AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR SUSAN SHELL

Elliott R. Jones: Good afternoon, Professor Shell. By the way, this is a beautiful office. You have one of the best offices…

Susan Meld Shell: Yes, I'm really sorry I'm leaving it. [Laughs].

ERJ: So yes, the political science department recently had a conference in your honor titled, "Kant and the Future of the University." Could you please introduce yourself and your interest in Kant, especially as a political science professor?

SMS: Okay, well, that's a broad question, and I suppose my interest in Kant originated when I was in college, and although I was very interested in philosophy, I was in one of these crazy programs that we had back then, when you didn't have to major in anything. So I got to take anything I wanted. And I took a number of philosophy courses. But in those days at Cornell, the department was very analytic in a way that was quite narrow. They didn't do the history of philosophy, which was what I was interested in. So I ended up learning about Kant mostly from an English course on the poetry of the sublime. It was an English Romantic poetry seminar, Milton to Wordsworth, and we got assigned various papers. I was assigned the 'Kant on the sublime' paper. So that was my introduction. And in fact, that course at Cornell spawned a lot of political theorists and Kantians, including Richard Velkley and Clifford Orwin and Nathan Tarcov, and others.

So it was a very interesting class, and not only for English majors. So I think my interest in Kant has always been, well, at least it was initially his theory of the sublime. And I think all of my research begins in

this grounding human experience, which combines the very high and the very low—pain, pleasure, and literary and artistic expression, as well as more conventionally analytic expressions of philosophic thought. At least this was for me a kind of founding touchstone for approaching Kant. And since at the time you could do the history of philosophy more readily in the department of Political Science, I started out studying political philosophy with Alan Bloom and other students of Leo Strauss, who urged a return to the forgotten wisdom of ancient thought. But I've always been very interested in the modern alternative to the ancients. And Kant has always seemed to me a particularly attractive and potent adversary, or at least a challenge, to ancient thought. And that's one reason why I've again and again returned to Kant, though I've also worked on Hobbes and Rousseau and Hegel and Heidegger, but somehow I'm always drawn back to Kant, who's now become a familiar old friend—at least a one-way friend. [Laughs].

There are certain disadvantages to working on one thinker—a lot of disadvantages—but one of the advantages is that you really get to know the nooks and crannies, like, like a close friend. It's nice to have lots of acquaintances, but also one friend you know really, really well. And for me, Kant has been that kind of a figure.

Peini Feng: So now, turning to Kant's philosophy.

SMS: Yes.

PF: You just mentioned that Kant is a kind of modern alternative to ancient philosophy.

SMS: Yeah.

PF: And for most of the students, when they begin their journey of philosophy, they begin with Plato's *Republic* in their introductory courses. And as you said, Kant is an alternative to ancient philosophy, so I guess it includes Plato. So, how would you compare Plato's philosophy to Kant's philosophy?

SMS: Well, then we get into this difficult question of, who's Plato?

PF: Exactly.

SMS: And again, my first, actually my very first, philosophy course I took as a high school student in Seattle at the University of Washington…it was a wonderful course, but it was taught by a professor who took an analytic approach. And what we basically did

is went through Plato's dialogues, a few that we read, and found all the logical errors he made. You know, all the bloopers, highlighting how much smarter we are. It always struck me as unlikely that I, a 15-year-old, knew better than Plato. So, I mean, that's one question: which or whose Plato? And I suppose the interpretation that I have found rather compelling is a certain version of the Straussian reading of Plato and Strauss in particular, who is another figure I've worked on a lot, including an edited translation of his correspondence with Gerhard Krüger, who was an assistant of Heidegger in the 20s. He and Strauss, as young men, were very close friends. They were in the same Weimar milieu as such figures as Hannah Arendt, Gershom Scholem, and Hans Jonas. These were all people growing up in the same, the same atmosphere in which Neo-Kantianism was the convention of the day. And so, they were all rebels. [Laughs]. They were anti-Kantian rebels, and Strauss carried out a correspondence with Krüger through the 30s and the war years. Strauss, by then, was an exile from Germany. But again, that would be another way of framing the Plato versus Kant debate, because Krüger, who remained in Germany, was a self-declared Kantian, though a kind of Augustinian Kantian. There were just many Platos and many Kants. [Laughs]. I hate to complicate the question, but if you want to understand how both of them became the mature thinkers they eventually became, you can look at that correspondence where Kruger is turning away from Heidegger toward a more Christian, Neo-Platonist understanding of Kant. And Strauss, for his part, is discovering the esotericism of medieval philosophy—Alfarabi and Maimonides particularly—but, eventually, Plato as well. So I would say that, in a way, my whole career has been bound up with variations on the debate between Plato and Kant, but again, with an openness to the possibility that there are, there are a number of compelling readings of both figures, and that in itself takes on a history of its own. It takes on a life of its own because we're all, in a way, interpreters, right? Some, some of us may eventually become philosophers, full-blooded sense, but I don't take that as really a professional term, so much as an honorific indicating a certain kind of penetration that I wouldn't pretend to have myself, but certainly has been an object of study for me and for many others.

