



BOOK REVIEWS

Jeffrey Church, *Kant, Liberalism, and the Meaning of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022 Pp. 305 ISBN 9780197633182 (hbk) \$74.00

Jeffrey Church begins his excellent study, *Kant, Liberalism, and the Meaning of Life*, with the question of utmost importance for our political moment: where does liberalism go from here? The recent ‘neoliberal turn’ and its ‘cosmopolitan, impersonal, bureaucratic governance’ has ‘steadily evacuated moral language from politics’ and disempowered ordinary citizens (p. 1). The rise of ‘illiberal forms of populism on the left and the right’ are a response to the excesses of liberal governments that have undermined our ‘moral needs for meaning, purpose, and belonging’ (p. 1). The failures of liberalism lead people to search for meaning ‘in something greater’ through a turn to ideology, nationalism, populism or any outlet that gives its adherents a common purpose (p. 2). In response to the problems arising from this ‘meaning deficit’, Church concludes that liberalism needs ‘rethinking and reformulating at a fundamental level’ (p. 3). Church argues that Kant’s pre-Critical anthropology contains untapped resources in the efforts to revive a form of liberalism that could respond to the longing for meaning inherent in the human soul.

Church’s turn to an obscure part of Kant’s *oeuvre* will seem strange to those not already sympathetic towards his attempt to defend liberalism. Church justifies this turn by pointing to the failure of contemporary liberals and neo-Kantians to provide anything but a legalistic account of liberalism that abstracts from the ‘dynamic and pluralistic character’ of politics (p. 4). This vision of politics, best represented by John Rawls, is ‘uninspiring’ (p. 4). Yet both critics and defenders of liberalism are too quick to throw out the Kantian baby with the Rawlsian bathwater. Kant’s ‘vast corpus’, Church argues, ‘contains resources for a distinct form of liberalism’ that is ‘oriented toward the meaning of human existence rather than simply justice as its end’ (p. 5). The pre-Critical anthropological writings present a form of liberalism that understands the dynamic struggles inherent in the difficulty of navigating the conflicting ends of embodied political agents. The task of providing harmony for these ends can become a source of meaning that arouses political agency.

The book is split into three parts and eleven chapters. In part I, Church takes up the theme of ‘the meaning of life’ in Kant’s pre-Critical anthropology. He makes use of student notes to four lecture courses on anthropology given by Kant in the 1770s (Collins, Parow, Friedländer, Pillau) and three courses from the 1780s (*Menschenkunde*, Mrongovius and Busolt). Church finds in these lectures a depiction of the human as a creature torn between two different but equally demanding natural ends: wholeness and perfection. This conflict is a ‘contradiction in human nature that nature itself cannot solve’ (p. 28). Our longing for wholeness is understood by reference to the original state of nature, where we existed in ‘a condition of harmony’ with ourselves, others, and the environment (p. 36). What we most desire with respect to this end is our self-preservation, the continued propagation of the species and the satisfactions of seeing ourselves reflected in our offspring. The desire for perfection manifests

in our efforts to distinguish ourselves from others and assert our independence. It arises partly from the sublimation of the sexual drive (following Rousseau) but more decidedly from the capacity for freedom. The complete fulfilment of one of these ends keeps us from meeting the demands of the other (p. 66). The dissatisfactions that arise from the conflict of our natural *teloi* leads us to view life as meaningless.

