Con-Textos Kantianos
ISSN-e: 2386-7655

https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/kant.91837

EDICIONES COMPLUTENSE

Kant's Revolution of Thought

Samuele Fasol[1]

Recibido: 10-10-2023 / Aceptado: 23-10-2023

Review of: Willaschek, Marcus, *Kant. Die Revolution des Denkens*, München, C. H. Beck, 2023, pp. 430.

Cómo citar: Fasol, S. (2023). Kant's Revolution of Thought. *Con-Textos Kantianos*, 18, 163-165. https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/kant.91837

Any book aimed to introduce the whole philosophy of a complex author as Kant is likely to oversimplify many parts of his work or, conversely, to focus too much on specific technicalities at the expense of the big picture. Marcus Willaschek's *Kant. Die Revolution des Denkens* constitutes an admirable attempt to avoid both these possibilities. Written on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of Kant's birth (1724-2024), the volume presents an informative and fascinating introduction to Kant's life and thought, aiming to clarify all the topics and questions involved in Kant's multifaceted view, while exhibiting the continuity and the common elements of his works.

The book's structure is quite innovative at least for two reasons. Firstly, it does not follow a chronological but a thematic order. More specifically, the volume is divided into six parts, for a total of 30 chapters, concerning the different areas of Kantian philosophy: politics and history, ethics, law and religion, nature and science, knowledge, and, finally, metaphysics. Secondly, each chapter, which is related to the others but can be read independently, starts from some events of Kant's life or some consideration concerning the cultural and social atmosphere of Kant's time, to then introduce the related aspects of his philosophy and works he published.

Beyond the introductory and well-known features of Kant's philosophy that Willaschek explains in a clear way, helpful for both students and non-philosophers, three deep and non-trivial aspects of his work deserve mention: (i) the continuity and coherence of Kant's philosophy described all along the various areas of concern; (ii) the honest and unbiased focus on the controversial points of the Kantian thought in relation to our present time; (iii) the alternated emphasis on historical circumstances of the eighteenth century or events of Kant's life, and on Kant's works, focusing on famous as well as less-known writings; such a structure enables to appreciate the interdependence of the two.

Starting from the first aspect, Willaschek stresses in the Introduction and, then, in the whole volume, three features of the Kantian philosophy that constitute the common thread of his whole thought, highlighting its continuity. First, Willaschek points out that Kant's philosophy often attempts to reconcile two apparently incompatible views. This feature of Kant's method emerges in many different points, as the author emphasizes in various chapters; as a first example, Kant tried to reconcile a realist and an idealist view of politics (Willaschek, Ch. 2). Willaschek clarifies persuasively that Kant recognized the selfishness and violence of the human attitude, while also aiming for a political framework able to promote morality and achieve "perpetual piece". He reconciled such apparently incompatible views by underlining the surprisingly moral effects of many egoistical actions, and also by promoting a regulative and hopeful approach towards the realization of a peaceful and moral society insofar as this latter ideal is not fully impossible. As a second example, Kant investigated how to combine an education aimed at freedom and self-determination without giving up obligations and constraints (Willaschek, Ch. 5): on one side, education should aim at the voluntary and free pursuit of moral deeds, while, on the other, students also need obligations and coercions. Willaschek explains that also in this case Kant mediates between the two extremes: the child should gradually understand the reasonable and correct rules he initially followed only out of fear of punishment. As a third example, Willaschek highlights also that Kant defended the consistency between the notion of a benevolent God and the radical evil in human nature (Willaschek, Ch. 14-15). While humans inevitably exhibit an inclination

[1] Università Roma Tre,
Email: samuele.fasol@uniroma3.it

(*Hang*) towards evil, they can and must pursue morality and overcome this radical evil independently of any belief in God; at the same time, the concept of God designates a certain perspective on human beings and has a crucial role in making conceivable the conciliation of morality with happiness. The two last examples of Kant's conciliatory attitude are maybe the most notorious and philosophically relevant: Kant solved the problem of the Antinomies by demonstrating that the respective theses and antitheses were not incompatible if considered from two different points of view, claiming the non-contradictory relationship between mechanistic explanations and free will (and, later, teleology) (Willaschek, Ch. 20-21); finally, Kant reconciled, as well-known, the rationalist and the empiricist traditions (Willaschek, Ch. 6-21). Willaschek sheds light on all these examples without simplifying them, emphasizing the pattern between the various attempts to conciliate two extremes, in which Kant's strategy often involves the distinction between a present factual state of affairs and a hopeful attitude towards regulative but non-impossible ideals.

The second common thread characterizing the whole of Kantian thought is, according to Willaschek, his "revolution of the way of thinking" that gives the subtitle to the book, by which Kant shifted the attention from the objects around us to the standpoint of the observer. Objectivity, as Willaschek emphasizes (Willaschek, Ch. 1-25), cannot be achieved if our thinking is "directed" by things, but only if things, structured by our thinking, become objects for us. This second point provides another example of the above-mentioned point, namely Kant's conciliatory attitude: he mediated, indeed, between the absolutist tradition of Plato, Aristotle, and the Christian philosophers towards "Truth", the "Good" and the "Beautiful", and the relativist tradition of the sophists and Hume, later culminated in Nietzsche (Willaschek, Ch. 1). These three notions are parts of subjective representations "produced" (*hervorbringen*) according to the conditions imposed by the structure of our cognition. However, such representations are by no means arbitrary or random, since they follow necessary rules that are the same for all human beings. Therefore, Kant overcomes the one-sidedness of both absolutism and relativism by claiming the universality and objectivity of knowledge and by binding it, at the same time, to the standpoint of a rational being. In other words, knowledge is not objective *despite*, but *in virtue of* its dependence on the conditions imposed by the subject.

Willaschek then highlights a third common thread that shows the continuity and coherence of Kant's philosophy: his balanced consideration of theory and practice, thought and action. The two extremes are always co-present and mutually interacting, but in hypothetical conflicts between the two practice is prior (Willaschek, Ch. 1). Philosophy and science, according to Kant, are not ends in themselves. Conversely, they should contribute to making life better. According to Willaschek, the priority of practice over theory emerges, for example, in Kant's focus on moral actions, self-determination and self-legislation, inherited by Rousseau (Willaschek, Ch. 9). It is not our moral duty that depends on theoretical knowledge, but, on the contrary, it determines what we should reasonably believe to be true (Willaschek, Ch. 10). The case of free will exemplifies as well the priority of practice over theory: even if we do not have sufficient theoretical arguments to claim the existence of a free will, we are legitimated in assuming it and believing in it insofar as free will grounds the possibility to act morally (Willaschek, Ch. 14). The postulates of the existence of God and the immortality of the Soul follow the same reasoning (Willaschek, Ch. 10-15-27).

Kant's conciliatory attitude, focus on the human standpoint, and complex view of the relationship between theory and practice constitute a common thread that runs through all his works, and Willaschek emphasizes these three elements enabling the reader to appreciate the unity of the Kantian philosophy despite the most disparate topics it concerns.

The second relevant aspect of Willaschek's introduction is the honest and unbiased focus on the controversial points of Kant's thought in relation to our present time. Willaschek is rightly persuaded that most of Kant's reflections can be admired while, in parallel, criticizing and rejecting his racist and sexist statements. Willaschek's approach to such topics is particularly interesting insofar as he emphasizes the contradictions between some of Kant's opinions and his moral philosophy. In this way, Kant as a moral philosopher can arguably become the first and major opponent to Kant as a man of the eighteenth-century. In Chapter 16, for example, Willaschek highlights the clearly racist characteristics of Kant's anthropology: even if not influential, such anthropology was based on a theory of races that claimed to be scientific, and in which many stereotypical and external attributes of human bodies and cultures were linked to intellectual and moral qualities. At the same time, Kant's Categorical Imperative commands to treat not only any human being but all *humanity* and any rational being, as an end and not just a means. Thus, Kant's philosophy appears to correct his anthropological statements about races in a way that Kant himself was, maybe, unaware of.

Willaschek, however, does not absolve Kant so easily. Conversely, he lists the different positions of the debate over Kant's racism, even if he does not strictly deepen them, highlighting how the controversial parts of his anthropology can be also considered influential over his philosophical thoughts. Willaschek does not want to propose a straightforward view of these complex topics, he rather introduces the reader to the debates providing a key to understanding all the multifaceted and controversial aspects of Kant's thought. His approach seems to be successful, in particular, in the discussion over Kant's idea of Enlightenment. In Chapter 4 (pp. 67-71), Willaschek compares the Kantian definition of Enlightenment as «der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbst verschuldeten Unmündigkeit [the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority]»

with Max Horkheimer's and Theodor W. Adorno's claim on Enlightenment as a miserably failed project. The two members of the Frankfurt School considered in fact the Enlightenment as the project that reduced reason and science to an instrumental mastery of nature and society, setting the stage for totalitarianism and capitalism. Willaschek accurately defends Kant's philosophy and the Enlightenment in general from such accusations through three considerations: in the first place, the subject of Enlightenment involves, at least in the long run, humanity as a whole, including the oppressed groups and the minorities. In the second place, the real targets of criticism of Horkheimer's and Adorno's considerations are the products of mass media and ideologies, which, according to Kant, are exactly the opposite of the Enlightenment cultural attitude, since Enlightenment aims to independent and critical rational beings able to autonomously examine fake-news, rhetorical speeches and teachings from politicians, religious leaders and influencers (the contemporary version of the people Kant called "Vormunde"). In the third place, Kant's ideal of Enlightenment is strictly related to the public dimension, in which everyone is a scholar before the entire public of the world of readers. Thus, Enlightenment is not a given and completed project that can be considered as failed or successful; conversely, it has to be gradually pursued through tiring attempts, and Kant's considerations should be renewed as well in relation to the evolution of society. For example, contemporary conspiracy theorists should not focus only on Kant's general invitation to autonomous thinking, but on the public dimension of his invitation and on how autonomous thinking becomes illuminating: discussions and exchanges of reasons and counter-reasons presuppose the acknowledgment of common principles, shared by the scientific community. Willaschek, in short, compares Kant's works with our contemporary society, both condemning the controversial parts of his thought and contextualizing them in the century in which they were written; at the same time, he acutely sheds light on the elements of his philosophy that can and should be reconsidered as deeply helpful for the present.

The third relevant aspect of Willaschek's volume, strictly related to the latter considerations, is that he alternates the narration of historical circumstances of the eighteenth century or events of Kant's life with the related aspects of Kant's works, focusing on both famous and less-known writings. In Chapter 1, for example, he mentions the three "revolutions" that characterized Kant's life: a personal revolution, in 1764, that reoriented his philosophy towards ethics and practical reason; a philosophical revolution, in 1770, that led him to the project of the *Critique of pure reason*; and a political revolution, namely the French Revolution in 1789, that hugely impressed Kant who condemned any violence while, however, sympathizing with the overcoming of a despotic regime. All these references to historical and personal events are crucial for contextualizing Kant's works in the cultural atmosphere in which they were composed. To only mention a few other examples, Willaschek devotes Chapter 7, concerned with Kant's Categorical Imperative, to the compelling correspondence between the philosopher and Maria von Herbert. Similarly, he starts Chapter 20, concerned with animals and teleology, with Vacaunson's automaton and the seventeenth-century debate over animals.

Furthermore, Willaschek does not ignore the scientific knowledge of Kant's time and Kant's related interest in physics, astronomy, geology, geography, chemistry, and biology, partially highlighted in Chapter 19. Even if, sometimes, contemporary authors exaggerate the commitment of Kant's philosophy to Newtonian mechanics, the strong link between Kant's works and the science of his time is indisputable, to the point that Willaschek's thoroughgoing introduction to Kant may be considered insufficient only on this point. After attending the physics lectures of the Königsberg professors Knutzen and Teske, as well as the teachings on mathematics of the often forgotten Ammon, Marquardt, and Rappolt, Kant wrote two essays in 1754 on astronomical questions, followed by his *Universal natural history and theory of the heavens* (1755). In this latter work, he formulated what is known as the Kant-Laplace nebular hypothesis. Despite Kant's elaboration does not exhibit mathematical precision, he acutely suggested that our solar systems and the other galaxies emerged from a primordial nebula of matter. Beyond his properly scientific works, Kant examined the very foundations of science in his mature works, among which the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787) and the *Metaphysical foundations of natural science* (1786), individuating the non-empirical presuppositions that make the mathematical description of a law-like nature possible, a still relevant project for contemporary philosophy of science.

In the last chapter, Willaschek mentions the later authors influenced by Kant as well, from neo-Kantians and Husserl to logical empiricists and Rawls, even introducing contemporary commenters and Kant scholars. By contextualizing the Kantian works in the cultural and social atmosphere of his time, mentioning the authors he discussed with and the later philosophers he influenced, Willaschek frames in a historically accurate way the many facets of Kant's philosophy, regarded as still significant and fruitful today.