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Review of “Kant Trouble: The Obscurities of the Enlightened”

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Book Review

Kant Trouble: The Obscurities of the Enlightened. Diane Morgan (Warwick Studies in European Philosophy, Andrew Benjamin, editor). London: Routledge, 2000. Pp. xii + 238. ISBN: 0-415-18353-7.

In her book, *Kant Trouble*, Diane Morgan sets out to show readers that there is much more to Kant's work than meets the eye of most traditional Kant scholars. Her book draws upon a wide range of Kant's texts -- some of them still not available in English translation. Morgan explicitly rejects the standard ways of assessing Kant's work in terms of the pre-critical, critical, and post-critical phases, treating all of Kant's work with the same respect. She thereby breaks with the tendency of some Kant scholars to judge the "critical" work as representative of Kant's most important contribution to philosophy, while looking down upon the "pre-critical" work as immature and dismissing some of the post-critical work (most notably the work on anthropology) as "the late work of a senile old man" (x).

Morgan has produced a most unconventional and eclectic study of Kant's work, a study in which freemasonry, landscape gardening, Egyptians, and architecture are used to frame a set of problems surrounding Kant's attempt to develop an architectonic of reason. Morgan addresses problems facing Kant's vision of his system by using conceptual tools from philosophy, architecture, and literary and cultural studies. The result is an intensive, comparative study of Kant's thought. The significance of Kant's metaphors, of marginal interest to philosophers, is boldly placed at the center of Morgan's study. Even the way Morgan has organized her book is unconventional. The book has a very long introduction that is followed by four rather short chapters and a conclusion.

Morgan's rejection of standard approaches to Kant's work is part of her general aim to "obscure the Kantian Enlightenment", in other words, the book does not seek to clarify Kant, but to complicate his work (47). Morgan finds limitations in most readings of Kant, calling Nietzsche's reading "disappointingly flat" (63, note 90). The unconventional reading of Kant that Morgan offers is far from flat. The Kant that attracts Morgan is the same one that caused Kleist's Kant crisis, and this Kant, Morgan tells us, is far from being the figure "whose movements were so regular that people set their watches by him and whose philosophy aims at all costs to establish domestic security" (x). Morgan's study reveals Kant's dangerous side, and therewith sheds light on areas of his thought that have not been widely explored by scholars. Yet, Morgan is sometimes interested to a fault in uncovering the racy, exciting dimensions of Kant's work, while neglecting the careful, detailed analysis that should accompany the original claims she makes.

Morgan uses the themes of freemasonry, Egypt, landscape gardening, and architecture as devices to lead us to the problems and shadows of Kant's thought. She tells us that:

[these themes] will not illuminate the shadowy areas of Kantian philosophy, but will

rather reveal not only how obscurity is to some extent necessarily inscribed in his systematic but also how he himself goes some way towards theorizing the destabilising effects that they provoke. This will provide us with a shaky basis for advocating Kant as a philosopher who means Big Trouble for settled ways of thinking (56).

Given that Morgan eschews illumination and clarity in the stated goals of her approach and aims, what can the reader expect of her book? Certainly, one can at the very least expect Morgan to shed light upon the reasons why Kant can be advocated as a philosopher who means Big Trouble for settled ways of thinking, and to accomplish this, she will have to provide some account of what these settled ways of thinking are and what sort of Big Trouble Kant poses to them.

The settled ways of thinking to which Morgan refers turn out to have everything to do with foundations and the philosopher's traditional penchant for establishing them. What Morgan seeks to show is that there is plenty of evidence in Kant's work to support the claim that he did not shy away from unstable foundations. Morgan is a creative reader of Kant's works and her discussion is, in many ways, a playful presentation of how Kant's use of certain central terms enables him to challenge "settled ways of thinking" and to permit "residual, mysterious blind spots, which human reason cannot fathom" (213). Put another way, Kant does not need sticks and stones to break the solid bones of the Enlightenment, words do that for him. Morgan wants us to see that the blind spots she uncovers in Kant's work, "[facilitate] and [render] necessary political and ethical projects but also [undermine] the very foundations of such projects" (213). The central way in which she explores these blind spots is through an analysis of three terms that frequently arise in Kant's attempts to establish an origin for the juridico-ethical community: 'groping' [*herumtappen*], 'affinities' [*Verwandtschaften*], and 'dissimulation' [*Verstellung*].