Church argues that our warring natural ends convince Kant to adopt a genealogical account of morality and a historical view of the species. Morality arises from our dissatisfaction with the natural order of things and is posited as the end that gives life meaning. Church thus stakes out a unique position within the literature: Kant's anthropology has 'foundational significance' for his ethical and political thought and is not merely the 'empirical vehicle for the realization of the moral law' (p. 8). As Church puts it, 'the moral law emerges not from the discovery of a transcendent, realist value, but is rather constructed as a result of our fundamental need to confer value on our lives' (p. 74). Morality arises as a need to give an end to ourselves that would fulfil our demands for meaning (p. 96). The chaotic conflict of our nature means that our task is not to 'discern the order of the cosmos outside of us and live according to it' but instead to 'find a way to fix the natural order' (p. 71). The self-legislated moral end provides a limit on our longing for perfection and wholeness and 'harmonizes all of our inclinations toward a single goal', transforming our natural ends such that they are no longer 'warring parties' but 'parts of a whole' (p. 89). Church is clear that Kant recognizes that these human tensions cannot be overcome, especially by political solutions, but they can be managed and justified by our pursuit of morality.

In part II, Church traces the influence of the pre-Critical anthropology on Kant's mature political thought of the 1780s and 1790s. This section is divided into three chapters dealing with the 'multiple purposes' that the Kantian liberal state must balance: culture, civilization and right. Culture is the realm of social life where we pursue our natural end of perfection. It is the realm of the explorations of the universe and the innovations of commerce but also the source of inequality and social discord. Civilization, on the other hand, is concerned with our longing for wholeness. It entails 'loyalty and commitment to the community which requires foreclosing the corrosive scepticism of reason' (p. 143). Civilization requires the creation of rules and boundaries. These rules are not simply the laws of the state but the informal mores surrounding politeness and honour, which make communities charming and lovable. (One feat of the book is Church's defence of politeness as a political virtue.) Church considers several examples of Kant's prudent management of the conflicting ends of culture and civilization, most notably Kant's thoughts on free speech, a right of culture that threatens to undermine the stability of civilization.

The liberal community, for Kant, is a 'perpetual partnership for the gradual achievement of right' that is itself an important part of our moral vocation (p. 193). As a part of this vocation, ideal right can harmonize the warring pursuits of society by providing a transcendent aim for political life. Hence, Church argues against the common interpretation that politics for Kant serves 'an instrumental role' in humanity's 'moralization' (p. 166). The primary political good is what Church calls 'political autonomy' (p. 172). Political autonomy consists in participating in the general will and self-legislation of a polity, and yet it is distinct from moral autonomy in that it need not involve an inner ethical commitment. It reflects the moral law in 'structure' if not in its 'inner nature' (p. 173). Political autonomy has intrinsic value

as part of the capacity to set our own ends. Accordingly, the political community as the arena where we exercise our political freedom ‘possesses intrinsic moral value, even if all the members of the community were self-interested devils’ (p. 173). The intrinsic value of politics makes the liberal community a source of enduring meaning, as we seek to preserve the inherited conditions of political autonomy. Kantian politics addresses, then, Burke’s conservative critique that liberalism narrows the horizons of its citizens. Instead, Church shows how Kant’s historical narrative of progress combines Burke’s concern for preserving the inheritance of civilization with the Enlightenment’s promotion of culture and the advancement of rights.

In the third and final section of the book, Church compares the strengths of this version of Kantian politics with the most influential strands of contemporary liberal thought, namely, perfectionism and political liberalism. By stressing ‘independence’, a condition of political autonomy, as the aim of political life, Church argues that the Kantian liberal can have his cake and eat it too. Kantian perfectionism can incorporate many of the goods that contemporary perfectionists support on the grounds that these things are instrumental in fostering independence. Kantian liberal perfectionism avoids the charge of paternalism insofar as it argues that the state should be concerned only with fostering the independence of its citizens and not any specific conception of the good life (p. 199). Yet Church also argues that Kantian liberalism can be reconstructed as a form of political liberalism superior to Rawlsian theory insofar as it provides a ‘thinner’ notion of justice centred around independence (p. 224). Independence as the agreed upon political value supplies the conditions for a more pluralistic liberalism. It makes room not simply for most comprehensive doctrines, which likely value independence, but for those interested in political life for merely selfish reasons. Kantian liberalism incorporates both angels and devils – albeit with the hope that the devils might undergo moral transformation.

