Moira Gatens

THE NEVER-ENDING CONFLICT: PHILOSOPHY AND ITS CRITICS [OR, *KANT'S "FLIP-FLOP"*]

A Reply to Ian Hunter

Hunter makes several contentious claims during his discussion of Kant's skirmish with the government censor over the publication of *Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason*. Kant's response to this skirmish resulted in the text *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798) in which he presents his views concerning the appropriate relation between the "higher" faculties (religion, law, medicine) and the "lower" faculty (philosophy). Hunter's claims may be summed up by his concluding remarks that Kantian reason is *both* "far too deeply embedded in the religious and political conflicts of his time" *and* "far too detached from the *real sources* of social peace to wear the mantle of reasonableness" (emphasis added). In short, Hunter asserts that the orthodox view of Kantian philosophy as one which proclaims a tolerant and enlightened conception of reason, is mistaken. Rather, it is a philosophy of "uncompromising moralism and an intolerant rationalism."

It is beyond the scope of a short response to engage, premise by premise, with this argument — though that is what a rigorous refutation of it would require. Instead, I will focus on Hunter's claim that Kant is "blind to the social and disciplinary conditions" of his conception of reason. According to Hunter, it is this blindness that prevents Kant from presenting a coherent account of how it is that the citizenry may ever come into possession of its capacity for the free exercise of its reason. Kant's assertion that the citizenry has the *capacity* to be free and autonomous results in what Hunter calls Kant's "flip-flop," that is, that he sometimes figures the state as a dangerous threat to the rational individual and at other times as the very embodiment of reason. Focussing on this claim — which is, I think, mistaken — will allow me to raise a number of problematic features of Hunter's presentation.

How does a people (that is, the "masses," the "multitude"), internally torn by inevitable conflicts engendered by pursuing individual self-interest and natural inclination, ever manage to form itself into a reasonable and concordant sociability? And what is the role of the state in this transformation? This is, surely, *the* fundamental question that has characterised political philosophy for centuries and not at all a problem peculiar to Kantian philosophy. Hobbes' response is among the better-known: the passage from a state of "the war of all against all" to civil peace is ensured by a calculative rationality that dictates to

each that the transformation of natural right into civil right through submission to an all powerful sovereign offers the only path to peace. That great motivator of human action, fear, ensures that each keeps to the compact made with the sovereign power.

Much modern political philosophy would share the anthropology implicit in this response: human nature requires a regime of disciplinary powers — a state — if it is to rise above its merely passional, natural condition. From this minimal shared premise, however, political theories then radically diverge. Those committed to a robust statism (and Hunter, it would seem, belongs in this Hobbesian camp) would claim that the state — as a transcendent disciplinary power — is, and will always be, a necessary feature of "civilised" human societies. However, others would claim that the functions of the state are historically conditioned and that its continued existence is an open question: it may wither away, or, it may indeed become the "corporate embodiment of reason itself." Roughly, one may observe that some anthropologies entertain a relatively fixed conception of human nature while others view human nature as dynamic — a set of capacities, which may be actualised in history (and Kant certainly falls into this latter camp). From the standpoint of the latter, there is no inconsistency in seeing the state as *both* an obstacle to, *and* a facilitator of, the development of human capacities, including those concerning reason, autonomy and freedom. In fact the state, itself a multiple and complex formation, may, *at one and the same time*, display both tendencies. No flip-flops here. So why does Hunter think that there is a problematic oscillation or possible inconsistency in Kant's position? One explanation is that Hunter's Hobbesian bent prevents him from appreciating the political implications of Kant's anthropology, including his account of the development of the self-governing individual.

Let me try to bring this problem into sharper focus by comparing one aspect (censorship policy) of the two historical state forms across which Kant wrote: that of Frederick the Great and that of his successor, Frederick William II. These two heads of state exercised their powers of censorship in quite different ways. In *What is Enlightenment?* Kant described Frederick the Great's motto toward what we may understand as "freedom of speech" in the following terms: "Argue as much as you will, about what you will, but obey." The edict issued by Frederick William II's censor (Woellner) strikes me as quite different: "A subject of the Prussian state is declared free to hold what religious views he likes, so long as he quietly performs his duties as a good citizen of the state and *so long as he keeps any peculiar opinion to himself* and carefully guards himself from spreading it or persuading others, making them uncertain in their faith or leading them astray." (emphasis added) Woellner was the state agent directly responsible for the censoring of Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason*. That

Hunter reads the second edict as representative of an historically specific form of enlightenment (though, admittedly, one that is at odds with Kantian enlightenment) may give the contemporary reader reason to pause. Yet this is precisely the proposition that Hunter's piece invites us to entertain. This is, presumably, his motivation for setting up a somewhat forced contrast between Kant and Thomasius: a contrast in which Thomasius is presented as understanding those *"real sources"* of social peace to which Hunter refers, whereas Kant, he would have us believe, is something of a hot-head, who lacks political prudence. However, Kant and Thomasius are concerned to address quite different "times": Thomasius is concerned with the prudential present, as is Kant in some of his writings. However, in *Conflict*, Kant is looking forward to an enlightened future.

