

**Onora O’Neill.** *Constructing Authorities: Reason, Politics and Interpretation in Kant’s Philosophy.* Cambridge University Press 2015. 253 pp. \$93.99 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781107116313); \$33.99 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781107538252).

In *Constructing Authorities*, Onora O’Neill brings together a collection of her essays from years of work in defense of Kant’s arguments on the authority of reason.

O’Neill points out that there is generally a suspicion among philosophers about appeals to authority—yet most philosophers take the authority of reason as a given. She explores some Kantian notions about the *construction* of the authority of reason and finds the vindication of reason as a central concern for Kant. She identifies two main Kantian threads which ‘justify minimal principles’ of reasoning: the first is that reasoning is practical and provides ‘norms that thought, action and communication can (but often fail to) meet’; the second is that the norms ‘can be used by a *plurality* of agents.’ (1) This has to do with how agents are able to communicate and share knowledge. Without these minimal principles, O’Neill claims of Kant’s view, we would not have the possibility of the authority of reason.

Reasoning is a process that is used by a group that has agreed-to shared understandings—appealing to, for example, only a fractional group accepts the authority of a church and so is not the authority that Kant appeals to for his *fully public* reason. The reasoning that Kant is interested in, O’Neill claims, does not attempt to construct large metaphysical edifices through pure reasoning—rather, reasoning is an eminently practical activity that cannot be considered solely in the abstract. Within this understanding of reasoning Kant couches both universal and conditional reasoning: the former relating to reasoning that can be reached by everyone, the latter relating to subset of people that have shared assumptions.

O’Neill also compares and contrasts how Kant’s arguments on reasoning relate to contemporary views. For instance, she investigates how Kant’s work fits into the works of writers of social contract theory, she looks at cosmopolitanism theories from Kant to the present day and she presents various understandings of autonomy which she relates back to Kant. In one essay, she compares Kant’s work to that of John Rawls’ constructivism.

I found the writings on Kant’s views related to theology particularly elucidating. As O’Neill rightly says, Kant’s philosophy of religion has been inscrutable to many. (217) Yet she provides a convincing interpretation of his work that gives a clear understanding of both his motivations and his arguments. Kant, she says, centers his religious position on reasoned human hope—the hope for our own ability to shape our world. That hope allows us not to view the religious texts as definitively authoritative; rather, through our hope of shaping the future we can look at the texts with reason. She continues in another essay with the theme of Kant and religion by discussing his view of the interpretation of sacred texts.

Often it is difficult to see the motivations and justifications of certain aspects of Kant’s writing. O’Neill has the ability to repeatedly provide convincing interpretations. To take one example, in chapter 9 she discusses Kant’s essay *What is Orientation in Thinking?* In this essay Kant uses geographical and political imagery. While others have taken these as unconnected, O’Neill uses the essay to argue that the ‘shift from geographical to political imagery ... is no superficial matter’ (153). She says at one point in the essay: ‘Our *geographical* situation inevitably raises *political* questions about the forms of association that a plurality of human beings can have, given that they cannot indefinitely continue to lead dispersed and solitary lives’ (163). This account provides a possible glimpse into the thoughts of Kant that others have overlooked.

While there is historical exegesis, O'Neill explains throughout the articles how the Kantian position is applicable to problems we are dealing with now. The articles bring together a cohesive understanding of research on Kant's views of reason and how they relate to our contemporary society.

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