

11. THE POLEMICAL EMPLOYMENT OF PURE REASON AND KANTIAN ETHICS

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ABSTRACT. From the earliest days of philosophy, polemic has functioned as a common means of philosophical argumentation. Kant spends some time in the *Critique of Pure Reason* analyzing the place of polemic in rational argumentation. Even though it does not provide a legitimate approach to philosophical argument as employed by the dogmatists, Kant's concern for the teaching of the young allows him to raise some issues concerning the ethics of philosophical argumentation also.

I. INTRODUCTION

Philosophical fighting or polemical confrontation has permeated the discipline throughout its history. Plato set himself in opposition to the sophists. Aristotle in turn attacked his teacher. We find similar controversy in the modern period. Locke carries on an extended polemic against Descartes and the Rationalists in the early sections of the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Then, Hume objects to Locke's view. Presumably, the opponents in these philosophical disputes are seeking the truth; but where do we find the truth? What methodological and ethical boundaries limit the discourse? Kant, explicitly treats this matter in the "Transcendental Doctrine of Method" of the first critique.¹

In Chapter I, "The Discipline of Pure Reason" he proposes criteria for evaluating various supposed philosophical methodologies. This paper examines Section 2, "The Discipline of Pure Reason in Respect of its Polemical Employment", a relatively unknown part of Kant's enterprise.² While the material shows Kant's estimate of his predecessors and as such poses an interesting historical problem, it also displays his understanding of the more general necessity for coordinating philosophical method with ethics. Kant must relate the ethics of intellectual argument with the rationality of intellectual argument without blurring the legitimate distinctions between these two aspects of argumentation. If he cannot achieve such an ordering, he has an internal conflict between philosophical methodology and general ethical principles as he later develops them in the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* and *The Critique of Practical Reason*.³

II. DOGMATICS, POLEMICS AND CRITIQUE

Hans Saner, in *Kant's Political Thought: Its Origins and Development*, examines the evolution of Kant's terminology regarding polemic.⁴ By organizing the Kantian material on polemic chronologically, Saner shows that Kant has no consistent terminology for the notion of contention. In the early writings he speaks of dispute and every type of disputatious writing as polemical. By the time of the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant begins to clarify his notion of polemics and refers consistently to it as "the polemical use of pure reason". Then, in the *Critique of Judgment* he distinguishes three forms of contention—dispute, debate, and quarrel. Only dispute and debate qualify as philosophical argument. Finally, in *The Debate of Departments* he reduces contention simply to dispute and debate.⁵

In the first critique Kant begins by telling us that, "By the polemical employment of pure reason I mean the defence of its propositions as against the dogmatic counter-propositions through which they are denied".⁶ The kind of knowledge Kant refers to in this definition occurs in the antinomies. We can look at the first antinomy as an example. Does the world have a beginning in time, and limitation with respect to space? Or, does the world have no beginning in time and no limitation in space?⁷

Each side of this antinomy moves outside of the domain of reason seeking an impossible knowledge. Since one cannot validate either position, a dogmatic polemic resorts to subjective principles such as name-calling, and logical chicanery. Even though the dogmatists on both sides of the controversy realize difficulties in their position, they argue for their respective claims polemically. The dogmatists violate the canons of rationality because both sides hold a position which defies the limits of reason.⁸

Since both sides of a polemical controversy seek unattainable knowledge and since neither can establish its own claim sufficiently to falsify the other, we find only a dogmatic impasse. The critical philosopher becomes the third party in a controversy such as this; criticism defends pure reason's claims against both dogmatic assertions. Consequently, Kant views any set of dogmatic counter-claims such as the first antinomy as negative in principle.⁹

Since both sides of the antinomy manifest dogmatic positions bent on the destruction of the opposition, for dogmatists the fight with the opposition not the pursuit of the truth becomes the major issue. Because of respect for the limits of reason, the critical thinker realizes that neither dogmatic position yields to philosophical reasoning. On the grounds of reason alone one cannot decide the eternity of world or its beginning in time. In critical philosophy the polemical use of pure reason, functions only as a method to resolve the struggle between opposing dogmas and to achieve ultimate victory for limited truth.¹⁰ Polemics, then, works quite differently for dogmatists as opposed to the critical thinker. The dogmatists desire only that their position prevail. The critical philosopher establishes the limits of reason; a methodological by-

product of the critical effort occurs in the means now available for resolving dogmatic disputes.

