Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten, by Immanuel Kant, Herausgegeben, eingeleitet und erläutert von Jens Timmermann, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004, ISBN 978-3-5253-0602-4.

Over the last two decades or so, much research has been published on Kant's *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten (GMS)*. Although there is, strictly speaking, no need for yet another edition of the text itself, the idea of making the text available with an introduction (including a bibliography) and a commentary (as well as a critical apparatus, further materials and an index) is certainly laudable (I understand that a similar book will be published with Suhrkamp Verlag soon). The proof of the pudding, however, is in the eating, and it turns out that this pudding is rather a *Wackelpudding* than anything else.

Timmermann's edition of the text itself appears to be reliable. That is not a surprise, given that the text of the *GMS*, unlike other texts of Kant's, has never posed any serious editorial problems and was recently edited in the Felix Meiner Verlag (1999) on the basis of the original editions anyway. The only critical remark would be that it is probably not wise to put textual variants and conjectures into an addendum – for how is one supposed to easily find out whether textual differences really make a difference or not (and sometimes they do)? No one will go back and forth between the text and the addendum.

In the introduction, Timmermann lays out basic elements of Kant's ethics and the *GMS*. Many things he says are, of course, right; but they are right on a level of an interpretative insight that has been reached a long time ago. Hardly anything new or interesting is added, and the way the information is laid out will certainly not help beginners either. Timmermann's commentary is basically structured as a series of more or less independent comments on all paragraphs of the *GMS*. The main problem with this kind of commentary is that it is impossible to have a meaningful commentary without looking at the text as a whole. What is much more problematic, the introduction and then later the commentary is full of blunders, misinterpretations and factual mistakes. Let us have a closer look.

Without actually quoting the letters, Timmermann writes that according to letters by J. G. Hamann, by the end of April and early May Kant was working on a 'Prodromus' on moral philosophy; and that this was an 'anti-critique' of Garve's Cicero (so Timmermann writes that J. G. Hamann reported that 'Ende April und Anfang Mai 1784 in Briefen, Kant arbeite an einem "Prodromus" zur Moralphilosophie; und es handele sich dabei um eine "Antikritik" zu Garves Cicero.' However, it was already in February that Hamann mentioned the legend (*Sage*) about such an *Antikritik* (a legend which Hamann, by the way, first does not confirm). More importantly, in those two letters in late April and early May, Hamann writes that the (alleged) *Antikritik* has 'sich in einen Prodromum der Moral *verwandelt*' (letter to Herder from 2 May 1784, my italics). Hence, the text characterized as *Prodromum* is not, as Timmermann suggests, identical with the (allegedly planned) *Antikritik gegen Cicero*;

rather this (allegedly planned) *Antikritik* was changed (*verwandelt*) to a *Prodromum*, that is, to the text that was later published as the *Groundwork*.

Timmermann interprets the structure of *GMS* in a way that one cannot help but call at times extremely sketchy, at times simply absurd. As is common (and correct), Timmermann holds that *GMS I/II* are analytic, *GMS III* synthetic; however, he fails to explain what that really means. These terms (analytic and synthetic) have several, distinguished meanings; most importantly, one must distinguish between analysis/synthesis in terms of conceptual analysis/synthesis, and analysis/synthesis in terms of Kant's analytic/synthetic method (as described in the *Prolegomena*). Thus just calling *GMS I/II* analytic and *GMS III* synthetic doesn't help much (and there is a quite a complicated story to tell whether what Kant has in mind at the end of the preface is conceptual analysis versus conceptual synthesis or analytic versus synthetic method). Nothing but absurd is Timmermann's claim that Kant's analysis of practical reason (as of *GMS* p. 412) is a version (*Gestalt*, p. 106) of the 'populäre sittliche Weltweisheit' ('popular moral philosophy') in *GMS II*. Although it is true, of course, that the transition to the metaphysics of morals (in p. 426) is only made after this analysis (as well as after the introduction of the universal law and natural law formula of the categorical imperative), one cannot conclude that, therefore, everything before that transition in *GMS* p. 426 belongs to 'popular moral philosophy' (and one can certainly not claim, as Timmermann incomprehensibly does (p. 106), that all three famous variants of the categorical imperative belong to popular moral philosophy, although the second and the third are introduced after the transition to the metaphysics of morals). Timmermann would not have come to this conclusion if he had devoted more time to the question of what this metaphysics of morals (in *GMS II*) is, after all, and how it is related both to the general project of metaphysics of morals as well as to the critique of pure practical reason. Much research has been dedicated to this of which Timmermann appears to know nothing (or maybe he does, but then he does not take it into account).

