

COMMUNITY
and
PROGRESS IN
KANT'S MORAL
PHILOSOPHY

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INTRODUCTION



THIS BOOK is a defense of the crucial role of community in Kant's moral philosophy. Over the course of the chapters that follow, I argue that Kant's moral theory reserves a central role for community in two distinct and ultimately related ways. First, Kant's moral philosophy—though often described as unconcerned with ends and goals—actually urges us to strive toward a particular end, and this end is best understood as a kind of ethical community. Second, the means through which we can best achieve this end are also social. Participation in social institutions and relationships such as education, friendship, and civic life help us to develop our moral capacities and thus further our progress toward the ideal ethical community. Indeed, because Kant tells us that we have a duty to work toward an ethical community, these social institutions that facilitate our progress toward this end become central to a complete account of Kant's moral philosophy.

This defense of the role of community in Kant's moral philosophy is important because his theory is often criticized for its alleged individualism. The major task of this introduction will be to explore these criticisms in order to understand the precise challenge that a Kantian defense of community must meet. In general, these charges of individualism in Kant's ethics tend to rest on two observations about his theory. In the first place, the *justification* for right action in Kant's ethics seems to be an individualistic one—there appears to be no shared good or communal end that agents appeal to when they consider the morality of their actions. Rather, Kant's moral philosophy puts the right before the good; the ground or justification for moral

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action has to do with respecting humanity and autonomy, and not with striving toward a previously defined good or community. Second, Kantian agents seem to become aware of the moral law individually, and they seem also to be able to apply the law on their own. Kant tells us that our knowledge of the moral law is implicit in the thought and action of normally developed agents, and that these agents do not need to consult others or receive any special education in order to know what the moral law requires of them. And, while applying the moral law might require knowledge of empirical particulars, the principles of practical reason that allow us to act are similarly fundamental and not shaped by community.

This book addresses each of these claims and argues that, although these observations about Kant's moral philosophy are not, strictly speaking, inaccurate, they fail to provide a complete picture of what is entailed by Kant's theory. In the first place (as noted above), Kant's moral philosophy is not wholly unconcerned with the ends that moral agents seek. It is, of course, true that Kant's theory does not begin with a claim about our obligation to promote happiness or some other end. Rather, it starts with a set of claims about our obligations to make our use of freedom consistent with others' use of freedom, and to respect humanity in others and ourselves. But precisely because Kant's theory values humanity, or our rational capacity to set and pursue ends, it will also be a theory that is concerned—on some level—that we are able to *accomplish* these ends. This combination of virtue and happiness (understood as the fulfillment of ends) constitutes what, for Kant, is the ultimate goal or end of his moral philosophy—a state of affairs that he calls the highest good. Kant's theory of the highest good is the focus of the first chapter of this book. In that chapter, I argue that Kant's most considered and developed account of the highest good describes this end as one that is realized in a community of moral agents in the course of human his-

tory. And since Kant tells us that we have a duty to pursue the highest good, this means that the end of morality that agents ought to seek, according to Kant, is actually a kind of community. I also argue (though this is a separate and stronger claim) that Kantian agents ought to think of the achievement of this community as part of the justification for moral action. When someone asks us why something is right or virtuous, the Kantian agent should be able to justify her action by appealing—in part—to the fact that it contributes to the achievement of this type of ethical community.

But I will also argue that this fact about the ends of Kant's ethics gives us reason to think that his moral philosophy is concerned with community in a second way. As noted above, Kant tells us that we have an *obligation* to pursue the end of the highest good. And because we have a duty to pursue the end of the ethical community, we also have a duty to pursue various activities that will help us accomplish this end more effectively. So, while it is true that Kantian agents should be able to know the moral law individually, it is also the case that a moral education, for example, can make agents more adept at moral reasoning and applying the moral law. Similarly, participation in a "moral friendship" can help us overcome obstacles to virtue, and participation in civic life can help us become more skilled at thinking from the standpoint of others. Thus, not only is the goal of Kant's moral philosophy a social one, but the means that we must pursue in order to achieve this goal are social, too. With these two facts in place, we can begin to see that Kant's moral philosophy asks us to be deeply involved with our community, to educate each other and make each other more virtuous so that we can achieve the end of community that morality dictates.

Before we begin this discussion, however, it is important to understand the precise criticisms of individualism leveled against Kant's moral philosophy. In the section that follows,

I outline two versions of this criticism and argue that it is the latter of these that Kantians concerned with community ought to be most concerned with.