PF: To ask a specific question…

SMS: I'm being evasive. [Laughs].

PF: No, it's very good. It's very good. A specific question that Plato cares about, which is nature. Philosophy, for him, at least one reading for Plato is that philosophy is an investigation of the whole of nature.

And for Kant, he also has very interesting comments on nature, such as his astronomical works. So how does Kant understand nature, and how might his understanding of nature be different from the ancient understanding of nature?

SMS: Well, that's a great question. Again, a really difficult question. But broadly, there are, again, many ways of understanding Plato and Aristotle and to what degree they were committed to a what, at least on the surface, appears to be a somewhat naively teleological understanding of nature. There are, I think, some very compelling readings of Plato that would not necessarily link him so directly to a kind of naive teleology of that kind. But, however that may be, certainly for Kant, what Kant takes on board is what I think most people nowadays willy nilly take on board, which is, at least in practical terms, a modern scientific view of nature. And when you have that view in mind, all kinds of moral and political problems immediately emerge, one being that freedom seems slightly impossible, except in this very tenuous way that the Heisenberg uncertainty principle might allow. But that's really not going to do it for most people.

It really doesn't leave much room for genuine human science, because humans become the kind of odd man out—the observers of nature who can't account for their own participation in nature. And one of the reasons that Kant is an attractive figure to me is that he deals with that problem head-on and in a particularly meticulous and careful way. And another thing that makes him very appealing to me is that he had a… and here, my reading of Kant is perhaps a little different from some other people. I've always been very interested in his early work, and his very late work, and what links them together. And it seems to me that most people start reading Kant with the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Well, you know, he was almost 60 [Laughs] by then he was a pretty smart guy before he wrote that. So, what was he doing all those years? And some of you know, some of us get our best thoughts when we're younger. So what were the best youthful thoughts that propelled Kant's career and made him so single-mindedly devoted to the kind of inquiry that he spent his life at? And those thoughts seem to be very much related to the questions of human embodiment, the kind of mysterious duplicity of human existence, and here's where the sublime also comes into play. So one of the reasons that Kant is attractive as a modern thinker, is that he aims at least for a comprehensiveness that many modern thinkers have either deliberately denied themselves or just find themselves unable to address, embracing both the authority of modern science on the one hand, yet also opening up the possibility of human freedom and making room for a rigorous investigation of

human existence that is not exhausted by a modern scientific, reductive materialist or quasi-materialist explanation of things.

PF: That is a beautiful answer, and fascinating.

SMS: Yes.

PF: I want to hear you talk more about Kant's comprehensive understanding of human existence. If it's possible.

SMS: So, I mean, if I think what ties all of this together for me is a series of questions that he keeps posing for himself and returning to. And one of the things that I find attractive in Kant as a thinker and also just as a human being, is, I could call it a youthfulness of mind, that many old people, you know, you learn things, and then you remain attached to them, and you defend them, and you become rigid. And he was always, in a way, returning to the same sets of questions and with a certain dissatisfaction in his former answers. And therefore, even at the very, very end he was driven—the *Opus posthumum* is a series of exercises in which he's trying, yet again, to perfect a system in which he sees gaps and in which he's… but but I think one way of describing what all of those attempts involve is a concern with the problem of human embodiment. So that would be, that would be one way, and another way in would be more moral and political. And this is another attractive feature from a modern liberal point of view, namely, that at least after reading Rousseau, all of his metaphysical formulations are reframed in terms of a project which is as he calls it, establishing the rights of humanity and the ends of reason are henceforth understood to be essentially moral and political, and again, from the point of view...and this is something that I took up, especially in my in my undergraduate course this semester, an extraordinarily robust and rich defense of liberal democracy, broadly understood that to some degree, leapfrogs beyond the 19th century and industrialization and colonialism and the various things that now seem to be, you know, weigh liberalism down. Even a figure like John Stuart Mill, who was a kind of a colonial apologist, Kant, in a way, is ahead of I mean, he's behind them. [Laughs]. He was writing at a time when, there really was virtually no industry in Prussia; they still had serfs, and we still had slavery in the United States, but in some ways, I find his thought extraordinarily helpful and fresh in ways many call postmodern. I'm not sure we really are postmodern yet, but we're certainly postindustrial and *pace* Trump. [Laughs]. And, you know, again, I think Kant has a lot of fresh insights to offer on questions that

