

Michael Olson on Colin McQuillan's "The Very Idea of a Critique of Pure Reason"

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COLIN MCQUILLAN | *Immanuel Kant: The Very Idea of a Critique of Pure Reason* | Northwestern University Press 2016

By Michael J. Olson

McQuillan's *Immanuel Kant: The Very Idea of a Critique of Pure Reason* brings together a raft of eighteenth-century sources with the aim of fleshing out the historical and conceptual lineaments of one of the central concepts of Kantian philosophy: critique. The driving purpose behind this study is to establish that Kant's critical philosophy is misrepresented when we reduce it to a criticism of transcendent or dogmatic metaphysics. Kant's interest in establishing a proper method for metaphysics spans the Critical turn of the 1770s, McQuillan argues, and developing a clearer understanding of just what Kant meant by 'critique' bears this claim out.

The protean concept of critique has a history that long predates Kant and that continues to shift in response to philosophical, political and aesthetic conditions today. The historical and disciplinary variations in the aims, objects and methods of critique threaten to hollow out any substance that might link its many specific, local meanings. In his 1978 lecture 'What is Critique?' Foucault indicates just how diffuse a general concept of critique becomes when one tries to draw together its many strands:

[B]etween the lofty Kantian enterprise and the small polemico-professional activities that bear the name 'critique', there was in the modern West (dating roughly from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century) a certain manner of thinking, of speaking, of otherwise acting, and a certain relation to what exists, to what one knows, to what one does, as well as a relation to society, to culture, to others, and all this one might name the 'critical attitude'.
(Foucault 1996:382)^[1]

Even if we limit ourselves to specifying the nature of critique in "the lofty Kantian enterprise", we face some serious difficulties. Critique is a concept so central to Kant's writings in the 1780s and 1790s that neither Kant himself nor his commentators take much time to define it. Though we might vaguely associate

Kantian critique with the criticism of metaphysics, or an effort to overcome scepticism and dogmatism, or the project of grounding the natural sciences—these are all conceptions of critique McQuillan dismisses as plainly inconsistent with the relevant texts—we struggle to articulate what exactly Kantian critique is. McQuillan's admirably clear monograph aims to correct this deficiency. After briefly outlining his analysis, I shall raise a question about one of McQuillan's core methodological decisions and suggest how alternative decisions might lead to different conclusions.

Extracting a Definition

The intuitive point of departure for a reconstruction of what 'critique' means in the Kantian philosophy is a survey of how the concept functioned in the eighteenth century more broadly. That is just how McQuillan begins: by considering what critique meant in the context of early modern philology, literary criticism, aesthetics and taste, as well as logic. While none of these pursuits provides a definitive historical model for Kantian critique, McQuillan finds a common feature in these fields that sheds light on Kant's use of the term. Although we might expect an examination of these forms of criticism to issue in a predominately negative sense of the term, he shows that in each of these areas critique is a deeply ambivalent activity. An early modern literary critic was in general equally concerned with identifying elements of beauty and elegance as with picking out moments of weakness or fault. In logic too critique was not conceived solely in terms of the identification and correction of mistakes, but also as the cultivation of a pragmatic and useful capacity for judgement. This ambivalence echoes that of Kant's own critique of metaphysics, which targets one sense of metaphysics while seeking to ground another. Thus McQuillan finds in this historical survey of the meaning of critique a reminder not to mistake Kant's direct criticisms of metaphysics for a more generally negative tenor in his conception of critique.

Chapters 2 and 3 consider Kant's attitude toward metaphysics and the question of how this changes during the 1770s. McQuillan's conclusion, as I have already indicated, is that the Critical turn does not usher in a rejection of metaphysics. On the contrary, we read that throughout his life "Kant remained committed to the idea that metaphysics must begin with a critique" (p. 95). Already in his essay for the Prussian Academy's 1763 essay contest (the *Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality*), Kant exhibits keen interest in establishing a novel and reliable method in metaphysics. The confidence and visibility this essay earned for Kant encouraged him to pursue his methodological investigations. This pursuit finds both positive and negative expression in a way that reinforces the theme established in Chapter 1. We know about the positive though ultimately abandoned dimension of this project, a "*Proper Method for Metaphysics*", through Kant's correspondence with Lambert

in late 1765 (Br, AA 10:51, 54–7; see also NEV, AA 2:308). The negative expression of the project, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (1766), seizes on the deluded, visionary results that follow from improper method. However, Kant's negative judgement of Swedenborg should not, McQuillan argues, blind us to his positive and contemporary aspirations to rehabilitate metaphysics with a new method.

