

Thomas E. Hill, Jr.

Virtue, Rules, and Justice: Kantian Aspirations.

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In his book *Virtue, Rules, and Justice: Kantian Aspirations* Thomas E. Hill, Jr. aims to “interpret, explain, and extend Kant’s ideas in ways that highlight their relevance to contemporary ethics” (1). More specifically, Hill focuses on providing a reading of Kant’s normative ethics, rather than his metaethical theory, using a form of what he calls “Kantian constructivism”. He then utilizes this framework to make judgments about several contemporary ethical issues. In addition to his focus upon Kantian constructivism, Hill also explains and interprets several other aspects of Kantian normative ethics, such as virtue and moral rules and principles. The book is composed of fifteen chapters, each of which was originally written as a separate piece over the past ten years. For this reason, the chapters can be taken separately or as a unified reading of Kant’s normative ethics that can be used to address practical contemporary issues.

In the following paragraphs, I will first provide a summary of each of the four sections of this work. In the first section, Hill provides an introduction to Kant’s ethics and describes how he approaches normative ethical issues using a broadly Kantian framework. In chapter one, he begins by introducing the basic themes of Kant’s ethics, including an overview of the formulations of the categorical imperative and a brief but clear discussion of human freedom (25–32). In chapter two, Hill focuses on “how certain basic normative questions are addressed by Kant and various contemporary Kantians who interpret and extend Kant’s theory” (35). His aim in this chapter is to highlight how various contemporary Kant scholars have developed Kant’s normative ethics. Finally, Hill provides his own suggestion for a direction that one can take to develop this aspect of his ethics by arguing for what he calls “Kantian constructivism as a normative ethical theory” (72). While Hill does not explicitly argue for Kantian constructivism in this book, he does provide reasons for believing that this theory can be used to address normative ethical issues, rather than simply political issues, while remaining “metaethically noncommittal” (73). Hill’s argument for this approach relies primarily upon the *Doctrine of Virtue* from the *Metaphysics of Morals*, where he finds “a normative ethical theory that has constructivist features that are separable from the more ambitious metaethical claims in the prominent Kantian constructivisms of [John] Rawls and [Onora] O’Neill” (74).

In the book’s second section, Hill explores the concept of virtue in Kant’s ethics. The first three chapters in this section clarify various aspects of Kantian virtue. The first chapter addresses the connection between human virtue and nature by “explor[ing] the idea that a proper valuing of natural environments is essential to...a broader human virtue that might be called ‘appreciation of the good’” (95). This argument contributes to Hill’s position that certain objects in nature should be valued for their own sake, rather than for their value to humans. The next chapter explores Kant’s understanding of weakness of will. This relates to Hill’s analysis of the concept of virtue insofar as Kant defines virtue as the strength of one’s will to do what is morally right. The third

chapter in this section takes a broader view of this topic by discussing the place of virtue in Kant's moral theory and then considering "how Kant's ethics, or at least an expanded and supplemented Kantian ethics, might respond to certain criticisms and alternatives often associated with 'virtue ethics'" (130). Finally, the section concludes with a chapter wherein Hill interprets the Doctrine of Virtue as Kant's statement of his normative ethics.

In the third section, Hill analyzes the role that moral rules and principles play in Kant's ethics. Hill spends the first three chapters addressing various aspects of moral rules and principles and then includes a final chapter connecting the topic to his Kantian framework. The first chapter in this section, chapter eight, highlights the problems of appeals to human dignity in moral theories, including "inflexible prohibitions and moral dilemmas" (195). The heart of Hill's response to these problems is to argue that "the idea of human dignity" can be incorporated into "a two-level, Kantian normative theory" (185), which consists of holding both universal principles as well as more specific principles that can be derived from these universal ones and used in particular situations. In this way, one can hold universal principles that respect human dignity while acting upon lower-level principles that take into account conflicts in universal principles and unique facts of particular situations. The next chapter acknowledges some difficulties that arise when ethical theories are based upon rules and principles, for example the problem of counterintuitive moral judgements. In response to these difficulties, Hill argues that these objections, which are often raised against rule-utilitarianism, do not apply to all such moral theories. More specifically, he posits that a Kantian approach to "identifying and justifying the morally significant rules and principles" is not undermined by such objections (204). In the next chapter, chapter ten, Hill uses a Kantian perspective to argue that moral rules and principles are important for a moral theory. In the final chapter, Hill utilizes his broadly Kantian framework to answer the following questions: "how, if at all, can we derive, justify, or support specific moral principles and judgments from more fundamental moral principles and judgments?" and "how, if it all, can (alleged) fundamental standards be defended?" (249).

The book concludes by using Hill's broadly Kantian framework to suggest Kantian responses to several practical questions. These include an interpretation of Kant's stance on the permissibility of revolution and questions regarding the treatment of criminals, forcible interventions for humanitarian purposes, and the responsibility of bystanders to stand up to oppression.

Overall, this book succeeds in two important ways. First, Hill provides an illuminative reading of many of the major aspects of Kant's ethics and distinguishes both his own reading from those of other commentators and Kant's ethics from other ethical theories. In so doing Hill provides readers who are unfamiliar with Kant's ethics with a general understanding of the relevant scholarship and an understanding of the difference between Kant's ethics and other ethical systems. It is in this area where Hill shines. His explanations are clear and accessible to a broad audience and he helpfully situates his work in the broader literature.

The second way in which Hill succeeds is in his expansion of Kant's ethics and demonstration of how a broadly Kantian ethical theory can be applied to contemporary ethical problems. This is a relatively unique contribution to the literature. Few others have gone to such lengths to extend Kant's ethical theory to highlight the contribution these theories can make to

practical ethical issues. Hill also thoroughly and consistently identifies a variety of objections to his interpretations and defends himself against them.

This work is not without difficulties, however. These lie principally in the book's structure and occasional lack of cohesion. As mentioned above, Hill explains that the chapters of this work "were written originally as self-standing discussions, intended to be clear and mostly understandable without special background, but always with an eye to how they might make up a coherent collection" (2). Because each chapter was written at a different time and to a different audience, it is sometimes difficult to understand how each chapter relates to the others or to the section in which it is grouped. For example, the four chapters on virtue discuss very different and narrow aspects of Kantian virtue. While each discussion is interesting and helpful, it is not clear why Hill chose to focus upon these particular aspects rather than others. Further, the fourth chapter in this section displays a marked shift of attention from clarifying certain aspects of human virtue to interpreting the *Doctrine of Virtue* as Kant's statement on normative ethics. For this reason, the book often feels a bit like a collection of essays rather than a cohesive project with a single thesis.

This is not to say that the chapters and sections have no shared theme. They all contribute to Hill's goal of either interpreting, explaining, or extending Kant's ethics. However, Hill appears to have a more specific goal in mind, by combining these articles into one work. He anticipates that different aspects of his Kantian framework will emerge in each section. It is this goal that could be made more explicit throughout the work, rather than solely in the introduction.

However, these difficulties do not undermine Hill's attaining his previously stated objective. Overall, this book would be a helpful aid for those looking for clear explanations of Kant's ethics, situated in relevant secondary literature and contrasted with other ethical theories, and those curious about how we can apply Kant's normative ethics to contemporary issues.

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