Kant's (Alleged) Individualism

In order to motivate the discussion in the rest of the book, I include here a brief discussion of some common criticisms concerning Kant's alleged individualism. I take these communitarian criticisms in two groups. First, I consider the objection that Kantian (or liberal) agents are unattached—that is, that they can have no essential commitments to other agents or to their own projects. Certainly, the project of this book would be somewhat hindered if this were the case. Fortunately, I think, these criticisms are fairly easily dispensed with, and in the first section I demonstrate why this is the case.

Next, I consider what I take to be a more serious set of objections to Kant's theory. Proponents of this criticism argue that even if Kantian agents are not problematically detached from their own projects and from each other, they are nevertheless unattached from a larger historical narrative. This fact, so the argument goes, leads to a kind of emptiness and alienation in Kant's theory. This is a criticism that is unquestionably inspired by Hegel's criticism of Kant, and while that topic could fill (and has filled) many volumes, in this brief discussion I hope only to show how Hegel's criticisms are a predecessor to similar contemporary criticisms of Kant and liberalism, most notably those of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor.¹

1. I should also note that the contemporary criticisms I consider in this introduction are not focused solely on Kant's conception of morality. Both Sandel and MacIntyre level their criticisms primarily against contemporary liberal theory (especially Rawls), but make references to Kant as well. This should not trouble us: while it is clear that Rawls is operating with different (certainly fewer) metaphysical assumptions than Kant is, I think that most of the criticisms leveled at him can be aimed at Kant as well. This is because these criticisms have

In many respects, the remainder of this book is a response to the worries raised by this group of objectors.

Unattached to Other Agents and Commitments

The criticism that the Kantian agent is incapable of commitment to projects, relationships, and institutions is raised most notably by Michael Sandel. Sandel's criticism finds its source in the observation that Kant bases his theory on the ideal of a free chooser of ends. He begins by citing what he takes to be the core thesis of liberalism (and, by extension, Kant's theory): that "a just society seeks not to promote any particular ends, but enables its citizens to pursue their own ends, consistent with a similar liberty for all; it therefore must govern by principles that do not presuppose any particular conception of the good."² For Kant, Sandel explains, what is right does not have to do with an external object, for example, of bringing about the greatest happiness. Instead, what is right is based on principles that stem solely from the fact that moral agents are capable of setting and pursuing their own ends. In several passages describing the flaws in Kantian theory, Sandel cites the following passage from Kant's "Theory and Practice" essay in order to demonstrate the apparent emptiness of Kant's moral theory:³ "But the concept of an external right as such proceeds entirely from the concept of *freedom* in the external relation of people to one another and has nothing at all to do with the

to do with those aspects of contemporary liberalism that have clear counterparts in Kant's practical philosophy. These features include, for example, the fundamental notion of a moral subject who is free to choose various associations and courses of actions. In Kant, this notion is expressed by the assertion that subjects are not bound by the laws of nature. In Rawls, it is expressed by the claim that moral agents are free to decide upon their own conception of the good. Still, when possible, I cite the references that these philosophers make to Kant.

2. Michael Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self," *Political Theory* 12, no. 1 (1984): 81–96, at 82.

3. See *ibid.*, and Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

end that all of them naturally have (their aim at happiness) and with the prescribing of means for attaining it.”⁴

Sandel continues by examining the consequences that such a theory about the relationship between the right and the good has for individual agents. His conclusion is that there will be a kind of parallel between the theory and its agents and that “as the right is prior to the good, so the subject [will be] prior to its ends.”⁵ This means that agents in a Kantian society will be “unencumbered” selves, selves “understood as prior to and independent of purposes and ends.”⁶ He elaborates that this means that “no role or commitment could define me so completely that I could not understand myself without it.”⁷ Though the Kantian agent is free to set and pursue ends, and in some sense is even defined by her capacity to do so, it is still the case that there is never any particular conception of the good that she is *necessarily* tied to. This is typically thought of as one of the stronger selling points of liberal theory, but given Sandel’s communitarian commitments, it is problematic. The liberal agent becomes a kind of empty vessel that—by definition—cannot be filled with any essential project or relationship.

