



KANT, COMPROMISE, AND BARBECUE CORINNA MIETH

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As I write this, I'm sitting at the Baltic Sea, just back from a run and contemplating a great year at Wiko that in hindsight seems to have passed very quickly between at least three different layers that I refer to as Kant, Compromise, and Barbecue.

1. Kant

Villa Walther received us with great end-of-summer days in the beautiful garden, where I met some of the other Fellows in afternoon sunshine. The pandemic seemed under control and I was amazed by all the interesting people I got the chance to talk to. When I saw a grill at the beautiful spot by the water, a vision of a relaxed barbecue instantly crossed my mind, but for the time being I was happy with Dunia's wonderful lunches. The Tuesday Colloquium presentations were another highlight; I learned so much about

things I did not know much if anything about before: the oldest stars, ant wars, female mongoose war tactics, graffiti, honeybees, and the interest that people from very different disciplines and cultural backgrounds share in Kantian philosophy. The interest in Kant amongst the Fellows was very broad, so that on the one hand, he was seen as the hero of the Enlightenment who defended the idea of equal moral worth and moral universalism, and on the other hand, he was seen as part of an ideological project of the Western Enlightenment that contributed to the invention of racism. So one topic I was debating not only in my own work, but also in discussions with other Fellows and in workshops with Kant scholars I was attending during my stay, was the relevance of Kantian philosophy today. The first contacts pretty soon led to the setup of a philosophers' working group with Christel Fricke and Ge Wang on Wednesday afternoons, where I learned a lot of new perspectives on Kant and a lot about China, too.

My own research focused on a new perspective on the Kantian approach to dignity. After finishing a paper on dignity and poverty, I started to work on dignity, modern slavery, and immigration restrictions within a Kantian framework. The idea is basically that once modern slavery is condemned as a severe form of interactional instrumentalization that constitutes a dignity violation, one should not miss the point that immigration restrictions within liberal democracies can also constitute a more structural, institutional dignity violation once migrants are denied legal channels to be a means for others on their own terms: to enter countries in order to work there, which falls under Kant's cosmopolitan right not to be treated with hostility. I'm especially grateful to Christel Fricke, Jaecun Kim, Sophie Bernard, Michel Lallement, and all the others who discussed these ideas with me. The third paper on Kant makes the point that the famous formula of humanity of the categorical imperative has a blind spot: once we treat others with hostility or disgust, we treat them neither as mere means nor as mere things, which the formula forbids, nor as ends in themselves, which the formula requires.

2. Compromise

With the summer coming to its end and the numbers of COVID infections growing again, I started to prepare the presentation of my Wiko research project on Migration, Stability, and Compromise. This went back to an earlier research project of mine on the Ethics of Migration. The difficulty for me has always been to bridge the gap between the moral assessment of migration, as we find it spelled out in Joseph Caren's book *The Ethics of Migration*, and political practice within liberal democracies. Considering the

life-endangering attempts to migrate by people who, for whatever reason, are more desperate to get into European countries than they are afraid of drowning in the Mediterranean, it looks like there is no sound moral reason to deny them entry and refuge. So on that level, it seemed to me that Carens is just right about open borders and there is nothing I can add to this discussion. Still, Carens says that danger to the stability of the receiving country might be a reason to restrict immigration; this is a reason of justice if the danger to stability stems from the immigrants themselves, but not if the threats to stability come from the backslashing population of Western democracies. In the latter case, immigration can still be restricted for the sake of stability, but only as a matter of pragmatism, not normative justification. Michael Blake speaks of a tragic choice here between giving up morality or justice for the sake of stability or the other way round. My idea was to focus my own research on the threats to stability from backlashes of the liberal democracies' own population when it comes to contested topics like migration. Here I was able to learn a lot from all the discussions at Wiko about Trumpism and populism in the US, a threat that people felt a bit of relief from after Joe Biden finally took over the office of US president in January 2021, after all the things that happened before and after the election.

Following Avishai Margalit, my idea was that compromise is by definition only a second-best, since once you compromise you can't get things completely your way. Still, the concept of compromise seemed useful to me when applied to the issue of backslashing populations: once we consider liberalism a historical project evolving in time, compromises between national liberals and cosmopolitan liberals make sense. But, as it came back to me in the discussion of my presentation, how can you ever be okay with second-best, when it comes to what you take for justice and morality? Still, compromise for the sake of stability and peace at the expense of justice might be better than war. On the other hand, stability is not something good for its own sake. Illiberal, totalitarian regimes can be very stable, but that would not be the kind of stability I was looking for. Starting the article, I took it for granted that liberal democratic stability is a valuable thing and that compromising on contested topics could be interpreted as realizing liberalism as a project in time. So that at the centre of this conception stands a critical self-understanding of liberalism as the ability to self-reflect and correct, rather than as closeness to an ideal normative content. Still, the contestation here was that liberalism might not, as I assumed, be something valuable, but part of the Western history of white supremacy and injustice and therefore itself not worth maintaining, but doomed to fail. From that view, of course, liberal democratic stability itself would not be worth maintaining, but might even be the wrong thing

to achieve, merely a disguised ideology, as e.g. a Marxist perspective has it. But once liberalism is addressed not as a solution to the problems we face today but as itself a major problem, so that it should not stay stable but be overcome, what would be the better alternative? What seemed clear to me as a result of the discussion of my paper back then was that there are quite different notions of justice out there, even within the liberal framework. Of course, that could be an argument exactly in favour of the need to compromise for the sake of peace, even at the expense of justice, once there are incompatible versions of justice. On the other hand, and this leads back to the objection mentioned above, once you are sure about your notion of justice, compromise might seem like treason and people with different notions of justice might seem like immoral persons you don't have to compromise with, since their opinion is wrong and therefore doesn't count. You feel that, as a moral person, you have to stand on principle. The most interesting thing for me when it comes to the notion of compromise is that in politics or history we might adore people who do not compromise, but stand on principle in the "here I stand, I can do no other" attitude I examined in an earlier publication. Still, in our private lives I dare to assume that most of us feel better in the company of people who are not standing on principle but are ready to compromise, who ask us what our standpoint is and respect it, who ask us what our needs are rather than judging them from their perspective in advance and who try to get along with us. To assess this difference in perception will be a further task for my research.

The long cold Berlin winter in lockdown from November till May required a lot of compromises, anyway. In mid-December, just before Christmas, I was diagnosed with COVID. I had felt that I was merely coming down with a cold and could not join the Wicked Wiko Runners on Sunday, and I informed the Wiko staff, who told me on Monday that another positive case had already been reported and that they wanted me to go to be tested. As with other things you don't really know before they happen to you, I learned some things about the disease: the biggest horror was not the mild symptoms I experienced, but the panic that I might have infected someone else – which, thank God, was not the case. Furthermore, I understood why other people did not take the test: once your result is positive, you're locked up for two weeks and you destroy all the plans of your contact persons, who have to go into quarantine because of you. Still, what really blew me away was all the support I got from those Co-Fellows who wrote me nice, supportive e-mails, walked my dog, brought food, or even called me every day to make sure that I don't work but recover. All my most cordial thanks to you guys again! Against these

odds, during the long wintertime I had the great opportunity to get to know some of my Co-Fellows better as open-minded, supportive, funny people who found ways to get through this time in grace and without growing bitter, with arranging social encounters as far as was possible, with creativity and kindness and *savoir vivre*, despite all the nasty circumstances. Special thanks to Madeleine and Katya, our Fellow speakers who kept it all together through these difficult times.

3. Barbecue

February was all covered by snow. I remember endless cold walks through the icy streets of Berlin, fingers freezing around my coffees-to-go. Then came spring, and I could not run because of a problem with my back, so I walked longer and longer every day to replace my training, contemplating my papers. While the members of the running team extended their distances every Sunday, my work felt like a marathon, and I feared that I would not manage to finish the papers in time before being overwhelmed by all my duties once back home. But then, step by step, with all the help from Anja Brockmann in the Wiko library, I got closer and closer and finished the papers and now after some time have started to run again. At one weekend in May, on a warm sunny day, we went to the Mauerpark, and all the trees that the Japanese government gave to the Germans after reunification were in bloom. That was the time for barbecue. Somehow the idea got a grip on some people and word spread that there was a barbecue at Villa Walther and people showed up bringing stuff, sharing things, sitting in the sun, chatting, Marcelo playing the guitar, and everybody starting to feel good again. Vegans, vegetarians, and meat eaters sat around a big table, drinking wine and beer and lemonade and bubbly and sometimes agreed to disagree. That was the last six weeks, a lovely time with many barbecues that found its highlight in the farewell party, after which everybody had sore muscles from their wild dancing performances releasing all the energy that had been stored during the long winter. On my last evening, we had one of these everybody-brings-what-is-still-in-their-fridge barbecues, and the mood of farewell hung in the summer air. That was it, our year, already over, with relief at finally getting back to all the family members and friends we had left at home and had missed so badly during the winter and with the prospect of seeing some of the new friends we made again in the future.

Reference list of the scientific articles and edited volumes produced during the sabbatical year and with Wiko's affiliation

Articles:

Knobloch, Thorben, and Corinna Mieth. "Migration, Stability and Compromising Mindsets." In *Migration, Stability and Solidarity*, edited by Corinna Mieth and Wolfram Cremer, 239–270. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021.

Mieth, Corinna, and Jacob Rosenthal. "Blindspots in the Formula of Humanity." In *Kant on Value*, edited by Christoph Horn and Robinson dos Santos. Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming.

Mieth, Corinna, and Garrath Williams. "Beyond Non-Instrumentalization: Migration, Poverty and Dignity within a Kantian Framework." In "Kant and Poverty," edited by Corinna Mieth, Martin Sticker, and Garrath Williams. Special issue, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, forthcoming.

Mieth, Corinna, and Garrath Williams. "Poverty, Dignity, and the Kingdom of Ends." In *Human Dignity and the Kingdom of Ends: Kantian Perspectives and Practical Applications*, edited by Adam Cureton and Jan-Willem van der Rijt, 206–223. New York: Routledge, 2021.

Edited Volumes:

Mieth, Corinna, and Wolfram Cremer, eds. *Migration, Stability and Solidarity*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021.

Mieth, Corinna, Martin Sticker, and Garrath Williams, eds. "Kant and Poverty." Special issue, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, forthcoming.