



1997

## Review of Roger J. Sullivan, An Introduction to Kant's Ethics (1994)

Harry van der Linden

Butler University, hvanderl@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch\\_papers](http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers)

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

van der Linden, Harry, "Review of Roger J. Sullivan, An Introduction to Kant's Ethics (1994)" *Kant-Studien* / (1997): 350-353.  
Available at [http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch\\_papers/41](http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/41)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact [omacisaa@butler.edu](mailto:omacisaa@butler.edu).

Permission to post this publication in our archive was granted by the copyright holder, K. G. Saur Verlag - ein Imprint der Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG ([www.degruyter.com](http://www.degruyter.com)). This copy should be used for educational and research purposes only.

The original publication appeared at:  
van der Linden, Harry. Review of Roger J. Sullivan, *An Introduction to Kant's Ethics* (1994), *Kant-Studien* 88 (1997): 350-53.

DOI: not available

dieses *zugleich* zum spezifisch transzendentalen Bestimmen. So erreicht Vf. schließlich dennoch qua Topik den apodiktischen Charakter aller echten Transzendentalphilosophie!

III. Aus Probe wie Gegenprobe folgt somit gleichermaßen, daß die Darlegungen des Vf. nicht den mindesten Aufschluß über Methode und Argumentation der transzendentalen Erkenntnis zu geben vermögen. Ein Rekurs auf die für „reputable Meinungen“ (S. 207) zuständige „Topik“ kann allenfalls für das Verständnis der Diskussionslage oder der *kommunikativen Situation* hilfreich sein, die zum einen Kants Unternehmen einer Kritik der reinen Vernunft *veranlaßt*, aber per se keineswegs philosophisch nezesitiert hat. Zum anderen mag sie als Instrumentarium gebraucht werden, den – unweigerlich faktisch-empirisch geprägten – Gang der *Rezeption* des Kritizismus zu beschreiben. Dabei könnte sie dann durchaus den Status reflexiver Hermeneutik beanspruchen (vgl. *KrV* B 766/767, B 780).

Im Zusammenhang mit den mitunter arg topischen Verläufen der Rezeption seiner kritischen Philosophie hat übrigens Kant gelegentlich seinen transzendentalen Ansatz über den geläufigen Standard der einführenden Partien der *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* hinaus erläutert. Dies geschieht vor allem in seiner Streitschrift gegen Eberhard (*Über eine Entdeckung, nach der alle neue Kritik der reinen Vernunft durch eine ältere entbehrlich gemacht werden soll*). Eine wirkliche Arbeit über Methode und Argumentation in Kants kritischer Philosophie könnte sich – worauf etwa auch H. E. Allison hingewiesen hat – diese wertvollen Handreichungen zunutze machen.

So gehört Leitners Buch zur langen (und täglich wundersam wachsenden) Liste von Arbeiten, die ungeachtet ihrer durchaus zu würdigenden Bemühungen im Einzelnen, das Ganze der Aufgabe verfehlt haben und verfehlen mußten, weil sie durch fundamentale Ebenenverwechslung (hier sogar durch mehrfache) dem Kern des kritizistischen Ansatzes nicht gerecht geworden – ja ihm sogar planmäßig ausgewichen – sind. Diese viele auch bekannte Autorennamen umfassende Liste verdient die Gattungsbezeichnung „lectiones *Kanti* ut non-*Kanti*“. Man kann diese auch als Variable lesen, denn mit anderen Philosophiegrößen, etwa Wittgenstein und Heidegger, wird eine ebenso muntere „doctrina ignorans“ getrieben.

Manfred Gawlina, München und Neapel

Roger J. Sullivan: *An Introduction to Kant's Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994, viii + 183 pages.

This solid but accessible and clearly-written introduction to Kant's ethics draws at times heavily from Sullivan's more technical and comprehensive *Immanuel Kant's Moral Theory* (1989). The introductory work, however, fully stands on its own with one unfortunate exception: Only citations from the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* are referenced; with regard to all other citations from Kant's work, Sullivan states (p. 2) that the references can be found in the "relevant sections" of his 1989 work. What seems to have motivated Sullivan to adopt this reference procedure is that his exposition of Kant's ethics is centered around the *Foundations* and aimed primarily at undergraduate students who are introduced to

Kant's moral theory through this book. Even so, the space saved does not seem worth the inconvenience created for students or other readers who on basis of Sullivan's text want to explore some specific aspects of Kant's work beyond the *Foundations*.