Timmermann also claims (p. XVIII) that the 'metaphysics of morals' Kant projects in the *GMS* for the future was not supposed to be dealing with duties anymore (and he notes that the actual *Metaphysics of Morals* published in 1797 did, however, have such a system of duties). But that is once again just plain false. In *GMS II*, where Kant for the first time introduces several perfect and imperfect duties towards oneself and against others, he expressly says that one must 'note well that I reserve the division of duties entirely for a future *metaphysics of morals*' (*GMS*, p. 421, n.);[1] so he expressly says that the division (the system) of duties is reserved for the 'future metaphysics of morals' (and similar remarks are made in the preface). On the other hand, Timmermann suggests that the *GMS* is in large parts concerned with duties, whereas Kant says quite explicitly that his talk about, and his division of, duties in the *GMS* is only 'a discretionary one (to order my examples)' (*GMS*, p. 421, n.). And it is simply untenable to claim, as Timmermann does (p. XVIII), that the *Grundlegung*

is not part of the system of philosophy sketched in the preface – how could it not be, since it already answers the 'principal question' (p. 392) of the whole enterprise (not to mention that the *GMS* already does make the transition to a metaphysics of morals in its second chapter)? It appears that to Timmermann the *GMS* is little more than an introduction (p. 88) – he even calls it 'Prodromus', following Hamann – and one would have hoped that this myth had long been abolished. The undeniable fact that *GMS III* moves on to a 'critique of pure practical reason' is also dismissed by Timmerman, again with the observation that all of this is preliminary – thereby ignoring, among many other things, that Kant clearly undertakes to exhibit the '*main feature*' (*GMS*, p. 445, my italics) of such a critique (a remark at the end of *GMS II* that Timmermann once again simply ignores).

Although Timmermann cannot be blamed for not discussing the secondary literature – this clearly is not the purpose of this kind of commentary – he must be held accountable for obviously not being familiar with, or at least not taking into account, important recent research literature. Thus, it is no surprise that his bibliography lacks important works. For instance, Michael McCarthy's papers are not mentioned at all; Heinrich P. Delfosse's excellent index (2000) about the *GMS* isn't used either (and hence Delfosse's helpful historical information about Wolff, Plato, Sulzer, etc. are not taken into account) and neither is Klaus Steigleder's book *Kants Moralphilosophie* (2002). One of the most important books on Kant of the last twenty years or so (as I would argue), Samuel Kerstein's *Kant's Search for the Supreme Principle of Morality* (almost like a commentary on *GMS I/II*, Cambridge University Press, 2002) is ignored; and so Timmermann passes over the much discussed gap in Kant's derivation of the categorical imperative (Wood, Allison, Kerstein) without any comment. Other books are listed but apparently not really read, for example, Marcia Baron's *Kantian Ethics Almost without Apology*. (Timmermann lists Baron's book under a preliminary title of the book; Timmermann obviously didn't check the title of the book as it was actually published – to say the least. By the way, Timmermann could have jumped at the opportunity to complete and update the bibliography provided in the edition of Meiner Verlag, 1999.) And so Timmermann seems entirely oblivious of the long and still ongoing debate about acting from duty in relation to inclination when he simply states that 'es ist freilich möglich, daß die Handlung *mit* Neigung und doch *aus* Pflicht geschieht' (it is certainly possible that an action *with* inclination still happens *from* duty, p. 96); a central and very elusive sentence in this passage of the GMS – 'that it is much harder to notice this difference' (*GMS*, p. 397) – receives practically no attention at all.

