

Kant on "Other" Rational Beings

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Review of: Klinge, H., *Die moralische Stufenleiter. Kant über Teufel, Menschen, Engel und Gott*, Berlin/Boston, Walter de Gruyter, 2018, 266 pp. ISBN: 978-3-11-057565-1.

The basis of the monograph published in the excellent series Kantstudien-Ergänzungsheft is a doctoral dissertation defended in 2016 at the University of Göttingen, under the supervision of Prof. Bernd Ludwig, Ph.D. Not only does the book contain a clear structure of content, it is also based on source literature and the latest studies. Other formal advantages of this publication include a very communicative language, detailed divisions (labeled with apt titles), a wide selection of literature and two types of indexes (personal and factual).

However, the book by Hendrik Klinge (currently employed at the Department of Systematic Historical Theology, University of Wuppertal) is not one of many studies of the main and still explored issues of Kantian philosophy. It is rather one of those books which one has longed to read for a long time, but which has not been written thus far. Indeed, the book provides answers to one of the questions that haunts every careful reader of Kant's writings: what does Kant mean when, while referring to validity of moral law, he uses the grammatical plural: "rational beings" (*vernünftige Wesen*)? Hendrik Klinge provides an exhaustive answer to this original question. Under no circumstance should the book be seen as an anthology of unrelated by a common basis reflections on God, angels, people and devils, which appear here and there in the writings of the Königsberg philosopher (which could be suggested by the second part of the title: *Kant über Teufel, Menschen, Engel und Gott*). There would be nothing more wrong. In fact, the book shows precisely this common and uniform basis, which justifies the remarks in Kant's writings on the existence of many "rational beings", differing from one another. This is also fundamentally in line with the

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approach of Kant who puts forward a direct thesis about the existence of a specific "moral gradation of beings" (Rel. AA VI, 65).

In the introduction, the author outlines the area of the discussed source literature; he summarizes briefly the state of current research on the issue taken up in the monograph and clearly formulates the main research objective. Of course, the basis for analysis is still the corpus of Kant's works in the *Akademieausgabe* edition. The exception is Kant's lectures on moral philosophy (from the 1770s), which the author quotes on the basis of Werner Stark's edition. Incidentally, in Klinge's monograph references to Kant's lectures and the handwritten legacy of the philosopher (especially *Opus postumum*) play an important role. Without these references, the monograph would not only be incomplete but the image of Kant's philosophy would contain serious gaps. The author is aware of the pioneering nature of his research ("An attempt to travel through Kant's world of moral beings in the aforementioned sense has not thus far been undertaken", p. 8). A brief review of literature from recent years (Holger Wille, Birgit Recki, Sebastian Maly, Gerhard Schwarz, Alexander Heit) does not bring anything essential to the ambitious task of determining "the significance of talking about 'other intelligent beings' alongside people in Kant's work" (page 15). It should be stressed however, that the author does not discuss here the already well-elaborated topic of hypothetical moral inhabitants of other planets that Kant introduced in his early treatise (*Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*). In this case, Klinge presents his view? only in a few places (cf. pages 25-26, 178), which is perhaps not quite enough.

The extensive introductory part is entirely filled with general terminological analyses. While carefully following the way in which Kant formulates thoughts and creates corresponding concepts, Klinge makes several important observations. The starting point is the famous phrase that opens the first part of *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. It does not speak of "human will" but of "good will" ("good" both "in" and "outside" the world). This is an important confirmation that in his first dissertation devoted entirely to moral philosophy, Kant takes a broad perspective that goes far beyond the human scale. Kant's further reflections only supplement the outlined image of practical philosophy in which not only man is not a measure of morality, but also not the only "addressee of the moral law." (p. 23). This function is served by a "reasonable being in general" (*vernünftige Wesen überhaupt*), which loses its anthropocentric meaning in Kant's philosophy, if one may say so (p. 25). This is certainly an exaggerated analogy, but since it comes to mind when reading Klinge's book, I will not hesitate to use it here: the Copernican upheaval in Kant's moral philosophy lies precisely in the fact that morality definitively ceases to be based on man, and its centre and point of reference is placed far beyond man. Around this centre, designated by the "moral law", many possible moral beings (*moralische Wesen*) "circulate". Man is only one of many such beings.

