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Review of “Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason”

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Book Review

Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason, Sebastian Gardner. London: Routledge, 1999, xiv + 377 pp., \$14.95 (pbk), ISBN 0-415-11909-X.

Gardner tells us in the first chapter of his clear and insightful guide to Kant's *Critique*, that already in 1804, the year of Kant's death, "the reception of his philosophy had given sufficient indication of its permanent place in history" (12). Following Kant's death, philosophers as diverse (chronologically as well as theoretically) as Schopenhauer, Husserl, Habermas, and Rawls have turned to Kant as a reference point for the development of their own views. From the late 1700s to the present, Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) work has consistently drawn attention from the leading figures of almost every period in the history of ideas. Starting with the first wave of the reception of Kant's thought, we find original theories given birth to by Kant's critical philosophy. For example, K.L. Reinhold believed that he had discovered the first principle (the infamous *Satz des Bewußtseins*) upon which Kant's philosophy ultimately rested; with characteristic arrogance, J.G. Fichte pronounced that he understood Kant and his critical project better than Kant himself, and that his version of idealism was proof of his greater understanding; Schelling's dramatic announcement that Kant had given us the conclusions--only the premises were missing--gave Schelling a lifetime's work (for he took it upon himself to dig up those missing premises).

Kant's prominent place in the history of philosophy has understandably led to the publication of many studies, commentaries, and introductions to his thought. We have many sources to which we can turn for assistance in coming to an understanding of Kant's critical project. And given the complexity of Kant's thought, this abundance of secondary sources is welcome. For most readers grappling with Kant's ideas for the first time, a good guide-book is almost a necessity.

Sebastian Gardner's work is part of the Routledge Philosophy Guidebooks series, edited by Tim Crane and Jonathan Wolff. The series has an impressive list of contributors (including Roger Crisp on Mill's *Utilitarianism*, E.J. Lowe on Locke's view of human understanding, Genevieve Lloyd on Spinoza's *Ethics*). As the book jacket indicates, one goal of the series is to "painlessly introduce students to the classic works of philosophy". Although, given the difficulty of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, it may be impossible to "painlessly" introduce students to this work, Gardner's book is certainly a clear and patiently explicated account of the main themes and arguments of the *Critique*, one that does not come at the cost of sacrificing philosophical rigor for clarity.

In light of the abundant material already published on Kant's *First Critique*, an obvious question to pose to Gardner's guidebook is: Why yet another introductory study of this classic? Does Gardner offer us something that extant commentaries and introductions to Kant's *First Critique*, e.g., Korner, Kemp Smith or H.J. Paton's, do not?

Because Gardner is writing in the 21st century, he is able to reference some of the original work on Kant's critical philosophy that was done in the latter part of the 20th century. As he tells us in the preface: "[t]he book reflects work, most of it in the last two decades, on Kant's theoretical philosophy by Henry Allison, Karl Ameriks, Richard Aquila, Ermano Bencivenga, Graham Bird, Gerd Buchdahl, Dieter Henrich, Arthur Melnick, Robert Pippin, Ralph Walker, Wayne Waxman, and others" (xii). Standard introductory studies of the *Critique* do not give the reader insight into the most recent developments in the field of Kant studies, and hence Gardner's book can lay claim to offering a new path in an otherwise well-tread field. Gardner takes the history of philosophy very seriously, and he is able to weave some of the contributions of prominent late 20th century Kantians into his narrative, while maintaining an accessible, clear style throughout his illuminating and useful introductory study of Kant's *Critique*.

The upshot of Gardner's reliance on the above-named group of Kantians is his emphasis on Kant's transcendental idealism. Transcendental idealism is a term which Gardner tells us early on, cannot be captured by a simple definition (45), yet we are told that "its core meaning is bound up with the Copernican revolution" (45). Gardner spends much of the book unpacking the meaning of Kant's transcendental idealism. Of the ten chapters that comprise Gardner's book, two, Chapters Five and Eight, are dedicated to a discussion of Kant's transcendental idealism. As Gardner tells us early on, "[w]ith a view to providing an introduction to the *Critique* that takes account of recent work, this book emphasizes the basis, content and implications of the doctrine of transcendental idealism, and furthermore seeks to bring out its strengths" (xii-xiii). Gardner does alert the reader to "an altogether different line" found in Kant commentary, "according to which transcendental idealism is an incoherent doctrine" (xiii). Gardner is quite open about the fact that he does not favor this line and has not gone to great lengths to present all of the advantages it might have. Given that Gardner's task is to introduce Kant's critical philosophy, it would be unfair to expect him to present all possible story lines in full detail.