Chapter 3 focuses on the emergence of Kant's Critical philosophy in the 1770s, particularly on the famous letter to Herz of February 1772 in which Kant first mentions the critique of pure reason he plans to publish shortly. Kant planned to expand and refine the arguments of his 1770 Inaugural Dissertation into another work that never materialised, "The Bounds of Sensibility and of Reason" (Br, AA 10:123). McQuillan argues that Kant came to see the shortcomings of the Dissertation and the plan for *The Bounds* following Herz's visit to Königsberg and that the February 1772 letter to Herz announces a shift in Kant's understanding of the proper methods of metaphysics. The focus is no longer on how to distinguish and separate sensible and intellectual cognitions (as it was in the Dissertation), but instead on how to explain the possibility that intellectual representations might refer to objects without being affected by them. It is a question, in short, of establishing a connection rather than policing a boundary. Since "[i]t is simply beyond the scope of an account of the 'bounds' (*Grenzen*) of sensibility and reason to explain how a valid relation between intellectual representation and its objects is constituted" (p. 93), the project of the Dissertation and *The Bounds* gives way in 1772 to a new project, which Kant now describes with the phrase "critique of pure reason" (Br, AA 10:132). Chapters 4 and 5 turn to the published texts of the 1780s and 1790s to backfill what exactly Kant took such a critique to involve.

On the argument of the first half of the book, neither the wider historical context nor Kant's own intellectual biography provides a definitive response to the question of just what critique means in the Critical philosophy. McQuillan accordingly turns to the Critical writings themselves in order to extract a definition of critique that reflects and finds support in the historical studies of the first three chapters. By way of methodological summary, he writes:

Because he never published an essay called 'An Answer to the Question: What is a Critique of Pure Reason' we are forced to look at the definitions of a critique of pure reason that Kant provides in the work bearing that title, if we want to understand what Kant's critique is and why he thought it was the only way to set metaphysics on the sure path of a science. (p. 169)

Elsewhere, McQuillan emphasises the importance of “programmatically” statements for reconstructing the meaning of this central concept (pp. 8, 36). I shall return to this topic below. Kant’s most direct explanations and descriptions of critique are concentrated, not surprisingly, in the Prefaces and Introductions of the first two editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

McQuillan extracts from these texts four primary explanations of critique and then unpacks how each one expands, delimits, or sharpens some element of the others. The first two explanations come from the A-Preface. The first identifies critique with a legal court whose conclusions are grounded in universal principles and contrasts this feature with the groundless caprice of sovereign decrees (Axi–xii). The second explanation of critique, McQuillan highlights, immediately follows the first in the A-Preface:

Yet by this I do not understand a critique of books and systems, but a critique of the faculty of reason in general, in respect of all the cognitions after which reason might strive **independently of all experience**. (Axi)

Together these two descriptions make clear that critique is centrally concerned with grounding the legitimacy of claims to extend cognition beyond experience and so to secure the claims of metaphysics against its many detractors. The third explanation of critique, drawn from the famous ‘Copernican revolution’ passages of the B-Preface, links critique to a transformed method in metaphysics, a method that follows the lead of geometry and natural science. “Just as mathematics constructs its objects in pure intuition and natural science formulates the principles that guide its experiments”, McQuillan writes, with the help of critique we recognise that “metaphysics generates for itself the *a priori* principles that make experience possible” (p. 128). Critique, in short, can establish metaphysics as a science by seizing upon a characteristic feature of the natural sciences, namely that they “comprehended that reason has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design” (Bxiii).

That critique lays only the foundations of a finally scientific metaphysics is established by the fourth and final description of critique McQuillan mentions. This explanation of what Kant means by critique is found in the Introduction to the *Critique*. Here, Kant restricts the ambitions of his project to “the mere estimation of pure reason, of its sources and its boundaries” (A11/B25) such that “[t]he critique of pure reason is only the idea, the method and the outline of transcendental philosophy” (p. 170). Drawing these four programmatic statements together, McQuillan concludes that “they suggest that Kant thought his critique would [1] secure reason’s rightful claims; [2] demonstrate the possibility of metaphysics; [3] provide metaphysics with a new and better

method; and [4] pave the way for a complete system of transcendental philosophy" (p. 178). This is the heart of McQuillan's reconstruction of Kantian critique.

In the final chapter, McQuillan examines how Kant defended this conception of critique against its detractors, in part by calling attention to four distinct benefits he took it to provide. The first benefit is negative: by establishing the necessary conditions of cognition in general, Kantian critique establishes the impossibility of a speculative metaphysics that extends beyond the realm of possible experience. Recalling the conclusion of the first chapter, however, we are reminded that this negative result is accompanied by a range of positive contributions. The limits placed on the sphere of cognition famously claim to preserve enough space for human freedom and morality. In the realm of theoretical philosophy, the negative account of the limits of experience is of course inseparable from Kant's positive account of the ideality of space and time, the objective validity of the categories, and the a priori principles of pure reason.

A Methodological Decision

As we saw above, given the lack of any definitive historical source for Kant's understanding of critique and given moreover the absence of any single clear exposition of the concept in his own writing, "we are forced" (p. 169), McQuillan argues, to fall back on the programmatic remarks about critique found primarily in the Prefaces and Introductions to the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Though these remarks must certainly be a prominent component of any analysis of Kant's understanding of critique, placing as much emphasis on them as McQuillan does impacts the conclusions he reaches.

At the end of Chapter 5, which details Kant's explanations of the benefits of critique, McQuillan briefly laments the way we often overlook Kant's role in 'the historical turn' in German philosophy. Though Hegel, for example, more directly presents his own position as the culmination of the historical development of philosophy in general, Kant makes similar claims for his Critical philosophy. In fact, McQuillan reminds us, Kant trumpets critique's unique ability to resolve the incessant metaphysical disputes that characterise the history of philosophy as one of the signal benefits that recommend his system. Nonetheless, since Hegel succeeded Kant, Hegel's culmination supersedes Kant's and the prominent historical rhetoric of the former obscures its debts to Kant's own reflections on the relation of history and philosophy.

This is admittedly a very minor point in the development of McQuillan's argument, and my interest is not in revisiting the complicated historical and conceptual relations between Kant and the German idealism of the early

nineteenth century. McQuillan's summary diagnosis of the source of our tendency to overlook Kant's reflections on the relation between history and critique suggests a methodological question that cuts to the heart of his treatment of Kant's Critical philosophy. McQuillan writes:

It is unfortunate that so many historians of philosophy have taken these philosophers [Fichte, Schelling and Hegel] at their word, because the force of their historical claims has tended to obscure the nature of their contributions to philosophy. (p. 165)

How philosophers describe their own work, McQuillan intimates, can obscure the historical record. This might make us wary, at least in principle, of relying on programmatic statements, which seem as a genre to oversell a work's novelty, clarity, and elegance. Our unease with such statements would be buttressed if there were instances in which Kant's own programmatic statements misrepresented the texts they ostensibly summarise or introduce. Though there are certainly others, I shall briefly address three such cases spanning the 1770s, 1780s, and 1790s.

The first example is the least problematic, but it establishes a pattern that is amplified in time. Readers of the Inaugural Dissertation will recall the uncomfortable fit between the first section of the text and the remaining four sections. As McQuillan observes, the guiding ideas of the Dissertation that the reader expects to be based on the first section of that text are scarcely touched upon in the sections that follow. He writes:

Unfortunately, the outline Kant presents in the first section of the dissertation is not really an accurate guide to its contents. Kant does discuss the concept of a world, explaining its matter, form, and completeness. [...] However, Kant's remarks about the concept of world are less central to his dissertation than another problem, with which he seems to have been more deeply concerned: the distinction between sensible and intellectual cognition. (pp. 70–1)

Though Kant does not misrepresent the content of the Dissertation in its first section, we can learn something from the puzzlingly clumsy organisation of that text. A reader typically expects the material introduced in the early sections of a text to anticipate and foreshadow the eventual development of those concepts and arguments in later sections of the text. Though entirely innocent, the organisation of the Dissertation illustrates that Kant does not reliably fulfil this expectation.

