

4-1991

Review of Richard L. Velkley, Freedom and the End of Reason: On the Moral Foundation of Kant's Critical Philosophy (1989)

Harry van der Linden

Butler University, hvanderl@butler.edu

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



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

van der Linden, Harry, "Review of Richard L. Velkley, Freedom and the End of Reason: On the Moral Foundation of Kant's Critical Philosophy (1989)" *Philosophy in Review* / (1991): 140-141.

Available at http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/23

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 fgaede@butler.edu.

Permission to post this publication in our archive was granted by the copyright holder, *Philosophy in Review* (<http://web.uvic.ca/hrd/pir/>). *Philosophy in Review* is the new title for the *Canadian Philosophical Reviews*. This copy should be used for educational and research purposes only.

The original publication appeared at:
van der Linden, Harry. Review of Richard L. Velkley, *Freedom and the End of Reason: On the Moral Foundation of Kant's Critical Philosophy* (1989), *Canadian Philosophical Reviews* 11 (April 1991): 140-141.

DOI: not available

Richard L. Velkley
*Freedom and the End of Reason: On the Moral
Foundation of Kant's Critical Philosophy.*
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press
1989. Pp. xxi + 222.
US\$29.95. ISBN 0-226-85260-1.

In this scholarly study, Velkley argues that Kant's notion of the highest good (*summum bonum*) as the (final) end of reason is central not just to Kant's ethics but to his whole critical philosophy. This thesis is not new. The thesis is defended, for example, in Lucien Goldmann's admirable but still neglected *Immanuel Kant* (1971), Yirmiahu Yovel's *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (1980), and my own *Kantian Ethics and Socialism* (1988). What sets Velkley's study apart from these works, however, is that he examines how the notion of the highest good as the ultimate aim and directive force of the critical enterprise evolved in Kant's precritical writings in response to Rousseau and the 'crisis' of instrumental reason (cf. 171-2n.13).

Velkley maintains (6) that the most important record of Kant's 'dialogue' with Rousseau is *Remarks to the Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. The book-length *Remarks* consists of numerous notes written during 1764-65. Although these notes might have been intended by Kant as preparatory notes for a new edition of the *Observations*, Velkley holds that they are 'better regarded as notes to Rousseau's writings' (50). On the basis of a detailed discussion of the *Remarks*, Velkley shows that Rousseau's impact on Kant goes beyond the often noted idea that the categorical imperative is a moral and 'internal' version of the general will. Notably, what Kant learned from Rousseau is that the emancipation project of the modern age (the Enlightenment) was doomed to fail because it was based on a view of reason as an instrument for the satisfaction of the passions. Instrumental reason had set human beings free from the restrictions of the old religious order with its dogmatic teleology but also had contributed to a new human enslavement to egoistic insatiable passions, precluding the realization of a society of civic virtue. Arguing that the passions are mediated by reason and thus culturally influenced, Rousseau showed Kant a way out of this 'crisis' of instrumental reason: Kant developed the idea of reason as legislator of its own moral ends, and held that this form of reason can regulate and modify the passions so that the pursuit of happiness will no longer give rise to social conflict and can be reconciled with the pursuit of virtue.

On Velkley's account, then, it was Rousseau who led Kant to construct a new kind of moral idealism in which reason projects the highest good as a harmony of autonomous beings 'with an appropriate satisfaction of natural desires' (14). The *Remarks*, however, only intimates the ideal of the highest good, and Velkley next discusses how Kant further developed this ideal between 1765 and 1780 in response to both Rousseau and the ancient Cynical, Epicurean, and Stoical accounts of the *summum bonum*. Velkley deals in most detail with the *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Explained by the Dreams*

of Metaphysics (1766), giving less attention to the *Lectures on Ethics* (1775-80). He further shows that during this period Kant also was concerned with developing a metaphysics in accordance with the highest good. Interestingly enough, as early as in the *Remarks* and the *Dreams*, Kant defined metaphysics as 'the science of the limits of human reason' (113). The *Dreams* strikingly anticipates the three *Critiques* in some other regards: it views the limits of reason as beneficial in that Kant held (as Velkley puts it) that 'insight into highest realities is not necessary, and is even distracting, to a firm grasp of the ultimate end of human life' (112). Also, the *Dreams* introduces the 'morality of postulations' in that the belief in immortality is seen as grounded in the infinite task set by ethical demands (110).

In the final chapter, Velkley turns to Kant's critical period and examines more commonly explored areas: the highest good as 'the ultimate end of theoretical inquiry' (136ff.), and the highest good as the resolution of 'culture's contradictions' (152ff.). What is puzzling (although this has its own merits) is that Velkley limits his discussion of the highest good as cultural ideal primarily to Kant's view in the *Reflexionen* (cf. 214n.75).

Velkley formulates in his Preface and Introduction three major aims of his study. He successfully realizes his first aim of demonstrating that the impact of Rousseau on Kant is much more extensive than is commonly thought. One would wish, though, that Velkley had made his discussion more accessible so that it would not presuppose a thorough familiarity with both Kant and Rousseau.

Velkley less successfully realizes his second aim of showing that his analysis of Kant's precritical works clarifies various aspects of the critical writings, in particular, the doctrine of the highest good. To be sure, Velkley's analysis has the merit of underlining that the highest good in the critical corpus is to be seen primarily as a cultural or social ideal because Kant began to develop this ideal in response to the 'crisis' of instrumental reason (cf. 153). However, Velkley notes but does not really analyze such problems as that the Kant of the critical period offered conflicting conceptions of the highest good and that the highest good as a social ideal does not seem to warrant the postulate of a future life. For a discussion of these problems, one must turn, for example, to Lewis White Beck, Yovel, and Thomas Auxter, to whose writings on the highest good Velkley pays surprisingly little or no attention.

Velkley's final objective is to show that Kant's 'dialogue' with Rousseau is important to our contemporary understanding of human emancipation and reason. Although this project seems tenable and worthwhile, I find Velkley's own execution of it in his Epilogue too brief and suggestive to be very helpful. Velkley's interesting historical study should have ended with an equally interesting detailed contemporary conclusion.

Harry van der Linden
Butler University