So, Kant's phrase, "the polemical use of reason" indicates a purely defensive struggle forced upon the critical thinker by dogmatically uncritical thinkers. Although initially it may appear similar to dogmatic polemics, it springs from a quite different motive. It intends to save reason from the grasp of unreason.¹¹ Kant restricts the use of polemic to resolution of dogmatic conflict and even then limits the critical thinker's use of this philosophical method. We must now look at the methodology of contention itself.

III. KANTIAN CONTENTION

On the one hand Kant seems to claim that no legitimate use for polemic exists in pure reason, since this negative usage falsifies reason. On the other hand, he says that the critical philosopher must by the very nature of philosophy employ the necessary rational means to eliminate dogmatism. So, the first problem that arises comes from an apparent conflict within pure reason itself.

Starting from the premise that reason must always be subject to criticism, he shows that any deliberate falsification of the reasoning process prejudices reason itself.

Ridicule and boasting form his [the dogmatist's] whole armoury, and these can be laughed at as mere child's play. This is a comforting consideration and affords reason fresh courage; for upon what could it rely, if, while it alone is called upon to remove all errors it should yet be at variance with itself, and without hope of peace and quiet possession.¹²

Criticism serves as the antidote to falsification. Even though dogmatic philosophers fail to subject their system to criticism, Kant proposes both to critique them and also to achieve completeness of truth in principle if not in all its details.

Using a methodological ploy, he counsels the critical philosopher to allow the two opponents to speak their position in the name of reason. Then the critical philosopher must combat the dogmatists with the weapons of reason itself. Since the critical philosopher has assurance of a successful outcome, one should not hesitate to engage in combat.¹³ Accordingly, such a thinker can only wish such debate would have occurred sooner. In this dispute the limitations and extent of reason must be upheld at all times. The critical philosopher never violates the "doctrine of elements" found in the first part of the *Critique*.

. . . what can be more prejudicial to the interests of knowledge than to communicate even our very thoughts in a falsified form, to conceal doubts which we feel in regard to our own assertions, or to give

the appearance of conclusiveness to grounds of proofs which we ourselves recognize to be insufficient.¹⁴

Since dogmatic polemic inevitably degenerates into the falsification of reason, no legitimate use of polemics appears possible. Critical philosophy must at all times serve knowledge, and the usual interpretation of polemic only falsifies the limits and extent of reason. We have a very interesting result. Because the dogmatists wallow around in falsehood, the critical philosopher has a duty to confront them in the service of knowledge. This new debate, however, cannot simply degenerate into another quarrel similar to the one the dogmatists carry on among themselves.

Having solved the conflict within reason itself, Kant now sets up a methodology for confrontation (1) that does not violate his overriding restriction that the critical philosopher must never violate the canons of pure reason, and (2) that will successfully resolve the dogmatic dispute. These two guidelines will protect the principle that two persons should not carry on a dispute about some thing whose reality neither of them can present in actual or even in possible experience.¹⁵

Kant then advises the critical philosopher to assume an attitude of scepticism as a first step in achieving resolution of any dogmatic dispute. Though it must be used as a procedure for gaining the dogmatists' attention, scepticism cannot be a final philosophical position. In this respect Kant feels that both he and Hume comment on the dogmatic battle; Hume, however, did not go far enough and made the crucial mistake of residing in ultimate scepticism. Since using a sceptical attack raises the dogmatists' consciousness of the impossibility of their positions, scepticism becomes an effective initial tool for the critical philosopher. Assuming a sceptical attitude the critical philosopher forces the dogmatists closer to the truth about the limits and extent of knowledge.

The part scepticism plays in the resolution of dogmatic disputes finds its foundation in Kant's threefold analysis of the progress of pure reason. We must initially recognize that the dogmatic step acts as the first stage in matters of pure reason. Secondly, we proceed to scepticism; this movement indicates that our judgment has become wiser and more circumspect. Finally, in the critical moment we subject not only the facts of reason but also reason itself to examination. This developmental process tests the extent of reason and its aptitude for pure *a-priori* knowledge.¹⁶

Scepticism helps the progress of pure reason. As Kant says, we cultivate this attitude as a legitimate "resting-place for human reason, where it can reflect upon its dogmatic wanderings and make survey of the region in which it finds itself, so that for the future it may be able to choose its path with more certainty".¹⁷ Kant complains that any final sceptical position permanently settles in the realm of unknowing. The only proper home for pure reason turns out to be certain and universal knowledge both with respect to the limits and the objects of knowledge. This kind of knowledge occurs only as a result of critical philosophy.

