1996

Review of Kant's Platonic Revolution in Moral and Political Philosophy

Harry van der Linden

Butler University, hvanderl@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers

Part of the Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation


Available at https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/814

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 digitalscholarship@butler.edu.
which “treat mainly the origins of the Declaration of Right in the political thought and practice of the preceding three centuries that Tocqueville designated the ‘Old Regime’”; English and American influences are not left out of account, but the French provenance of French thought is underscored. The two finest chapters are those of J. K. Wright (“National Sovereignty and the General Will”) and of Keith Baker (“The Idea of a Declaration of Rights”): the first traces the notion of volonté générale in its earliest theological incarnation—the notion of God’s “general will” to save “all men” in Malebranche, Bossuet, and Fénelon—then shows how Rousseau’s “secularized” or civic version of what had been divine was appropriated, used, and abused by Robespierre and Saint-Just; the second shows that while English and (especially) American experience and thought were not irrelevant in producing the Declaration of 1789, that celebrated text is an “immensely complex document” which was “drawn up with enormous difficulty and great urgency”—so that, not surprisingly, it bristles with “linguistic compromises” and “dramatic theoretical tensions.” (In any case, for Keith Baker, it is fortunate that recent Declaration scholarship has begun to “shift attention precisely from questions of origins and influences to questions of meaning and situation.”)

Also good in this helpful and learned volume are Van Kley’s introduction and his chapter on “The Origins of an Anti-Historical Declaration,” and Thomas E. Kaiser’s “The Declaration and French Jurisprudence”—this last chapter throwing valuable light on the transformation of French notions of property between 1789 and 1794.

P. R.


Seung states that Kant had an “incurable penchant for cheating,” but his “fraudulent claims . . . are so ingeniously disguised that they have misled not only his unwary readers but Kant himself” (p. 182). Two of these fraudulent claims are that duties can be derived from the universal-law formula as a consistency test and that The Metaphysics of Morals results from applying the moral law of the Groundwork. What Kant and his readers were misled into believing is that he had developed a cogent formalist ethics. For Seung, the practical enterprise is really a Platonic constructivism: Kant accepted normative Platonism in the Inaugural Dissertation, affirmed it in the first Critique by identifying Platonic Forms with practical Ideas, and, although he seemingly gave it up thereafter, his critical writings are best seen as attempts at its elaboration. The core of Kant’s Platonism is the highest good as social ideal: It is “equivalent to the kingdom of ends,” includes “social institutions of justice,” and is “the ultimate end for Kant’s derivation of of the three formulas of the categorical imperative” (p. 129).

Seung claims that “this is a remarkable outcome and a great surprise,” ignoring much recent Kant scholarship on the highest good. Still, his book is worth reading, notwithstanding its many instances of intellectual arrogance.

H. v. d. L.