The problem of multiplicity (plurality) of rational beings mentioned by Kant is not, however, an epistemological problem. We have no constitutive recognition of other rational beings at all, and, consequently, we also lack the basis for formulating

comparisons. Thus, man, the only rational being known to us, is on the one hand incomparable with anything else (p. 27), whereas on the other, it constitutes a point of reference to all erroneous analogies and anthropomorphisms that create only the pretence of cognition. The fundamental division delimited by the scope of knowledge into the sensual and the extra-sensual; into the earthly and the unearthly, however, does not prevent man from having a will to break even the strictest prohibitions to go beyond the realm of experience. This desire, strengthened by the power of superstition, is powerful and cannot be ignored. Kant discovered this personally and expressed it in his pre-critical essay *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Illustrated by Dreams of Metaphysics*. Categories of intellect not only have no application outside the area of experience; from a purely cognitive perspective, the "moral world" has no structure at all; it appears to us as a *corpus mysticum* that lacks any diversity (p. 37). This indeterminacy still typical of *Critique of Pure Reason* becomes the object of philosopher's interest in Kant's moral writings, starting with *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Here, the philosopher introduces important distinctions that initiate the process of "ordering" and "differentiating" the said *corpus mysticum*. The difference between a "holy being" and a "virtuous being" is defined; "finite holy beings" are distinguished from "God", etc. The most detailed distinction, however, is introduced by Kant in *Metaphysics of Morals*, where he differentiates between a being that has reason (*vernünftige Wesen*) and intelligible being (*Vernunftwesen*)¹, between *homo phenomenon* (a natural rational being using reason as a theoretical ability) and *homo noumenon* (a being able to be subject to pure practical reason) (p. 43ff.). Pure practical reason does not decide about the understanding of the extra-sensual world (this is impossible), but about belonging to the intelligible world. "It is not so much man as a being that has reason (*vernünftige Wesen*) that is an intelligible subject (*intelligibler Gegenstand*), but only man as rational being (*Vernunftwesen*) – according to the terminology introduced in 1797, i.e. as a being that as an addressee of the moral law has transcendental freedom" (p. 51). Such a clear emphasis that possessing reason as a cognitive ability does not yet make the being a rational being (*Vernunftwesen*) proves, as Klinge argues, that Kant breaks with the philosophical tradition which defines man as *animal rationale* and contrasts it with man as *animal morale* (pp. 56-57).

The remaining three parts (II, III and IV) speak of God (as the ruler of the world), celestial and subterranean beings (angels and devils) and man, who as an earthly being occupies an intermediate place (is a resident of two worlds), or, in other words, connects both orders in his existence. It would be difficult to adequately summarize the entire content of those parts. I am going to focus only those threads which I find most important.

Chapter 3 (beginning of part II), devoted to the rationality of God, begins with an accurate observation that in the extremely rich literature dedicated to Kantian criticism of evidence for the existence of God in general, little space is devoted to the analysis of God's

¹ This difference is difficult to express in English and is sometimes completely obliterated. I use the phrases used by Mary Gregor in the translation of Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge, 1991, p. 215).

properties. These considerations are usually dominated by the question of the existence of God. The justification for such an approach by interpreters of Kant's philosophy of religion is contained in the very nature of Kantian criticism, and not in the philosophical-theological tradition, with which Kant argues. This does not mean that Kant ignores the question of God's properties. On the contrary, he is interested in this issue and develops it, particularly in those scattered threads that qualify collectively as "moral proof of God's existence." It is known that Kant's interest in this matter grows with time and leads to the radicalization of his views. In the last notes of the philosopher (1st fascicle of *Opus postumum*) there is even an identification of God and pure practical reason (p. 75). I consider Klinge's analyses contained in this chapter to be among the most interesting polemics with contemporary interpretations of this part of Kant's *Opus postumum* where the philosopher reflects on the relation between God and pure practical reason (pp. 86-92).

