Kant without tears


Few recent works of philosophy have had a greater impact than Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, first published in 1971. It revitalized the whole area of moral and political philosophy and led to a revival of interest in questions of justice and right. A strong Kantian influence is evident in it, but the full extent and depth of Rawls’s study of Kant is only now revealed with the publication of these lectures. They were given at Harvard, where Rawls taught philosophy from 1962 until he retired in 1991. As well as Kant, the lectures dealt with a varying selection of other philosophers drawn from a list which included Hume, Leibniz, Bentham, Mill and Hegel. The course evolved but concentrated increasingly on Kant. Rawls’s lectures were dense and difficult. Early on he took pity on the students desperately trying to scribble down his words and distributed duplicated notes. What we have here is the final version of these notes for the course given in 1991, very lightly edited. They retain much of the dryness and roughness of teaching materials, but they are of philosophical interest for all that.

Philosophical problems are often taken to be eternal and unchanging. The history of philosophy is then treated as a timeless debate in which one can argue with the great philosophers of the past as if with a contemporary. This approach has been particularly influential among analytical philosophers. Rawls’s approach could hardly be more different. It is guided by two principles: to pose problems as philosophers of the past ‘themselves saw them’; and ‘to present each writer’s thought in what I took to be its strongest form’, because ‘I always took for granted that the writers we were studying were much smarter than I was.’ Hume is portrayed as primarily a naturalist rather than a mere sceptic; he gives a psychological account of moral reasoning, but has no normative conception of moral reason. Leibniz is presented as a moral ‘perfectionist’ who maintains that there is a divinely ordained moral order (‘the best of all possible worlds’) of which we can have *a priori* knowledge and to which we should aspire.

These positions provide the main poles in relation to which Kant’s ethics are situated. There is a detailed analysis of Kant’s various formulations of the Categorical Imperative and of the ways it is applied in moral deliberation. Rawls has no time for the common view, first voiced by Hegel, that the Categorical Imperative is a purely formal and empty principle. He deliberately plays down the role of the formal and *a priori* in Kant’s philosophy. Instead, he stresses the themes of autonomy and freedom. Arguably, however, Kant is a much more rigorous, formal and systematic thinker than Rawls wants to admit or than is Rawls himself.

The contrast with Leibniz is used to present Kant as a moral ‘constructivist’. For Kant, reason is autonomous. It cannot take its ideal ready-made from God or from any other external source. Reason must construct its ideal for itself; only then is it acting freely and morally. Again Rawls tries to avoid engaging with the philosophical system in which Kant’s ethics is located and which underpins it. However, some discussion of this is unavoidable. Kant talks of the two ‘realms’ of phenomena and things-in-themselves, but according to Rawls this language is misleading. Kant’s position should not be interpreted as a form of dualism. The scientific and moral, theoretical and practical, perspectives ‘are not points of view on different worlds, nor are they points of view from different worlds: they are points of view for asking different questions about one and the same world’.

Rawls warns against interpreting Kant as a ‘Manichaean’ who holds that ‘we have two selves: one is the good self we have as intelligences belonging to the intelligible world; and the other is the bad self we have as natural beings belonging to the sensible world’. Kant’s idea of autonomy implies instead an ‘Augustinian’ picture. According to this the self is completely free and ‘the origin of moral evil … lies not in a bad self with its natural desires but solely in the free power of choice’.

Although Rawls thus addresses some of the larger themes of Kant’s philosophy, he prefers to stick narrowly to Kant’s moral ideas and avoids engaging with Kant’s metaphysics in so far as he can. Kant the logical and systematic philosopher quietly fades from view, and instead we find ourselves in the company of a judicious and wise pragmatist offering sage and kindly moral guidance. This makes for a sympathetic picture, to be sure, but one cannot help feeling that it is more applicable to Rawls than to Kant.
For it is Rawls who wants to stick to ethics, be pragmatic, and avoid metaphysics. Kant, however, sees ethics as an integral part of a larger philosophical system (so, too, do Hume, Leibniz and Hegel for that matter). To imagine that one can have ethics without metaphysics is illusory. This comes out again at the end of the book, which concludes with a couple of very compressed lectures on Hegel in which Rawls’s main concern is to stress his social conception of ethics. Unusually, but illuminatingly, Rawls interprets Hegel’s philosophy as a form of liberalism, and thus as a precursor of his own ‘political not metaphysical’ and liberal conception of justice.

