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Rationality and the Structure of the Self, Volume II: A Kantian Conception

Cambridge University Press Reader B

I would put RSS2 into a group of books/papers that began more or less with Thomas Nagel's *The Possibility of Altruism*. Nagel's idea was to appeal to Kant to find a rational grounding for such important moral duties as altruism. The idea in this tradition (and RSS2 follows this) is to appeal to Kant's work to solve the contemporary problem of finding the right way to explain and justify ethical behavior; it is only secondarily intended to be exegesis of Kant's texts. The other most famous contribution to this project is Christine Korsgaard's *Sources of Normativity* (and parts of *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*). Another major contribution is Onora O'Neill's essay "Consistency in Action." The common target of these works is the 'desire theory of action' (DTA), which states that all actions can be traced back to desires. Although Aristotle really began this view, the contemporary source is David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*. AP conceives this epic intellectual battle—correctly I think—as an argument between two competing pictures of the self. Hume's self is propelled by desires, with reason just helping out to calculate how to satisfy the most desires. For Kant, reason is not merely an instrument, but a faculty that itself produces content, something that can direct action from its own principles.

AP's novel move in the project of appealing to Kant to provide justification for a non-desire based account of human action and so morality is to take Kant seriously when he says that it is one and the same reason that creates theories of the world and directs moral behavior. So she looks to the theory of cognition in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1C) for clues about his picture of the self in moral life. This approach has considerable plausibility because of the distinctive shape of Kant's theory knowledge. He believed that a particular conception of the self was essential to knowledge. Roughly, someone who is a rational cognizer—someone who knows the basis of his judgment—must understand himself as a continuing being through time who is in constant interaction with the environment he seeks to know. The crucial point for AP's purposes is that, if a would-be cognizer's encounters with the world are scatty or if he lacks a concept of himself as an on-going acquirer of information, then he will lose or perhaps never develop any sense of self. In this way, Kant argues that experience of a comprehensible world is actually necessary for a sense of a coherent self through time—and vice versa. Neither Nagel nor Korsgaard looked to Kant's own theories of cognition to buttress his rationalist approach to ethics, but appealed instead (roughly) to Wittgenstein's private language argument. O'Neill is closer to AP in making some use of the views of 1C, but she does not develop this line in great detail or in anything like the same way it is developed in RSS2.

On this basis, I believe the project to be both important and original. ... The writing and organization are excellent.

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The central theoretical apparatus of KSS2 is given in Chapter 2, where AP introduces the notions of horizontal and vertical consistency. These are important, because she will argue that consistency is necessary to having a sufficient intellectual grasp on the world to be capable of agency. This result then has two crucial implications. The first is that intellectual self-preservation and so consistency are necessary conditions to being an agent at all. So rather than reason being a potential source of action on a par with or competing with desire, an active reason that presses constantly for consistency is revealed as a necessary condition for desire or intention themselves (thus disposing of DTA). The second implication is that morality arises from the effort of reason to be consistent and so to preserve the life of the self.

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I'm sympathetic to AP's claim that it makes sense to talk about subsentential consistency, so that the objects of one's attitudes must be understood consistently (that is, it is not just that one's attitudes or attributions to those objects must be understood consistently.) I also think that she has a plausible view about Kant's understanding of representations and judgment.

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her approach to the intentionality of preferences seems plausible. I also think she makes good use of McClennen's work on resolute choice to argue that any genuinely intentional action presupposes consistency.

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Can reason ground morality? AP makes an interesting move on this question and one that is deeply Kantian. She starts with Kant's moral theory [Chapter 5, section 5] as providing a description of a perfectly rational/moral agent. This is certainly the way Kant saw things. Others have noticed this in the past, but I think that AP uses this recognition to much better effect. Once this ideal is in place, ordinary human behavior that falls long short of perfectly morality is explained in terms of stratagems for preserving the appearance of rational consistency (and so the life of the agent as such) in the face of recalcitrant data. There is an elegance here, as well as a strong Kantian strain, where reason is the hero of ethics and rationalization (or the misuse of reason) is the villain. Varieties of rationalizing are presented in chapters 7 and 8. I think the discussion of self-deception is interesting and plausible.

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The ms. is very long 763 pp. + a 54 pp. bibliography by my count. Still, it is not a cumbersome read; the prose marches along in quite a compelling way.