



Immanuel Kant: the very idea of a critique of pure reason

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BOOK REVIEW

Immanuel Kant: the very idea of a critique of pure reason, by J. Colin McQuillan, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2016, pp. xv + 176, \$34.95 (pb), ISBN 978-0-8101-3248-1

In this short book, Colin McQuillan asks ‘why Kant called his first *Critique* a critique’ (3). Put this way, such a task may not seem philosophically very deep, and to top it all, McQuillan largely ignores topics typically treated in the studies of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, including transcendental idealism, Kant’s new theory of sensibility, the deduction of the categories and the transcendental dialectic, which might make one suspect that the book is not true to its subtitle – how can one analyse the very idea of a critique of pure reason without analysing the key contents of Kant’s masterpiece that goes by the same name? Yet, McQuillan’s succinct analysis offers the reader a very clear view of Kant’s conception of critique. Not that McQuillan delves into the details of Kant’s arguments, but he succeeds exceptionally well in explaining, in a fresh and illuminating way, the long and winding intellectual process that led Kant to adopt his critical method.

McQuillan begins with a punchy introduction, where he emphasizes two interwoven things that set the tone for the whole book: namely, how accounts on Kant have tended to overlook or mischaracterize what Kant’s critique is really about, and how the *Critique of Pure Reason* is a culmination of Kant’s life project to establish a solid foundation for scientific metaphysics. In this respect, on McQuillan’s view, there is no dividing line between Kant’s pre-critical and critical philosophy.

In the process, McQuillan situates Kant’s conception of critique among other eighteenth-century conceptions (e.g. philological critique) and emphasizes the positive side to all of them: the ultimate aim of a critique is not to find flaws but an improvement. This point is spot on, but on the whole, I did not find these comparisons very helpful for understanding Kant’s position. Some of the differences are quite obvious, while some of the connections are somewhat anecdotal. At the same time, I found McQuillan’s analysis of the different kinds of critiques valuable on its own. Similarly successful is his concise illustration of the changing attitudes towards metaphysics in the German (or Prussian) academic circles from the 1740s to 1770s. McQuillan also does a good job in arguing how, in contrast to what some commentators have assumed, Kant never became hostile towards metaphysics in the 1760s.

This, however, is different from claiming that Kant was becoming more and more critical towards the way metaphysicians treated their subject matter. Is Kant’s 1760s reference to metaphysics as the science of the limits of human reason really just an innocent description of one of the ‘benefits of metaphysics’ (41)? Is such a formulation not also an indication – perhaps vague, but an indication nonetheless – of a novel stance on metaphysics in which the cognitive limitations of human beings become a central theme? Presumably, such a stance was largely lacking among the speculative metaphysicians. Be that as it

may, McQuillan's basic idea remains solid: namely, that Kant's aim was to improve, not demolish, metaphysical thinking.

McQuillan then moves on to Kant's 1770 inaugural dissertation, which is the most natural place to look for the first explicit steps towards critical philosophy. One such step is the distinction between sensible and intellectual cognition. As McQuillan rightly emphasizes, this move is insufficient, however. Kant still treats noumena unproblematically, as if the problems of metaphysics could be resolved simply by 'exclud[ing] everything sensible' (51) from its domain. McQuillan also argues convincingly how Kant's initial plans for *The Bounds of Sensibility and Reason* (which Kant never wrote) were based on the same idea, and how it was only after Kant recognized 'an entirely new approach to metaphysics' (50) that the route to critical philosophy opened up. On McQuillan's reading, this happened in 1772, when Kant set himself the question 'how a representation that refers to an object without being in any way affected by it can be possible' (Kant, *Correspondence*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 133; Kant's letter to Marcus Herz, 21 February 1772, AA 10:130–1). It is with this question concerning the ground of the relation between representations and objects that Kant 'turns to the understanding itself' (59).

In Chapter 4, McQuillan finally considers Kant's explicitly critical position, or rather, what Kant understood by a critique of pure reason. McQuillan finds four distinguishing features, basing his reading largely on the prefaces and introductions to the two editions of the first *Critique*. Firstly, reason must act as a kind of court of justice. In this role, the basic function of reason is to tell justified and unjustified metaphysical principles apart. Secondly, reason must also become critical of itself. To this end, Kant's critique is an analysis of the faculty of human reason and its supposed ability to gain knowledge independently of experience. Thirdly, critique means revolution. Kant's new procedure drastically limits the scope of metaphysics (at least from a theoretical point of view): we can only have a priori cognition of objects of possible experience. Fourthly, Kant's critique is a preparatory study for a system of pure reason, which would be the culminating point of transcendental philosophy.

Generally speaking, there is little to complain about in McQuillan's treatment of Kant's critique of pure reason. However, while McQuillan at times explicates Kant's approach concisely and illuminatively at the same time, often his analyses of Kant's ideas stay at the surface level. For example, while I think McQuillan is quite right in pointing out that building a system of pure reason would consist in tracking and cataloguing the so-called predicables, i.e. pure concepts derivable from the categories, it would have been good to hear what Kant might really mean by this, and what else might be involved. In all, McQuillan pretty much avoids the following question: What exactly is the kind of metaphysics that survives Kant's critique?

Before the concluding chapter – which is largely an overview of the contents of the book complemented with a sketch of how Kant's project was continued, or discontinued, by famous figures such as Fichte, Schopenhauer and Hegel – McQuillan goes through Kant's defences of critical philosophy, focusing on the *Prolegomena* and *On a Discovery*. Although McQuillan's treatment of Kant

remains mostly descriptive, he succeeds well in completing the picture of Kant's conception of critique. The chapter also reproduces Eberhard's dubious table of comparison between the Kantian and Leibnizian critique of pure reason, which readers not familiar with it might find interesting.

In brief, this short little book tells a real story, and it tells it well. While the story itself is not obviously a new one, McQuillan's careful textual analysis offers new insight into Kant's intellectual struggles. I can warmly recommend this clear and readable book, especially to historically minded scholars and students.

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