


Philosophy in Review



Otfried Höffe, 'Kant's Critique of Practical Reason: A Philosophy of Freedom.' Trans. Manfred Weltecke

Alexander Schwittek 

Volume 44, numéro 3, août 2024

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1113569ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1113569ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (imprimé)

1920-8936 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Schwittek, A. (2024). Compte rendu de [Otfried Höffe, 'Kant's Critique of Practical Reason: A Philosophy of Freedom.' Trans. Manfred Weltecke]. *Philosophy in Review*, 44(3), 16–18. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1113569ar>

© Alexander Schwittek, 2024



Cet document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Otfried Höffe. *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason: A Philosophy of Freedom*. Trans. Manfred Weltecke. University of Wales Press 2023. 296 pp. \$99.00 USD (Hardcover 9781837720453).

This year marks the 300th birthday of Immanuel Kant, an occasion celebrated with the gathering of hundreds of Kant scholars in Bonn, Germany, for the international Jubilee conference. Among these scholars is Otfried Höffe, one of the most distinguished and renowned experts in Kant's philosophy. With nearly his entire professional life dedicated to studying, interpreting, and teaching Kant's works, Höffe's contributions to the field are profound and extensive. His scholarship has deepened our understanding of Kant's philosophy and ensured its continued relevance in contemporary philosophical discourse.

In the first English edition of *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason: A Philosophy of Freedom*, an abridged and updated version of Höffe's seminal work initially published in German, the author systematically introduces the most essential aspects of Kant's practical philosophy and relates them to contemporary debates in which Kant's voice is still heard. The central theme of the book revolves around the notion that '[a]ll of Kant's critical thinking is ultimately about morality and freedom' (xii). Höffe positions himself as 'heterodox' (194) within Kant scholarship and guides the reader through Kant's practical philosophy, shedding light on its core driving forces, Kant's revolutionary impact on moral philosophy, and the provocations inherent in Kant's practical philosophy. Also, Höffe delves into political philosophy, the philosophy of history, and Kant's perspectives on religion and education.

The book originated from a lecture and interpretation seminar Höffe conducted as his final course at the University of Tübingen in the Winter term of 2010/11. Traces of the oral presentation can still be recognized. It is, therefore, the sum of the reflection and interpretations of a lifelong engagement with Kant's philosophy. It is one of the most sophisticated systematic engagements of his practical philosophy unrivalled, both in German and English Kant scholarship and echoes Höffe's motto: 'I Kant get no satisfaction' (xii). The first English version is slightly shortened and updated. Splendidly translated by Manfred Weltecke, a trained philosopher familiar with Kant, it remains faithful to the technical terminology that plays a significant role in understanding Kant correctly and preventing hermeneutical disputes stemming from avoidable wrong translations. Moreover, as it is common in Kant scholarship, it uses the standard pagination of the edition by the Prussian Academy of Sciences, the *Akademieausgabe*, to quote Kant's work. The book combines a thematic discussion with careful and in-depth interpretations of Kant's texts. The result is an overview saturated with material that forms an informative companion to the various parts of Kant's practical philosophy.

The book is structured into four main parts, each further divided into sub-sections. The primary text is preceded by an informative 'Preface' setting the tone of the book. In the instructive 'Introduction' Höffe delineated four 'pre-eminent motivating forces' (1) of Kant's philosophy. These encompass the Enlightenment, characterized by the imperative of autonomous thinking, the methodological aspiration of critique exemplified through the juridical analogy of a trial, morality as the most overarching motif, and cosmopolitanism. Höffe states that these elements are essential



for comprehending Kant's philosophy and also crucial for 'our contemporary civilization' (1).

Part I, entitled 'Kant's Revolution of Moral Philosophy', explores the core themes of Kant's moral philosophy, including his substantial critique of the principle of happiness, a comprehensive explication of the supreme principle of morality (the categorical imperative), as well as the more intricate concepts of the freedom of the will and the fact of reason.