I can only appreciate here the fact that Klinge does not ignore in his monograph Kant's deliberations about the trinity nature of God. However, it would be impossible to examine them in this paper. The issue, the literal interpretation of which did not convey any relevance for Kant himself, acquires – as we know – a practical meaning. However, Klinge does not ponder any further as to what extent this practical interpretation, acceptable to reason, is accomplished "by force" (cf. Bettina Stangneth). In any case, one cannot help the impression that we are dealing here with the schematism of divisions typical for Kant.

The third part of the monograph (Chapters 6-8) contains answers to questions about the remaining "inhuman" rational beings mentioned in the title: angels and devils. In Kant's opinion, the determination of the nature of these beings in relation to the nature of man needs to take into account the factor of will. An angel, after the German poet Haller, whom Kant eagerly quotes, would be somehow "automatically" capable of goodness (p. 145). The virtue attributed to such a being would be the maximum (or minimum) of virtue attainable by man. However, the holiness attributed to an angel would rather signify a state of moral perfection, which is not attainable by man at all (p. 156). In both cases the "angel" would be a kind of a border concept. It is easy to guess that the "devil" in Kant's moral philosophy performs a similar function. With the only difference that it serves a better understanding of human evil (p. 159). Similarly, heaven and hell "describe" those very intelligible areas (or kingdoms) that are determined by the relationship between intelligible beings (pp. 178-186) and not a place in the world of possible experience.

The last, fourth part of the book (Chapters 9 and 10) is devoted to man as a being who, living in two worlds (intelligible and sensual), stands at the centre of Kant's deliberations (pp. 189-191). The author cannot disregard here those aspects of Kant's practical philosophy in which the question about the vocation of man is posed: Kant's Christology and the deliberations on the ideal, the model (*Vorbild*), the archetype (*Urbild*) which are connected with it. The tension between the actual status of man as a sensual being and man's vocation to sanctity leads Kant to philosophical reflections on the

theological theme of salvation which also crown Klinge's monograph: "man *in re* is subject to duty, but *in spe* is holy" (pp. 250).

Reading of this interesting book, however, gives rise to a few remarks. Kant's precise terminological distinctions and the corresponding analyses carried out by the author of the discussed monograph seem to be inexpressible in a foreign language. Of course, one of the key concepts seems to be the term "being", which in the English translation replaces the term "Wesen" used by Kant. Kant obviously explains its meaning ("das Wort Wesen ist eigentlich ein alt deutsches Wort, und heißt so viel wie "Seyn"". AA, XXVIII 411]) and indicates that "Wesen" is the equivalent of the Latin term "ens". But even an awareness of this fact will probably not help to prevent the constant blurring of the difference between *vernünftige Wesen* and *Vernunftwesen*, not in the original, of course, but in translations. The Latin term "ens" also brings to mind another thought, namely that Kant's analyses can also be considered as a continuation of old reflections on the "great chain of existence" (Arthur O. Lovejoy). Admittedly, the author of the monograph avoids joining Kant in his speculations on this subject in pre-critical writings. A testimony to this fact is contained in Kant's reviews of the monumental work of Herder and in Kant's essay titled *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*. The relation between rational and irrational beings seems to touch upon the key subject matter of these two worlds, which Kant took up directly in his polemics with Herder. The author of the discussed monograph on this subject neither takes up nor reflects on the analogy between the order of rational beings (the intelligible order) and the order of material perfection of being (the sensual order). The fact that Kant rejected pre-critical hypotheses about the inhabitants of other planets gives him the right to do so. However, doesn't this subject matter return in Kant's philosophy in a new form in his later attempts to integrate the divided system of philosophy? An attempt to answer such a question would, however, go far beyond the scope of the excellent monograph by Hendrik Klinge.

