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Autonomy: Toward the Social Self-Governance of Reason

by Philip Rossi, S. J.

Interpretations of Kant's notion of autonomy that are "relational"—that is to say, that locate its fundamental context in terms of an individual moral agent's relationship to others in society—are no longer as problematic as they once seemed.[1] Still, the strength and persistence of a view that sees Kantian autonomy as "individualist," or as standing in fundamental tension with the roles and relationships that are constitutive of an agent's membership in a community, requires that an account be given of why a relational rather than an individualist reading more adequately represents Kant's own view of autonomy.[2] What I thus propose to do in this note is simply to provide what I consider to be one important indication that Kant deeply embeds both his understanding of reason and its moral function in the context of human social interaction. I shall do so by drawing attention to a passage from the *Critique of Pure Reason*—"The discipline of pure reason with regard to its polemical use" (A738/B767 – A757/B785)—that is rarely given consideration in discussions of Kant's moral thought, even though it bears quite directly on the question of the extent to which there is a social character to his understanding of reason and the full range of its exercise.[3] I draw attention to this passage precisely because I believe it offers useful support for the view that Kant sees autonomy as fundamentally—and appropriately—a function of a relationality that is proper to human moral agency.[4] If this is so, then in proposing autonomy as the proper characterization of human moral freedom, Kant at least implicitly affirms it as the *social* character of the self-governance of reason—an affirmation that he will later more fully articulate in concepts such as the highest good, the ethical commonwealth, and the cosmopolitan perspective.

Before looking at this passage and its import for a relational understanding of autonomy, it will be useful to consider some of the factors that lie behind the strength and persistence of an individualist reading of this concept. While it may be the case that some of these factors have their origin in the cultural dynamics of the individualism that has arisen from more than two centuries of interplay between democratic polities with market and consumer economies, the ones most pertinent to my argument are those which can be located within Kant's own texts. The strength and the persistence of this individualist reading has its origin in the fact that Kant does treat the notion of autonomy in ways that do provide a basis for it. There is no doubt, for instance, that Kant takes autonomy to be crucial to the full integrity of the individual choices that one makes as a moral agent: if we are to exercise autonomy, no one else can do our choosing for us. There is also little doubt that in the Kantian texts which have become standard reading for

courses in ethics—most notably the second part of *The Groundwork of the Metaphysicals of Morals—Kant* does not make it all that evident, save in the image of the kingdom of ends, that autonomy can be, let alone should be, appropriately rendered as an account of the *social* self-governance of reason. He offers what has often been taken to be a picture of moral decision-making in which an individual moral agent makes choices that seem not to be at all affected by the concrete features of our human condition, such as one's relation to other human beings in the specific society of which one is a member. One makes one's decisions as an abstract member of a timeless "intelligible world" standing, at best, in an abstract, formal relation with an equally abstract set of fellow members of that world.[5]

The strength of this individualist reading of Kant's notion of autonomy, however, rests to a large degree, first, on detaching the arguments of the *Groundwork* from the larger conceptual structure of Kant's critical project and, second, on taking this text as Kant's definitive statement on moral philosophy. What the *Groundwork* represents, however, is an intermediate—albeit quite significant—exposition of a still developing account of moral life that undergoes further refinement and even significant revision for more than another decade. One consequence of this isolation of the concepts and arguments of the *Groundwork* from both their systematic context in the critical project and their place in the historical development of Kant's thinking is that this text is read without reference to his first efforts to envision the form and function of a critical exposition of morality in the first *Critique,* or indeed to his later treatments, sometimes strikingly different from those in the *Groundwork,* of the same central issues in other texts from the late 1780s and throughout the 1790s. When the *Groundwork* is read in the wider context provided by other major texts from different stages of Kant's exposition of the critical project, however, one begins to see the lineaments of a more complex account of moral agency and autonomy than that provided by individualist readings focused principally on this one work. One striking way in which the picture becomes more complex is that reference to this larger array of texts brings into higher relief the social embeddedness of moral agency and autonomy that Kant only hints at in the text of the *Groundwork* with the image of the “kingdom of ends.”