What one can and should expect from an introductory study is a clear, reliable, and honest account of the material. Gardner fulfills these expectations by providing a nice overview of the metaphysical issues that guided Kant's critical project and by discussing the relevant historical and biographical details which will engage the reader who might be coming to Kant for the first time. At the end of the first chapter, Gardner provides a simple diagram outlining the major sections of the *Critique* in order to give the reader a general structural overview. This is part of a move that characterizes Gardner's introduction to Kant: he takes the "baroque architecture of Kant's text" and remodels it, creating a more transparent, modern style. Gardner also offers useful advice to the reader. For example, he tells us early on that: "[t]he organization of the *Critique* can be grasped more clearly in light of the conclusions that Kant comes to in the work" (26). Gardner then offers a concise summary of the metaphysical conclusions arrived at by Kant in the *Critique*. He draws attention to the division between the two sections (the Aesthetic and Analytic), which are "concerned with knowable objects" and which jointly "vindicate the metaphysics of experience" and the section (the Dialectic), which is "concerned with (concepts of) objects that cannot be known", and which "denies legitimacy to the other kind of metaphysics—transcendent metaphysics" (26). This kind of explanatory strategy allows the reader to see the Kantian forest through the trees, and will surely be of great use to a reader coming to the *Critique* for the first time.

Gardner consistently ties his explanations to particular textual references, patiently alerting the

reader of clarifications that are in order before certain key terms, e.g., ‘transcendental idealism’, ‘representation’, ‘a priori’, etc. can be understood. Gardner is careful to provide an overview of the arguments used by Kant to establish his points and to provide famous historical objections and, though with clear sympathies to Kant’s positions, to fairly assess those objections. Gardner thoroughly clarifies not only the central themes of the major sections of the *Critique*, e.g., the Aesthetic, Analytic, Dialectic, and Canon of Pure Reason, he also makes a strong case for the centrality of his treatment of transcendental idealism. He tells us that: “[t]he most that a brief commentary can hope to do is to communicate a broad picture of what Kant says in the *Critique* and, more importantly, make this task seem worth pursuing. Highlighting the theme of transcendental idealism [...] seemed suited to this purpose” (xiii).

Kant’s transcendental idealism is the guiding thread of Gardner’s study, and he goes to great pains to justify its importance and to clarify its meaning. In Chapter Two, *The Possibility of Objects*, Gardner includes a section on the two basic late 20th century interpretations of Kant: the analytic and the idealist, represented respectively by P.F. Strawson and D. Henrich. As he tells us, the analytic interpretation “has its name because it identifies the task of Kantian philosophy as that of analyzing the implications of our conception of experience” (32). In contrast, according to the proponents of the idealist line of interpretation, Kant’s more fundamental investigation was concerned with how the subject constitutes the world and the accompanying view that the structure of experience is found in the operations of the mind (32). Gardner connects this point regarding Kant’s interest in examining the structure of experience as located in the mind to Kant’s transcendental enquiry concerning the possibility of objects. According to Gardner, “whereas on the analytic interpretation the *Critique* provides new answers to traditional philosophical questions, on the idealist interpretation it reconceives the framework within which philosophical questions are raised and answered” (46). Hence, proper attention to Kant’s transcendental idealism sheds light on Kant’s original contributions to metaphysics. In fact, as Gardner points out, in the preface to the second edition of the *Critique* (at Bxxii), Kant himself describes the proof of his doctrine of transcendental idealism as the “main purpose” of the *Critique*.

Chapters Three (*How are synthetic a priori judgements possible?*) and Four (*The sensible conditions of objects*) lay down the foundation for Gardner’s in-depth discussion of Kant’s transcendental idealism, which is the subject of Chapter Five. Gardner contrasts transcendental idealism with Kant’s empirical realism and, like Kant, sharply opposes it to transcendental realism. With the sort of clarity that characterizes his book, Gardner tells us that: “transcendental idealism may be defined as the thesis that the objects of our cognition are mere appearances: they are empirically real but transcendently ideal. To say that they are transcendently ideal is to say that they do not have in themselves, i.e. independently of our mode of cognition, the constitution which we represent them as having; rather our mode of cognition determines this constitution. Transcendental idealism entails that things cannot be known as they are in themselves” (95). In order to keep the Kantian jargon comprehensible, Gardner reminds us that the term ‘transcendental’ points us beyond the empirical, human standpoint not to a transcendent realm, but to the very roots of appearances themselves, that is, to the conditions of the possibility of objects.

