

***The Fiery Test of Critique: A Reading of Kant's Dialectic***, by Ian Proops. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, 486 pp. ISBN 13: 9780199656042 hb £80

While the first part of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, i.e., the Analytic, has been subject to a vast number of interpretations, the second part of the work, i.e., the Dialectic, has received far less attention. Proops' choice of focus on the latter is therefore in itself a welcoming enrichment to Kant scholarship. But his choice of topic is certainly not the only laudable fact about this book. In my view it is for several reasons a masterpiece. First, the scope of Proops' approach is admirable. He offers a reading of almost all of the Dialectic and most of the time he does not shy away from apparently hopelessly vague and confusing passages that would have been very tempting to skip. Second, Proops draws on an impressive breadth of philosophical material. He not only engages with most of Kant's corpus and a number of other Kant scholars, he is also very well read in the historically relevant texts and brings to light Kant's engagement with and reactions to his predecessors. Third, Proops manages to use the tools of contemporary analytic philosophy in a way that sharpens and clarifies Kant's reasoning without reducing his originality. This brings me to the fourth point. The book is a remarkably lucid read. Proops has put a lot of effort into defining his terms and explaining his choice of concepts, which I found by and large very helpful. Kant's texts are hard enough and one really should not have to spend time trying to understand what the interpreter wants to argue, which alas happens far too often in Kant scholarship. Before I present some of my more critical remarks and questions to the book, let me give a brief presentation of its aims and content.

In the Introduction Proops outlines no less than six goals (3-7). The first and most obvious goal is to scrutinize Kant's critique of speculative metaphysics as presented in the Dialectic. The second goal is to argue that despite his critique, Kant 'nonetheless endorses certain

theoretically grounded arguments concerning the supersensible' (4). Such 'doctrinal beliefs' include (as a minimum) beliefs in a human afterlife and a god. This implies that Kant is not simply arguing against speculative metaphysics as such, but against certain brands of it which Proops dubs *dogmatism*. This leads naturally to a third goal, namely to survey and understand the philosophical terrain within which Kant's philosophy is situated. A fourth goal of the book is to understand Kant's famous claim: 'I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith' (B xxx). The fifth goal is to argue that Kant's notion of 'critique' covers not only an investigation of the limits of our ability to acquire a priori knowledge but also a test for 'separating the wheat of good speculative metaphysics from the chaff of the bad' (7). One of several original moves in this book is Proops' attempt to argue for this reading by carefully analyzing Kant's metaphor of the *fiery test*. According to Proops Kant is not alluding to the medieval tradition of proving someone's guilt by subjecting them to fire and observing subsequent burns. Rather the test in question is the cupellation test known from metallurgy. In such a test one can check the content of precious metals in a sample (e.g., a coin) by burning it in a furnace in the presence of a lead catalyst. At the end of this process, one might find nuggets of e.g., gold and silver (10). Proop's idea then, is that the practice of critique tests speculative metaphysics in a similar way. By subjecting its proofs to the fire of philosophical scrutiny one need not discard their whole content but can keep their "nuggets" of philosophical value. The sixth and final goal of the book is to get a better understanding of Kant's methodological self-conception. Proops argues that Kant's self-acclaimed 'skeptical method' is closest to his (idiosyncratic) understanding of Pyrrho according to which one slowly and gradually reaches certainty about a disputed matter, albeit only by introducing subtle changes in the original dispute.

These six goals are not pursued in independent chapters. Proops' approach is instead to work through the order of the Dialectic and scrutinize the arguments (goal one), partly with the aid of insight into Kant's 'interlocutors' (goal three) and his methodological self-conceptions (goal six). In doing so Proops develops his original reading of Kant as being more positive to speculative metaphysics than many other influential interpretations allow for (goal two, four and five).

The book falls into three main parts. The theme of the first part (39-203) is rational psychology. Before Proops' thorough treatment of the paralogisms (Ch. 3-8) we find two more introductory chapters. The first deals with transcendental illusion. It may seem a bit odd to discuss this under the heading of *Rational Psychology*. I surmise however that Proops finds it fitting because i) according to his reading rational psychology is only to be rejected if it collapses into dogmatism and ii) transcendental illusion pertains to a faculty of the mind, namely reason, and must therefore be an object of psychology. The second chapter offers a reading of the distinction between empirical and rational psychology in Kant and his forerunners. The next six chapters are devoted to in depth discussions of the two versions of the four paralogistic inferences about the soul.