But Sandel’s conception of the Kantian end-setter makes several unwarranted assumptions. First, the notion of practical reason with which Sandel credits Kant is a rather skeletal one. On Sandel’s account, it seems that Kantian agents set ends almost on a whim, and then, just as quickly as they have set them, tend to abandon those ends and projects in favor of new ends. But nothing like this is entailed by Kant’s conception of practical reasoning. Rather, Kant’s conception of practical reasoning admits of all manner of long-term end setting, prefer-

4. Immanuel Kant, “On the Common Saying: That May be Correct in Theory but Is of no Use in Practice,” in *Practical Philosophy*; trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Ak. 8:289.

5. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 7.

6. Sandel, “The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,” 86.

7. *Ibid.*

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ence ordering, and sacrifice. This is clearly reflected both in Kant's detailed discussion of practical reason in the context of the hypothetical imperative and in the contemporary notion that a Kantian agent is capable of choosing what kinds of long-range goals and activities constitute a good *life*. A Kantian agent can be firmly committed to the goals that she freely sets.

But perhaps this response does not address the heart of Sandel's concern. Perhaps Sandel can still object that even though Kantian agents are not fickle end-setters, it is nevertheless the case that they are always free to sever the commitments they do make. In other words, even if Kantian agents are capable of long-term commitments, nothing binds them to these commitments in the way a preexisting notion of the good might. And, for this reason, nothing can "define" them absolutely; there is never an end or pursuit that cannot be abandoned at will.⁸

But there are at least two reasons that this should not be a concern—the first appeals to what we might call practical considerations, while the other appeals to moral considerations. To take the first: it is simply not the case that Kantian end-setters are always able to sever any of their commitments on a whim, without consequence to themselves or their community. Now, perhaps some commitments are like this; they can be abandoned without much consequence. A person who spends her childhood and adolescence pursuing a talent playing the violin might eventually decide to become a pediatrician with little spare time for playing her instrument. She might from time to time miss her former commitment, but there need be no serious practical consequences that stem from her choice. But other commitments are not so easily abandoned. If our pediatrician has spent the better part of a decade in medical training

8. Allen Buchanan suggests this interpretation of Sandel's argument. See Allen E. Buchanan, "Assessing the Communitarian Critique of Liberalism," *Ethics* 99, no. 4 (1989): 852–882, at 867–868.

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and sacrificed countless other projects in building her career, then it seems strange to insist that she can, practically speaking, “sever” her commitment to medicine on a whim.⁹ Nor are careers and other major commitments the only pursuits that cannot be severed easily. Imagine the difficulties involved in ending a friendship with a coworker one has known for only a few years. Thus, in response to Sandel, we might say that the mere fact that we order our lives around our choices and live in a community with others creates a host of practical reasons that make commitments difficult to sever, even if there is no end toward which everyone in the community is mutually striving.

Furthermore, there are times when we impose various constraints upon ourselves precisely *because* we want to make it difficult to sever a commitment. So, for example, we may choose to make public marriage vows because we realize that our relationship with our spouse is worth preserving, and making such vows will, in times of stress, force us to try to work through our difficulties. And the fact that we create such constraints for ourselves is not a concession to the claim that we are incapable of commitment. Rather, we value such commitments, and, as Allen Buchanan puts it, such constraints “are devices we employ to create conditions under which genuine commitments can emerge.”¹⁰

These practical hindrances to severing commitments hint at a second reason that Kantian agents are not unencumbered, and this is a moral reason. Partially because of the sometimes-

9. Note that this is not a moral claim (though, as we will see, it can be the basis of a moral claim). The observation is not that our medical student “lets someone down” or fails her potential patients morally. Rather, it is just a claim about the way that any agent (including a Kantian agent) must order her preferences and commitments when she decides which long-term ends she wants to pursue. If she eventually abandons these ends and pursuits, her life can—practically speaking—experience some amount of turmoil.

10. Buchanan, “Assessing the Communitarian Critique of Liberalism,” 869–870.

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negative effects of severing commitments, some freely chosen commitments and relationships actually create new obligations from which we cannot simply excuse ourselves. Parenthood is perhaps the most obvious of these commitments, but it is by no means an isolated example. When we make certain commitments and enter into certain relationships, others come to depend on us in their pursuit of their own ends. In Kant's terminology, when we enter into these kinds of relationships, we have an obligation adopt the ends of others, or to make others' ends our own. So, for example, a teacher or mentor in some sense adopts her students' ends of learning as her own. For her to abandon this kind of commitment without good reason would constitute a moral failing similar to a breach of contract.