An interesting example of the procedure occurs in the context of the fourth paralogism—that perceptions are caused by an outer existence is only doubtful. Kant

first discusses the three kinds of objections that can be lodged against any philosophical proposition. Dogmatic objections attack a proposition. Sceptical objections set assertion and counter-assertion in mutual opposition to each other. Finally, critical objections attack the proof of a proposition.¹⁸ Having outlined the ways of objecting to philosophical propositions Kant then shows that we first understand the assertion, 'perceptions are caused by an outer existence' dogmatically and that any dogmatic objection would attack the proposition directly. For example, the dogmatic objection attempts to show the incoherence of the proposition itself. Secondly, for every dogmatic assertion there exists a counter-assertion. In this case the determination that, "perceptions are not caused by an outer existence". The sceptic sets these two sentences in opposition to each other. Since they contradict each other the truth of the matter cannot be known. While Kant allows tentative scepticism, we cannot remain in this state. Critical philosophy moves on to investigate the very proofs for each dogmatic assertion; it finds the assertions contradictory and discovers the inconclusiveness of each proof. The critical stance rejects scepticism and acknowledges the limits of reason.

An implicit ethical stance underlies all of Kant's talk of procedure and method. The next section will look at the ethically significant statements in "The Discipline of Pure Reason in respect of its Polemical Employment" showing how Kant coordinates ethics with intellectual argumentation.

IV. KANTIAN ETHICS AND CONTENTION

Up to this point we have been talking about the rationality of intellectual argument showing Kant's proposed solution for dissolving dogmatic disputes and allowing the truth to appear. In the section of the *Critique* under consideration, however, Kant himself sees some ethical implications concerning the polemical employment of pure reason. We must now turn to the issue of the ethics of rational argument.

Saner's chronological arrangement of the Kantian terminology regarding polemic has the advantage of showing that this topic continually bothered Kant as a background for his political thought. The survey, however, fails to point out a more general concern for ethical philosophical procedure which would be applicable to all philosophical discussion. We cannot blame Saner for missing these ethical implications for Kant, especially in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, explicates the matter by using what appears to be exclusively political terminology such as "verdict of a judge",¹⁹ "recognized methods of *legal action*",²⁰ and, "the *ensorship* of reason".²¹ Underneath all of this supposed political terminology rests an implicit ethical stance that Kant will develop in his later ethical works.

In order to concretize Kant's abstract presentation Saner emphasizes especially the categories of license and freedom. In this context dogmatists live in license, because they fail properly to observe the limits of reason. The critical philosopher's freedom results from an extensive study of the elements of pure reason prior to making any philosophical statement; this forces respect for reason's capacities.²² Kant

touches two situations in this section of the first critique that pose ethical problems. He is concerned to lead the dogmatist to correct reasoning, and he has interest in the training of the young.

First, Kant places the discussion in a context of duty and responsibility saying that, "Reason *must* in all its undertakings subject itself to criticism . . ." ²³ Dogmatic positions fail for not submitting to such criticism. Second, referring to the training of the young, Kant points out that we have an urgent duty to save them from the dogmatists. Kant says:

But must not the young, at least, when entrusted to our academical teaching be warned against such writings, and preserved from premature knowledge of such dangerous propositions, until their faculty of judgment is mature, or rather until the doctrine which we seek to instill in them has taken such firm root, that they effectively withstand all persuasion to contrary views, from whatever quarter it may come? ²⁴

Finally, Kant feels that the critical philosopher must rescue the dogmatist from philosophical wandering.

All sceptical polemic should properly be directed only against the dogmatist, who without any misgivings as to his fundamental objective principles, that is without criticism proceeds complacently upon his adopted path; it should be designed simply to put him out of countenance and thus bring him to self knowledge. ²⁵

Since Kant places the discussion in the context of duty to the young and to the dogmatists themselves, one can legitimately ask how this polemical use of reason coordinates with the classical Kantian statements of the categorical imperative and the duties to self and others which Kant will work out in detail in his later ethical works? Although Kant views his various formulations of the categorical imperative as complementary statements with different emphases, we will look at two versions which have special interest.