Part II, 'Kant's Provocations', identifies four primary provocations posited by Kant that have had a lasting impact on philosophy. According to Höffe, these provocations encompass the notion of the highest good and the essential feeling of respect. Additionally, Höffe highlights Kant's doctrine of the postulates of practical reason, emphasizes the sharp dichotomy drawn by Kant between duty and desire, and underscores Kant's central claim that metaphysics is essential for a sound and persuasive justification of moral principles. This claim starkly contrasts with contemporary skeptical views on metaphysical justifications. It is noteworthy that Höffe presents a compelling argument for a closer relationship between Aristotle and Kant, challenging the traditional view of them as opposites, proposing a more profound connection beyond superficial categorizations and oversimplified generalizations of their respective ethical paradigms. Höffe asserts that the normative paradigm of Aristotelian ethics, rooted in the idea of εὐδαιμονία (eudaimonia), contrasts with Kant's deontological approach, which focuses on concepts of autonomy and the self-legislation of the will. However, for Höffe, due to a 'number of fundamental similarities, Kant proves to be an Aristotelian in the way he practices moral philosophy' (130). He connivingly argues for this deeper connection, which is often neglected within the mainstream view of Kant and Aristotle. In particular, he stresses that both philosophers held similar standpoints regarding the question of metaphysics, as they '[b]oth develop a metaphysical ethics free of metaphysics, namely a genuinely practical fundamental philosophy largely independent of their theoretical fundamental philosophy' (138).

Part III, titled 'World Politics and World History', constitutes a comprehensive analysis of Kant's political theory, focusing on its ultimate goal of peace. This section explores peace's unique and foundational role in Kant's political thought, its integration with his Philosophy of History, and his cosmopolitan stance.

In Part IV, Höffe delves into themes typically considered peripheral but nonetheless substantial to Kant's thought, including his Philosophy of Religion, his views on education, and the concept of human beings as the ultimate end.

The final chapter, 'A Look at the More Recent German Debate', is worth mentioning on its own. Added specifically for the English edition, it offers a selective overview of the current German debate, along with an outline of the most significant new publications and projects. Moreover, Höffe attests and criticizes a growing insufficient proficiency in German that leads to 'a great loss of quality in the international debate on his work' (230). Höffe's summary in this chapter is especially valuable for those seeking an understanding of the nuances and developments within the fruitful German discussion. His book concludes with an 'Afterword' looking at noteworthy global English secondary literature on Kant. Furthermore, the extensive 'Bibliography' and 'Index' are instrumental in navigating the text and digging deeper into the subject matter.

As far as criticism is concerned, Höffe surprisingly does not discuss the controversial debate on Kant's philosophy of race. In recent years, Kant's philosophy of race has come under increasing scrutiny, which has rightly shifted the debate towards a more critical examination of his ideas. Kant made numerous derogatory remarks about people of colour. His views on race are not merely incidental but are found in numerous notes, lecture manuscripts, and scattered remarks in published texts. He was preoccupied with race for decades and was one of the first German-speaking representatives to put forward a scientific concept of race. The discussion in the literature on these topics is extensive and ranges from apologetic contributions that reject any criticism to works that refer to him as the founder of scientific racism, as he was instrumental in spreading and popularizing the concept. Remarkably, these discussions are absent from Höffe's reconstruction of Kant's practical philosophy. His account predominantly highlights Kant as an Enlightened thinker, emphasizing his contributions to ethics, autonomy, and rationality. While these aspects are undoubtedly central and are, until today, the most crucial resource for justifying universalistic moral principles, this portrayal can be misleading if it neglects to address particular areas of his philosophy that are *prima facie* at odds with his ethics. Additionally, Kant's sexist views on women are another critical area that is not mentioned. Kant described women as being naturally inferior to men in terms of moral agency as they are not receptive to moral obligation, and he also excluded them from the citizen body as he only grants them passive citizenship. While Höffe's reconstruction of Kant's practical philosophy may present him in an overwhelmingly positive light, it is crucial to tackle the full scope of Kant's legacy. A crucial question remains: How can one reconcile Kant's universal moral principles with his disparaging remarks about non-Whites and women? I would have liked to hear Höffe's illuminating thoughts on this intricate question as well as an engagement with recent literature.

Overall, *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason. A Philosophy of Freedom* is a mandatory tool for anyone interested in Kant's practical philosophy and its legacy, whether they are students, instructors, or researchers. The textbook's character makes it an ideal companion for students examining Kant's works. It perfectly complements the original texts by providing clarity and additional insights that can enhance understanding. With its structured explanations and thoughtful commentary, it helps to make Kant's practical philosophy more accessible. Nevertheless, and I cannot stress this enough, it does not make reading the original text superfluous. Instead, it encourages the reader to delve deeper into the debates. Furthermore, the book is not just beneficial for students; it is also an excellent resource for instructors. It can be used as a supplementary tool in the classroom, aiding the teaching process, especially for students engaging with Kant's text for the first time. Its comprehensive approach ensures teachers can navigate Kant's philosophy more effectively in seminars without risking leaving students behind.

Alexander Schwitteck, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn