

Sorin Baiasu, *Kant and Sartre: Rediscovering Critical Ethics*

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Baiasu's book has a clearly stated purpose: to show that Sartre's ethical theory is closely related to Kant's. This is an ambitious undertaking if only because many readers will approach Sartre and Kant's ethics with a preconception of these authors' views as being very different, if not at loggerheads. Baiasu undertakes this task by analysing Sartre's criticism of both Kant's theoretical and practical philosophy. Inevitably, the discussion of the many relevant topics and interpretations has to be curtailed to fit the format of the book. By and large, Baiasu does a good job of deciding where to expand and where to abstain from going into further detail to suit his purpose. This he achieves by setting out a clear methodology that underpins the presentation of each set of topics (9). The book is divided into three parts, covering respectively, identity and self-choice; freedom and normativity; and authority and progress. In each part, the first chapter is devoted to Kant, the second presents Sartre's views with a focus that is first directed upon his objections to Kant, and then their evaluation, chiefly in order to establish to what extent these are indeed Kant's views that Sartre is criticizing. In many cases, as Baiasu argues, there are in fact misunderstandings about Kant's position or the implications thereof.

In bringing together Kant and Sartre's views, Baiasu inevitably has to deal with some ill-fitting notions. Thus Baiasu acknowledges that there is scope for further discussion of the 'similarities and differences' between different forms of self-consciousness found in Sartre and Kant for instance (58). But to show any kind of convergence of views, it is important to present a clear picture of how the *key concepts* of one philosophical framework can find a place within the other. I shall give two examples of Baiasu's proposals in this respect. The first concerns transcendental apperception which Baiasu examines to establish a notion of a person's identity over time that is sufficient for her status as moral subject. Baiasu's interpretation is driven by a very Sartrean concern not to let any aspect of our experience escape from self-consciousness. As he recognizes (in line with Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason (CPR)* B131–2) that an actual instance of 'I think' does not necessarily have to accompany any given presentation, he looks for a more primitive self-consciousness, at the pre-reflective level (28–9). This leads him to make some controversial claims about the conditions for having a sensation, namely that this requires a synthesis of presentations. There are two problems with this. First, if

'condition' is understood epistemologically, then Baiasu is appealing to a Strawsonian identification of sensation with sense-data, and to the correct claim that the latter require the ability to differentiate between them (28), and hence self-consciousness. But this is because sense-data are objects ('Object', A92/B125), while Kant's notion of sensation is to be understood as a pre-objective ingredient in the construction of the object. Second, it is unclear whether Baiasu is not in fact interested in ontological conditions, e.g. what is required to have a sensation, which he seems to conflate, again in Strawsonian fashion, with Kant's notion of *Erfahrung* (28–9).<sup>1</sup> But if so, he should not be looking at the Transcendental Deduction as it does not deal with such ontological conditions. The further claim that the pre-reflective self-consciousness in question here is 'very closely related' (30) to Kant's transcendental unity of apperception amounts to an attempt to give a Kantian spin to such an ontological condition. What this certainly makes extremely puzzling is that Baiasu still tries to make sense of the Kantian distinction between subjective and objective unities of consciousness (31). This involves an identification of this subjective unity with the empirical unity of apperception (32–3). But this is questionable insofar as the first concerns how the manifold is 'given for ... combination' (B139) and cannot therefore require a synthesis.<sup>2</sup>

More successful in my view – and more important for his purposes – is Baiasu's analysis of Kant's notion of disposition (*Gesinnung*) which Sartre criticizes, proposing his own notion of 'fundamental project' in its stead. Baiasu presents an interesting take on the problems concerning these notions. If we are to be responsible for our acts, the disposition must itself be chosen. For Sartre, the Kantian notion of an atemporal choice must be rejected, and he proposes to view it as a choice which 'in its very upsurge' (*Being and Nothingness* (BN) 502) is temporalized (62). This is not particularly illuminating however, and Baiasu considers Baldwin's (*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 1980) attempt to make sense of these notions. Baldwin thinks that 'no transformation of a person's disposition/fundamental project can be voluntary' (63), so the question of how it can be free looms large as a threat to both Kant's and Sartre's systems. For Baldwin, the problem is that, while the disposition/fundamental project provides the reasons for the choices made by an agent, since this project itself must be chosen, how can this be on the basis of reasons? This leads Baldwin to a notion of *original choice* that is not based upon further reasons. But this does not appear to be a choice at all (63). Baldwin's solution is to view the disposition/fundamental project as indeterminate, standing in relation to individual actions in the same way as a painting is related to brushstrokes (64): any of the latter can change the painting significantly (or not), thus providing additional determination to the project. Baiasu rightly queries

Baldwin's assumption that the original choice must be deliberative (65), whereas in fact, for Sartre, 'there is a choice of deliberation as a procedure' (BN 473), and other choices are possible (66). But there is also a sense in which he fails to appreciate the resources of Baldwin's proposal, opting rather for its rejection on the further grounds that, if the fundamental project were indeterminate, we could not understand our reasons for action as their comprehensibility depends upon this project (65). But indeterminacy does not mean *total* lack of determinacy. It just means a non-total determinacy. It seems therefore that Baldwin's proposal could be adjusted by dropping his requirement that the original choice be deliberative. Indeed, the indeterminacy of the project explains why, as Sartre himself says, particular actions and projects are not determined by the global project but contribute to it insofar as they 'are united in the global project which we are' (BN 502).

This can be seen as explaining how the global/fundamental project manifests itself 'through a set of individual choices which are in effect a "temporalisation" of the original choice' (BN 502). Baiasu's alternative interpretation of this passage as referring to a *global* project which stands over and above particular *fundamental* projects (now plural) as their synthesis is not particularly convincing (70). But Baiasu's suggestion that what seems to be missing, and may be implied, by Sartre's account, are the Kantian resources of drawing upon a noumenal realm in which the original choice is located, while it temporalizes itself in the phenomenal realm, is very perceptive (70, 72), and directly supports an understanding of the original choice as manifested temporally through the set of an agent's particular decisions.

Overall, in part I, Baiasu has made a good case for the dual claims that Kant and Sartre share a minimal notion of personal identity, while rejecting any substantive notion of ego, and that they both subscribe to the idea that the whole life of a person is based upon a free choice of self. Turning now to part II, we find Baiasu tackling the difficult problem of these authors' understanding of freedom. The issue of making sense of Kant's different, but related, notions of freedom is a difficult one to which Baiasu cannot do justice within the few pages that he devotes to this topic. Stressing that this is a short presentation, he distinguishes practical from transcendental freedom and from autonomy. The presentation of these notions and their interrelation enters into just about the right amount of detail for the purposes of the book (86–91). Endnotes add some detail to this picture while raising controversial issues, such as an apparently compatibilist take on the notion of practical freedom, although Kant defines it through our having 'in our power of choice a causality for producing [something] independently from ... natural causes and even against their force and influence' (CPR A534/B562). Otherwise, the order of presentation is sometimes unusual. We find, for instance, that the categorical imperative is introduced (with a questionable

heavy focus upon Höffe's take on its interpretation) after a discussion of the practical antinomy of the *CPrR* (91–8). Such choices are generally, however, justified by the overall requirements of the argument.

When discussing Sartre's ideas, Baiasu's presentation is more immediately appealing. This is probably not surprising since the book's argument is driven by a consideration of Sartre's criticisms of Kant. Baiasu's accounts of reflective consciousness (110–13), or of Sartre's criticism of the free will/determinism debate (114–18), for instance, are very illuminating. The Sartrean criticisms of Kant's views of ethical normativity that Baiasu discusses are essentially two. First, Sartre dismisses Kant's notion of spontaneity which is viewed as relying upon a conception of 'eternal subject' (118–21) that is fixed, and therefore cannot be spontaneous. Baiasu appeals to Kant's distinction of appearances and things-in-themselves to avoid this problem: there is simply no knowledge of what freedom might mean at the level of things-in-themselves (120). Further discussion of this issue would have been useful, particularly in relation to the claim that seems to underpin such criticisms, namely that the agent's spontaneity is a property of a putative noumenal self. Second, Baiasu presents Sartre's dissatisfaction with a moral normativity based upon, and imperatives consisting of, universal rules, which lies in their claimed inability to address and properly take into account the individual human being they are addressed to, as they are in fact directed to abstract human beings (121–5). This is a very important criticism of Kant's ethics which Sartre can back up with his account of bad faith and his theory of impure reflection, as Baiasu shows very aptly (125–8). Baiasu provides a first Kantian answer to this Sartrean objection, namely by noting that moral rules for Kant are tailored to the particular circumstances of an action and characteristics of the agent (138–9). But the meat of the Sartrean objection is directed at the source of moral normativity. Sartre requires that there be an interpersonal dimension grounding any value that an agent adopts as norm (140). And Sartre, in a 'subtle and convincing' (141) interpretation of Kant, argues that the latter replaces the role of the other by drawing upon the noumenal dimension of the free agent. That is, the for-itself as object of reflection is turned into an object that thereby enjoys an absoluteness that grounds ethics: for Sartre, Kant's self-legislating noumenal dimension of the person thus legislates over the empirical dimension. This is a form of bad faith insofar as the choices made by the for-itself seem as though they were already made (they are presented as laws of reason) so that I am not responsible for them (141). And indeed, Sartre recognizes that this Kantian strategy avoids anxiety (*Cahiers pour une morale* 265–8, 255–7). Baiasu points out however that it is not obvious how the Sartrean distinction between value and norm, together with the role of interpersonal relations, actually do the work of

grounding Sartre's own understanding of normativity, and thereby of undermining Kant's approach to it. He concludes his discussion of this issue by emphasizing the role of the other, as one that enables a norm to be identified as such, as opposed to just any particular value the agent might happen to have (144). It is not clear that this captures all that Sartre wants to draw out from the encounter with the other however,<sup>3</sup> and indeed a further discussion of this issue would have been welcome. But Baiasu sheds some interesting and new light upon the issue of the source of normativity for Sartre, while clearly showing how this account parallels Kant's in many ways. And we therefore end up with two structurally similar accounts of normativity that both in their own way avoid moral realism (as Baiasu understands it) while requiring some split within the notion of person: empirical/intelligible for Kant; for-itself/in-itself for Sartre (143–4). The discussion around this theme of normativity must surely constitute one of the highlights of this book.

The final part of the book deals with the notions of authority and progress, but actually starts off by examining core aspects of Kant's moral philosophy, such as how the formula of universal law (FUL) is to be applied (157–72). Baiasu reviews Korsgaard's logical and practical interpretations of the so-called 'contradiction in conception' test, and endorses Herman's criticism of Korsgaard's practical contradiction interpretation. This constitutes a springboard for Baiasu to present his take on how rules of action should be tested for their conformity to the categorical imperative (CI). Baiasu is right to remind us that what is at stake is the moral injunction that the CI have a constitutive role in our practice (169), and that it is not the action as empirical phenomenon that must be examined here (166). But it is not clear that this requires rejecting the whole standard view of the FUL test (that he identifies as originating in O'Neill's work). Indeed Baiasu stresses more than once the importance of distinguishing between the detailed rule of an action and the maxim/principle governing it (e.g. 146–7). This distinction goes a long way to addressing his worries: the maxim must indeed reflect the underlying intention, and when it does, the contradiction in the will that an immoral maxim gives rise to does not derive from contingent features of the empirical world.

Baiasu also provides a very interesting discussion of Kant's claim that the moral law has precedence over a conception of the good (174–8). This issue is important for the comparison with Sartre who originally understood ethics to be about values, but later, in the Cornell Lectures, changed his mind on the relation between imperatives and values. This topic is closely related to Sartre's criticism of Kant's ethics as authoritarian (198). After initially dismissing Sartre's claim that Kantian imperatives are enforceable through power (199), he then considers whether the fact of reason's authority over the agent provides Sartre with a more powerful

argument against Kant. Baiasu's discussion of Kant's 'fact of reason' is very insightful: he argues that Kant is not dogmatic here, but that there is a clear argument for the authority of this fact (202–4) so that Sartre's criticism of Kant seems unjustified. In the final pages of the book, Baiasu even seeks to reconcile the enlightened optimism of Kant's totalizing view of progress towards the highest good, with Sartre's suspicion of all totalizing explanations. Although he cannot fully deflect Sartre's criticism, his thoughtful analyses of the importance of Kant's regulative/constitutive distinction in his understanding of the notion of progress (204–6), and of Sartre's belief that his dialectical method can uncover the 'Truth of History' (224) are worth reading. Controversially, Baiasu claims that Sartre's criticism of Kant on moral progress boils down to his favouring a value-based ethics (225).

Overall, in Baiasu's book, interpretative choices are made which will not be to everyone's liking, and one can safely assume that many readers will not share all these choices. This, I think, should not deter the reader, as Baiasu's project is teeming with intellectual originality and philosophical insights. As such, it will doubtlessly stimulate the reader into looking into aspects of these authors' thought in a different light. And if the book has achieved that, it has achieved a lot.

#### Notes

- 1 With my thanks to Dennis Schulting for pointing this out, and identifying the Strawsonian assumptions.
- 2 See my 'Kant's Conception of the Self as subject and its Embodiment'. *Kant Yearbook*, 2 (2010), 147–74.
- 3 Baiasu returns to this issue much later in the book (192), but there is a sense in which he tries to force the issue of the importance of interpersonal relations onto Kant's ethics (194–5).

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Katerina Deligiorgi, *The Scope of Autonomy: Kant and the Morality of Freedom*

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*The Scope of Autonomy*, Katerina Deligiorgi's excellent new study, has a number of noteworthy strengths. First, unlike most contemporary