A key initial point of reference for Kant's earlier efforts to provide a critical exposition of morality is a passage from the "Canon of Pure Reason" (A 808/B 836) in which Kant first defines a "moral world" as "the world as it would be if it were in conformity with all moral laws (as it can be in accordance with the freedom of rational beings and should be in accordance with the necessary laws of morality)." He then refers to the "objective reality" of this world as an "object of reason in its practical use" and "a *corpus mysticum* of the rational beings in it, insofar as their free choice under moral laws has thoroughgoing systematic unity in itself as well as with the

freedom of everyone else." A few pages later he further explains the interconnectedness of the agents in this "moral world" by reference to Leibniz's concept of a "realm of grace":

> Leibniz called the world, insofar as in it one attends only to rational beings and their interconnection in accordance with moral laws under the rule of the highest good, the realm of grace, and distinguished it from the realm of nature, where, to be sure, rational beings stand under moral laws but cannot expect any successes for their conduct except in accordance with the course of nature in our sensible world Thus to regard ourselves as in the realm of grace, where every happiness awaits us as long as we ourselves do not limit our share of it through the unworthiness to be happy, is a practically necessary idea of reason (A 812/B 840).

These passages anticipate elements that eventually will enter into Kant's account of critique as the social self-governance of reason—for example, the kingdom of ends, the object of practical reason, radical evil, the formulation of the universal principle of justice. They also suggest, as well, some problems that recur in his later development of that account—for instance, the moral function of the ends of action, moral "weakness" and "impurity" in relation to "radical evil," and, most notably, the relation between nature and freedom in terms of what he calls here the "realm of nature" and the "realm of grace"—not all of which he is later able to bring to a satisfactory resolution. Of the elements in these passages, the ones that I believe bear most directly upon an articulation of the social character of autonomy are those which express Kant's understanding both of the unity of reason and of the comprehensive unifying dynamic of reason, an understanding that he images and conceptualizes in terms such as "world" and "realm" (or "kingdom").

To understand how Kant's use of this terminology bears on the notion of autonomy as the social self-governance of reason, it is crucial to recall that Kant takes *reason itself* to be a mark of the interrelatedness of the beings who exercise it. Put in most direct terms, any "world" that human reason constructs will have to have the character of being a social world. Kant gives clear affirmation of this in the first *Critique,* in the second section of the first chapter of the "Doctrine of Method," a discussion that carries the title, "The discipline of pure reason with regard to its polemical use." Two passages are of particular relevance, since they each use the establishment and operation of civic order in society as an extended image for the critical use of reason. The first is the opening paragraph of the section:

> Reason must subject itself to critique in all its undertakings, and cannot restrict the

> freedom of critique through any prohibition without damaging itself and drawing upon itself a disadvantageous suspicion. Now there is nothing so important because of its utility, nothing so holy, that it may be exempted from this searching review and inspection, which knows no respect for persons. The very existence of reason depends upon this freedom, which has no dictatorial authority, but whose claim is never anything more than the agreement of free citizens, each of whom must be able to express his reservations, indeed even his *veto,* without holding back (A738-39/B 766-67).

The second passage is part of a later discussion in the same section in which Kant offers a defense of what he will later term the "public use of reason":

> Without this [the critique of reason as the true court of justice], reason is as it were in the state of nature, and it cannot make its assertions and claims valid or secure them except though war. The critique, on the contrary, which derives all decisions from the ground rules of its own constitution, whose authority no one can doubt, grants us the peace of a state of law, in which we should not conduct our controversy except by due process. What brings the quarrel in the state of nature to an end is a victory, of which both sides boast, although for the most part there follows only an uncertain peace, arranged by an authority in the middle; but in the state of law it is the verdict, which since it goes to the origin of the controversies itself, must secure a perpetual peace *(*A751-52/B 779-80).

As Onora O'Neill ably argued, the juridical and political imagery that runs deeply throughout Kant's writings needs to be taken as a particularly revealing clue to his thinking about the nature and function of human reason.[6] The passages just cited from the first *Critique* offer just such a clue. They indicate that we would not be far off the mark in taking Kant to understand critique as the very process by which reason (freely) brings itself to be exercised socially-and consequently to understand autonomy as the exercise of the freedom by which reason acknowledges and takes upon itself the task of being governed socially. If this is so, there is all the more reason to agree with O'Neill's assessment that autonomy is at the very heart of critique and to urge, perhaps even more strongly than she does, that critique is itself a social task:

> Critique of reason is possible only if we think of critique as recursive and of reason as constructed rather than imposed. The constraint on possibilities of construction is imposed by the fact that the principles are to be found for a plurality of possible voices or agents who share a world. Nothing has been established about

principles of a cognitive order for solitary beings.[7]