some of the 19th and early 20th century, even late 20th century figures are less…Yeah, seems outdated in the way that Kant isn't, at least if read the way I tend to read him, which is very sympathetically, or as with the expectation that he, that there's something there that is not only true, but also practically helpful.

PF: So, you mentioned that Kant's understanding of human nature, if we can use the word human nature or human existence, leads to a very specific discovery of what politics should be and why politics should be the final aim or end for human beings. Could you talk more about this?

SMS: Well, I mentioned that politics for him is a kind of transitional phase between what he calls the state of nature, I mean, these are all kind of formulas and the 'kingdom of ends', a moral kingdom of ends, which is…it's easy to understand as a secularized version of the Christian kingdom of grace, but politics is has this intriguing in-betweenness for him, which is his juxtaposition in *Perpetual Peace* of the moral politician and the political moralist; a political moralist is somebody who uses morality for political purposes, which is to say that he's immoral. So there's no such thing, you know, strictly speaking, as a political moralist. A moral politician, on the other hand, is something that's at least possible, but extremely difficult. So let me, let me describe it this way, that one of the interesting comparisons you could draw would be Aristotle on natural right and the limitations of law. And we'll leave Aquinas out of it for now, Kant on law and how to finesse those, those hard cases where general laws don't seem to quite do the job. And then someone like Schmitt, who says, hell with the law, let's just have, you know, dictators declare states of exception, you know, do their will, and we'll hope God's on their side.

So, I think Kant, again, offers attractive alternative, to say that the kind of Aristotelian argument for the prudence of the statesman who just somehow knows, because of this kind of σοφὴ φρόνησις, this practical wisdom, knowing what to do on the spot, and can somehow adjust the laws accordingly, or even ignore it on occasion which is, in a way, a very attractive ideal, but very difficult to bring about or to meet with any regularity, so that politics becomes, for him, an almost inevitably failed project to achieve some kind of justice that… and Kant is a little bit more hopeful than Aristotle, I think, about the possibilities, particularly of democratic politics and so again, that's another attraction for me, is that he is more hopeful while at the same time having,

an Augustinian understanding of the tragic dimension, the potentially catastrophic degradation to which human beings can bring themselves. And whereas, perhaps not the tragedians, but the Greek philosophers tend to be ultimately to be a somewhat cheerier bunch, if only you know, for the few who can be philosophers, they are also somewhat neglectful, perhaps, of the fate of the many who can't.

PF: Yes, another interesting difference between Aristotle, or ancient philosophy, and Kantian philosophy is that, well, Aristotle and probably Plato care a lot about happiness and probably regard happiness as the end of our human life. But Kant would probably say, well, maybe following the moral law and pursuing a kind of transformation from the state of nature to the state of law should be our proper end. Why would Kant reject this kind of classical notion of happiness as the end and have a new proper end for human beings, which is the moral end?

SMS: Okay, well, his won't be a very satisfactory answer, but one reason is that in a way he buys into the Hobbesian story about happiness, that that at least as natural beings, in the crude sense, we're driven by certain laws of desire, as he puts it, such that happiness can only mean when you're talking about at that level, and that's the crudely natural level. Happiness is simply the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain. And from that point of view, human life is pretty futile, because, again, he buys it to a kind of Lockean argument, I think at the same time which, which to some degree, Rousseau shares, which is that we're, if you, if you think of life… just a kind of an accounting book of pleasure and pain, you're always going to end up in the red. I mean, a very simple way, because for every pleasure, there's a pain that comes first, but there's going to be a pain at the end that's going to have no pleasure afterwards. And therefore, you're– you know that even the very best life is going to have more pain than pleasure. So if you're just living for maximum pleasure or minimum pain, the best thing to do is kill yourself at first as quickly as possible. So, it can't possibly be. He says that, if concepts were all there were to life, and you had a choice, nobody would choose to be born. So, there must be more to it. Then I think he inherits, partly from Rousseau, an idea that there are two kinds of enjoyment. There's, and this is to use Rousseau's language, there's *plaisir*, there's pleasure, and there's joy, *jouissance*.

