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BOOK REVIEW

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Kant on laws

Eric Watkins

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, xv + 297 pp. ISBN: 978-1-107-16391-1 hb £75.00

For a long time, Eric Watkins has been one of the leading researchers within Kant scholarship. After having published his extremely rich and influential *Kant and the Metaphysics of Causality* (2005), and after having published numerous journal articles and edited volumes on Kant and related topics, Watkins has now published his single-authored *Kant on Laws* (2019). The book collects previously published articles by Watkins on the subject of laws, but, as Watkins explains in the *Preface*, the articles were often substantially rewritten, resulting in a book that is more than the sum of its parts. The focus of this book is "on the unity, diversity, and centrality of the notion of law as it is employed in Kant's theoretical and practical philosophy" (p. 1). The guiding idea is that Kant accepts a univocal concept of law "that can nonetheless be applied to a wide range of particular cases" (p. 1). According to Watkins, the generic and univocal concept of law that Kant adopts, which is explained in Part I of the book, includes two elements: (a) necessity, and (b) the act of a spontaneous faculty that legislates or prescribes this necessity to a specific domain (p. 2). This concept of law applies both to natural laws and to the moral law and can be discerned in all of Kant's specific instances of so-called laws. In the book, Watkins first spells out this generic and univocal concept of law, and then analyzes different instantiations or instances of this generic concept, discussing, among others, transcendental laws, the laws of mechanics, teleological principles or laws, regulative principles or laws, and the moral law. The result is a very rich and rewarding account of both the unity and diversity of Kant's concept of law.

Part I of the book develops Kant's generic concept of law (Chapter 1) and discusses Kant's conception of transcendental laws, arguing that the necessity of transcendental laws is based on our cognitive or epistemic natures and contrasting Kant's account of law to contemporary alternatives (Chapter 2). Since Chapter 1 is crucial to Watkins' core argument in the book, I will devote some more attention to it.

In Chapter 1, Watkins identifies two philosophical traditions which reflected on the concept of law and which influenced Kant. According to the natural law tradition, developed, for example, by Thomas Aquinas and Francisco Suarez, before being adopted by several early modern thinkers, what we ought to do is based on natural law (p. 17). As Watkins explains, this tradition requires (a) a legislator with authority (e.g., an act of will of a superior such as God) for a law to have binding force, and (b) things that are subject to a law must be rational beings who are aware of its binding force and are free to obey the law or not (p. 21). Next to the natural law tradition, Watkins argues that the notion of law was also crucial to early modern natural philosophy. A central goal of this tradition, developed among others by Galileo, Descartes, and Newton, was to formulate mathematically precise and universal laws of motion that describe the motion of all bodies. As Watkins puts the point: "the task of formulating and justifying laws of nature was central to natural philosophy at the time" (p. 21). The different concepts of law taken from these two traditions give rise, Watkins explains, to philosophical challenges. First, not all natural philosophers thought that the laws of nature must have a legislator, as the natural law tradition required (p. 21). Thus, Newton, for example, labeled

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the laws of motion as axioms, and did not speculate about their source. Second, it is not clear how natural laws can govern inanimate nature, if inanimate bodies lack rationality and the freedom to obey the laws or not, as is again required by the natural law tradition (p. 22). Hence, the different concepts of law taken from the natural law tradition and from early modern natural philosophy pose problems for the intelligibility of the concept of a law of nature.

Watkins argues that Kant solves this problem by taking laws of nature to involve two components, namely necessity and legislation. The necessity of laws of nature involves what Watkins calls determination. For example, if a body imparts motion to another it causally determines an acceleration in the other body. In this way, one body necessitates a change in the other body (pp. 22–23). In addition, Kant argues that the lawfulness of laws of nature "derives from the understanding, since the understanding is an active faculty that is able to prescribe, or legislate, lawfulness to nature a priori" (p. 24). Hence, laws of nature involve legislation. Similar to natural laws, the moral law is also necessary for Kant, although the notion of necessity here is different from that ascribed to natural laws. The moral law is objectively necessary (for any rational being) and it *necessitates* or *obliges* human beings to act in a certain way (p. 25). Moreover, like natural laws, the moral law involves legislation. This follows from the fact that practical reason is autonomous in its legislation of the moral law (p. 26). More specifically, reason "*actively* and *spontaneously* gives the law to itself" (p. 26). In this way, Watkins explains, Kant could combine the idea that laws require a legislator (taken from the natural law tradition) with the idea of a law of nature (taken from early modern natural philosophy or natural science). Moreover, Kant could argue that whatever is subject to a law must be subject to necessity, but "deny that every kind of necessity requires rationality and freedom of the subjects in question" (p. 27). For whereas *obligation* "requires the rationality and freedom of whoever is obligated," the necessity of determination, ascribed to inanimate natural objects subject to natural laws, does not require rationality and freedom (p. 27). In this way, Kant could retain key elements of the natural law tradition while making sense of the concept of a law of nature.