The account of Kant’s transcendental idealism is connected to Kant’s Analytic, the theme of Chapter Six. According to Gardner, the Analytic is “premised on the truth of transcendental idealism. It is an account of how the world (must be) constructed conceptually on the assumption

that the fundamental conceptual features of the objects of our cognition derive from our mode of cognition, rather than being determined by how things are independently of our subjectivity” (120). The further significance and meaning of Kant’s transcendental idealism is explored as Gardner leads the reader through a discussion of Kant’s Dialectic (Chapter Seven).

Having made a strong case for the systematic role that Kant’s transcendental idealism plays in the *Critique*, Gardner turns, in Chapter Eight, to a capstone discussion of Kant’s transcendental idealism. Gardner opens Chapter Eight with a reference to Jacobi’s famous complaint that “year after year, he [Jacobi] had been forced in confusion to recommence the *Critique* because he had found himself unable to enter into the system of Kantian philosophy without the presupposition of the thing in itself, and yet, with that presupposition, unable to remain within it” (269). By the end of the chapter, we see why Jacobi was wrong that Kant’s system led to a paradox. Gardner tells us that: “there is no contradiction in saying that the objects of our perception are inside us in the transcendental (and no other) sense, and that they presuppose something outside us (in the transcendental sense), of which we can have negative and existential (but no other sort of) knowledge; we can know ourselves to be affected by something unknowable” (303). Once we become aware of the “perspectival character of our cognitive situation” (305), argues Gardner, we see why we *must* accept the existence of things in themselves and why such an acceptance does not condemn us to a world of illusion (such condemnation constituting just cause for abandoning Kant’s system), but a world of appearance that is the same for all human subjects qua knowing human subjects. Gardner is careful to distinguish what he is trying to capture with his reference to the “perspectival character of our cognitive situation” from any kind of relativism. Yet, he does not show his customary care with explicating terms in this discussion of the implications of Kant’s transcendental idealism, in particular, more needs to be said regarding the “perspectival character of our cognitive situation”.

While clear, reliable, and engaging, Gardner’s introduction faces some problems. The discussion of the transcendental deduction is not suited for beginners. Gardner refers to some “well-recognised problems which Strawson’s argument faces” (142). Those readers who need a guide to Kant’s critical philosophy will probably not be familiar with as sophisticated a work on Kant’s *Critique* as Strawson’s, and so these “well-recognised problems” should not be dropped in as casually as Gardner drops them. A reference to the “ocular lens analogy” (92) is also problematic along the same lines. Students not acquainted with the secondary literature will not know what this analogy is. So while Gardner’s claim that: “the ocular (‘lens’) analogy for human sensibility is [...] misleading, in so far as it suggests, first, that some other medium could take the place of human sensibility in giving the same objects, and second, that human sensibility to some degree misrepresents (‘colors’) objects” (92) works well enough to explain why the forms of sensibility cannot be likened to a lens, he should have spent more time explaining the analogy and its use by earlier interpreters of Kant. In discussing the distinctiveness of transcendental idealism, Gardner tells us that: “[t]he differences of transcendental idealism from Hume’s skeptical empiricism and Leibniz’s ‘dogmatic’ rationalism are straightforward and need no comment...” (96). A beginning student would probably need *at least* a sentence or two of comment in order to have some idea of what Gardner means in this context. In a book written for readers new to Kant, it is counter-productive to assume knowledge of even well-known philosophical positions.

In spite of a few moments when Gardner moves above the level of the reading public that a

philosophy guidebook is intended to serve, the book will surely be of help to students coming to Kant's *Critique* for the first time. Gardner's competent and engaging introduction to Kant's *Critique* ends with a brief, yet useful sketch of the reception and influence of the *Critique*. In addition, each chapter has its own bibliography, which helps guide the reader to topic-relevant literature.

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