If we turn our attention to the height of the Critical period, we find a less innocent instance in which Kant's formal or programmatic indications of what the reader will find in a published text misrepresent that text's real contents. In the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant offers a customary summary of the changes introduced in the new edition. He writes:

I have found nothing to alter either in the propositions themselves or in their grounds of proof, or in the form and completeness of the book's plan; [...] Yet in the **presentation** there is still much to do, and here is where I have attempted to make improvements in this edition [...]. (Bxxxvii-xxxviii; emphasis original)

Most readers will not accept that the differences between the A- and B-Deductions can be chalked up to "revisions of the mode of presentation" (Bxxxviii); quite the contrary. McQuillan observes that "[b]ecause Kant placed such great emphasis on the 'Deduction', many regard the changes he made to its central arguments in the second (B) edition as the key to understanding the first *Critique*" (p. 97). Even if a charitable reading of Kant's claim that the real differences between the two editions of the *Critique* are merely superficial allows us to overlook this case, a final example makes the capacity of Kant's programmatic statements about the Critical philosophy to misrepresent historical reality plain.

In response to a review suggesting that Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* finally brings the critique of pure reason to completion, Kant issues a blunt criticism of Fichtean philosophy. After calling Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* a "totally indefensible system" comprising "fruitless sophistries" (Br, AA 12:370), Kant remarks on the systematic completion of the critique of pure reason as he articulated it. Kant writes:

The critical philosophy must remain confident of its irresistible propensity to satisfy the theoretical as well as the moral, practical purposes of reason, confident that **no change of opinions, no touching up or reconstruction into some other form**, is in store for it; the system of the Critique rests on a fully secured foundation, established forever. (Br, AA 12:371; boldface added).

Kant wrote this in August of 1799. During this same time, he was also writing the notes we now know as *Übergang* 1–14 from the *Opus postumum*, which struggle to resolve the principles of a "Transition from the metaphysical foundations of natural science to physics". This project was closely connected with a gap he reports having discovered in the Critical *Lehrgebäude*, which only the previous

autumn Kant described as causing in him "a pain like that of Tantalus" (Br, AA 12:257). Though dating his working notes from this period presents some difficulties, there is little doubt that Kant fails to articulate the principles of the 'transition' project to his own satisfaction in the notes of May–August 1799. Given that, and in light of the systematic importance he grants this project for the critique of reason more generally, we can only conclude that Kant's programmatic assertion of the prior completion of his system in the "Declaration" concerning Fichte wilfully misrepresents his understanding of the nature and structure of a critique of reason in the summer of 1799. If the aether proofs he was sketching at the time do not imply a "change of opinions, [...] touching up or reconstruction into some other form", it is hard to imagine what would.

These three examples cast some doubt on whether what Kant says about his work reliably tracks what that work says for itself. There are instances in which rhetorical interests apparently outweigh the interest of accurately describing the nuances of one's position. Since we should expect these instances to align fairly closely with the programmatic remarks McQuillan's interpretation emphasises, we should ask what effect this interpretive decision has on the account he provides. We might wonder how well Kant's efforts in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Critique of Judgement* harmonise with the definitions and explanations of critique offered in the parerga of the First *Critique*.

