



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Problems from Kant by James Van Cleve

Rae Langton

The Philosophical Review, Vol. 110, No. 3. (Jul., 2001), pp. 451-454.

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The Philosophical Review, Vol. 110, No. 3 (July 2001)

PROBLEMS FROM KANT. By JAMES VAN CLEVE. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Pp. xii, 340.

This book will be enjoyed not only by those philosophers interested in Kant, but by those interested in metaphysics and epistemology more generally. Van Cleve is fascinated both by Kant and by the problems that fascinated Kant; so in attending to Kant's arguments about space, substance, the a priori (for example), we learn much about space, substance, the a priori. He writes with directness, accessibility, and care; there can be few recent books on the problems of Kant's First *Critique* that treat so great a range of arguments with such seriousness and sophistication. (It is no accident they are often problems that the author himself has addressed effectively elsewhere).

As to the seriousness, Kant's central doctrines (about synthetic a priori truths, transcendental idealism, things in themselves) are confronted and evaluated, without the least attempt to dilute them. Van Cleve is a sympathetic interpreter, often finding himself on Kant's side: Kant is right about synthetic a priori truths; more surprisingly, he is right about things in themselves. And while Kant's transcendental idealism is ultimately to be rejected (not prettified), we should reject it only after looking it clear in the eye and acknowledging its centrality.

Clarity and rigor are among the book's notable virtues. There are commentators whose idea of doing Kant justice is to stay as close to him as possible; if Kant says "it follows from this ...," they too will loyally say "it follows from this ...," without suggesting how the "it" could possibly "follow." Van Cleve is, thankfully, not among them. Arguments are displayed in numbered premise-and-conclusion format (using formalism where appropriate), setting an enviable standard of precision for ongoing discussion, without unduly compromising readability. One is reminded of Bennett in some aspects of style (the rigor, the engagingly personal sense of one philosopher arguing with another) and content (phenomena as "logical constructions" of conscious states). There is an impressive knowledge of the contemporary English-language Kant literature; a wide-ranging ability to draw upon relevant work in contemporary philosophy on, for example, supervenience and antirealism; and enlightening use of other texts (e.g., the *Inaugural Dissertation* and the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*) and other figures (such as Leibniz, Lambert, Berkeley)—all of which make a book that is admirably comprehensive in scope.

An unusual feature is a section of tiny, self-contained appendices, on questions as diverse as whether something could be red and green all over; why Kant once argued from incongruent counterparts to absolute space; whether Kant's "synthesis" is a solution to the "binding problem" identified by

experimental psychologists. In their precision, originality, and brevity, these are gems of analysis, which would prove as useful for introducing students to these topics as for shedding light on Kant.

Disagreements of interpretation aside, my only complaint is that, in the course of one's journey through this expansive volume, one can occasionally lose sense of the overall narrative.

I take up one theme, the distinction between phenomena and things in themselves. According to van Cleve, it is a fundamentally idealist distinction:

Virtual vs. Real: Phenomena are virtual objects (logical constructions of conscious states), things in themselves are real objects.

On this distinction, we have a metaphysics of two worlds, two sorts of objects, virtual and real; and an epistemology that makes ignorance of things in themselves ignorance of the real.

I focus on one argument, of special interest to me because it draws on Kant's idea that the phenomenal realm is one of "*mere relations*"—an idea that has not typically been credited with the importance it merits. Van Cleve asks us to consider the following passage:

[E]verything in our knowledge which belongs to intuition ... contains nothing but mere relations; namely of locations in an intuition (extension), of change in location (motion), and of laws according to which this change is determined (moving forces). What it is that is present in this or that location, or what it is that is operative in the things themselves apart from change of location, is not given through intuition. Now a thing in itself cannot be known through mere relations; and we may therefore conclude that since outer sense gives us nothing but mere relations, this sense can contain in its representation only the relation of an object to the subject, and not the inner properties of the object in itself. (B67)

This suggests an interpretation of Kant's distinction that is not fundamentally idealist:

Relational vs. Intrinsic: Phenomena are the relational aspects of things which have (in themselves) an intrinsic nature.

(Similar passages from the Amphiboly, and elsewhere, suggest it, and I myself argue for it in detail elsewhere.)¹ On this distinction we have a metaphysics of one world with two classes of properties, relational and intrinsic, and an epistemology that says ignorance of things in themselves is not idealism, but epistemic humility:

what is denied to us is not any access whatever to these things, but only knowledge of their intrinsic or non-relational features. ... the phrase 'knowledge of things as they appear' contrasts not with 'knowledge of things as they *really* are' but with 'knowledge of things as they *intrinsically* are'. (150)

¹Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility: Our Ignorance of Things in Themselves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press, 1998).