And *jouissance* is an active sentiment of your own living force, your own existence, the sentiment of your own existence, which has a kind of self-sufficient gratifying *raison d'etre* that is independent of this lower calculus. And for Kant, the equivalent of that, that activity, that

active pleasure – Kant doesn't call it active pleasure. He calls it moral satisfaction, which is again the sense of one's own existence. And the other thing that Kant changes from Rousseau: for Rousseau, reason is ultimately not the highest expression of this life force, this life activity. It's more like imagination, the experience of the poet, the experience of the solitary walker, you know, floating in his boat. And for Kant, the highest expression of reason is a moral activity which transcends this aesthetic self-activity, but that has certain, at least formal, similarities with what I think Rousseau means by *jouissance*, by this kind of active sentiment of one's own existence.

Kant, on the other hand, is not, I mean, he doesn't want to be called a hedonist, and so he identifies that with a kind of noble transcendence of happiness, of ordinary happiness, which is this kind of higher feeling, because ultimately, it is a moral feeling of one's own autonomy. That's something that goes beyond what, I think, what Rousseau would admit. Another way of putting it is that Rousseau ultimately is not a moralist, in my view, and Kant is.

PF: That's a noble answer…

SMS: Yah.

PF: and a true one, I guess.

SMS: Yah.

PF: So, I'm very attracted by the idea that to live a moral life now, how should I do it? And you just mentioned that, well, Kant has a kind of praise for liberal democracy, yeah, because it can help us to satisfy our political purpose, which is to live a moral life. Could you say a few more words about why Kant thinks that a liberal democracy is good for our lives?

SMS: Well, that's a really…that's a really great question too. So, I read a lot of Kant's later writings as at least partly a response to Rousseau's *First Discourse*. It raises this very interesting question, you know? I mean, well, Rousseau didn't raise it. Somebody else raised, but Rousseau tries to answer it. You know, it has progress in the arts and sciences made us better? Made us morally better? Has it made us happier? And Rousseau's answer, crudely, is mostly no. Mostly…but there may be a few individuals like me. That is to say, if you can live this very high life, if you're a genius, if nature broke the mold with you, too. But otherwise, no, it's… it's been a, it's been a bad deal, and…and rather than take that misologic path all the way

that maybe some followers of Rousseau would, though, I think not Rousseau. Kant wants to find a way to redeem civilization so that history can be read as a comedy, after all, and not a divine comedy, but, you know, a kind of human comedy, and but it's one in which we have to ourselves produce the result. And since it's in a state of freedom, always shadowed by the possibility of failure, and indeed catastrophic failure. And so the comedy is sort of a tragedy, like all great comedies, at least Shakespearean comedies, the line between comedy and tragedy is very thin.

So why? Why? Well, I mean, these are attractive ideas -- the dignity of…the dignity of man. I mean, I, frankly, I sometimes find the contemptuousness in some classical works for ordinary people. You know, I…it just doesn't resonate with me. Maybe because I'm an ordinary person, but I resist self-contempt, but, but there's something attractive about Kant's desire to see in ordinary people, you know, all the warts, but at the same time, moral possibilities that that mere intellectual prowess, can't compensate for or can't eclipse and at the same…so I find these efforts in Kant's later works like the *Critique of Judgmen*t…to figure out how you move a civilization that, in his time and ours can look very decadent, and one could almost despair of the human condition. If you look around the world and you know what AI might do and what you know what social media has already done, you know, where are we going with this? Has it made us better? Has it made us happier, or is it simply degrading us, this development of our rational faculties, especially through technology, let alone the possibility of, you know, thermonuclear war, climate, extinction, whatever people are worried about that Kant sees politics as the sole remedy? It's a difficult remedy. We're made of crooked timber, as he famously puts it. So, there's no perfect political solution, but something like liberal democracy is the best we can do.

And then that becomes itself a cause to which a moral person can devote him or herself. And you think of figures like, you know, fighters, I think the 106-year-old woman who was in the French Resistance who recently died. I mean, these are people who, you know, devoted themselves to a very high ideal, an idea of France that that really did stand for the rights of man, broadly understood, and someone like Abraham Lincoln, similarly, I think, can set a model for the kind of commitment to a larger purpose which is not specifically religious. It's not linked to a particular…truth, or metaphysics. And you know it is, I think, attractively familiar to those of us who've grown up in a liberal democracy and willy nilly, take, take the Declaration of Independence

to be a very noble document and…and so on. I don't mean to exclude you from growing up in the States…

PF: That's fine.