As we indicated above, one of the highest broadest conclusions McQuillan draws from his study of the notion of critique is that Kant's Critical and pre-Critical writings are more continuous than many have been prepared to accept. What separates the Critical from the pre-Critical writings is not Kant's attitude toward metaphysics, McQuillan argues, but the discovery of a new approach to long-standing problems (pp. 6–8). McQuillan's interpretation implies that Kant had a more or less unified and stable conception of critique already in mind by early 1772 (pp. 77–85). This implication is reinforced when, in the closing lines of the text, McQuillan observes "that there are more conceptions of critique at play in German philosophy than *the one associated with Kant*" (p. 178; emphasis added). To what degree is the idea that there is in Kant *one* sense of the meaning and method of critique, one might ask, a product of McQuillan's interpretive decision to focus on programmatic explanations drawn largely from prefaces and introductions? And if the unity and stability of Kant's conception of critique is at least in part a function of emphasising these passages over others, what pressure does this place on McQuillan's broader claim about the continuity of Kant's commitment to the viability of metaphysics? Where do the developments in Kant's thinking through the 1780s and 1790s contest or challenge the conception of critique that McQuillan sees at work already in the

1770s? Does Kant's increasing interest in the problem of establishing the systematic unity of scientific knowledge of the natural world in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786) and in the 'transition' project of the *Opus postumum*, for example, present any resistance to McQuillan's rejection of the idea that critique aims to ground the natural sciences (p. 2)? Indeed what does this development indicate about Kant's long-standing interest in the relation between metaphysics and the natural sciences?

McQuillan oversells the necessity of his interpretive decision to focus on programmatic texts when he says that "we are forced" by the indeterminacy of contextual evidence to turn to Kant's programmatic explanations of critique. There are certainly other options available. One could, for instance, allow Kant's general remarks about the nature of critique to recede into the background in order to highlight the fruits this new method bears when applied to specific questions. McQuillan's discussion of the novelty of Kantian critique in relation to Eberhard's claims that Kant's most valuable contributions had all previously been made by Leibniz invites this kind of focused treatment of the details (pp. 150–61). Eberhard's claim rests largely on the similarity between elements of Leibnizian philosophy and Kantian critique when the latter is viewed from the programmatic level. Kant's response, which goes so far as to suggest that his critique is "the true apology for Leibniz" (p. 159; ÜE, AA 8:250), turns on the detail of how his Critical method is applied to specific philosophical issues: the nature of appearance, space, etc. Not only would such an approach help to flesh out the programmatic explanations McQuillan favours, it would also enable us to compare the ways Kant deploys the critical method in relation to specific problems with his more general programmatic remarks about the aims, principles, and benefits of such a method.

Another interpretative strategy one might adopt would be to compare Kant's conception of critique with his conception of closely related ideas that have received greater scholarly attention. There has, for example, been plenty of scholarly attention to Kant's debt to the medieval and early modern history of the idea of the transcendental (Hinske 1970; Angelelli 1972; Doyle 1997), which might help us gain additional purchase on his understanding of critique. Indeed McQuillan provides an opening for this approach when he contrasts the propaedeutic nature of critique in relation to the full system of transcendental philosophy in Chapter 4 (pp. 128–31). Kant's willingness to call his position critical idealism rather than transcendental idealism in order to allay confusion among his readers (Prol, AA 4:293) signals the proximity of these concepts. Were one to pursue this connection, the historical antecedents for Kantian

philosophy would shift away from literature, philology and art, and onto scholastic metaphysics. It would be very interesting to see how such an analysis might dovetail with or contest elements of McQuillan's interpretation.

In any case, all analyses are guided by interpretive decisions that bring some aspects of the subject into relief while obscuring others. To pursue the alternatives and questions posed here would certainly muddy the waters McQuillan does much to clarify. He should be commended for foregrounding the methodological choices that guide his analysis. The exceptionally clear exposition of Kant's understanding of the aims, methods and utility of critique is in large measure a consequence of these choices and it makes a valuable and accessible contribution to efforts the come to grips with the Kantian articulation of one of the central concepts of modern philosophy. Indeed, future research into how Kant's conception of critique shifts and creaks during the nearly two decades of work following the first publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* will benefit from McQuillan's foundational analysis. The criticisms offered here should accordingly be taken as an indication of this book's ability to spur its readers to engage again with a concept so central to Kantian philosophy we too often overlook it entirely.

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Notes:

[1] See also von Bormann et al. (1976). ↩

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