Sullivan's book has ten short chapters. In the first chapter, he introduces Kant's moral theory on basis of his political theory, writing that this format "has proved extraordinarily helpful to my students in illuminating just those parts of Kant's moral theory that are usually the hardest for them to comprehend and appreciate" (p. 1). Sullivan describes Kant as a liberal thinker committed to the rule of law, the right of each individual to pursue his own conception of happiness, and the idea that each person has dignity based on his capacity for moral autonomy. Sullivan shows that Kant's liberal commitments led him to formulate the Universal Principle of Justice as the foundation of the good society, but, adhering to a formalist reading of Kant, he nonetheless claims that "an appeal to the principle of noncontradiction ... proves the correctness of the Universal Principle" (p. 13). He further characterizes Kant as a *classical* liberal who viewed the task of the government as fundamentally negative, apparently giving little significance to the latter's claim that it is the duty of the state "to maintain those members of the society who are unable to maintain themselves" (Ak VI, 326).

Sullivan proceeds to sketch how Kant's liberal ideas shaped his moral thought. He also argues that the tyranny of Frederick the Great and Machiavelli's work significantly influenced Kant's moral thought. Here the links are less convincing or illuminating. Sullivan maintains, for example, that Kant learned from Machiavelli that "people have engaged in all sorts of conduct," and that, therefore, "moral norms cannot be based on experience" (p. 22). A more serious problem is that Sullivan fails to make clear how his linking of Kant's political and moral thought is to be interpreted: Is it a reconstruction, a mere mode of exposition chosen for pedagogical purposes, or an account of how Kant's political convictions and experiences actually informed his ethics? Sullivan seems to pursue all three, and this invites misunderstanding. He rightly notes that the Universal Principle of Justice must bring harmony between human beings with diverse conceptions of happiness and that the categorical imperative in the *Foundations* has a similar purpose. However, it must be confusing for beginning students to read that "in the *Foundations* Kant restated [the Universal Principle of Justice] so it would apply not only to our behavior but also to our aims and motives" (p. 28; my emphasis).

Chapters 2–6 discuss, respectively, Kant's explication and justification of the categorical imperative, the universal-law formula, the formula of respect for persons, the formula of the realm of ends, and the "limits of the categorical imperative." These chapters, with the exception of the last one, are primarily expository. In my view, a more critical approach is preferable. Of course, an introductory text should not so much engage in critical analysis that the main picture might be lost or that students are left wondering why they should study the philosopher under discussion, but Sullivan at times ignores clear gaps or problems in Kant's arguments. Thus Sullivan simply restates, for instance, Kant's inadequate argument that since the good will is motivated by duty rather than by realizing some end of the inclinations, the good will must be guided by the universal-law formula of the categorical imperative. Certainly, this argument must come as a surprise to students who define their

good character, say, in terms of a commitment to the Golden Rule or the Ten Commandments. Other examples are that Sullivan hardly addresses the many difficulties involved in formulating maxims and that he does not assess Kant's doctrine of natural ends (teleology). A more critical approach, I think, would not only stimulate beginning students to become engaged in critical assessment of Kant's ethics, but would also provide an opportunity to discuss how Kant's work has led to a diverse Kantian tradition in ethics.

In his discussion of the universal-law formula, Sullivan insists that the "ultimate moral norm is a purely formal law, completely empty of all content, ... showing its roots in the logical principle of noncontradiction" (p. 41). Relatedly, he claims that the denial of the moral law "results in a practical incoherency" (p. 35) and that even though "the Categorical Imperative requires us to assess the consequences of the adoption of a particular maxim, it is concerned only with the *formal* or *logical* consequences" (p. 51). Sullivan's use of the term "logical" is puzzling here, for in testing the universalizability of a maxim one must hypothetically consider what the empirical consequences of its universal adoption would be. Further, a "practical contradiction" emerges only if one accepts the idea that maxims should be universalizable and then proposes to act on a non-universalizable maxim. The person who rejects the universal-law formula altogether and acts on a non-universalizable maxim is not engaged in a "practical absurdity" (p. 22). What needs to be shown is why we should be committed to this formula. What justifies the formula? Sullivan's introductory chapter provides an answer — the formula is the constitutive principle of the ideal community of free rational agents — but his formalist interpretation prevents him from explicitly defending it.