Keeping this notion of adopting the ends of others in mind, we can now return to the passage from Kant's "Theory and Practice" essay that troubled Sandel so much. Above, we saw that Sandel takes issue with a system that is (seemingly) based on the idea of "external freedom" alone and that has "nothing to do" with the ends that we set as agents. But the context in which this passage appears should allay some of Sandel's fears. The passage appears in a section of the "Theory and Practice" essay entitled "On the Relation of Theory to Practice in the Right of a State" and is subtitled "Against Hobbes." The passage, in other words, deals with the foundation of what Kant calls duties of right, or the duties we have to each other that can be coerced with the threat of punishment. Kant argues "against Hobbes" in this passage by arguing that the basis of these duties of right is not a shared end that all members of a political society have, but rather the "harmony" of each person's freedom with "the freedom of everyone insofar as this is possible in accordance with a universal law."¹¹ But, as we have already seen, when it

11. "Theory and Practice," Ak 8:290.

comes to the obligations that Kantian agents have toward each other as *moral* agents, Kant is not unconcerned with the ends that people set. Rather, he thinks, we have a duty to think of the ends of others as our own.¹²

The second, crucial point to keep in mind with respect to the “Theory and Practice” passage (and any other passage in which Kant discusses the priority of the right over the good) is that Kant is only making claims about the *ground* of his moral system. Thus, Sandel’s claim that, for Kant, the right exists “prior to” and “independent of” the good is only partially correct. It is certainly true that Kant’s theory places the right “prior to” the good in deriving a supreme principle of morality and justifying right action. But it is not the case (as we will see in chapter 1) that the good is “independent” of the right. Rather, Kant will argue that agents who act from an understanding of the moral law necessarily also pursue a particular good. However, this good (Kant calls it the “highest good”) will be limited by—and stems from—our respect for humanity. So, despite the fact that Kant’s theory does not begin with a single, unifying idea of the good to be pursued, it is nevertheless the case that Kantian agents are concerned with pursuing an end.

Unattached to History or Narrative

We are now in a position to consider a second set of objections. These objections, like those outlined above, begin from

12. In fairness to Sandel, of course, his is a criticism of liberalism, so we might understand his criticism to be limited to just those external duties of right that the passage discusses. Still, it is important to recall that Kant’s political philosophy is intended in large part to protect the capacity we have, as moral agents, to set and pursue ends. Thus, to think that Kant constructs a political theory out of whole cloth from the notion of freedom alone is, I think, misstating Kant’s project. This claim is, however, a matter of some debate. See, for example: Allen Wood, “The Final Form of Kant’s Practical Philosophy,” in *Kant’s Metaphysics of Morals: Interpretative Essays*, ed. Mark Timmons (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1–22. See, in the same volume, Paul Guyer, “Kant’s Deductions of the Principles of Right,” 23–64.

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a set of observations about the freedom of Kantian agents. But instead of starting from an observation about agents' ability to freely set ends, these theories begin from the observation that the Kantian agent's will seems to be unaffected by circumstance or empirical limitation. So, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the Kantian picture that (allegedly) separates the will from limiting empirical conditions is a kind of "fantasy" in which "we live the story we please."¹³ And, far from "freeing" the Kantian agent's will, they argue, this fact robs individuals' actions of meaning and alienates agents from their communities and commitments.

In considering this set of objections, however, we need to proceed with caution. If "liv[ing] the story we please" means being able to live whatever life we imagine for ourselves, regardless of the empirical limitations that history, geography, biology, and economics place in our way, then Kant cannot be saddled with this claim. It would be absurd to deny such limitations, and Kant's insistence, for example, that we ought to help those in need suggests an obvious recognition of the fact that states of affairs in the world can limit our ability to pursue ends. But there is also a very real sense in which Kant does think that our willing is independent of empirical facts. Once we understand Kant's claims to this effect, we will have a better sense of the type of objection that these philosophers advance.

The first sense in which Kant thinks we are free from empirical limitations, then, is one we have already seen. Kant thinks that agents are free to set ends for themselves and decide on their conception of a good life. We may, of course, be free to *set* ends for ourselves, but our freedom to pursue these ends is limited both by empirical facts about the world and,

13. Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition" in *Liberalism and Its Critics*, ed. Michael Sandel, 125–148, at 135 (New York: New York University Press, 1984). MacIntyre continues: "We enter a stage we did not design and find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making."

perhaps more importantly, by the requirements of the moral law. I might set the end of running a mile in under thirty seconds, but empirical limitations of physiology will certainly stand in the way of this. I may also set the end of appropriating my neighbor's wallet without his consent. Pursuing this end might not be limited by empirical facts, but it will be limited by the requirements of the moral law.