In Chapter 1, Morgan spends much time exploring Kant's use of the term 'herumtappen' or groping. In the eyes of Western thinkers who privilege the Greek culture far and above the Egyptian one, the path of science laid out by the Egyptians never gets beyond a "groping stage". Morgan analyzes the rejection of Egyptian culture in terms of a general rejection of the nomadic way of life, a life without roots or foundations. Morgan does an admirable job of relating her discussion of Egypt to Kant's use of metaphors in the Introduction and Preface of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The presence of the "plodding and groping Egyptians" in the first *Critique* is related to the problem of establishing a foundation not just within the context of the *Critique*, but within a far wider social context, that of the Law. Morgan makes this connection in order to show that what is being unsettled in Kant's thought has repercussions for far more than just the arguments of the *Critique*: the very foundations of human society are shown to rest on shaky ground.

In Chapters 2 and 3, Morgan continues to press her argument that Kant's "enlightened" thought is not as sunny as it is commonly believed to be. In these two chapters, Morgan reads Kant through the lens of the German term 'Verwandtschaft' or affinity. The affinities she is most interested in are those between organic and inorganic material and of the corresponding organic and mechanical forces that determine the relations between them. According to Morgan, 'Verwandtschaften', "fail to respect limits" [t]hey problematise the very idea of limits by revealing them as ill-founded, artificial distinctions" (162). In showing the important role that affinities play in Kant's system, Morgan seeks to show that within his system, key distinctions breakdown and uncertainty permeates Kant's critical project. According to Morgan, "[a]ffinities problematise limits,

distinctions and boundaries"(159), and Kant's philosophy rests upon affinities, putting at risk his critical project, which is defined in terms of the limits it is able to set down. Morgan analyzes Kant's references to 'affinities' to lend more support to her "obscurest" portrait of Kant.

The picture darkens further still in the final chapter of the book. In Chapter 4 Morgan presents another "blind spot" of Kant's work, and this blind spot is perhaps the most disturbing one of all. Radical evil is a "devilish dissimulation" of human nature, it is "an original propensity to evil in human beings" (160); it is an evil so anchored in human nature that it can ruin the very foundations of moral maxims. According to Morgan, the concept of radical evil casts doubt upon the nature of human beings to such an extent that it thwarts "attempts to use the human subject as a dependable building block for a systematic philosophy" (162). She claims that "the exploration of the term 'radical evil' opens up an abyss within human nature into which certainty tumbles, together with all claims to be able to erect a secure system based on knowable principles" (160).

The term that guides Morgan's discussion of radical evil is '*Verstellung*', or dissimulation. Morgan makes much of the German prefix, 'Ver-', which she describes as "slippery" (210), a prefix that points to a sort of destabilizing force. By drawing attention to the strong presence of the term '*Verstellung*' in Kant's account of the moral law, Morgan tries to show that Kant was aware that we could never develop into perfectly autonomous, moral individuals (210), for all attempts to live up to the moral law necessarily involve a sort of slippery move of dissimulation.

In her voyage to uncover some of the shadows lurking behind Kant's Enlightenment project, it seems somewhat surprising that Morgan presents no analysis of the Early-German Romantics and their attempt to reveal some of the areas left cloudy by the Enlightenment. They were, after all, the first generation of Kant readers and the first to uncover some of the same problems that she addresses. Perhaps she ignores them, because she does not see them as philosophers. When mention is made of Novalis, he is characterized as a "Romantic poet" (193) and not as a philosopher. Given the agility that Morgan shows in her reading not just of Kant, but of several of his contemporaries (Hamann, Herder, Hegel, Rousseau, etc.) as well as a host of contemporary thinkers, one wonders why she would have turned a blind eye to the Romantics -- the problem of establishing foundations was a theme that guided much of their work.

Upon deeper reflection, however, one sees that it is just as well that Morgan leaves Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, Hölderlin and other members of the Early-German Romantic movement out of her discussion, for they, after all, worked to show not that our foundations were shaky, but that all foundations were provisional, subject to change and improvement, a thesis at once more radical and more reasonable than the "shaky ground" thesis that guides Morgan's study. The contemporary figures Morgan relies upon to present her reading of Kant are Deleuze, Derrida, and Lyotard. Her reading of Kant falls squarely in the tradition of post-modern, deconstructionist thought. One wonders, at the end of the study, whether Morgan's "complicating" reading of Kant has cast Kant in a new, darker light or created an entirely new, post-modern version of him. Either way, the book offers many provocative, original insights concerning Kant's work.

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