SMS: …and pledging allegiance to the flag. Did you still have to pledge? Did you pledge allegiance to the flag?

ERJ: Yes.

SMS: Really?

ERJ: In elementary school? Yes.

SMS: And then, you stopped?

ERJ: Yeah, probably around maybe fifth grade, even though it was the same school.

SMS: And do you know why they stopped?

ERJ: No, just all of a sudden. Yeah, there's no explanation.

SMS: Well, I mean, I grew up in the middle of the cold, the height of the Cold War, and we did all kinds of stuff. We had bugle calls. We had to stand at attention if, in high school, if you were late and you were caught out in the parking lot or something, you had to stand rigidly at attention while this recording of, you know, of Reveille played. So, I mean, there were all kinds of excesses, shall we say. But there's a certain kind of refined patriotism with respect to liberal democracy that I think enables one to live a moral life, not simply in terms of one's ordinary day-to-day transactions, but feeling, you know, that there is a larger communal project to which you can attach your energies.

PF: There's one specific event that Kant has commented on, and has experienced, and is very controversial, which is the French Revolution.

SMS: Yes. I thought you were going to ask about Kant's racism…I am puzzled…maybe you are going to get to that

PF: I was not expecting that.

SMS: Ok, alright, alright.

PF: If you want.

SMS: No, no, no, I mean, if you say controversial, I didn't know the French Revolution was controversial, but…

PF: Well, it's controversial to some people, such as Burke.

SMS: Oh, well, what a crank. [Laughs]. No. Burke had his own problems, but he's a little unfair. And he was, you know, he had this nice, liberal British tradition too, that he could fall back on. What the Germans did with Burke was somewhat different from what Burke did with Burke, and I'm not sure the Irish would have fared so well under a kind of German version of Burkeism, but that's neither here nor there.. There's a very interesting Kant scholar at the University of Oslo, Reidar Maliks, who's coming to the workshop, who wrote a really interesting book about Kant and the French Revolution. And I think there's a lot of…there are a lot of good things in that little book, but one of them is just tracing out the complexities of Kant's comments on the French Revolution and what he likes, what he refers to with praise, particularly in *the Critique of Judgment*, which was published in 1790 is a very early stage of what comes to be called The French Revolution. And it was a stage in which arguably no laws were broken, yet, and arguably they were on their way to establishing a constitutional monarchy of a sort that…that's kind of a quasi-British sort.

And so that was, that was a French transformation that he could wholeheartedly endorse. What it became later he had, you know, he was much more critical of, as his comments on the execution of Louis XVI illustrate, but he still thought that the sheer fact of the revolution, with all its warts, demonstrated. This is what he argues in a late work, *The Conflict of the Faculties,* that all things considered, there's a germ, there's an element, there's a slight preponderance in these mysterious human innards that we can't directly access. There's a slight tilt in the direction of morality over immorality. And he makes a very interesting argument that, again, rests on a kind of sublimity, as he describes it, an experience of the sublime, not directly by any of the actors, not the soldiers themselves, but people like Kant looking on and seeing it as a kind of historical sign. There's what he calls a moment of exaltation, which is not quite enthusiasm, which is itself not a terrible thing. But when you're enthusiastic, your reason is no longer in charge. You're overwhelmed with this, these high emotions. And this is kind of a good thing. But again, it's never a good thing for reason to lose control, as with enthusiasm, as distinguished from fanaticism, which is in no way good. So, he uses a different word for enthusiasm, enthusiasm, and *Schwärmerei,* which is, you can translate as fanaticism.

But even then, when Kant's talking about this, what he says is the key moment, they've got a sign that history is progress, progress is happening, and has already happened. It's this, this sense of exaltation in the spectators who look at this without, without breaking the law, which would indicate a lapse of reason, and particularly moral reason. So that would be a, I guess, example of… I don't know…if that's an answer to your question about the French Revolution, is we had this very complicated response, that was both dark and light.

ERJ: I want to add something only because, well, one, you mentioned racism, and two, because we had an author two years ago who wrote on Kant and racism, and I can't remember the thesis of the paper, but I'm just wondering, do you have any thoughts on racism in Kant's work in particularly relating to liberalism…to his advocation for liberalism, or it seems, at least in my, not in-depth reading of Kant, that it seems to be in contrast with the idea that everyone is endowed with or at least there are some self-legislating subjects.