Rawls’s account is reminiscent of A Theory of Justice, with its fundamental idea founding principles of justice on what a reasonable person would choose in an ‘original position’ behind a ‘veil of ignorance’. The Hegelian objection, that this presupposes an atomistic rational agent, an ‘unencumbered self’, who exists prior to and independent of social relationships, is forcefully argued against rawls by communitarians like Sandel. Rawls’s interpretation of Kant seems vulnerable to the same objection, but unfortunately he does not say enough to show how it might avoid this Hegelian criticism.

For all its problems, however, Rawls’s non-metaphysical reading of Kant gives a remarkably kind account of his ethics which admirably brings out his continuing relevance. For that, and for the light they shed on Rawls’s own views, these lectures are important.

Sean Sayers

New paternalism


It is not clear from the acknowledgements in The World of the Gift whether Jacques Godbout has children. But treated abstractly they provide the moralizing core of this work: ‘to have children is also to give back what one has received from one’s parents, and it is the most beautiful gift one can offer them: to “make them” grandparents.’ While Messrs Taylor have recently sought to encourage a fuckfest for the future (Prospect, June 2001), this latter task is motivated by a desire to ensure sufficient numbers of potential ‘progressives’. (There is a strange inversion here of the Augustine quotation provided by Monique Schneider in RP 106: ‘the proletariat were those whose task it was to bring children into the world’.) Godbout, on the other hand, has a heightened goal: it is through birth, ‘the quintessential gift in all societies’, that transcendence (‘grace’) can appear in this modern world. It appears through the creation of freely chosen obligations: ‘The only way to combat this [existential] anxiety is to make oneself indispensable to someone or to something, a child, a cat, a cause.’

Godbout’s project is presented as a corrective to Marcel Mauss. The gift is contrasted to commodity exchange in that it is marked by an absence of immediate equivalence in a circulation of deferred, asymmetric returns. Despite his exemplary research into the gift, Mauss was ‘too timid’ in that he banished the gift to archaic societies where it is seen to function as a form of exchange in the absence of money. Instead, Godbout undertakes to devise a ‘scientific and philosophical alternative to utilitarianism’, which would allow two truths to be seen: (1) The gift is as relevant to the structuring of modernity as it is to archaic societies. Its logic is transhistorical. (2) In humans, the drive to give is as important as the drive to profit. Sociologists should therefore give priority to social ties in creating explanatory systems.

There are therefore two levels to Godbout’s analysis. One would focus on the functional role of the gift in society, highlighting the areas where an economic explanation is insufficient. The second would address the intentional dimension of social ties, the better to understand motivation. Godbout, however, chooses not to keep these two strands apart (‘in this debate cognitive and normative categories are mixed together and it seems impossible to separate them’), or rather arguments drawn from an intentional or ethical perspective are constantly allowed to tell against functional theories. As he writes:

Many are now trying to reverse this trend towards objectification. Ethics is now more in demand than sociology. Sociologists as important as Etzioni have launched new movements such as ‘socio-economy,’ in order to oppose ‘American cynicism.’ Our reflections on the gift are part of that effort.

This resistance to ‘objectification’ is most apparent in his criticism of Marx’s theory of surplus value: the workforce cannot be ‘reduced to merchandise’; ‘Marx here allowed himself to be misled by the very appearance he wanted to demystify.’ Godbout’s humanism balks at any functional moment, including one necessary to understand the workings of capital. Godbout’s