse into the human will. There is no transcendent reality. The idea of the good remains indefinable and empty so that human choice may fill it. ... Act, choice, decision, responsibility, independence are emphasized in this philosophy of puritanical origin and apparent austerity. [105-6, Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, pp. 79-81]
5. ... unfortunately, in some places it appears that Kant himself wants to make positive use of noumenal freedom ... Whatever Kant himself said on the subject, his flirtations with supernaturalism regarding freedom are flights of transcendent metaphysics, inconsistent with

the basic epistemological strictures of the critical philosophy. [106-7, Allen Wood, *Kantian Ethics*, p. 138]

6. Kant's view is marked by a number of dualisms... To abandon those dualisms as he meant them is, for many, to abandon what is distinctive in his theory. I believe otherwise. His moral conception has a characteristic structure that is more clearly discernible when these dualisms are not taken in the sense he gave them but reinterpreted ... One of the aims of *A Theory of Justice* was to indicate how this might be done. [107, John Rawls, *A Kantian Conception of Equality*, p. 264.]

Questions

1. Rosen offers a stark reading of the project of Kantian ethics. It aims to provide a “decision procedure” for moral choice – at what Rawls calls a “CI procedure” (categorical imperative procedure, at 108). This is the version of the project that he claims is doomed to failure (108). But later in the chapter (pp. 124-5), he admits that Kantian ethicists such as Wood, Herman, and O’Neill all back off from this strong version of the project. So, has he set up a straw man?
2. What is the relation between the view of the Kantian ethical project that Rosen offers and the view that the earlier generation of intuitionists (Paton, Duncan, T. C. Williams, Greene) offer?

Comments

1. One observation about the chapter, and this section of it in particular, is that it begins with the relation Kantian ethicists have to the reading of Kant. Wood doesn’t want to measure his reading of Kant by “textual accuracy or exegetical standards” but rather by the standards of ethical correctness (108). O’Neill says her “interest is less in exegesis than in argument” (108). But there is no further discussion in the chapter of what the alternative standard of reading historical texts could be. Is Rosen after *only* textual accuracy? Perhaps it is because he has already flirted so much in chapters 1 and 2 with the various meta-questions about the project that he doesn’t want to return to it here. But I’d have thought a brief account would have been appropriate.

5.2 The *Groundwork*: An Outline (109-110)

Summary

This short section outlines the basic structure of a central part of §2 in Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. The section begins by announcing the first formula of the Categorical Imperative (the formula of the Universal Law of Nature, from Ak. 4:421) and then outlines the four different kinds of duties that are taken to be derivable from it. These duties can be thought of as divisible along two different axes: duties to oneself vs. duties to another, and strict duties vs. wide duties. Thus, we get the following structure:

	Duties to Oneself	Duties to Another
Strict Duties	No suicide	No lying promises
Wide Duties	Help others in need	Cultivate one’s own talents

It then says that Kant goes on to articulate a second formulation of the CI, the so-called Humanity Formulation (Ak. 4:429) and re-interprets the four cases in terms of this formulation. In each case, now, the action is seen to be a “duty” because to act in opposition to it is to treat others or oneself as a “means only.” Finally, there is a third formulation of the CI, often called the Kingdom of Ends Formulation (Ak. 4:433). Rosen points out that in this instance Kant does not re-interpret the four cases in terms of this formulation, pointing us back to the original, Universal Law formulation, instead.

Interesting Passages Cited

1. There is ... only a single categorical imperative and it is this: act only in accordance with that maxim which you can at the same time will as a universal law. [109, Kant *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*, Ak. 4:421]
2. ...all imperatives of duty can be derived from this single imperative as from their principle... [109, Kant, *Groundwork*, Ak. 4:421]
3. Some actions are so constituted that their maxim cannot even be *thought* without contradiction as a universal law of nature, far less could one *will* that it *should* become such. In the case of others that inner impossibility is indeed not to be found, but it is still impossible to *will* that their maxim be raised to the universality of a law of nature because such a will would contradict itself. It is easy to see that the first is opposed to strict or narrower (unremitting) duty, the second only to wide (meritorious) duty... [109-110, Kant, *Groundwork*, Ak. 4:424]
4. It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a good will. [337 (fn 18), Kant, *Groundwork*, Ak. 4:393. The famous, opening sentence of §1]
5. But suppose there were something *the existence of which in itself* has an absolute worth, that, as an *end in itself*, could be a ground of determinate laws, then the ground of a possible categorical imperative, i.e., of a practical law, would lie in it, and only in it alone. [110, Kant, *Groundwork*, Ak. 4:428]
6. The practical imperative will thus be the following: *So act that you use humanity, in your own person as well as in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.* [110, Kant, *Groundwork*, 4:429. The so-called Humanity Formulation of the Categorical Imperative]
7. By a *kingdom*, however, I understand the systematic union of several rational beings through common laws. [110, Kant, *Groundwork*, Ak. 4:433, though *misattributed in fn 23 as being at Ak. 4:443*]

Questions

1. Why does Rosen think it is significant that Kant does not re-interpret the duties in terms of the Kingdom of Ends formulation?
2. Aren't there usually four different formulations of the Categorical Imperative? What happened to the Autonomy Formulation?