The second part of the book (209-336) is devoted to a discussion of the antinomies and falls into five chapters (Ch. 9-13). The main take in Proops' reading of the mathematical antinomies is that Kant attempts to show that on the assumption that transcendental realism is true the respective pairs of inferences lead to contradictions. If this line of argument had worked, and Proops is clear that it doesn't (244), the mathematical antinomies would have been perfectly suited for the indirect argument for transcendental idealism. Proops' reading (250-255) brings out number of relevant points that are often overlooked such as Kant's

theory of infinite judgment and his limitation of the validity of the apagogic method in transcendental philosophy (see also Serck-Hanssen, 2019).

Proops claims, and I think correctly, that also the dynamical antinomies are supposed to provide us with an indirect argument for transcendental idealism. But whereas in the mathematical antinomies the realist's mistake is to take appearances to be things in themselves, the mistake involved in the dynamical antinomies is to take things in themselves (freedom or a necessary being) to be in time and hence appearances (305). The third antinomy is given the most extensive treatment (277-317). This is a reasonable choice since it is here Kant makes the first crucial move towards his theory of freedom. Just what he takes himself to establish in the resolution of this antimony is much debated. Proops argues for a minimalist reading according to which it is not shown that transcendental freedom is even logically possible but only that *for all we know* both the thesis and the antithesis *can* be true (279-81). However, since neither the reality nor the consistency of 'transcendental freedom' is established by the reasoning of the third antinomy, it is still possible that both cannot be true. In the rest of the chapter Proops deals with Kant's many conceptions of freedom and causality in his metaphysical and practical writings. We also find a very helpful discussion of how to place Kant in the more current debate between compatibilists and libertarians.

The third and last part of the book (337-462) contains three chapters (Ch.14-16) devoted to a detailed analysis of each of the arguments of the Ideal, i.e., the ontological, the cosmological and physico-theological argument. Here Proops attempts to explain why Kant takes the two latter to depend on the former (fallacious) argument. Proops also takes seriously and develops the idea that although defective as a dogmatic argument, there are some kernels of truth in the

physico-theological argument which allow us to reach a doctrinal belief in an Author of nature (419-21).

In the second to last chapter (ch.17) Proops' discusses the Appendix and tries to make sense of Kant's rather opaque and confusing claims about the regulative use of reason. Compared to Proops' stamina when approaching many of the other difficult parts of the *Dialectic* it is a bit surprising to find that he gives up trying to make sense of the idea of the world (426) and only to some extent manages to explain Kant's point with respect to the idea of the soul. I also find Proop's disappointingly rash when dispensing with a careful interpreter like Willaschek in a footnote with the remark 'I cannot follow him' (422n). This is all the more unfortunate as one of the few topics that is left partly unexplained in Proop's otherwise comprehensive study is the metaphysical deduction of the ideas. Let me now turn to a few other critical comments and challenges.

If Proops is correct, therapeutical interpretations of the *Dialectic* (e.g., Grier 2001, Allison 2004; Bird 2006) overlook Kant's deep commitment to (theoretical) metaphysical claims about our afterlife and God as they believe that Kant's aim in the *Dialectic* (if we disregard the Appendix) is only to warn us against illusions and fallacies that we strictly speaking should have been vaccinated against already in the *Analytic*. This does not mean that Proops fails to take seriously what Kant says about the illusory ingredients of speculative metaphysics. As already noted, the first chapter of the book is devoted to a discussion of this intriguing part of the *Dialectic*. Most of the chapter offers an elaboration of Grier's reading of transcendental illusion. The chapter ends somewhat surprisingly however by Proops suggesting that according to Kant's most streamlined account 'the content of transcendental illusion is equivalent to transcendental realism' (53). This surely fits with some of the central

features of transcendental illusion. Most obviously, to the transcendental realist time and space, which are merely subjective (transcendentally speaking) appear to be objective i.e., properties of things in themselves or themselves such things. But other points are more difficult to accommodate. Let me here just mention two worries. First, this reading does not appear to be very helpful when it comes to interpreting the paralogisms and pin down the illusion involved in these fallacious inferences. Although I disagree with several of the details of her argument, I think that one of the virtues of Grier's interpretation is precisely that she offers a reading of transcendental illusion that appears to fit with the way Kant attempts to deal with all three types of dialectical inferences.