A similarly strong and explicit stress on the social character of reason, however, is not immediately evident in the *Groundwork*—although I believe one could argue that it is implicit in the confidence that Kant exhibits throughout that work and, indeed, throughout his moral philosophy in the reliability of ordinary moral judgment.[8] In the development of his arguments in the *Groundwork,* Kant's explicit focus simply is on matters other than the way in which the newly introduced concept of autonomy expresses the fundamentally social character of reason. Yet it not difficult to find key elements in his arguments at least presuppose, if not explicitly confirm, the social character of this moral exercise of reason. A particularly clear statement of this is in the affirmation of morality as "the lawgiving by which alone a kingdom of ends is possible"[9]—a description that, in slightly different terminology, echoes what he had written in the "Canon of Pure Reason" about the social character of the world that is to be effected by the moral exercise of reason. In characterizing the moral exercise of reason as autonomy, Kant quite evidently highlights the fact that responsibility for the appropriate moral exercise of reason rests squarely in the hands of individual moral agents-and this is the aspect of his discussion that gives much of the persuasive power to what I have termed "individualist" understandings of autonomy. Yet by affirming, in the concept of autonomy, each individual agent's responsibility for the exercise of reason, Kant neither denies nor weakens his prior claims about the social character of reason. His strong affirmation of individual responsibility here, moreover, does bring to light an issue that plays a role in his later development of the notion of the "highest good." That issue is the precise character of the bearing that an *individual's* appropriate exercise of moral reason then has upon effecting the highest good in its *social* form. Full exploration of that issue, which I believe would further bolster the claim that Kant takes the full scope of autonomy to consist in the social self-governance of reason, lies beyond the scope of this note.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 374: "Kant holds that just because 'thinking for oneself' claims universal rational validity, this thinking must also strive to 'think from the standpoint of everyone else,' which is possible for beings like ourselves through free communication between people ... I submit that any interpretation of Kant that takes account of his conception of reason as grounded on public communication must display Kantian autonomy as intersubjective already."

2. The controversy between "liberals" and "communitarians" over a range of questions in political and social philosophy is one place in which this kind of issue has been recently been played out—though usually without much consideration of the question as to whether the concepts and arguments employed by either of the contending views adequately represent Kant's own thinking about autonomy. Both sides have commonly taken it for granted that Kant's reading of moral agency—and, *a fortiori,* the autonomy which is its central conceptual element—has a deeply ingrained individualist cast to it *(*or*,* as some parties to the controversy have termed it, that it provides a "thin" account of moral agency).

3. The *Critique of Pure Reason* is cited by use of the standard convention of referring to the first (A) and second (B) editions of the German text. Translations are from *Critique o/Pure Reason,* trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

4. In the "Introduction" to their translation of the *Critique of Pure Reason,* Paul Guyer and Allen Wood draw attention to this section as one that "provides an ardent defense of freedom of public communication" and that also "presages Kant's impassioned defense of freedom of thought in his political writings of the 17905" (p. 19). Their notice of this passage suggested to me that it may also have bearing on Kant's account of autonomy.

5. See, for instance, Iris Murdoch's classic portrait of the "Kantian" moral agent in The *Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Shocken, 1971), 79-80, which concludes: "Kant's man had already received a glorious incarnation nearly a century earlier in the work of Milton: his proper name is Lucifer." In a less dramatic vein, Martha Nussbaum, in commenting on John Rawls' Kantian construal of moral agency, observes: "This interpenetration between person and nature is not imagined as going very deep, in the sense that once necessary things are at hand, all is well. No deeper consideration of the structure of relatedness between persons and things-or, indeed, persons and one another-is called for by the Kantian idea of the person" ("Aristotelian Social Democracy," in *Liberalism and the Good,* ed. R. Bruce Douglas, Gerald M. Mara, and Henry S. Richardson [London/New York: Routledge, 1990], 203-52, at 243).

6. See "Reason and Politics in the Kantian Enterprise," in Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3-27.

7. Ibid, 27.

8. See Roger J. Sullivan, *Immanuel Kant's Moral Theory* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 4-6.

9. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* in Immanuel Kant, *Practical*

Philosophy, trans. Mary Gregor, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge/New York:: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 84. The passage cited can be found in *Kant's Gesammelte Schriften,* ed. Königlich Preuβische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902-), IV, 434.