SMS: Right. So, there's moral universalism on the one hand. And then he says in his anthropology lectures and private notes, and you know, there's a tension on Kant's thought. And the tension is, on the one hand, his universalism, which I think is his deeper philosophic commitment, because it's rational and it's a priori and it's necessary. And then there is this attempt to look at history in a way that would support our hopes in the realization of this, this ideal. And there, he gives himself permission, under the rubric of what he calls 'reflective judgment', to make educated guesses about a kind of teleology within history. And again, none of this has the certitude of either empirical fact or certainly a priori knowledge, but he presents it as a permissible hope that you could look for signs that nature is on our side, and is sort of going to help us, if we help ourselves.

And there, I think he runs into trouble sometimes because in his, in his desire to find meaningful patterns he will seize on things that he may think are innocuous, but that lack objective, empirical evidence, and yet support certain kinds of historical hopes, and one is a trajectory of history that involves a kind of racial hierarchy, with white Europeans at the top and American Indians at the bottom, and then blacks, and then Asians. So, he finds that an appealing and attractive pattern, because it suggests a kind of symmetry. And I mean, I think he gives himself too much permission in those directions. He does it also with women and male-female differences. These are things which cannot really be by his own better lights, proven empirically, but it…it's this, this window that opens up when he talks about 'reflective judgment' and that gives

him permission to say things about Judaism and Christianity. So, every time he…this is the downside of his, of his imaginative efforts to cull from the historical evidence, signs of, of natural support for human moral progress. So, I think it's a difficulty in his thinking.

But on the other hand, what? What thinker doesn't have difficulties? One of the attractions of Kant is that it's sort of like a carpet. I mean, that every comprehensive philosophy has, has, there's always wrinkles. And so you, you try to smooth the wrinkles here, and they pop up someplace else and, and, you know, there are wrinkles for Aristotle, in the way, it's a little, you know, if so, if there's a natural teleology that acorns become oak trees, what about all the acorns that don't become oak trees? And if our natural teleology is to become a philosopher, but you know, millions and millions and millions of us are going to be like acorns that just rot in the ground. Maybe that's not a fully satisfying understanding of the human condition either. So that's a pretty crude way to summarize Aristotle. [Laughs].

PF: That's fine.

SMS: But, yeah, so, I…in a way that the difficulties are as revealing of the human condition as the, you know, insights. I mean, in a way, that the difficulties are them… are themselves insights. And Kant is only too happy to admit where things break… in his system break down, and one is the intelligibility of freedom. He admits that ultimately, it's not intelligible, but we can't let it go.

PF: We're talking about all these difficulties about Kant in a specific institution, which is a university

SMS: Yes. [Laughs].

PF: And Kant also, I believe, has some interesting comments on the role and mission of the university in the progressive force in human development.

SMS: Yeah. Now this is a very late development in his thinking, after he suffered through the reign of the successor to Frederick the Great, who, from Kant's point of view, was a very benign ruler. I mean, not that he did all in every way, good things, but at least he was very… his touch was very light when it came to censorship, and so Kant was able to do his thing quite, quite readily. The only thing you couldn't do under Frederick the Great was question his authority, and as long as you didn't question autocracy as such, you could pretty much publish

anything you wanted. Particularly, he was critical of religion. You know, he was delighted when you criticized religion.

So, Kant had a pretty free hand. And I think he assumed that rulers like Frederick the Great, who were great Machiavellians, basically, as I think Kant probably believed, that you could work with that. You could work out a *modus vivendi* with such rulers that you wouldn't rock their boat, and then they would let you publish *What is Enlightenment*, and *the Critique of Pure Reason,* and so on. Gradually you would bring about a general public enlightenment that would make possible, maybe a slightly more liberal form of government. The death of Frederick and the rise of this much inferior and much more censorious Friedrich Wilhelm II meant that Kant could no longer publish freely on religion, and he couldn't really publish freely about anything touching on serious moral and political issues until the death of that king.

