

Religion, Politics, and Historical Approaches to Philosophy

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This enormously erudite and original book is the culmination of many years of thinking deeply about difficult texts. Rosen’s book explores themes of deep interest and importance to me—about religion, about politics, and about historical approaches to philosophy. My comments and questions will focus on these, and more on Kant than on Hegel.

I start with the moving autobiographical reflections at the end where Rosen notes that he has been accused in his career of being not a “philosopher” but a “historian of ideas” (308), the implication being that the latter is somehow “less”—less important, less serious, less challenging?—than philosophy proper. I imagine that like me, Rosen is skeptical of this distinction, for if the history of ideas is not important, why would any philosopher bother with Kant? Rosen makes another distinction in philosophers’ approaches to figures like Kant between “interpretation” and “advocacy” (175). While I think that he, like me, would place the emphasis on interpretation, I am also interested in getting the best interpretation down because I think Kant was very clever and worth learning from. And so, presumably does Rosen.

One of the most interesting contributions of Rosen’s book for me then is its implicit treatment of the politics of scholarship—in this case, the politics of late twentieth-century history of philosophy. Rosen is entirely convincing to me that leading lights of Kant studies like Allen Wood and Christine Korsgaard have got him wrong on pretty fundamental points. But I want to hear more about why Rosen thinks they got him wrong, and what is at stake in the error. And why does it matter that they got him wrong, really? Crudely, it seems like the error is fueled by the desire to “secularize” Kant, which in turn supposes that any “religious” features of his thought are not really relevant or indeed respectable any longer. Of course that supposition reflects certain sociological facts about the academy—or more specifically about Harvard!—in a particular place and time. The number of Rawls students that grace this book’s pages is really something.

But another important point I take Rosen to be making is that to get Kant right we have to push beyond the facile binaries that structure so much history of philosophy—starting with the assumption that Kant must either be “religious” or “secular.” A similar binary I work on insists that figures

in the history of political thought must either be “feminist” or “sexist”—or “racist” or “antiracist.” But once we have realized that Kant’s thoughts on God are philosophically serious and essential, and the binary is exploded, what then? A historically-minded approach to philosophy can help us escape these binaries, and to resist the pull of presentism in politicizing our inquiries prematurely. But I want to hear more from Rosen on how one should contextualize philosophy as opposed to the history of political thought. What is the relevant context? What information “outside” of the texts themselves needs bringing in (the “contextual field”)? Biography? Politics? Sociocultural history? Or simply other contemporary “philosophy”?

What I find most exciting about Rosen’s reading of Kant is its social sensibility—in reading Kantian moral philosophy with an eye towards its social and positional language, Rosen uncovers the irresistibly altitudinal sensibility of it all—and thus to recognize the continuing importance of an inaccessibly external and radical superiority that can keep persons in awe and hold them responsible. This is especially important, Rosen shows us, for understanding Kant’s commitment to equality. The equality of persons in the kingdom of ends relies on “respect” as a sort of awe of something higher (like an authoritative judge). So whether or not it is “religious,” Kant’s thought is resolutely theistic. And as a theist of some sort myself, this is hardly disqualifying.

Elizabeth Anderson¹ and Colin Bird² have likewise drawn attention to the importance of “awe,” respect, and “honor” in eighteenth-century Germany for understanding Kant. But for other moral and political philosophers, all the social-positional language is metaphorical window-dressing, a mere distraction from the rationality of the moral theory. As a nonspecialist, I am tempted to conclude that political theorists and philosophers are simply better placed to interpret Kant, then, but would like to hear what Rosen thinks.

To move from history as a matter of method, to history as a matter of philosophical importance, this book tracks the move from God as Judge to History as Judge (from Kant to Hegel) in the history of German philosophy. But I hope that Rosen can help us to understand what Hegel and later critical theorists mean by “history” in the first place. This comes up a bit in the book, and I have gone back and forth with Rainer Forst about it too.³ For me, as a historically informed political theorist, “history” is something we study that can be understood more or less accurately—so if you want to argue that

¹Elizabeth Anderson, “Emotions in Kant’s Later Moral Philosophy: Honour and the Phenomenology of Moral Value,” in *Kant’s Ethics of Virtue*, ed. Monika Betzler (New York: De Gruyter, 2008), 123–45.

²Colin Bird, “Dignity as a Moral Concept,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 30, no. 1–2 (2013): 150–76.

³Teresa M. Bejan, “What’s the Use? Rainer Forst and the History of Toleration,” in *Toleration, Power and the Right to Justification: Rainer Forst in Dialogue* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 23–45.

“history will judge” you are saying (to me) that it is very important that historians do good historical work and get the history right. It is not saying, I believe, that historians will judge. But it is saying that we need to trust in them and the work they do. But would Hegel have cared that his information about ancient Rome or China, for example, was faulty? Or that the news he was receiving about the French Revolution was partial? To put it crudely, does it even matter for critical theorists following Hegel that the history is good history? Or is the goodness of history simply judged relative to the political or moral purposes the philosopher has in view?