Above, we saw that Michael Sandel's worries about the liberal "unencumbered self" rested largely on observations about this first kind of Kantian freedom. And we also saw that these worries can be fairly easily put to rest by considering both a fuller picture of Kant's understanding of practical reasoning and Kant's claim that we have a duty to adopt the ends of others. But, within this description of freedom—specifically in the claim that our ends can be limited by a moral law that we recognize through the use of our pure practical reason—we can begin to understand another way in which Kant thinks our wills are separate from (or not necessarily affected by) nature.¹⁴ The criticisms that Hegel, MacIntyre, and Taylor advance are, I think, best understood as objections to this sense of freedom.

One way in which our will is separate from nature has to do with our recognition of the moral law and the source of that law itself. Kant argues that, if we are to have a moral law that is necessary and universal, we must abstract from practical anthropology, or empirical facts of human existence, and instead base our moral theory on principles of pure practical reason.¹⁵ The

14. John Rawls expresses these two senses of Kantian freedom in terms of our capacity to be "rational" (that is, our capacity to set ends and pursue our own conception of a good life) and "reasonable" (our capacity to recognize the requirements of morality and be independently moved by these requirements). See John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Barbara Herman, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 164–166.

15. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Ak 4:389.

claims of morality are not claims that stem from the will of a divine lawmaker, nor are they claims that stem from the particulars of the society in which we find ourselves. Furthermore, we do not need any special sense or access to empirical information in order to discover what the moral law requires of us. Our recognition of the moral law is, as Kant puts it, a “fact of reason.”¹⁶

Second, Kant thinks that when it comes to applying the moral law and being motivated to act from the moral law, we are autonomous. In other words, not only are we able to recognize the requirements of the moral law with the use of reason alone, we are also able to act from that recognition without the need for external motivation. And this, Kant argues, is not because we have a desire to follow the commands of the moral law that is simply stronger than our desire to follow the dictates of inclination. Rather, our recognition of the moral law is altogether different from other, empirical motivators. It can, as it were, overrule these other motivators. This, then, is the second sense in which Kant thinks we are free with respect to the forces of nature.¹⁷

Keeping in mind these two senses in which Kantian agents are not dictated by nature, we can now begin to explore the charges of emptiness and alienation put forth by philosophers such as Hegel, MacIntyre, and Taylor. To this end, it is useful to begin with Alasdair MacIntyre’s observations about the importance of narrative when it comes to the intelligibility of actions. MacIntyre argues that it is impossible to make actions “intelligible” except in the context of a setting or narrative. Thus, for example, when we see a woman gardening, it is im-

16. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*; trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Ak 5:31.

17. This is, of course, the standard picture of Kantian autonomy that we are familiar with. But Kant does suggest some exceptions to this story. For example, in the *Lectures on Ethics*, he explains that drunkenness can affect our will to the extent that it is not free in this respect. See Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Ak 27:288.

possible to know what she is really doing without the benefit of a larger context and narrative. Perhaps she is trying to impress the neighbors, or perhaps she is grudgingly taking care of chores, or relaxing after a stressful day.¹⁸ So far, I think, there is nothing essential to Kant's thought that would force him to disagree. And it would be a rather uncharitable interpretation of MacIntyre's claim to say that this is the fullest extent of his argument. Rather, we can begin to get a better sense of what is really at issue for MacIntyre when we consider his claim that this problem of unintelligibility is intensified when we extrapolate it, as it were, to make sense not just of individual actions, but of the actions and decisions of a community, and of that community's conception of the good: "In what does the unity of an individual life consist? The answer to that is its unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask 'What is good for me' is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion. To ask 'what is good for man' is to ask what all answers to the former questions have in common."¹⁹

MacIntyre's claim, then, is not just that individual actions are unintelligible without some kind of unifying narrative, but that—more seriously—moral actions, or actions that we undertake based on our understanding of what is right or good, are unintelligible without the benefit of a unifying narrative. Or, put slightly differently, MacIntyre's claim is that an action done for the sake a moral law based in reason alone is as unintelligible as an individual action that exists apart from any unifying story or narrative. And, indeed, a moral theory that insists that we can discern and act upon morality's requirements through the use of reason alone is not just unintelligible; it is also alienating. Rather than being able to act morally because we have a set of conceptions about what is good for us—for example, fam-

18. MacIntyre, "The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition," 128–129.

19. *Ibid.*, 141.

ily, political life, or friendship—we are forced to adopt a universal morality that actually abstracts from these central institutions and relationships. In essence, as Charles Taylor puts it, we lose “our identification with the society in which [we live].”²⁰ Thus, when we turn away from a moral theory that is unified by a narrative and strives to complete that narrative, we ultimately adopt a theory that is empty, unintelligible, and alienating.

To understand the force of this criticism, it will be helpful at this point to look at its clear ancestor in Hegel’s criticisms of Kant’s theory of freedom. Contrary to what is perhaps generally assumed, Hegel does not necessarily take issue with the idea of drawing a divide between the realm of natural causality and that of a free, rational will. The problem that Hegel sees in Kant’s theory is that, having created this divide, Kant does nothing to bridge the gap again. In other words, there is a sense in which Hegel is a critic of Kant’s theory because he thinks Kant doesn’t go *far enough* with his theory of freedom. Having separated freedom and nature, Hegel thinks, Kant leaves them separated, and this is precisely what Hegel cites as the source of the shortcomings of Kant’s moral theory.

Hegel is fairly clear, for example, in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* that he thinks Kant’s division between freedom and nature is an important one. By way of introducing his discussion of Kant, he says: “It is a great advance when the principle is established that freedom is the last hinge on which man turns, a highest possible pinnacle, which allows nothing further to be imposed upon it; thus man bows to no authority, and acknowledges no obligations, where his freedom is not respected.”²¹ Of course, as we have already seen, Hegel is misrepresenting Kant’s theory of freedom to a certain extent. Kant’s

20. Charles Taylor, “Hegel, History and Politics” in *Liberalism and Its Critics*, ed. Michael Sandel (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 177–199, at 191.

21. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 3, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (New York: Humanities Press, 1974), 459.

sense of freedom is not one in which no authority or obligation is recognized. Being free is being subject to a moral law that one gives to oneself, and not some sort of arbitrary freedom in which we merely do whatever we like. But despite this overstatement, Hegel's admiration of the idea of freedom still stands, and is further echoed in several passages in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. In the introductory sections of his work, Hegel begins with the same concept of freedom. So, for example, he explains that "the will contains the element of *pure indeterminacy* or of the 'I's pure reflection into itself, in which every limitation, every content, whether present immediately through nature, through needs, desires, and drives, or given and determined in some other way, is dissolved."²²

In fact, Hegel has his own terminology for this type of freedom—he calls it "personal freedom."²³ When I act under personal freedom, I choose which of my desires I will follow. My act is my own, and not determined by external forces.²⁴ And Hegel does not think that personal freedom is unimportant. In fact, he reserves a special sphere of rights, a sphere that he calls "abstract right," for this kind of freedom. Abstract right provides a site for personal freedom and includes, for example, the right to do whatever one wishes to do with one's own personal property, so long as this does not interfere with the rights

22. G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), section 5.

23. For an especially informative discussion of the types of freedom in Hegel's political thought, see Frederick Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). For simplicity's sake, in this discussion I focus only on what Hegel and Neuhouser call the "external realization" of the three types of freedom discussed here. Hegel is also concerned with another aspect of freedom, characterized in his claim that freedom consists of "being with oneself in another." Though this sense of freedom is essential to fully understanding Hegel's own theory, for the purposes of comparing his notion of freedom with Kant's, I leave it aside here. For a discussion of these two aspects of Hegelian freedom, see Neuhouser, 20–24.

24. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, section 35.

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of others.²⁵ Though Hegel seems to associate personal freedom with Kant's philosophy (for example, in the passage quoted above), Kant is also clearly concerned with a second type of freedom that Hegel calls "moral freedom." This type of freedom, according to Hegel, is the type of freedom we use when we act on a rule or principle that we give to ourselves, or when we limit our behavior based on our conception of moral conduct.²⁶ Generalizing, then, we might say that Hegel's notion of "personal freedom" is similar to Kant's idea of humanity, understood in terms of a rational will that is able to set ends for itself, while "moral freedom" is similar to Kant's notion of personality or autonomy, the ability to act on a law one gives to oneself.

