Review

Immanuel Kant und die Öffentlichkeit der Vernunft
Kantstudien-Ergänzungshefte
by Johannes Keienburg

Katerina Deligiorgi, University of Sussex

Against those who consider Kant’s philosophy to be subjectivist or indeed solipsist, Johannes Keienburg seeks to show that the idea of ‘publicity’ Öffentlichkeit shapes Kant’s entire philosophical project. To evaluate this claim we need to get a clear sense of ‘publicity’. As the author acknowledges, Kant does not use the term Öffentlichkeit (p.4). The nearest textual resources are the essays on ‘Perpetual Peace’ and the ‘Conflict of Faculties’ where Kant employs Publizität and, of course, the essay on Enlightenment, where he introduces the term ‘public [öffentliche] use of reason’. The usage in both cases is rather narrowly specified, in the first case it relates to Kant’s response to the normative commitments of contract theories and in the latter case to the normative commitments of reasoning. Both topics have attracted considerable scholarly and philosophical attention. What distinguishes Keienburg’s contribution to these discussions is the thesis that there is a deeper and hitherto unrecongnised sense of publicity in Kant’s work that concerns reason as such. Keineburg sums this deeper sense in the claim that reason depends on public dialogue and debate about matters that concern it, this public dialogue and debate, in turn, are conducted by free individuals who create a public space of reason through their
engagement in public argument (p.5). Jointly these claims form the core publicity thesis defended in this book.

Since the inspiration for this formulation of the publicity thesis comes clearly from the Enlightenment essay, this is where I start. Keienburg’s treatment of both the philosophical and historical context (pp.31-39) is somewhat disappointing since it adds little to the existing literature about the theoretical conditions of public use of reason, their relation to intellectual freedom, and existing scholarly treatments of the broader issues concerning Aufklärung, publicity, secrecy, tolerance, the real and ideal public, cosmopolitanism and so forth. These matters have been extensively documented, at least since the 1970s, and debated by Norbert Hinske, Hans Saner, Georg Cavallar, Thomas Auxter, James Schmidt, Pauline Kleingeld and of course, Onora O’Neill, whose work remains a key reference for those who seek to connect the discipline of reason, public reasoning and social practice. Since none of these is mentioned here, it is not clear what the author brings to these discussions that is new. I doubt anyone would disagree with Keienburg about the importance for Kant of public reasoning, of stating your maxims in public, of submitting to public scrutiny, and of tolerating criticism. All are essential if we are to avoid turning ourselves into ‘logical egoists’ (Anthropology Akademie 6:129). They are also important safeguards for a republican polity. The problem is not with this broad expression of intent; it is rather with the detail of the argument. In what follows, I will focus on two of the least convincing applications of the publicity thesis, in the theoretical and in the moral domains.

In the context of the Critique of Pure Reason the load-bearing term is not ‘publicity’ but ‘intersubjectivity’ (p.86). The argument is that Kant is concerned with intellectual faculties that all human beings possess and are capable of using. This fact grounds the view that the basis of all experience is ‘transcendental intersubjectivity’, a structure of understanding that is valid for all. The notion of validity
adds normative weight to what starts off as a descriptive claim. Keienburg then interprets Kant’s thesis about the discursivity of our understanding as a thesis about the linguistic nature and so the communicability of cognitions (p.87). This interpretation is put to the service of the overall aim which is to acquit the Kantian transcendental ‘I’ of solipsism. The criticism was made by Karl-Otto Apel in the 1970s in order to motivate an original philosophical project, the hermeneutical and pragmatist appropriation of the transcendental idealist legacy. Effectively Keienburg argues that Kant was there first. But this move is not needed to allay such worries and it would not for those who have them because of the brevity of the argument. Keienburg relies on skilful analysis and extension of Kant’s metaphors about the public tribunal of reason (p.49, p.53), giving hints only (esp. on pp.96f) on how the categories of the understanding might relate to language and so form an early version of communication theory. Let us say that a link is made convincingly between the categories and language. One general question is whether this suffices for establishing intersubjectivity, given that the thesis that a language is an essentially a public object is not unchallengeable, especially if one distinguishes between language and communication. The more narrowly Kantian question is what is the status of the categories; it is not enough to establish that we use these concepts in stating our beliefs about objects, but given that we have to use them, what is the nature of the modal claim and how it relates to the earlier point Keienburg makes about the natural condition of human knowers as beings in possession of certain cognitive faculties. If Keienburg’s ‘we think’ is not to remain a slogan only, then it needs to be defined against current literature on the first Critique, and in particular rival accounts of Kant’s move away from the Cartesian epistemological paradigm which dominate the contemporary Anglophone commentary: realist (Kenneth Wetsphal), conceptualist, (John McDowell), non-conceptualist (Robert Hanna,
The intersubjective reconstruction of Kant’s moral philosophy is also not very convincing. Certainly for Kant ethics is centrally about how we treat others and how we decide about what is right and wrong by testing our thinking in a very demanding way: the universalizability test. So both with respect to the initial context of the moral question and to how we should seek to answer it or at least to guide our moral deliberation, the claim that there is an intersubjective horizon to Kantian ethics is plausible. But then again the devil is in the detail. Most importantly, pure reason in its practical employment has a dictatorial aspect that Keienburg’s social reconstruction lacks. Elaborating on Otfried Hoeffe’s claim that Kantian moral theory is essentially a social theory (p.120), Keienburg argues for a communal, progressive ethical commonwealth (p.126), suppressing the imperatival command of the moral law and its inescapably personal address.

Taking his cue from Hannah Arendt’s lectures on Kant’s theory of judgement, Keienburg seeks to show how a certain conception of sensus communis, sometimes understood as publicity at other times as intersubjectivity, runs through the whole of Kant’s philosophy. I have my reservations about this thesis. Nonetheless this is a very readable book, likely to be of interest to those who seek an introduction to Kant from the perspective shaped by the social and political thought of Frankfurt School critical theory. Such audience might also be receptive to the deeper Arendtian purpose of this book, which is to revive, through a reading of Kant, interest in having a public to share.