Second, according to Kant transcendental illusion is unavoidable and necessary. This sounds odd if transcendental illusion is equivalent (even if only partly or sometimes, cf. 460) to transcendental realism. For although Kant believes that it is quite natural to be a transcendental realist, he arguably also believes that this attitude can be overcome. To me it seems at the least very unlikely that Kant would say of himself that even though he is a convinced transcendental idealist, he nevertheless cannot avoid that space and time "appears" to him as (transcendentally speaking) things in themselves. And although Proops discusses and eventually rejects the cogency of Kant's claims concerning the necessary and unavoidable status of transcendental illusion (53-54) he never suggests that Kant does not mean what he says.

My second point concerns chapter two. Here Proops first offers an insightful reading of how the distinction between empirical and rational psychology is conceived in works preceding the first *Critique*, namely in writings of Wolff, Baumgarten, Gottsched, Meier and finally but most importantly, the pre-critical Kant (*Metaphysics* L1, 1777-80). For the latter rational

psychology can establish a priori, i.e., from the concept of the I, that the soul is a single and simple substance that will exist at all future times (76). At the time of the first *Critique* Kant has however landed on the position that the 'I' (of rational psychology) is not an empirical concept. In the rest of the chapter Proops attempts to interpret Kant's new position, to wit that the 'I' is a purely intellectual concept (B 422 note).

Kant's claims are very hard to grasp and Proops manages to make good sense of most of them. I think he is completely right in arguing that for Kant the 'I think', although it appears to involve the *experience* or intuition of an existent thinker, the empirical element is only due to the matter which must be given if thinking is to be actualized at all (84). I am however far less convinced by the claim that in addition 'Kant takes each of us to have an intellectual consciousness of our self-activity and existence' (84). First, as Proops notes, such a view does not sit well with Kant's official epistemology as it suggests that we can (per impossible) cognize our determining self. Second, Proops' reference to *Prolegomena* (§46, note, Ak 4: 334) does not do the trick. For although it is correct that Kant here replaces 'consciousness' with 'feeling' Kant's point about existence appears to be the same as the one in the famous note in the first *Critique* (B 422, note). The feeling of existence is the feeling of that 'to which all thinking *stands in relation*' (Prol. §46, note, my emphasis). I take this to be a feeling of that undetermined given matter against which any thought (as actualized) must stand as a condition. Admittedly, this still leaves us with the question of how to understand the term 'intellectual consciousness'. On my view, the intellectual consciousness Kant talks about in the two problematic passages Proops cites (Bx1; B 278) is the pure residue, what remains of the concept of I so to speak, when the critical philosopher has cleansed it from the (apparent) extra content on which it in fact rides piggy back. As the product of such a

philosophical amelioration, I find the term “intellectual consciousness” quite fitting and not all that mysterious.

My third point concerns Proops harsh remark (91) that Kant tells an outright lie when he claims that it is only the manner of exposition that is different in the two editions of the first *Critique*. According to Proops’s reading, as opposed to in the B-edition, the paralogisms in the A-edition do not involve equivocations (129). The latter are only sophisms (*sophisma ignoratio elenchi*) in that they purport to prove more than they in fact do, but not fallacies (*sophisma figurae dictionis*). Apart from wondering how this difference, if correct, could be an interesting example of Kant’s dishonesty, I must admit that I am not all that convinced. For instance, with respect to the first paralogism, if Proops had not allowed himself to assume that the word ‘determination’ in the major premise means the same as ‘predicate’ in the minor (127), the inference would have involved an ambiguity (albeit one only recognizable for a thinker with the appropriate critical tools). Its proponent would then have tried to establish the conclusion by using a major premise that states the conditions for something qualifying as a substance<sub>1</sub> (in Proops’ sense) while the minor subsumes the I under the condition of a substance<sub>0</sub>.

Before I end, let me say a few words about the results of the ‘fiery test’. In the last chapter of the book (ch.18) Proops summarizes his understanding of the fruits of Kant’s critical enterprise. Most importantly, he argues that ‘Kant regarded rational metaphysics as yielding two sorts of valuable residue when subjected to the fiery test of critique. The nugget of gold, which is contained within rational cosmology, is an indirect proof of Transcendental Idealism’ (453). Despite Proops’ meticulous and insightful interpretation, I am however not convinced that this is the right way of putting it. Rather than *containing* a proof it seems to me that rational cosmology for Kant works as a *catalyst* that prompts us to look for a



radically new solution. And indeed Proops himself seems to waiver between these two ways of talking as he also says that ‘speculative reason...*facilitates* the discovery of Transcendental Idealism.’(452, my emphasis). I believe that our disagreement at least in part hinges on the question of where to locate the kind of philosophy that Kant calls ‘critique’. Does it belong to speculative metaphysics or is it better conceived as a distinct rational discipline? Here I will have to leave this question unanswered.

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