

## Book Reviews

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Henrik Jøker Bjerre, *Kantian Deeds*  
New York and London: Continuum, 2010  
Pp. 208  
ISBN 9781441155559 (pbk) \$32.95  
doi:10.1017/S1369415412000192

In *Kantian Deeds*, Henrik Jøker Bjerre draws upon two different traditions to offer a reading of Kant that emphasizes the revolutionary aspects of his ethics. The two traditions are (Slovenian) Lacanian psychoanalysis – most notably, Slavoj Žižek and Alenka Zupančič – and current analytic philosophy – represented by John McDowell and Robert Brandom.

While he displays respect for both traditions, in *Kantian Deeds*, Bjerre seeks to push the cause of the former. He argues that such a reading of Kant – and in particular, Zupančič's – points us beyond an understanding of ourselves as clever linguistic animals. This move, past our second nature, is arguably the key claim of the book.

In what follows I look to further detail this claim. In doing so, I will touch upon Bjerre's distinctions between Soft and Hard Kantianism, morality and extra-morality, as well as the eponymous Kantian deeds. Following this I question the robustness of these distinctions, and challenge Bjerre's emphasis on the revolutionary nature of Kant's ethical thought. I conclude by inviting a comparison with Allison's reading of Kant on absolute spontaneity.

Before we begin, allow me to briefly remark on Bjerre's project in general. Bjerre is drawn to those elements of Kant that take us beyond second nature without resulting in rampant Platonism. As such, *Kantian Deeds* grapples with one of the most compelling aspects of Kant's thought, namely, whether it might resist – or even recommend against – naturalization.

The style of the book also warrants admiration. In line with his attempt to bring together both analytic philosophy and (Slovenian) Lacanian psychoanalysis, *Kantian Deeds* is clear, accessible, well-structured and also funny. It is not often that a book on Kantian ethics prompts smiles and even laughter, but Bjerre manages just this; at one point, whilst discussing the (ethical) primacy of the sublime over the beautiful, Bjerre notes that: 'It is no coincidence that Kant in the famous quote from the *Critique of Practical Reason* refers to the "starry heavens above and the moral law within" and not to, say, "the beautiful cornfield in front of me and the moral law within".' (p. 119).

Bjerre characterizes the two traditions that he engages with as Soft and Hard Kantianism. This distinction is intended to bring out two different tendencies that Kantians have. Soft Kantians – again, primarily represented by McDowell and Brandom – concern themselves with second nature and espouse a kind of linguistic naturalism. They also aim to downplay some of the putative harsher elements of Kant’s ethics, often looking to marry Kant with Aristotle (p. 44).

Hard Kantians, in contrast, emphasize the harsh elements of Kant’s ethics; they insist on the strictness of the moral law. Further, they are interested in (what Bjerre calls) a metaphysical question, specifically, how Kant points beyond our second nature.

Let us turn to consider Bjerre’s distinction between the pre-moral, the normal moral, and the extra-moral. In doing so, the significance of the Soft/Hard Kantian divide should become (more) apparent. In chapter 2 Bjerre sets out this tripartite structure of (moral) action (pp. 25–6). His account of pre-moral and moral action is in line with the Soft Kantian view of the acquisition of language, culture and normativity. According to this view, first nature action is pre-moral (p. 27). As we gain mastery of a language, we are initiated into a (moral) culture – our second nature (p. 31). The role of language is thus crucial to understanding how (normal) morality is possible, and what it consists in (p. 32).

It is Bjerre’s contention that there is a conservative element inherent in such a conception of morality. He regards the Soft Kantian idea of an ethical upbringing as somewhat conservative and preserving (p. 177). Perhaps for this reason, Bjerre often equates normal morality with the received norms of a community, or the status quo (see e.g. pp. 149–50). In a characteristic remark, he notes that, ‘what “we do around here”’; this is what I call normal morality’ (p. 120).

In contrast to such an understanding of morality, the Hard Kantian focuses on what Bjerre calls the extra-moral. When we act out of pure respect for the moral law, Bjerre contends that we go beyond the received norms of a community and act in an extra-moral way. Such acts, he calls deeds. Deeds take us beyond our second nature; they ‘have the character of refusal and revolution – it is a type of action that refrains from relying on the received norms of a community’ (p. 149).

Bjerre offers a (preliminary) definition of the deed as, ‘*a refusal to fulfill the demand or wish of the Other* – refusing, in other words, to act “normally” or in accordance with “how things are done around here”’ (p. 45). Here we see the specifically (Slovenian) Lacanian dimension of Bjerre’s project. Following (Žižek’s and Zupančič’s) Lacan, Bjerre is interested in moments where we break free from the existing symbolic order – the Other – to encounter the real.

Equating normal morality with the existing symbolic order and Kant's ethics with acting out of pure duty sets up the contrast that Bjerre is after. If normal morality were just the status quo – 'what we do around here' – then this would be a sorry state of affairs, and something like Bjerre's deeds would be required.

Such a position, however, unfairly caricatures normal morality. In this way Bjerre seems to operate with a false dichotomy between normal morality and duty, conceived respectively as the status quo and revolutionary deeds. This dichotomy is unsatisfactory. Even by Bjerre's own characterization, normal morality amounts to more than just what 'we do around here'. At one juncture he notes that normal morality 'is basically a matter of giving and asking for reasons, critically examining our convictions and behaviour, and a fundamentally *social* phenomenon' (p. 32). This reads as a fair account of (normal) morality. Here, we are in the space of reasons, and can critically examine our convictions and behaviour. Yet, construed in this manner, normal morality is not so clearly conservative, and the need for revolutionary deeds is less pressing.

Moreover, Bjerre's critique of normal morality – the received norms of a community – seems at odds with Kant's esteem of common moral appraisal. For Kant, such appraisal is 'very worthy of respect' (Ak. 4: 412).

Thus whilst Bjerre's ambitions are admirable, his project lacks a fine touch. He is often guilty of conflating normal morality with the status quo. Regarding (normal) morality in such a light allows him to get his (Slovenian) Lacanian point in play, and lends weight to his claim that we need a revolutionary extra-moral dimension to our actions. However, a more careful treatment of normal morality appears to circumvent this issue, and lessens the need for Kantian deeds.

I would like to conclude by inviting a comparison with Henry Allison. Allison provides another way in which Kant's ethics might point us beyond second nature without thus collapsing into rampant Platonism. Whereas Bjerre (and others) equate absolute spontaneity in Kant with acting out of pure respect for the moral law, Allison regards it as a general requirement of rational agency (Allison 1990, 1996). For Allison it is the defining feature of the conception of ourselves as rational agents that we conceive our agency as independent from determination by antecedent conditions (Allison 1996: 126).

Conceived in this manner, absolute spontaneity recommends a divergence from the Soft Kantianism of McDowell or Brandom without succumbing to rampant Platonism or conflating duty with revolution.

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