The Ethics of Common Human Reason – Method, Moral-Psychology, Self-Deception and Education in Kant

I discuss Kant’s notion of the pre-theoretical understanding of morality, which is widely acknowledged as crucial to a proper understanding of his ethics and political philosophy, yet detailed and substantive historical and systematic discussion of this key topic is scarce. The point I want to establish is that Kant believes that philosophers can and should learn from the common perspective for their search and vindication of a supreme principle of morality, and for this enterprise, at least as a preparatory step, engage philosophically uneducated agents in dialogue or listen to and observe what these agents have to say about morally relevant cases. The most controversial claim I will defend is that Kant’s ethics has important empirical elements. I will discuss what these empirical elements are, how the philosopher can learn about them, and how they can be part of an ethics that stresses its conceptual purity. Furthermore, my book contains a novel look at Kant’s conception of the Fact of Reason, the different formulae of the Categorical Imperative, Kant’s philosophical method, conception of rationality, moral education and the role of the practical philosopher.

In chapter 1, I situate common rational capacities in Kant’s framework of rational capacities. For this purpose I offer a taxonomy of rational capacities and their functions in Kant. I discuss the differences between the common agent, the academically educated person and the philosopher. I then provide a brief developmental history of the notion of common rational capacities in Kant’s philosophy and show that common rational capacities are an important element of Kant’s ethical anti-elitism.

In chapter 2, I discuss in detail the two most significant appeals to common rational capacities in Kant’s practical philosophy. They are said to confirm the Groundwork’s deduction and to accredit the Fact of Reason. The controversial point I establish in this chapter is that common rational capacities are more important for the Second Critique than for Groundwork I and the Groundwork in general. Common rational capacities are a point of reference throughout Kant’s philosophical enterprise and even play crucial roles for his attempt to philosophically vindicate his practical philosophy. Kant aims to show that even his complicated philosophical deduction, and the assumption of a Fact of Reason are supported by common commitments. Amongst Kant’s appeals to common rational capacities his Second Critique accreditation of the Fact of Reason stands out, since here common rational capacities do not merely serve as a starting point, or confirmation of philosophical operations but as foundational for Kant’s enterprise.

In chapter 3, I argue against approaches in the literature which understand ordinary cognition of duty as something passive. When we look at how Kant actually describes ordinary moral cognition, a more appealing picture emerges. The common agent is an active seeker of moral truth who can orient her reasoning on the notion of universality in the form of pre-theoretical common universalization tests. In addition, the common agent is aware that rational beings must be treated in ways different from mere objects. Furthermore, I argue that the different ways of ordinary cognition of duty are at the bottom of the two main formulations of the Categorical Imperative. My investigation offers a rationale as to why there are different formulae of the same principle.
In chapter 4, I critically evaluate Kant’s conception of common human reason. I focus on two problems: Firstly, did Kant overlook the intuitive appeal of consequences and, secondly, is Kant’s idea that common human reason is universally shared too optimistic? With regard to the former, I show a number of ways in which consequences do matter for Kant. Kant, however, maintains that consequences are not foundational for ethics. I argue that whilst this makes Kant’s ethics counterintuitive in some cases, it helps his ethics achieve greater systematic consistency and a more secure grounding. With regard to the latter, I argue that, pace Kant, we should be open to the possibility that there are rational agents whose reasoning does not work on the Kantian framework. Furthermore, Kant is interested in rational commitments not necessarily in what agents say or believe about morality. This touches the difficult issue of how invasive and revisionary philosophical engagement with common agents can and should be. I discuss this in detail in chapters 8 and 9.

In chapter 5, I turn to the possibility of corruption of common rational capacities discussed mostly under the label “rationalizing”. I discuss in detail *Groundwork IV*:405, a passage in which Kant introduces rationalizing as an element of his critical practical philosophy and in which he in a very dense manner explains the foundations and workings of this phenomenon. I then turn to the background of rationalizing in Kant’s moral psychology and metaphysics of agency and explain what it means that rationalizing is a rational activity. For this purpose I discuss the way different aspects of an agent’s rationality contribute to rationalizing. The main yield of this chapter is that I show how rationalizing does not only concern questions of motivation but general features of one’s conception of morality, and I explain the often overlooked roles pure and empirical practical reason play for this process.

In chapter 6, I address two objections against the possibility of rationalizing on a Kantian framework. Firstly, rational agents can never lose their connection to the moral law entirely, and, secondly, rationalizing seems to be impossible since conscience unfailingly warns agents before every moral transgression. I concede the first point and explain in detail how Kant envisages the process of corrupting one’s common rational capacities. I then turn to conscience and argue that we should reject Kant’s notion of conscience as an infallible internal court and rather think of conscience as an internal panel. This allows us to maintain that conscience has a central function and also that the danger of self-deception is a real and substantial one and requires critical philosophy to address it.

In chapter 7, I turn to the question of moral education and moral improvement through philosophical instruction. There are four types of moral education or moral instruction on a Kantian framework: (i) Education is necessary for agents to make the transition from a purely instrumental to a pure practical use of reason (Basic Education). (ii) Education can strengthen the motivational force of the moral law by presenting the moral law in its full dignity and clarity (Motivational Education). (iii) Education can instruct agents about the source of morality and offer an abstract formula of the Categorical Imperative (Philosophical Education). (iv) Education can enhance agents’ capacity to apply general moral principles to concrete cases (Education of Judgment). The third of these is in particular aimed against rationalizing.
In chapter 8, I turn to the question of how the Kantian philosopher can know of the common understanding of morality. I argue against Grenberg’s recent book. I discuss in detail how empirical elements can be part of an ethics that stresses the purity of the source of morality and of the moral motive as well as the non-contingency of duties. I suggest that we understand purity as a claim about source and motives of morality only. This leaves open that philosophers can gain insight from interaction with other agents. I label this a third-personal approach to ethics as opposed to Grenberg’s first-personal or phenomenological approach. Understanding Kant as recommending a third-personal approach to ethics is systematically more attractive and it has better textual support.

In chapter 9, I discuss how Kant envisages the philosopher’s interaction with other agents in a way such that philosophers can gain understanding of the common perspective from it. The philosopher has to investigate common agent’s moral judgments and perform certain cleansing procedures in order to isolate the rational content of these judgments from impure and idiosyncratic elements. What these cleansing procedures are, is suggested in two puzzling and largely neglected passages in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, namely, V:92 and V:163. In these passages Kant claims that practical philosophers should follow the paradigm of the chemist and conduct *experiments*, albeit not on chemical elements but on common human reason. I clarify Kant’s conception of the chemical experiment as a method of decomposition and recombination and show how this method is to be applied to agents’ reactions to thought experiments and to philosophical engagement with them.

I close with a critical discussion of the problem that, on the one hand, the philosopher should isolate the *rational* content of ordinary cognition, and, on the other hand, she must be open to what agents actually have to say (which is not always rational). Imagine the common agent being unable to find her convictions in Kantian moral theory. No matter how much Kant (or a Kantian) explains and how many examples he presents, the common agent does not judge or react in the way Kant expects. Would Kant think that persistent disagreement between him and the common agent must be the fault of the common agent and due to hidden and persistent rationalizing, or does Kant take the common agent so seriously that he would be willing to have himself corrected by continued failure to obtain the confirmation of the common agent?