Part 2 discusses Kant's analysis and justification of the laws of mechanics in his philosophical and scientific writings. Chapter 3 discusses the system of principles, which is articulated in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and which grounds the laws of mechanics, and contains illuminating discussion of the Axioms of Intuition, the Anticipations of Perception, and the Analogies of Experience. Chapter 4, which in my opinion is one of the highlights of the book, discusses the argumentative structure of Kant's *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. Watkins argues that the principles of the *Metaphysical Foundations* are not deductively derived from the more general transcendental principles of the first *Critique*, but are justified by transcendental arguments that show that the principles of the *Metaphysical Foundations* are "necessary for experience of matter understood as *spatio*temporal objects of outer sense" (p. 50). Chapter 5 is a historical chapter that analyzes the reception of Newton's laws of motion in 18th century Germany, explaining Kant's particular and somewhat peculiar formulation of these laws of motion, while Chapter 6 provides a detailed interpretation of Kant's justification of the Laws of Mechanics.

Part 3 discusses Kant's conception of teleological laws. In Chapter 7, Watkins provides an illuminating and precise reconstruction of the Antinomy of Teleological Judgment, articulated by Kant in the third *Critique*, while also offering a nice presentation of almost all relevant contemporary interpretations of this Antinomy. Chapter 8 interprets Kant's account of objective purposiveness, paying special attention to Kant's idea that every natural object and nature as a whole must be judged teleologically.

Part 4 contains an analysis of regulative principles or laws in Kant. Though some may object to calling regulative principles laws, Watkins thinks that the regulative principles fit Kant's generic concept of law. Chapter 9 discusses Kant's little investigated remarks on rational cosmology. Watkins notes that Kant adopts several a priori laws of rational cosmology, such as the laws of no fate, no chance, no leap, and continuity. These laws are not constitutive, but regulative, that is, they "do not prescribe how the world must be" but "determine how we must view the world" (p. 189). As such, their "necessity thus attaches to how we must explain the world (rather than how the world is)" (p. 189). Chapter 10 then analyzes what Kant calls logical laws in the *Dialectic* and his logic lectures, such as the principles of homogeneity, specificity, and continuity, arguing that Kant's justification of these regulative principles or laws is based on his conception of reason.

The final part of the book, Part 5, is devoted to the moral law. Chapter 11 develops parallels between the moral law and the laws of nature, considering whether Kant's idea, developed in the *Prolegomena*, that we prescribe laws to nature influenced his doctrine of autonomy in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. In Chapter 12, Watkins argues that God still fulfills an important role in Kant's theoretical and practical philosophy. The chapter considers Kant's arguments for the existence of God in the first *Critique*, the second *Critique*, and the third *Critique*.

In the Conclusion, Watkins explains how we can explain the diversity of laws in Kant, given that Kant accepts a generic and univocal concept of law. According to Watkins, the diversity of laws can be explained by appealing to (x) differences in the kinds of necessity involved in different laws, (y) different kinds of faculties that are responsible for the law, and (z) the different spontaneous acts that the faculties engage in with respect to the law (p. 270).

Kant on Laws is a good book. Watkins is an extremely illuminating historian and Kant scholar. Most of his chapters break new ground, and the chapters are very well written and clear. The book integrates discussion of Kant's theoretical and practical philosophy, which is a significant achievement, and the book, though descriptive, also contains discussion of contemporary accounts of law. Hence, scholars not familiar with Kant and interested in contemporary philosophy of science can also profit from this book. Finally, it is worth emphasizing that I learned a great deal when I read this book, even though I was familiar with a lot of Watkins work. I have one small criticism. Apart from some brief remarks, the book does not contain a detailed discussion of Kant's views on empirical laws. This topic has received considerable attention in recent Kant scholarship, and deserved, I think, a chapter in this book. There is consensus among scholars that Kant allowed for empirical laws, for example, the law of gravitation, but whether there are laws in sciences such as chemistry and biology (the more problematic sciences in the 18th century) is a matter of hot debate. Consider the following point. On one influential account of empirical law in Kant, developed by Michael Friedman, empirical laws are lawlike because they are grounded by a priori principles. Friedman's account can, for example, make sense of the fact that the law of gravitation is a necessary law for Kant, because it is grounded by a priori (mathematical and metaphysical) principles. However, given that it is not clear how a priori constitutive principles ground the sciences of chemistry and biology, it is not clear whether Kant allows for the possibility of chemical and biological laws. For example, some biologists of Kant's time seemed to adopt purely empirical and experimental justifications of the regularities that govern organic nature. Can such regularities count as laws according to Kant? What accounts for the necessity of such empirically discovered regularities? Watkins' book would have been more complete if he had discussed the topic of empirical laws. However, this is only a small criticism. *Kant on Laws* is a wonderful piece of scholarship and must be read by anyone with an interest in Kant's conception of law.

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