Despite its thin conception of justice, Church argues in the final chapter that Kantian politics can meet the challenges levelled against liberalism by Michael Sandel and other communitarian theorists. Church argues that Sandel’s vision of community weighs the end of wholeness over perfection and does not properly investigate the content of the telos of human life (p. 250). Communitarian politics cannot satisfy the end of perfection, nor can it provide a suitable grounding for morality insofar as its reluctance to investigate the content of our telos leads to a conventionalism where the community’s standards are accepted without any further appeal to reason. For its part, Kantian liberalism can provide a narrative of meaning that draws citizens out of the anomie and atomization that Sandel rightly laments but without sacrificing our desire to perfect ourselves. Kantian citizenship ‘brings some harmony to our soul’ by prioritizing ‘certain civic commitments’, and thereby better balances the competing drives of our nature (p. 256).

I leave it to future readers to evaluate whether Church is successful in balancing the demands of perfectionism, political liberalism and communitarianism. I would, however, like to highlight one claim about Kant’s thought that threatens to undermine Church’s interpretation: that the strength of Kant’s pre-Critical anthropology derives from the fact that it does not require the philosophical commitments of the Critical period, which depend on ‘questionable metaphysical premises’ (p. 12). It is not clear why we should rely so heavily on the pre-Critical Kant, especially when, as Church seems to acknowledge, many of the anthropological insights of the pre-Critical writings are integrated into the Critical system in the third *Critique*

(see pp. 100–1, 278, n. 46). Nor is it clear if Kantian liberalism can jettison the ‘questionable metaphysical premises’ of the Critical period without also giving up moral meaning. The genealogical account of morality cannot explain why any particular moral law is correct other than an appeal to the arc of history that has long lost its authority. If the moral end is not grounded in something other than the need to make life meaningful, then one might wonder if Church escapes the conventionalism with which he charges Sandel. Without the aid and authority of Kant’s ‘rationalistic and deontological’ justification of morality, Church’s pre-Critical Kantian liberalism cannot escape the possibility that the moral law will be legislated by the arbitrary will of the majority (p. 12).

It could be the case that Church overstates the divide between the anthropological and metaphysical strands of Kant’s thought to bring out those parts of his politics often overlooked in the scholarship. Indeed, Church’s emphasis on the anthropology lectures is not only original and valuable in itself but illuminates overlooked details in Kant’s late political writings. Above all, Church’s study shows that Kant provides an alternative account of human nature within the liberal tradition that points the way toward the ennobling of civic activity (p. 219). In this way, Church begins to make good on his call to rethink the foundations of our politics by recovering a source of political wisdom that helps us reflect on the possibility of a morally meaningful liberalism.

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Anna Tomaszewska, *Kant’s Rational Religion and the Radical Enlightenment: From Spinoza to Contemporary Debates*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022 Pp. 226 ISBN 9781350195844 (hbk) \$143.95

Anna Tomaszewska’s *Kant’s Rational Religion and the Radical Enlightenment* is an attempt to reconsider Kant’s role in the Enlightenment project in view of his changing attitudes about God and religion. The book spans the entirety of Kant’s career, from his pre-Critical attempts to prove the existence of God, through his Critical attitudes towards our knowledge of the divine, and to Kant’s posthumously published writings on the relation between God and practical reason.

Tomaszewska begins with a discussion of the two main strands of Enlightenment attitudes toward religion. The so-called *moderate* Enlightenment is characterized by an attempt to bring science and religion together, and to show that, properly understood, both institutions ought to be a part of our society. The *radical* Enlightenment, represented in this book by the philosophy of Spinoza, claims that society has no room for organized religion. While the moderate Enlightenment aims to adapt the church to our more secular times, the radical Enlightenment aims to secularize society by removing the church altogether.

The central tenet of the radical Enlightenment is that there is something problematic about *revealed* religion. In particular, the radical Enlighteners held that there are