Hunter's claim that there was no *single* enlightenment but rather a variety of enlightenment practices seems relatively uncontentious. What is contentious is his claim concerning what is to count as an individual or governmental practice of enlightenment; for example, Woellner's edict. Woellner's edict is presented by Hunter as a mere restatement of the division between public and private — the "cornerstone" of the enlightenment. But this notoriously elusive distinction is not as easily captured as (Hunter's) words would suggest: that is, as the "freedom of private devotion coupled with a strict policing of public polemics." The terms "public" and "private" refer to a variety of social and civil spaces and roles.

Returning to Kant's *Conflict* will show the extent to which the content of the distinction between private and public was itself highly contested. Even a cursory reading of this text shows that, for Kant, this division is more complex than the contrast between the public duties of a citizen and that citizen's private religious beliefs. Contrary to contemporary intuitions, the practitioners or "businessmen" trained by the higher faculties are, *qua* their roles as pastors, lawyers and doctors, *private* individuals. The *Conflict* makes it clear that Kant's views on the role of religion in political life were only one part of what concerned him. His primary concerns were with the question of what should be the appropriate relation between the higher and lower faculties as well as between the University and the state. Kant conceived of the three higher faculties (religion, law and medicine) as *necessarily* accountable to the state since their tasks involved training those who would instruct as well as care for the population's spiritual, legal and health needs. However, given the tendency of human nature to follow its inclinations and then regret the consequences of doing so, "the people," as Kant puts it, tend to approach those connected with the higher faculties as if they are magicians and miracle-workers. What they seek are answers to the following questions: " if I've been a scoundrel all my life, how can I get an eleventh hour ticket to heaven? If I've broken the law,

how can I still win my case? And even if I've used and abused my physical powers as I've pleased, how can I stay healthy and live a long time" (cf. 49)? This is one of the ways in which "the people" impose upon themselves a dependence on others for their well-being.

Kant sees the higher faculties, and the "businessmen" they produce, as liable to corruption precisely through the magical powers with which superstitious lay-people invest them. Philosophy, argues Kant, is not prone to corruption of this sort since the people do not generally invest philosophers with any useful powers! Hence philosophy potentially has at least two worthwhile functions to perform. First, its critical powers may be brought to bear on the knowledge possessed, or claimed to be possessed, by the higher faculties. This is one of the roles of philosophy, as Kant sees it, within the University. Hunter is simply mistaken about what Kant sees as the function of the philosophy faculty: the critical examination of claims to knowledge is hardly the same thing as the "pursuit of universal truth." Second, philosophy may be of assistance to the development of a just state in so far as it can expose the misuse of the power which the higher faculties may wield over the population. What is at stake here is Kant's understanding of the *politics* of knowledge. The conflict between the higher and lower faculties is (and should be) a *never-ending* conflict, and Kant adds that it is the responsibility of philosophy to see that this conflict is ongoing.

What Kant refers to as the "unsociable sociability" of human being provides the stimulus for the development of human capacities for autonomy, reason and morality. As he argued in *Idea for a Universal History*: "Nature should thus be thanked for fostering social incompatibility, enviously competitive vanity, and insatiable desires for possessions or even power. Without these desires, all man's excellent natural capacities would never be roused to develop. Man wishes concord, but nature, knowing better what is good for his species, wishes discord." Such discord or conflict must, however, be *disciplined* (or managed) conflict that does not upset civil peace. This proposition returns us to Kant's thoughts, in *Conflict*, on the value of critical philosophy to the development of these natural capacities. It is the philosophy faculty which he sees as capable of initiating a disciplined and public debate concerning the status and legitimacy of the higher faculties' claims to knowledge. However, his use of "public" here is not synonymous with "civil." As Kant makes clear in *Conflict* (57), this conception of public concerns a sub-section of the citizenry, that is, the *"learned* public". It is precisely in their *private* role as instructors of, and carers for, the people that Kant would restrict the powers of the "businessmen," as well as those of the higher faculties who train them. However, in so far as those in both the higher and the lower faculties constitute an intellectual community, they have the obligation to engage in criticism and debate with one another. On

this view, criticism within a scholarly community, concerning its particular claims to knowledge, is not seen as disruptive to civil peace but rather as prerequisite to the ongoing development of human capacities. For Kant this is the distinction between disciplined conflict and out-and-out war since all parties to the conflict should be striving toward the same aim: the improvement of human reason and knowledge.

Whatever one's views concerning the plausibility of Kant's vision of the University, and its relation to the state, his views on the power of critical philosophy are still worth defending. I, for one, would defend the practice of continuing to question the legitimacy of political organisation or social privilege that is grounded in mere habit, superstition or tradition. In this sense at least, I would consider myself the heir of yet another enlightenment: that "practice of reason" which resulted in Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).

Kant's notion of enlightenment was concerned to defend the freedom to exercise one's reason through a critical engagement with one's time in a disciplined manner , that is, in a manner that does not threaten or disrupt civil peace. Ironically, it is the pursuit of this freedom that has exposed some of the less attractive features of Kantianism itself: its universalism, its unflattering account of women's nature and capacities, and its Eurocentrism. One may only speculate on what the current state of critical philosophy would be if Hunter's preferred statist understanding of the "real sources" of social peace had held sway.