Comments

1. To me this looks like a reasonable account of the discussion of the categorical imperative as it occurs in Ak. 4:420-437, which is a substantial portion of §2 of the *Groundwork*. But I am certainly no expert on this text. I'd be interested to know if anyone thinks it is controversial.

5.3 Four Issues for Kantian Ethics

(111-113)

Summary

Rosen highlights four issues that the contemporary Kantian Ethicist faces, given the reconstruction of the relation between the categorical imperative and the four kinds of duties that he finds at the center of §2 of the *Groundwork*. These are:

1. Do Kant's formulations of the CI give determinate answers to the question what one ought to do?
2. Do they give the same answers?
3. Are the answers they give plausible?
4. Are the answers they give Kant's own?

Of these, most contemporary Kantians have spent a lot of time trying to answer (1). Rosen says that (2) is not that significant. But he thinks that (3) and (4) are both important and cause trouble for Kantian Ethics. Most of these folks are modern liberals, and Kant's discussion of strict duties not to lie or commit suicide can be troubling for them. But more important is his extreme retributivism.

Interesting Passages Cited

Questions

1. What is the relation between the interpretation of the CI given in §5.2 and the extreme retributivism that Rosen highlights as so central to Kant's view? I can believe both parts of the interpretation, but I don't see how they are connected.
 - a. Rosen will no doubt generate the retributivism from the theological position he sees to be motivating Kant's position (somehow). But the CI looks like it can be independently motivated too. So unless there is an intrinsic connection between the CI and the retributivist intuitions, I don't see why the contemporary Kantian Ethicist should be worried by this attack.

Comments

5.4 Universal Law

(113-119)

Summary

This section considers the Universal Law Formulation of the Categorical Imperative. Rosen considers the so-called Open Question Objection to the formulation, which suggests that the universalizability of a maxim is at best a necessary condition on an it's being a duty to perform the action. The condition can be satisfied but the action not be obligatory, as in the case of refusing to accept the challenge of a duel. Sure, if everyone acted that way there would be no institution of dueling. But that might be fine. Perhaps a more interesting case is what Korsgaard calls the Practical Contradiction Interpretation of the categorical imperative (114). This is a case not of the "contradiction in conception" but of the "contradiction in will" (113). Rosen argues that the Practical Contradiction Interpretation cannot deal with "narrow" or "strict" duties such as the prohibition of suicide or lying (115ff). Korsgaard concedes as much, but insists that it helps with the more central cases of "selfishness, meanness, advantage-taking, and disrespect for the rights of other" (Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, pp. 100-101, quoted on p. 117). Rosen uses O'Neill

to spell out this intuition, but then argues against it using the case of standing in line to buy his niece a concert ticket. The motivation is necessarily competitive in just the way O’Neill reviles – he can’t get the ticket unless others fail to. Still, it doesn’t seem wrong. Rosen takes this to count against the Practical Contradiction Interpretation of the CI as it applies to cases of “strict” duty.

Interesting Passages Cited

1. [S]ome actions are so constituted by their nature that their maxim cannot even be *thought* without contradiction as a universal law of nature. [113-114, Kant, *Groundwork* Ak. 4:424]
2. According to proponents of the practical contradiction interpretation, the maxim’s efficacy in achieving its purpose would be undercut by its universalization. [114, Korsgaard, Editor’s Preface to Cambridge edition of Kant’s *Groundwork*, p. xix in the 1997 edition, but xxii in the 2012 edition.]

Questions

Comments

5.5 Wide Duty

(119-120)

Summary

In this section, Rosen goes on to discuss whether the Universal Law Formulation of the CI applies to cases of “wide” duties like helping others in need or cultivating one’s talents. He considers O’Neill’s attempt to defend the formulation for the case of cultivating one’s talents. Suppose that instead of cultivating one’s talents, one escapes to the life of the “South Sea Islander,” who Kant sees as basically lazy. Such a person, according to Kant devotes “his life merely to idleness, amusement, procreation – in a word to enjoyment” (119, *Groundwork*, Ak. 4:424). Against the claim that there doesn’t appear to be any contradiction of the will itself in such an ambition, O’Neill marshals the Principle of Rational Intending. Rosen argues that it doesn’t help.

Interesting Passages Cited

Questions

Comments

5.6 The Formula of Humanity

(120-124)

Summary

Interesting Passages Cited

Questions

Comments

5.7 Does Kantianism Require a DDP? (124-129)

Summary

Interesting Passages Cited

Questions

Comments

5.8 Inner, Unconditioned Value (129-132)

Summary

Interesting Passages Cited

Questions

Comments

5.9 Inner, Unconditioned Value as a Guide... (133-138)

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5.10 Morality as a System (139-141)

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5.11 Conclusion (141-143)

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Comments

Notes from the Sessions

Johan: Where does the CI fit in for Rosen?