So Kant developed workarounds. And the big workaround he finally comes down to is the workaround that he has sort of lived through and with his whole life, which is as a university professor, student, and then professor. And so, he re-envisions the university very late in his work. 1798, pretty much the large, last big thing he writes, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, which means the university, faculties and he co-ops the whole mechanism of the university as then understood, which basically was a state apparatus for the production of doctors, lawyers and ministers, who were themselves servants of the state and carrying out the State's mission in various ways. But there was this other faculty, the lower faculty, the philosophy faculty, which we would today call the College of Arts and Sciences, as opposed to the law school, the medical school, and the School of Theology. And he saw in that little corner of things, where he at least facetiously says the purpose of the universe is to produce Ph.D.s. That's kind of a joke, but not entirely. But really, it's the pursuit of truth and the critique of reason, the self-critique of reason as a part, a necessary part and foundation of that, of that pursuit that can come to terms with, and, again, work out a *modus vivendi* with the state, precisely because the state, too, needs the facts. They're going to have to fight wars. They need guns that actually work, and they're going to, you know, deal with plague. They need medical information that actually works. So the idea here is that Kant can, he can use the university as a kind of inner transformative institution that placates the state by giving it goods that it can appreciate. And at the same time, it brings about a kind of inner revolution in thinking by training all the people who are going to go out there and be state ministers. And so, there'll be a kind of subtle, radical transformation of society through the university

under the guise, which isn't entirely a guise or merely a guise of supporting ends that this that rulers themselves can -- whose value rulers can appreciate.

And it seems to me that the modern university, as it develops after Kant in Germany and then the United States, very much carries through on that plan. We always have to pay the piper, somebody, taxpayers, the church, big rich donors, somebody has to be convinced that it's good for them to support this thing. And so, the idea that you can be a pure, you know, academy of knowledge? Well, yeah, even Socrates had to flatter his rich friends. [Laughs]. So, I think Kant was very clear-headed about the political necessities that in his time, which weren't altogether different from the political necessities in our day. And I think we've lost sight of some of those political necessities and are high-minded, oh, 'we're all for academic freedom of speech.' Well, okay, and what about who's going to pay, who's going to pay the salaries, and who's going to buy the labs? And I think the forgetfulness about that has cost the university something.

At the same time, Kant has a very interesting way of describing the University. He says it's a commonwealth of scholars whose members are teachers and students. And the trustees of the University are not the big-shot donors, like in our day, the trustees are the professors, which I find an appealing thought. [Laughs]. I mean, he's a real believer in faculty governance. And at the same time, he says that every university faculty has a right-wing and a left-wing. And he's here borrowing the language of the French Parliament, National Assembly, the right and the left, as we still call it, and the right wing are the professional schools. Because their whole job is to shore up institutions that are the status quo. Teach the law as it is. To teach the latest, good, best practice as we now know it, that's the job of the lower faculty, the philosophy department, the biology department, and so on and so forth. Their job is actually to find out what's true, and that means that they're going to, you know, they're going to be boat rockers, because what's true, what's known, new discoveries are, this is not necessarily going to coincide with what is actually being done on the ground.

And therefore the College of Arts and Sciences, the philosophy faculty, is left, is inherently left, not in the sense of being a hotbed of Marxism, although that's one way you can understand it [Laughs], but that there's a kind of progressive radicalism inherent in the pursuit of knowledge, in the sense that a proper College of Arts and Sciences understands itself, and so it isn't when right wing MAGA folks think university is a hotbed of Left wing radicalism. Kant will say, well, you

know, they kind of have a point [Laughs], but not for the reason they think. And I think that's just a very, very interesting formulation and insight on his part about the inherent structure of a modern university.

And there's a there's a third role that I think he foresees that then becomes very prominent, which is the role of the university in shaping national cultures, certainly in Germany, which didn't have a unified state until much later in the 19th century, with Fichte already the university is where a common civic German consciousness is supposed to emerge and I think at the American the land-grant colleges in the US, and then later, places like Johns Hopkins, which were more, even more emphatically modeled on the German system, the idea that these are places where American culture is going to be somehow nurtured, and where you bring together people from, you know, this, this coast and that coast, and the Midwest and different demographics. And the result is some kind of broad, high national culture, that's one of the functions of a university, and so we're not just a Jesuit university, we're not just a Catholic University, we're also an American university. And that means that, too, is part of what a place like BC is supposed to be doing from a Kantian point of view. So, I find all of those ideas very fresh.

PF: I think so, especially under our current administration.