We reach the Relational vs. Intrinsic interpretation, van Cleve says, if we interpret B67 epistemologically, like this (153):

Syllogism 1

1. All we know about objects through outer sense is what relations they stand in.
 2. To know how an object is in itself is to know how it is in nonrelational respects.
 3. Therefore, we do not know through outer sense how objects are in themselves.
- (153)

This commits Kant to one world of objects that have two classes of properties, relational and intrinsic, the latter unknown. (What of paradigm intrinsic properties, shape, solidity? Kant's answer is that such properties are ultimately relational—that bodies are constituted by (relational) forces of attraction and repulsion.)

But van Cleve rejects Syllogism 1, preferring instead the metaphysical

Syllogism 2

1. The only properties had by objects of outer sense are relational properties.
2. A thing in itself cannot have relational properties only.
3. Therefore, objects of outer sense are not things in themselves (but only appearances).

He takes Syllogism 2 to favor the Virtual vs. Real interpretation. Why? Chiefly (though there are more reasons) because he takes Kant to assume that *real* things must have intrinsic properties (2); given that bodies have no intrinsic properties (1), they are not real (3).

However, Syllogism 2 can be interpreted as entirely consistent with Syllogism 1: it states a metaphysical aspect of the Relational vs. Intrinsic distinction. Things in themselves must have intrinsic properties (2); given that bodies have no intrinsic properties (1), bodies are not things in themselves (3). It is compatible with this that bodies (“containing” only relational properties) are real; and that the relational properties belong to things that have an unknown intrinsic nature (Syllogism 1).

Crucial to van Cleve's idealist interpretation is that the relations are not possessed by the things that have intrinsic properties. But B67 contradicts this. Kant says the something that presents itself in this or that location has unknown activities going on within it. He says outer sense represents only the relation of an object, not the intrinsic properties belonging to the object as it is in itself. The object bearing the relation is the object that has the intrinsic properties. So B67 undermines van Cleve's interpretation, and supports the idea of the in itself as the intrinsic.

One can't hope to do justice here to either side, and the detail would take us through other arguments from van Cleve, and from Kant, about substance,

²Van Cleve adds '(to us?)', querying whether Kant's thought concerns an object's relations to other things generally, or to us in particular—a question I haven't scope to go into here.

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relations, and reducibility. For now, I shall simply stop with a reprise of my earlier verdict: this is a splendid book, to be enjoyed by anyone interested in Kant, or in the philosophical problems that gripped him.

RAE LANGTON

University of Edinburgh

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THE PARADOX OF SUBJECTIVITY: THE SELF IN THE TRANSCENDENTAL TRADITION. By DAVID CARR. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Pp. 150.

David Carr's *Paradox of Subjectivity* is a brilliant and challenging defense of the legitimacy and distinctiveness of the transcendental tradition in modern philosophy. Carr's central claim is that the transcendental tradition is defined not by a metaphysical position, but rather by a methodological stance. Indeed, transcendentalism, he argues, involves no metaphysical commitments of any kind. He focuses this thesis by using it to address the later Heidegger's charge that modern philosophy, from Descartes through to Nietzsche, and maybe Husserl too, is essentially a metaphysics of the subject.

Carr introduces his suggestion by appropriating the approach to Kant's transcendental idealism pioneered by Gerold Prauss and Henry Allison. Kant's transcendental and empirical standpoints are not rival factual perspectives, as perhaps psychology and physiology are. Rather, they are different methodological positions. The empirical standpoint, analogously with Husserl's "natural attitude," takes the world as given and explores it factually. The transcendental standpoint reflects on the subjective conditions that make it possible for the world to be an object for us. From the transcendental standpoint, we do not make, retract, or even epistemologically evaluate any ontic commitments we might make or be tempted to make. That is, we neither assert nor deny the existence of the world or anything in it, nor do we evaluate the cogency of the evidence we have for the existence of the world or anything in it. Using Husserlian language, Carr explains that transcendental philosophy "brackets" the actual existence of the world and instead focuses on, and investigates the structure of, the world as object, the meaning of the world.

Carr contrasts this transcendental approach within philosophy with the metaphysical concerns of Kant's predecessors. Descartes posited a mental substance, as well as mysterious, purely subjective entities, "ideas," to explain how the world is an object of human consciousness. This turns philosophy into a poor cousin of psychology. Hume responded to Descartes with a healthy skepticism toward the entities posited and explanations offered within the Cartesian system. Descartes takes the self to be an odd sort of entity,