But what is crucial to note about both of these types of freedom is that Hegel does not think that we can even make sense of what is important about them, or what kinds of decisions to make with them, without a broader story about the social life we lead. Without this additional information, these initial types of freedom are essentially without content. To understand Hegel's claim, it is perhaps useful to draw an analogy with Hegel's criticisms of Kant's categorical imperative. Hegel's criticism in that context is that Kant abstracts so much information in order to find a principle of morality that is necessary and universal that he robs the categorical imperative of the information necessary to make decisions and motivate agents. Indeed, Hegel thinks, in order to get his procedure to work, Kant is actually forced to smuggle in empirical information about, for example, the consequences of telling lies.²⁷

Similar concerns about the emptiness of abstraction mo-

25. *Ibid.*, section 42. Since we practice our personal freedom by appropriating and using parts of the physical world, an account of property rights makes sense as part of the account of personal freedom.

26. Neuhauser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory*, 25.

27. G. W. F. Hegel, *Natural Law: The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, Its Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law*, trans. T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 80.

tivate Hegel's worries about the incompleteness of personal and moral freedoms. Recall that personal freedom, for Hegel, consists in our ability to choose which desires to follow. Moral freedom, we might say, stands in a kind of hierarchical and limiting relationship to personal freedom. Through the use of moral freedom, we are able to choose a course of action that accords with our own conception of what is right or good. But without some further information about what is right and good, or where we might look in order to discover these facts, any account of moral and personal freedom runs the risk of being empty.²⁸ Thus, in order to decide "when freedom in the ordinary sense is objectively valuable, and when it is not" Hegel thinks we need to introduce a third type of freedom.²⁹ This type of freedom is what Hegel calls social freedom, and it exists within what he calls "ethical life."

Hegel's claim in the *Philosophy of Right* is that, within the sphere of ethical life, a subject's duties are defined through the role that he or she plays in that community, understood as a collection of "rational social institutions."³⁰ These rational social institutions thus provide content and direction for moral and personal freedom. As Hegel explains: "In an ethical community, it is easy to say *what* someone must do and *what* the duties are which he has to fulfill in order to be virtuous. He must simply do what is prescribed, expressly stated, and known to him within his situation."³¹ And though passages like this one may make it seem as though Hegel wants us simply to obey (perhaps

28. In Kant's moral philosophy, of course, this information is provided by pure practical reason. But this will not satisfy Hegel. As Neuhausser puts it, Hegelian "moral subjects lack the resources to give complete, non-arbitrary content to the concept of the good" (32).

29. Allen Wood, editor's introduction to Kant, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, xv. See also Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 36-40.

30. Neuhausser, 32.

31. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, section 150.

reluctantly) the dictates of our community and institutions, Hegel thinks that this sense of compulsion is not part of ethical life. Rather, these institutions are themselves intended to reflect the roles we already play in our personal lives.

The fact that rational social institutions are constructed to reflect our roles as private citizens explains, then, how it is easier for a person in Hegel's society to *know* what his duty is, and why it is easier for the member of this society to act on this knowledge, once recognized. In ethical life, Hegel thinks, one loses the sense of separation between oneself and others that is (allegedly) a part of the Kantian picture. For Hegel, life in his society is a form of "being-with-oneself-in-another" that makes it less likely that I will view my needs as conflicting with the needs of others. The analogy often suggested for this idea is that of the relationship between organs and the body that they make up. The individual organ's role and purpose is to support the functioning of the body, which, in turn, supports the existence of the organ. In this sense, one might say, the organ's "interests" just are the interests of the whole.

It is worth noting at this point the similarities that contemporary theories share with Hegel's concerns about the lack of content in personal and moral freedom. As I read him, Alasdair MacIntyre is making a similar point when he worries that abstract, universal laws that apply to "man as such" are a "painful illusion." Without a further story to tell about how laws are grounded in a conception of the good, or how they help us advance toward the ends of a narrative, MacIntyre, like Hegel, thinks such laws are essentially empty. MacIntyre's solution to this problem is, as we have seen, to ensure that human activity is always placed within the context of a narrative that provides meaning. Hegel's solution for reunifying the realms of freedom and nature lies in his account of Social Freedom and *Sittlichkeit*, or Ethical Life. For Hegel, citizens can make sense of their other freedoms only when they are a part of this

system. Social Freedom and Ethical Life provide content and meaning to all the other freedoms we have and value.