Kant states in *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* that one should, "Act according to that maxim which can at the same time make itself a universal law". ²⁶ This version of the categorical imperative relates to the polemical use of reason in several ways. The critical philosopher in the name of truth has a duty to correct error at all times; Kant would view the proper use of reason with its restrictions as a superb instance of this version of the categorical imperative. Not only the critical philosopher but everyone should correct error, and this can be maintained as a universal law. To assume the opposite certainly leads to contradiction. The earlier discussion of Kantian contention shows that the manner of argumentation Kant proposes in the polemical use of reason develops in such a way that it becomes a universal law with both epistemological and ethical implications.

Moving to an alternative wording of the imperative, we find some additional implications of the ethics of intellectual argument. In this restatement Kant says, "Act in such a way that you treat humanity whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means."²⁷ Does Kant use the dogmatists a mere means to justify critical philosophy? Do the dogmatists merely give a negative example for the education and admonition of the young? It would seem that the dogmatists have become a means for the advancement of critical philosophy. Does this not violate the criterion of means and ends?

In order to prove that Kant observes the requirements of this equivalent version, we must distinguish between the dogmatic philosopher as a rational being and the thought system of dogmatic philosophy. Once we accomplish this, we can demonstrate that Kant employs the dogmatist neither as a means to an end in promoting critical philosophy nor in protecting the young. As we read this section of the *Critique*, we find Kant not only defending truth at all costs but also interest in the dogmatist as a kindred rational being.²⁸ While Kant counsels the critical philosopher to utilize scepticism, this ploy neither destroys nor is it final. Rather, it moves a person from an incorrect way of thinking to truth. Far from using the dogmatist in the argument as a pawn to justify theoretical truth, Kant hopes to improve the dogmatist by forcing criticism of the dogmatic position. Having been made aware of the elements and method of critical philosophy, the dogmatist will come to see the boundaries of human reason. The method fits with the general movement of a rational philosophy. Separating the dogmatist as person from the dogmatic way of thinking shows Kant's respect for the person without accepting fallacious thought.

We must also look at Kant's use of the dogmatists as bad examples for the young. In this instance does not Kant make them a means to an end? Kant does not violate the means-end version of the categorical imperative here either. He certainly shows concern for the best interests of the student by describing the means to avoid the pitfalls of dogmatic philosophy. Does he have the best interests of the dogmatist in mind? Is not the dogmatist merely a straw man for the critical philosopher and hence merely a means to an end? In order to solve this problem we must turn to the theory of duties outlined in the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*.

How can we describe the duty to the young? Is the duty to the student a strict duty or meritorious (contingent) duty to another? Because of the very nature of the teacher-student relationship, one can claim that the critical philosopher has a strict duty to the student in leading the way to truth. Kant would want each and every teacher to seek only the welfare of the student.²⁹ We still face the problem of the dogmatist in this three-way relationship. Kant feels correcting dogmatic assertions, even in the context of saving the student from dogmatic philosophy, also implies a strict duty to the dogmatist. Since Kant holds legitimate knowledge as the ultimate value, he preserves the rational nature of the errant philosopher by leading the person to truth. Kant's critical philosophy at one and the same time saves the student from falling into dogmatic error and corrects the path of the already mistaken dogmatist. This short analysis of philosophical duties leads us to the general conclusion that Kant's use of the dogmatist as an example for the young does not violate the means-end criterion. The three-way relationship of critical philosopher, dogmatist, and stu-

dent can be explained not only on the grounds of rational argumentation but also ethically. Kant's methodology in the *Critique* together with the ethical development of the *Grounding* not only preserves the dignity of the participants in the discussion but also assures the ultimate victory of truth.

V. CONCLUSION

Because *a-priori* knowledge, both theoretical and practical, must manifest unity, Kant works out a plan in the matter of the polemical use of pure reason whereby the ethical implications of argument will agree with the method of rational argument. Even though at the time he wrote the first critique, Kant had no completely developed *a priori* ethics, this section of the *Critique* manifests sensitivity to the complexities surrounding philosophical argumentation. While he wants to specify a methodology for resolving disputes among the dogmatists, he also correctly takes scandal over their bickering and evaluates it not only from the viewpoint of rational argumentation but also from an ethical stance.