His reconstruction of the famous three propositions about duty – the first of which Kant notoriously never states – cannot convince either and, again, does not reflect recent research. The third proposition, according to Kant, is that duty is the 'necessity of an action from respect for the law' (*GMS*, p. 400). Kant says that this proposition is a 'consequence [*Folgerung*] of the first two' (p. 400). Now, Timmermann argues that

respect is really new in proposition three. For a variety of reasons, however, this makes no sense: first, if proposition three is a consequence of propositions one and two, how then can it include anything entirely new? Second, in the paragraphs about proposition one, very clearly what is thematic is acting from duty and, as Kant says right after proposition one, to act from duty means 'subjectively' (i.e. with regard to the motive) nothing but acting from respect (at other places Kant identifies acting from duty with acting from respect), hence proposition one is about the subjective motive of respect (whereas proposition two is about the objective motive, the law itself). Timmermann pays no attention at all to this distinction between the objective and subjective elements of duty mentioned in *GMS*, p. 400 (he refers to it only later, not realizing that this undermines his own interpretation of the three propositions). Thirdly, Timmermann's own reconstruction lacks any plausibility. According to him, proposition one states that an action has moral worth if and only if its maxim guarantees that the action necessarily will take place even with or against all inclinations (p. 96). But maxims are neutral concerning the motivation to comply with them. The maxim never to overcharge one's customers can be the maxim both of an action done from duty as well as the action done from inclination; one and the very same maxim can be the maxim of an action from duty or just in accordance with duty. Only the maxim always to act from duty (if such a maxim made sense in the first place) would refer to the motivation directly; and even such a maxim would not, of course, guarantee that a given action necessarily will take place.

There is more to criticize (and little to praise) in the introduction and the commentary on *GMS II*. It is, for instance, quite misleading for Timmermann to claim that hypothetical imperatives 'angeben, wie man etwas, das man ohnehin tun möchte, realisiert' (that hypothetical imperatives 'state how to put something into reality that one wants to do anyway', p. XVI); for Kant makes it very clear that 'determining the means themselves to a proposed aim' (*GMS*, p. 417) is not the task of hypothetical imperatives. In his interpretation of *GMS III*, things get even worse. As with Baron's book, Dieter Schönecker's book on '*Grundlegung III*' (1999) is listed in the bibliography but, again, listed with the wrong title or, to be more precise, is listed with the preliminary title the book had when it was announced in another place. Obviously, Timmermann did not really hold the published book in his hands and this shows. Of course, the point is not that Schönecker's interpretation *GMS III* is correct (it might very well not be and in many respects it certainly isn't). But it will be fair to say (and it has been said elsewhere) that this is the most comprehensive interpretation of *GMS III* so far, and that at least some of its interpretative hypotheses are at least worth considering (and, again, to this end one has to be familiar with them first).

Timmermann is, of course, absolutely right that the question 'Why be moral?' is not the question Kant is interested in, if it is understood as asking whether there is a reason to act morally based on self-interest; for according to Kant morality itself is (almost by definition) not based on self-interest. However, there is no need to understand 'why be moral?' in

this sense. In any event, Kant in a variety of ways poses the question 'from whence the moral law obligates' (*GMS*, p. 450), and it is quite complicated to unravel what he has in mind (or rather, what the text means). The problem with Timmermann's commentary is that there is simply no way to do justice to Kant's text (and its interpretations suggested so far) without going deep into tiny details. The most striking example for this is the notorious 'circle' in section three of *GMS III*. Again, this too is a highly tricky and ramified story. And Timmermann does not even bother to take notice of the fact (at least he does not refer to it) that Kant not only calls this a circle but also an 'Erbittung eines Prinzips' (*GMS*, p. 453), that is, a *petitio principii*, which, as has been pointed out in the literature, is quite remarkable since for Kant a *petitio principii* is different from a *circulus in probando*. Now what all of this means and implies is hard to say; in any event, simply to ignore it seems not be the right way to comment on a text, and yet that is exactly what Timmermann does. His commentary is full of sweeping assertions that are just this: sweeping assertions, and nothing else.

One more example: Timmermann mentions Kant's talk of the 'Selbsttätigkeit der Vernunft' (spontaneity of reason, p. 140). Fair enough, but what does this mean and, most importantly, are we to understand this 'Selbsttätigkeit der Vernunft' as practical reason? There is nothing about this (there is only a side remark later, on p. 145). But why then bother to read Timmermann's commentary? A beginner will not be made adequately familiar with the basic ideas and problems; for an advanced reader, there is simply nothing to be learned from it. It is possible to outline the structure and meaning of most difficult texts in a limited number of pages; but that's only possible if such an outline is based on an intense and careful study of the text itself.

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Note

[1] All translations of the GMS are taken from Allen Wood's translation (Yale University Press, 2002).

***New Essays on the History of Autonomy: A Collection Honouring J. B. Schneewind*, edited by Natalie Brender and Larry Krasnoff, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, ISBN 978-0-5218-2835-2.**

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