

Onora O'Neill

## Justice and Virtue



Geboren 1941 in Aughafatten. B. A., M. A. in Psychologie und Philosophie, University of Oxford; Ph. D. in Philosophie, Harvard University, 1969. Zur Zeit Professor für Philosophie an der University of Essex. Bücher: *Acting on Principle* (1975); *Faces of Hunger: A Study of Poverty, Development and Justice* (1986); *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (1989). Adresse: Department of Philosophy, University of Essex. Colchester, C04 3SQ, England.

Even a sabbatical year usually vibrates to familiar academic rhythms of term and semester: this one did not. Its celebrations and tensions were of quite other sorts, its notable dates known to all: November 9th, March 18th, July 2nd. Conversations were more political, more incessant, closer to real hopes and worries. That might not seem ideal for sustained academic work, but I did not experience it as distraction. Perhaps I was fortunate to work partly on political philosophy, and to find many bridges between half-formed thoughts and newly forming realities. Although the foreground of attention was filled with the news of the week, at another level the work chugged along. I am almost startled to find how much has been written, and attribute this largely to the benign securities of the Wissenschaftskolleg.

Before coming I planned to write a book on justice and the virtues. It was to begin with the question why most contemporary theorists of justice — unlike their predecessors — insist not merely that virtue cannot provide the sole normative system for a modern society, but more radically that justice entails a neutrality about good lives, and that nothing objective can be said about the virtues, which must be viewed as merely subjective concerns. Over the past couple of years, while finishing a cycle of work on Kant's account of practical reason, I had written a number of preliminary studies, and had concluded that it is possible to construct integrated accounts of justice and of virtue, without reinstating the pieties either of Aristotelian or of theological ethics. However, as I worked on the details of argument the book-after-next began to intrude, and I started to write in a tentative and preliminary way on the relation be-

tween the grounds of reason, hope and hermeneutics, particularly in Kant's thought. So when I got here there were two books beckoning rather than one.

During my year in the Kolleg I kept to this idiosyncratic pattern of working alternately on immediate and on further projects. The autumn is always a good time for the toughest work — so I threw myself at the more distant but more difficult question of the grounding of reason. For philosophers this problem is like the grinning frog at the bottom of the beer mug: one would like to avoid it, but it isn't clear just how to do so. There's a postmodernist 'solution': keep refilling the mug, and drift more — or less — comfortably with the tide of the conversation of mankind. Then there is the radical self-denial of giving up beer—that's to say conversation, not to mention philosophy. Or one can face the frog, which is what I'd like to do. About two months and a hundred pages later I retreated a bit battered, as is to be expected, but with more sense of what it will take to grasp this most slippery and ultimately unavoidable of philosophical issues when its turn comes.

In January I duly returned to justice and virtue, sustained by the knowledge that this was familiar terrain that I had criss-crossed from varied starting-points. It would be exaggeration to say that the book wrote itself, but two-thirds of it is written, and the rest should be done within the year. Then I shall be returning to the discomforts of writing on reason. However, I took out a little insurance policy against finding myself alone with those discomforts, by writing a substantial paper on the project that lies two ahead, in which I hope to show that (contrary to current pieties) we must choose between a convincing conception of autonomy and the empiricist theories of action that are commonly deployed in the social sciences and in much contemporary ethics and political philosophy.

The year in the Kolleg also gave me a first opportunity to take regular part in academic discussion in German. For the first two months it was strenuous; then things fell into place, and with the help of tolerant and supportive colleagues, especially in the frequent meetings of the "*Philosophischer Kreis*" in the Kolleg, I no longer felt constrained. In the second half of the year I wrote several papers in German and inflicted them on audiences in Göttingen, Bayreuth and Freiburg (Switzerland). An unintended consequence of diversifying in this way is that I have ended the year hurriedly Englishing one of my own papers.

The rest of my time was divided between a lot of small projects. I have almost reached the undreamed of situation of having completed, reworked or revised all papers to whose publication I had been committed at the beginning of the year. Like other Fellows, I was also drawn into

sporadic journalism, trying to capture aspects of what we felt and witnessed here for more distant audiences — in my case those of the *Irish Times* and the *London Review of Books*. I also wrote on connections between the events in Eastern Europe and the themes of justice and virtue, and in particular on the writings of Vaclav Havel, who now seems prescient rather than naive in his long-held view that the virtues of citizens may actually matter. At a more practical level I continued and extended my involvement with organising small-scale contacts and cooperation between Anglophone and Eastern European philosophers.

Intellectually this year was what I had hoped for — only more so; in other ways it was an *annus mirabilis*. Like other non-German Fellows I was moved partly by sympathy for the joys and fears of German friends and colleagues; but the experiences of the year also moved me more directly. Only now can I sense how much my entire life has been lived with bated breath, waiting for the real end of the war that began before many of us were born, and whose aftermath of cold stagnation seemed likely to last our lives. The ways in which this will change my work are still quite obscure to me: it is hard to see over a watershed. The most I dare guess is that some of the more defensive — yet polemical — debates about liberty and equality that have dominated political philosophy for decades will lose their appeal. What I dare hope is that the marginalised questions about North-South justice and ecological ethics begin to get not only real resources, but serious rather than gestural intellectual attention.