From the strictly theoretical viewpoint Kant gives the critical philosopher a methodology for evaluating controversies among the dogmatists. By following this procedure one will inevitably rouse the dogmatists from slumber forcing them to acknowledge the extent and limits of reason without yielding to the temptation of scepticism. In this context the methodology also involves some suggestions concerning how to teach the young in an academic setting to prevent them from wandering down the path of dogmatism. Since one can more easily teach correctly at the start than correct error, Kant hopes his analysis of the polemical use of pure reason will prevent dogmatism from making inroads into the intellectual life of the student.

Kant, however, does not separate theoretical discussion from doing philosophy ethically. The critical philosopher especially must confront his opponents in such a way that critique does not violate the rationality of the adversaries. And, as has been shown, we can construe the duty arising from this philosophical discussion as a strict obligation to another. If we follow the method outlined in "The Disciple of Pure Reason in respect of its Polemical Employment" scrupulously, we will be acting not only in the interest of a kind of abstract truth but in the interest of the philosophical life of both the dogmatists and the students.

Kant's approach to philosophical debate turns out to be most helpful. He neither allows the dogmatists to claim victory for their positions, nor does he allow them to continue to corrupt others with fallacious teachings. Rather than permit the debate simply to degenerate into a quarrelsome scepticism, Kant gives a methodology for acknowledging the disputants as rational beings who can never be used merely as a means but must always be considered as ends in themselves even though they have wandered into dogmatism. □

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* Norman Kemp Smith, Trans. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965). All future references will appear in the usual format as *CPR* A—/B—.
- ² *CPR*, A738/B766-A769/B797.
- ³ Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, James W. Ellington, Trans. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1981). *Critique of Practical Reason* Lewis White Beck, trans. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1956). All future references will appear as *Grounding*, — (G.S. IV, —) and *CPracR*, — (G.S. V, —).
- ⁴ E.B. Ashton, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973). Cf. especially Part II, "Kant as Polemicist: The Struggle for Metaphysics", 69-213.
- ⁵ Cf. Part II, section 5 entitled, "Kantian Drafts of the Modes of Contention", 73-107.
- ⁶ *CPR*, A739/B767.
- ⁷ *CPR*, A426/B454 ff.
- ⁸ Saner, *Kant's Political Thought*, 80.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 80-1. Cf. also *CPR*, A742/B770, A406/B433-A567/B595.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 104-5.
- ¹² *CPR*, A743/B771.
- ¹³ *CPR*, A744/B722.
- ¹⁴ *CPR*, A749/B777.
- ¹⁵ *CPR*, A750/B778. Kant obviously refers here to such matters as those covered in the antinomies. Kant assesses these disputes by saying, the disputants, ". . . brood over the mere idea of the thing in order to extract from it something *more than the idea*, namely the reality of the object itself[.] What means have they of ending the dispute, since neither of them can make his thesis genuinely comprehensible and certain but only attack and refute that of his opponent?" (*CPR*, A750/B778).
- ¹⁶ *CPR*, A 751/B779 — A 752/B780. In this section Kant descriptively illustrates the dispute of the dogmatists as a war. He shows how the critique of pure reason mediates between the opponents and ensures peace for the future.

17 CPR, A761/B789.

18 CPR, A388.

19 CPR, A739/B767.

20 CPR, A751/B779.

21 CPR, A761/B789.

22 Saner, *Kant's Political Thought*, 81.

23 CPR, A738/B766 (emphasis added).

24 CPR, A754/B782.

25 CPR, A763/B791.

26 *Grounding*, 30 (G.S., IV, 321). Cf. also *CPracR*, 30-1 (G.S., V, 30).

27 *Grounding*, 36 (G.S., IV, 429).

28 In the subsection called *The Impossibility of a Sceptical Satisfaction of Pure Reason in its Internal Conflicts*", Kant speaks very gently and with a certain respect for David Hume. He does not, however, accept Hume's philosophical method. Kant says, "The sceptical errors of this otherwise singularly acute thinker arose chiefly from a defect which he shares in common with all dogmatists, namely, that he did not make a systematic review of all the various kinds of *a priori* synthesis ascribable to the understanding". CPR, A767/B795.

29 . . . what can be more prejudicial to the interests of knowledge than to communicate even our very thoughts in a falsified form, to conceal doubts which we feel in regard to our own assertions, or to give an appearance of conclusiveness to grounds of proof which we ourselves recognize to be insufficient. CPR, A749/B777.