SMS: Yeah, yeah. But again, it kind of reminds you of why we're having some of the problems we're having because of a certain forgetfulness about paying the piper. And here's another thing that came to mind in my undergraduate class today. Why? Why the sudden indifference or even glee with which MAGA is receiving the destruction of biological research and medical research, I mean, all these lifesaving things? I mean, America had this, you know, vast engine of biomedical research and progress, and, you know, just a hatchet has been taken to it. Why do ordinary people out there in the hinterland not find that alarming? And I think Kant might say, Well, one reason is because they don't get the benefit. As far as I can tell, medicine is expensive, even apart from COVID. You know, maybe if we had the national health care system that delivered more affordable health care to ordinary people, they wouldn't be so suspicious or so eager to see the hatchet, but why should they pay? Why should they pay taxes for advanced cancer research that they're not going to be able to utilize or access?

So that, and Kant would say, well, because he has a very interesting approach to welfare as well. Part of the responsibility of the state is to make sure that there's a healthy population, and not for the sake,

not because people have a right to welfare, not out of compassion, but because, if you don't have a healthy population, you don't have a state, you know, Europe…You need healthy people, and families, and new citizens, or it's just an idea. It's not a reality.

So, yeah, you can just use Kant in all kinds of ways, I think, to figure out correctives that don't parse as either blue or red, Democrat, Republican, but, but maybe point in a helpful direction, just in terms of very current problems we face, we can then we go on to, you know, international relations that would be a whole other, a whole other interview.

PF: So if we are not going into international politics and stay on the topic of the University. Yeah, you have been studying in the university for a long time, and then you have been a professor in the university for a long time.

SMS: I've been in school a long time, beginning with, you know, nursery school, yeah. [Laughs].

PF: And you have been a student of Kant, a friend of Kant for a long time.

SMS: Yeah, unrequited friend. [Laughs].

PF: Yes. Is there some advice or inspiration that we can get from Kant about what we should do as university students, and how we can best utilize the resources in university as students, based on your reading of Kant or your experience as a professor?

SMS: Well, I am not sure if this has to do with Kant specifically, but I was, in a way, privileged, in a way not so privileged, to be a student at the university at a time when there was a…it was, it was the mid to late 60s—to date myself. And in the end, it all blew up. I mean, I had no classes my senior year, basically my first year in graduate school. I mean, it was a mess. It was chaos and…but the first two years of college was a kind of exposure to an extremely broad range of approaches which were at the height of their self-confidence. So, I had, I had courses in the philosophy department that were just analytic, you know. You just wouldn't believe how narrowly analytic. And then I had historicist courses in the German department, and I had New-criticism, and also the beginning of Critical theory in literature departments. I had these Straussian professors in the government department, then I had these Positivist professors, also in the government department. So, I would say that ideally you should expose yourself to as broad

a range of approaches as you can manage, while also negotiating the demands of a major and, you know, getting the professors that your friends tell you are good, and all the other things you do when you choose courses. But I would think I'd say that one thing is to open one's mind, to as broad a range of approaches as possible.

And I think Kant had the benefit of that himself as a young student, because he was caught between two, these two conflicting approaches. One was the Leibnizian rationalist approach, and the other was embodied in a very, very interesting thinker named Crusius, who was a Lutheran, who strongly was a fidelist. And so, either from the very early stage, Kant confronted this conflict between freedom -- moral freedom -- as simply a fact of human life, that if there are moral obligations, then we must be free, because otherwise it would be meaningless. On the other hand, the Leibnitzian view, which tended to diminish the meaning of freedom in that view's rationalist notion that there's a sufficient reason for everything.

So, from the very beginning, he was trying to negotiate these two outlooks and find a kind of satisfying synthesis. And there seemed to be something to recommend both of them. If you went totally with Crusius, you had to give up on reason. If you went totally with Leibniz, you seemed to have to give up the moral life. And I'm not saying you can always find a perfect medium. But Kant is a radical moderatist. You know, he wants to have it all, but he wants to get the extremes in their full-blown form, and then try to work out a satisfactory accommodation. And so, to the extent that I think undergraduate education presents itself in a somewhat similar way, that's probably something that Kant would also approve.

PF: So, philosophize in intentions.

SMS: Yeah, you know, my husband makes fun of me. He says everything for you, in the end, reduces to: it's a problem. [Laughs]. But I think Strauss says the same thing. He says, right? There's only the eternal problems, eternal questions. And Nietzsche says almost the same. So maybe that's the best we can do. Yeah, that's not so bad.

PF: It's important to understand what we don't know. That's philosophy.

SMS: Yeah, yeah. You don't necessarily have to come up with it, with the right answer, at least not right away.

ERJ: Well, Professor Shell, we thank you so much for your time for this interview today, and we wish you all the best in your philosophical endeavors.

SMS: [Laughs]. Thank you, you too.