

**Heiko Puls.** *Sittliches Bewusstsein und Kategorischer Imperativ in Kants Grundlegung: Ein Kommentar zum dritten Abschnitt.* De Gruyter 2016. 318 pp. \$112.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9783110373745).

With his book *Sittliches Bewusstsein und Kategorischer Imperativ in Kants Grundlegung: Ein Kommentar zum dritten Abschnitt*, Puls presents a complex, detailed, and illuminating commentary on one of Kant's most opaque texts—the third section of *Groundwork*. For more than 250 years, this book, and especially its last part, has challenged innumerable readers and experts of Kantian practical philosophy trying to make sense of Kant's thoughts. In one way or another, the third part of *Groundwork* is supposed to show that morality is not a mere 'thought entity,' but real. Apart from that, there is no consensus on what *exactly* Kant wants to show, how he does so, why and where, and what the term 'deduction' means and in which way it is relevant at all. Puls tries to shed light on these issues and offers a comprehensive and subtle new analysis of Kant's text, directing the reader's attention especially to the argumentative structure of the text and its rhetorical elements. Regardless of whether one is convinced by Puls' interpretation in the end or not, reading this book clarifies many severe problems and provides the reader with important ideas, observations and references, which undoubtedly help to better understand Kant's thoughts.

What is the core of Puls' book? Its main thesis can be summarized quite simply: Puls' aim is to show that, as in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant presents us in *Groundwork* too, with some kind of *fact of reason*-theory. There is, claims Puls, no deduction of the Categorical Imperative (CI) in a direct sense in *Groundwork*. Kant, he says, does not try to deduce the validity or bindingness of the CI at any point; rather, Kant holds that we know about the CI and its binding, obligating force through an immediate awareness of it that we experience through the moral feeling of respect. Says Puls: 'The moral consciousness of the human being, i.e., the consciousness of the validity of the Categorical Imperative through the feeling of respect, is sufficient for the proof of the validity of the moral law and requires no further deduction' (9). Given an influential line of interpretation recently and prominently held by Schönecker, who claims the opposite, Puls has to argue thoughtfully for his thesis. He therefore offers a very close and highly detailed exegesis of the text, with almost no sentence slipping out of focus.

Puls' book has six main chapters (and a very helpful summary), one corresponding to each section of *Groundwork* III. In what follows, I will try to summarize Puls' main chapters. In section 1 Puls explains Kant's so-called thesis of analyticity according to which a holy or pure rational will is analytically connected with the moral law. But to connect the will of a sensibly affected rational being with the moral law, another element is necessary, which is claimed to be accessible through freedom and to be the idea of the pure will. According to Puls, Kant claims in section 2, that we cannot think of practical reason without thinking of freedom as well; one has to assume the latter when assuming the former. 'To think of a being with practical reason without attributing freedom to it would make no sense,' says Puls, 'for then this being's practical reason would not determine itself' (70). Thus, unlike Schönecker and other interpreters, Puls argues that Kant does *not* deduce practical reason from theoretical reason. Section 3 is perhaps the core of *Groundwork* III and, in any case, the core of Puls' book. Here, the deduction of freedom out of pure practical reason is said to take place through the fact of reason. The famous supposed circle is resolved by pointing to the possibility of a moral interest—which is, after all (says Puls), the feeling of respect. Therefore, freedom is legitimated through the fact of reason which inevitably shows us that we indeed have practical reason and are autonomous beings (and the solution of the antinomies legitimates this assumption). Therefore, the supposed circle is resolved and it is said to be clear already at this point that the CI

has validity and obliges us. So, not only has Kant shown at this point, as other interpreters suggest, that we *can* act morally, but that we really *should*: ‘Kant’s claim, that the suspicion of a circle in section 3 is resolved, is a further important argument for the claim that Kant not only thinks to have shown that a human being recognizes himself only with regard to his endowment with reason as standing under the non-imperative law, but that he recognizes himself as *subjected* to the moral law’ (145).

In section 4, Puls argues, Kant summarizes his thesis from sections 1-3 and presents the deduction of the idea of the pure will. The question of how the CI is possible is again answered by reference to the fact of reason: through the latter, Puls argues, we experience the world of understanding as superior and lawgiving in a certain ‘teleological’ sense. We just know that we are to follow the moral law ‘*because* it is a law of the world of understanding’ (298), but this insight is not an additional insight different from the fact of reason. The superiority is a brute fact for us, one we cannot understand in any deeper sense. Hence, there is, according to Puls, no need to emphasize Schönecker’s so-called onto-ethical principle more than is necessary; with this principle, no additional and particularly no ontological justification is given. Now the already mentioned ‘third’ comes into play: this ‘third’ is the pure will of sensibly affected rational beings. The CI is possible because we, qua pure will, already want to do what the CI demands us to: ‘when one would search an answer to the question, why this fact pertains, one could only point to a circumstance that represents a certain perspective of description of this fact itself: that the moral law is recognized through human beings immediately as valid because in the end the demands of the actual self are principally acknowledged as right and necessary’ (194). The last two sections of *Groundwork* III recapitulate the previous, and they do this, Puls notices, without mentioning the circle of section 3 again, and with much less rhetorical drama. Puls takes this as an opportunity to reformulate and confirm his main thesis with the help of Kant’s own explicating words. Taking all this together, what Puls wants to show is this: through the fact of reason we know that we are autonomous beings with practical reason, and therefore we know that we are free. We directly experience the moral law as binding and we know that the CI is possible because our pure will always wants what is morally good.

As I have already stated, the attentive reader will surely profit from Puls’ book in many ways. I would think that a great many readers will be open to Puls’ thought of assuming more continuity in Kant’s practical works and therefore for the idea of finding an immediate awareness of the bindingness of the moral law even in the *Groundwork*. I have no doubt that Puls’ book will become a seminal work for philosophers studying Kant’s *Groundwork* carefully, but I can also imagine that Puls’ thesis will remain highly controversial. Here is just one reason: at some points, readers might become somewhat confused with respect to the use of the terms ‘deduction’ and ‘fact of reason,’ which one might take as different types of justification excluding each other. According to Puls, there is no direct deduction of the CI, but, first, a deduction of freedom, second, a deduction of the moral law *through the fact of reason*, third, a deduction of the pure will, and fourth, at least in some sense a ‘deduction of the possibility of the CI’ (217), to which everything boils down. But since a deduction might exclude brute facts (as the fact of reason) as part of its justification (and vice versa), the relations might not be as clear as claimed. Additionally, the reader might find himself even more puzzled when Puls holds (in line with other interpreters) that even in the *Critique of Pure Reason* a deduction takes place. So the thesis is that both in the second *Critique* and in the *Groundwork*, Kant claims that a deduction of the moral law is possible and that in both works, the fact of reason plays a central role. Since several passages of the second *Critique* seem to speak against this claim (but, of course, these passages are controversial), one might have a hard time being convinced by Puls’ arguments (although he, along with others, tries to interpret these passages in his sense). What speaks

in favor of Puls' main thesis is that Kant published the *Critique of Practical Reason* just about three years after the *Groundwork* and that such an extreme change of position would seem, to say the least, surprising. It is up to the reader to decide with which side she aligns herself in this highly contentious and difficult debate. In any case, Puls opens a new and highly stimulating perspective on these questions with his impressive book.

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