In the chapter on the "limits of the categorical imperative," Sullivan argues that "the Categorical Imperative does *not* offer us a recipe for making our specific moral decisions" (p. 94) and must instead be seen as a procedure for determining general moral rules that require moral judgment for their application to specific situations. One attractive feature of this interpretation is that it solves the problem of ethical rigorism: Moral rules are valid without exception, but in a particular situation one may judge that one rule overrides another relevant rule. Applying this insight to Kant's infamous *On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives*, it follows that the maxim of lying is always immoral, but we may lie in order to save a life. Sullivan adds: "The problem is that here, as elsewhere, Kant did not clearly distinguish between judging the moral quality of a *maxim* and judging *how to act* in a particular instance" (p. 103). Another strength of Sullivan's view of the limits of the categorical imperative is that it makes Kant's claim more plausible that the demands of morality are clear to common human reason. The claim applies only to general moral rules; error, moral disagreement, and the like, emerge primarily with respect to judgments of how to apply these rules (cf. p. 105). One price paid, however, is that Sullivan significantly restricts the scope of Kantian ethics, especially since he denies the possibility of substantive Kantian guidelines for making particular moral judgments (see p. 39–41).

Chapter 7 discusses how Kant developed the distinction between prudence and morality, while chapter 8 addresses his view of moral character, nonmoral feelings, and respect for the moral law and other moral feelings. Sullivan corrects in the latter chapter the wrong impression created by the *Foundations* that actions done

out of sympathy lack moral worth. Kant's real view is that those actions have worth if undertaken by a person who has made a basic commitment to the moral law. This commitment then plays the crucial role of constraining or re-directing natural sympathy where morally necessary, as in the case when compassion for someone might lead one to violate that person's autonomy (see p. 146).

Chapter 9 offers an inventory of Kantian duties by addressing three questions: What is the ideal political society? What kind of person should we become? How should our personal relationships be? Sullivan sketches here the ideal Kantian agent as a very gradualist liberal thinker, who treasures friendship and marriage, pursues happiness within moral limits, and helps others in need. There is something fundamental missing from this picture: The Kant who was enthusiastic about the French Revolution, condemned colonialism with sarcasm, disapproved of both standing and paid armies, or held that all property is provisional until the realization of the federation of states. Admittedly, this radical dimension of Kant does not translate into specific duties in his work, but this is an issue that deserves to be discussed in an introductory text on his ethics.

The final chapter of Sullivan's book analyzes the third section of the *Foundations* and is followed by "Suggestions for Further Reading." Sullivan notes that "[f]rom the very beginning, Kant's ideas engendered an enormous secondary literature as well as differing interpretations of those ideas" (p. 175); yet, he limits his suggested readings to recent works by Anglo-American scholars.

Notwithstanding its shortcomings, Sullivan's book would be a good addition to any course that discusses the *Foundations* in detail. The book will help students in understanding this difficult text and provide them with a broader and richer picture of Kant's ethics than they would obtain from the *Foundations* alone, for, where necessary, Sullivan pays ample and careful attention to such works as the second *Critique*, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, and *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

Harry van der Linden, Indianapolis

Markku Leppäkoski: *The Transcendental How. Kant's Transcendental Deduction of Objective Cognition*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International 1993, 280 pages.

This work is a doctoral dissertation defended in 1993 at the University of Stockholm. Its main topic is Kant's theory of synthetic judgments *a priori*. The central thesis which the author argues for is that Kant was largely interested in the question of how it is possible to establish or to justify some synthetic judgments in an *a priori* fashion. Leppäkoski interprets this question to be a "how"-question in contrast to a "that"-question, and he holds that he is in accord here with Kant's own distinction between "how"- and "that"-questions (about which more below). Given this conviction, the title of this study is well chosen. The author believes that if transcendental idealism is true, then the answer to the pertinent "that"-question follows, *i. e.*, the truth of Kant's idealism shows that some synthetic judgments are possible *a priori*. In contrast, to answer the corresponding "how"-question is to provide an account of how transcendental idealism can be established.