Nothing Marginal About It

Governmental laws have to respect individuals and individual liberty, and allow them the autonomy to determine their own lives. These laws have to apply equally to everyone and show respect for all citizens.

SOUND LIKE A STATEMENT RIPPED straight from today’s political or legal headlines? Maybe so, but it’s also a central theme of 18th-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s beliefs and writings.

So says MSU Associate Professor of Philosophy Fred Rauscher, who used a $75,000 National Endowment for the Humanities grant to translate selected writings of Kant from German into English. Rauscher collaborated with Professor Kenneth R. Westphal, now of the University of Kent, on the project, which focused on Kant’s lectures, notes, and drafts on political philosophy.

Three types of material were included: first, the only surviving transcript of Kant’s lecture course in political philosophy; second, selections from surviving drafts of books and essays on the subject; and third, independent reflections from Kant’s three decades of work in political philosophy. The translations will be included in the Cambridge Edition of the “Works of Immanuel Kant in Translation,” a comprehensive, multivolume set of new critical translations published by Cambridge University Press. The grant enabled Rauscher to work on the project at the Kant Archives in Marburg, Germany.

“Kant’s political philosophy has been available to English-speakers in translations of his published books and essays for almost two centuries,” Rauscher says. “In the past decade, attention has turned more and more to the unpublished manuscripts. People are now able to see Kant’s thought process at work as he developed his positions over the years.

“After I began work on this translation, other scholars contacted me for help in translating the same material into other languages as well. I am now working with translators from Brazil, Italy and Poland, sharing resources.”

Sometimes, Rauscher says, Kant made things easier to understand in these materials than in the final published version. This is especially true in his course lectures where Kant had to explain his ideas simply enough for the equivalent of today’s college freshmen to understand.

“Kant’s lectures were so popular, some students took extensive notes and wrote them out as lecture transcripts,” says Rauscher. “Then copyists produced duplicates that were bound and sold to other students, even in future semesters.

“We have to keep in mind that these students only took down what they understood. These lecture transcripts can make Kant’s published work easier to understand, but we have to beware of students’ misinterpretations as well.”

Rauscher says that we can see Kant’s side of the lecture course by looking at the textbooks he used in his courses. Kant had his own copy of the textbooks interleaved with blank pages for his notes. When these were filled he used the margins of the printed pages. The notes he scribbled in these spaces were the only notes he had when giving his lectures. “We can often see passages in the student transcriptions mirroring Kant’s notes in these books, and we can sometimes tell when the students misunderstood Kant’s point.”

Kant’s own hand is revealed in his own book drafts as well. “Some of these drafts are early formulations of arguments that appear in the published version. We can use these drafts to see what Kant rejected on the way to creating the final polished formulation.” At the other extreme, here and there a printer’s copy has survived with last minute changes Kant added,” says Rauscher. “Most of these last-minute changes are minor, but in some cases Kant deleted entire paragraphs of interesting material.”
Kant’s political philosophy, says Rauscher, emphasizes individual autonomy. He captured the ethos of the Enlightenment in his essay What is Enlightenment? in relation to individuals’ use of their own reason in freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

In other works, he notes, Kant was one of the first to propose something like the League of Nations. “He believed that there would be international peace only when all member states are republics. War was brought about by tyrants seeking power who force their people into war. Kant believed that if you gave the decision to go to war to the actual people, the people would not choose war. He believed that there would not be wars between democratic republics,” Rauscher says. “In essence, Kant believed that human beings are ‘ends to themselves.’ Thus, we should always treat others as an end, not the means. Give them the choice. It’s the difference between forcing war and the people voting to go to war.”

Rauscher notes that Enlightenment ideas such as Kant’s held considerable sway around the turn of the 19th century, and there was a greater emphasis on individual autonomy after Kant’s views became known; more emphasis on treating individuals with dignity. One example Rauscher provides is Brazil, a nation with a thriving community of Kant scholars Rauscher has worked with in his research.

“Kant’s ideas were an inspiration in the 19th century when Brazil became independent (1822) and liberal politicians came to power,” says Rauscher. “Kant’s viewpoints were very influential in this occurring. Over the next two centuries Brazil went from autocratic rule to democratic republic and back and forth many times. Military rule in Brazil finally ended 25 years ago, and philosophers turned again to Kant and the idea of the republic and democracy,” Rauscher says. “So, Kant’s teachings can still be an inspiration.”

And Rauscher says that Kant’s viewpoints continue to influence political discourse here in the U.S. as well as abroad. The recent focus on individual rights versus government control of our lives that has been advanced by nearly everyone from the newly-minted Tea Party to gay rights activists can be traced back to Kant. The same can be said of recent moves to consolidate alliances among countries in the interest of expanding free trade – whether it be NAFTA (Canada, the U.S. and Mexico), the European Union, BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India and China), BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) or some other power-based acronym. Such groups, different as they may be, show a willingness and a commitment from emerging powers to come together in mutual respect to redefine world governance and assert their right to a place at the table.

“Kant would have been very pleased with the European Union,” Rauscher says, “and the fact that this democratic union makes it very difficult to foresee another war between France and Germany. He was a great believer in progress. He tried to show that governments were becoming more enlightened, more rational, more peaceful, and he tried to shine a light on the path they had to take to continue that progress.”

For all that, Rauscher says that Kant had his shortcomings.

“He advocated for so much individual decision making, it’s not clear he can see the social goods needed to achieve this type of autonomy. The issue is not just state oppression, but is the state there to promote some forms of autonomy? For example, is its role to provide health care to achieve autonomy?”

Rauscher notes that Kant’s detractors say that his moral and political philosophy leans too much on individual autonomy and fails to emphasize a responsibility to help others. Kant does not see the need for collective effort to create the social and material conditions that make for autonomous living.

According to Rauscher, Immanuel Kant’s political philosophy is one of the hallmark defenses of classical liberalism, which emphasizes the centrality of freedom of the individual as the purpose of government. In the tradition of social contract theorists, Kant argued that the power of a government over its citizens is justified only if it is rational for individuals to prefer living under that government over living in anarchy.

Kant’s version of classical liberalism is distinct from others above all in his support of freedom on the basis of its inherent value rather than as a secondary value derived from some other value such as personal happiness or obedience to God.

“Kant believed that government power provides the order that guarantees freedom,” Rauscher explains, “but he warned that government could go too far if it denies individual rights and liberties.”