A Kantian Conception of Community (An Overview)

The remainder of the discussion in this book is in many respects a response to the type of criticism raised by Hegel and contemporary philosophers who criticize Kant's theory on the grounds that it lacks a meaning-providing narrative or unifying goal. Of course, there is a sense in which no interpretation of Kantian ethics will be able to satisfy the conditions that these critics set for intelligibility. A central and unmovable tenet of Kant's moral philosophy is, and must be, that the source of the moral law (and thus the ultimate justification for moral action) stems from reason alone. A Kantian will never be able to locate the ground of morality in a teleological conception of goodness alone, nor can the ground of morality be dictated by what is good for a community, as Hegel understands it.

But there is another sense in which Kant's moral philosophy can easily rise to the challenge that these critics set forth. This is because involved in the very moral law that our reason recognizes as universally binding and necessary is a notion of an end or goal toward which moral action is geared. One of the main tasks of chapter 1 will be to demonstrate how this is possible within the context of Kant's theory. There, I argue several crucial points: first, that Kant's ethics, though strictly speaking non-teleological and non-consequentialist, is importantly goal oriented. Second, that this goal is best understood as an ethical community, achievable on earth within the course of human history. Third, I argue that, once we recognize this fact, we are able to see that, while the initial justification of Kantian morality stems from reason alone, this very understanding of morality issues forth a notion of the goals of morality that can help guide and justify future actions.

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By the end of the first chapter, I will have argued that Kant's most plausible and mature account of the highest good is one in which this goal is shared by a community as an end of human history. However, I will still need to show not just that the highest good is a state of affairs that agents *enjoy* communally, but also that it is a state of affairs that agents can *work toward* communally. So, in chapter 2, I outline what I take to be Kant's theory of moral choice and action and argue that it allows for a crucial social component. Specifically, Kant's theory of moral choice and action makes most sense if we see Kantian agents as involved in a project of developing a moral character that is based on their recognition of the moral law. This account of a Kantian moral character, I argue, has two major benefits. First, it allows for a much more plausible account of moral choice and action than an account that describes agents as making countless individual moral decisions. Second, it helps us see how community could be involved in our progress toward the highest good. Specifically, I will argue, social institutions and relationships are central to developing this moral character in agents. And, of course, with moral character thus encouraged and developed, agents are in a better position to pursue and achieve the end of the highest good.

In chapters 3 through 5, I examine in detail the various social institutions that play a role in helping us accomplish the highest good, in the form of an ethical community. In chapter 3, I examine Kant's philosophy of education, and argue that, despite appearances to the contrary, Kant's philosophy of education is entirely consistent with his moral epistemology and account of moral motivation. His account of early education emphasizes discipline, to be sure, but the goal of such discipline—and moral education in general—is to foster a character that is receptive to learning and to applying the moral law. We will see that Kant has a carefully organized plan for education, one that teaches children to appreciate the value of their own

freedom and ultimately respect this value in others. As Kant himself points out, education is thus an irreplaceable component of a community's progress toward the highest good.³²

Chapter 4 examines the role that friendship plays in the development of moral character. Kant follows Aristotle in outlining several types of friendship, and I argue that one type of friendship in particular, one that Kant calls "moral friendship," provides a sense of complete trust in which agents are able to engage in moral self-examination and improvement, without fear of the types of judgment and comparison that pervade other relationships. The ability to examine and improve upon oneself morally is, of course, a crucial part of developing a moral character that will be more likely to pursue the end of an ethical community.

Chapter 5 argues that civic life and public participation are also key components in our progress toward the highest good. The first section in this chapter argues that a system of externally coercible laws can in fact play an important role in such progress toward the highest good, despite its being founded upon an awareness of human imperfection. Specifically, such laws make it possible for virtuous agents to pursue and sometimes accomplish the ends that they set for themselves, even if they live in society with others who are not motivated by the moral law (and who may, therefore, thwart others' pursuit of their ends). The second part of chapter 5 argues that participation in civic life and a republican government contributes to our progress toward the highest good by fostering our ability to think for ourselves and to think from the standpoint of others. These two capacities, Kant argues, are crucial to our ability to reason morally—and thus achieve an ethical community.

What appears throughout the discussion that follows, then,

32. Immanuel Kant, "Lectures on Pedagogy," in *History, Anthropology, and Education*, trans. Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), Ak 9:448.

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is that Kant's moral philosophy is concerned with community on several different levels and that, ideally, the Kantian agent's life will be marked by involvement in community from early education through adulthood. Kantian agents have an obligation to pursue a communal end, and they do so by participating fully in social institutions and relationships. Far from being isolated and unattached agents, then, Kantian agents are—and are expected to be—deeply concerned with and involved in their communities.