

Robert Stern, *Kantian Ethics: Value, Agency, and Obligation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). ISBN:9870198722298.

*Reviewed by Maks Sipowicz*

Robert Stern's new book, *Kantian Ethics: Value, Agency, and Obligation*, is a collection of fourteen previously published, though not easily accessible, essays regarding the central themes of Kant's moral project. Given the scope of Stern's book, no review can adequately present the breadth of its contribution to the literature. My hope, then, is that the following outline of the text's main concerns will serve to encourage readers to experience the text on their own, and to engage with its insightful arguments.

The focal point, and the stated aim of this book, is a presentation of what Stern refers to as "a strand of inter-related issues [in Kantian philosophy] that form a 'spine' in Kantian ethics" (11). These issues, on his diagnosis, concern the way in which Kant understands the notions of obligation, value, agency, autonomy and rationality, along with tracing the way in which these particular facets of Kant's thought have influenced subsequent thinkers. The book is divided into two parts along those lines. The first focusing closely on the above themes from Kant's ethics and the second focusing on Kant's influence among his readers.

The book begins with seven chapters which together amount to the crux of Stern's reading of Kant. Chapter 1 takes up the distinction between the holy, or divine, will and the human will in Kant. Contrary to the common attitude of treating this distinction as insignificant, Stern argues that it provides valuable insights into Kant's practical philosophy, in particular with regard to helping us solve controversies related to the ethical debates between internalism and externalism, or realism and anti-realism. Chapter 2 looks at the constructivist critique of moral realism, and



presents and responds to three different versions of the constructivist “argument from autonomy” (41)—that is, the argument that moral realism, if true, threatens the autonomy of moral agents. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 reflect on Christine Korsgaard’s interpretation of Kant. First, by looking at her transcendental argument to consider the value of such arguments in general. Second, by providing a response to critics of Korsgaard’s argument against moral scepticism. Then finally, by situating her reading of Kant within the context of the current debates between constructivists and realists, and looking to Kant for the lessons that can be learned from these debates, both in relation to Kantian philosophy, and philosophy more generally. Chapters 6 and 7 consider the place of the principle of “ought implies can” in Kant’s philosophy, with the former arguing that the principle is usually understood differently to the way employed by Kant, and the latter focusing on the place this principle has within Kant’s theory of moral obligation.

In the second part of the book Stern turns his attention to other readers of Kant. Chapters 8 and 9 respond to a possible Hegelian critique of Kantian philosophy. Chapter 10 looks at two competing readings of Kant and German Idealism in England, focusing on the work of T. H. Green and F. H. Bradley, and exploring the idea of “my station and my duties” by asking what theory of duty or obligation is meant to be embodied by this position (172). Chapter 11 remains with the British idealists, this time focusing on what Stern calls their “post-Kantian perfectionism” (190)—that is, a reading of moral life that relates it to human self-realisation, but also taking Kantian moral principles into account. Chapter 12 responds to William James’ take on Kant’s ethics, and produces two contrasting ways of understanding James’ and Kant’s disparate approaches to the problem of freedom. Chapter 13 deals with Knud Løgstrup’s critique of morality, with Stern presenting an alternative version of Løgstrup’s critique, along Kantian lines, which can ultimately do much of the same work (224). Finally, chapter 14, evaluates Stephen Darwall’s response to Elizabeth Anscombe’s challenge to moral theory, that in today’s world, the traditional ethical project of trying to establish what our moral obligations are is a waste of time.

Though the book covers a huge breadth of literature and conceptual content, its largest contribution, at least from my point of view, is in the first seven chapters, and in particular with Stern’s contribution to the ongoing and lively debate about whether or not Kant should be seen as a constructivist. Stern’s response that the constructivist reading is not sufficiently motivated by Kant’s philosophy presents a significant issue that his opponents, such as Frederick Rausher, Andrews Reath, or Paul Formosa, will undoubtedly need to account for and overcome.

Most existing literature on Kant is intimidating enough to dissuade the casual reader from beginning any sustained engagement. In addition to his significant contributions to the literature, Stern's work can be similarly commended for its accessibility. Stern writes in a clear and lucid style, and thus his work is to be recommended not just to scholars deeply entrenched in the literature, but also to graduate students or advanced undergraduates seeking a starting point to studying Kant beyond the primary texts.

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