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Review of *Immanuel Kant: The Very Idea of a Critique of Pure Reason* by J. Colin McQuillan

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J. Colin McQuillan. *Immanuel Kant: The Very Idea of a Critique of Pure Reason*. Northwestern University Press 2016. 192 pp. \$99.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780810132450); \$34.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780810132481).

J. Colin McQuillan's *Immanuel Kant: The Very Idea of a Critique of Pure Reason* begins by noting the surprising fact that 'up to this point there has not been a single work that explains why Kant calls the *Critique of Pure Reason* a critique' (ix). In light of this oversight, McQuillan aims to provide 'a study of the background, development, exposition, and justification of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*' that focuses on 'Kant's conception of critique, rather than his arguments for the transcendental ideality of space and time, his deduction of the pure concepts of the understanding, or the objections he raises against traditional metaphysics' (ix). McQuillan argues that it is precisely 'Kant's conception of a critique and his insistence that philosophy must begin with a critique of pure reason that distinguishes his critical philosophy from his pre-critical philosophy' (x); Kant's mature thought cannot be defined 'by its opposition to the views he espoused during his pre-critical period' (xi); Kant 'never denied that metaphysics was possible or desirable' (xii); and Kant's critical philosophy aims to achieve 'what he set out to accomplish in his pre-critical philosophy: a revolutionary transformation of the method of metaphysics that would set metaphysics on the sure path of science' (x). McQuillan's thesis is that Kant's 'critique' names a novel approach to metaphysics that begins with the question of the ground of the relation between representations and objects.

After a brief overview of the conceptions of criticism at work in modern 'philological critique' (4-6), 'literary criticism' (6-10), 'critique of taste' (10-4), and 'critical logic' (14-7), McQuillan provides an account of how and why the notion of critique first emerged in Kant's thinking. He begins by examining Kant's investigation of the method befitting metaphysics in his Prize Essay (1764) and highlighting Kant's methodological investigations in the mid-1760s. McQuillan rightly notes that Kant's preoccupation with the question of the proper method of metaphysics implies a logically prior concern with metaphysics simply. Thus, he criticizes scholars who argue that Kant lost faith in metaphysics in the 1760s and emerged as a disillusioned skeptic. However, he also questions scholars who acknowledge Kant's abiding interest in metaphysics but claim that Kant's conception of the nature of metaphysics underwent a 'dramatic change' in the 1760s, specifically those who emphasize Kant's description of metaphysics as the 'science of the limits of human reason' (21, 40-41). While McQuillan acknowledges that Kant aims to 'place metaphysics on a new foundation' (22) by articulating a method that ensures the success of metaphysical inquiry, he seems committed to the conclusion that Kant's conception of the nature of metaphysics is more or less traditional, even as late as Kant's *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Elucidated by Dreams of a Metaphysician* (1766). However, McQuillan does not explore the possibility that Kant's methodological investigations led him to reinterpret metaphysics as a science of the limits of human reason. He also overlooks the striking fact that Kant concludes *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* by emphasizing the practical, moral significance of metaphysics.

In any event, McQuillan goes on to explain that Kant's pursuit of the proper method of metaphysics leads him to raise the question of the relationship between representations and objects—a question Kant describes as the 'key to the whole secret of metaphysics' (42). To adumbrate McQuillan's compelling account: Kant's Inaugural Dissertation (1770) emphasizes the difference between sensible and intellectual cognition. Since Kant holds that metaphysics is concerned with rational principles, not empirical concepts, he concludes that purifying the former of the latter will uncover metaphysical inquiry's proper objects, thereby clarifying its task and guaranteeing its efficacy. Kant planned to elaborate this method in a work called *The Bounds of Sensibility and Reason* until a

conversation with his former student Marcus Herz led Kant to see that purifying intellectual cognition ultimately only raises the more fundamental question of how intellectual concepts are related to the world. Thus, McQuillan uncovers a shift in Kant's focus 'from the "bounds" (*Grenzen*) of sensibility and reason to the "ground" (*Grund*) of the relation between representations and objects' (55). Further, he notes that Kant's rejection of Platonism, occasionalism, and pre-established harmony led him to turn 'to the understanding itself' in order to pursue 'an immanent account' of the validity of representations (59). Finally, McQuillan highlights that Kant's notion of 'critique' first appears as a description of his pursuit of an immanent account of the ground of objectively valid representations (60).

McQuillan's account of Kant's first reference to 'critique' raises the question of whether and how this early reference informs Kant's mature philosophy. Thus, McQuillan examines Kant's explicit discussions of the nature and purpose of critique in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. More specifically, McQuillan offers careful interpretations of four of Kant's 'definitions' of critique therein: his account of the critique of reason as a court of justice (65-70); his definition of critique as an investigation of the possibility of metaphysics (70-7); his description of the *Critique* as an attempt to transform the procedure of metaphysics (78-86); and his characterization of the *Critique* as an account of the sources and boundaries of reason (86-8). While McQuillan's interpretations of these passages are compelling, one wonders why McQuillan does not devote more attention to the first *Critique*'s Doctrine of Method, which is explicitly concerned with elucidating the purpose of Kant's critique of reason.

McQuillan concludes his book by reflecting on Kant's continued commitment to the project of critique after the first *Critique*'s publication. Thus, he offers a helpful overview of Kant's several apologies for the notion of critique in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (91-6), the Preface to the second edition of the first *Critique* (96-102), the so-called Kant-Eberhard controversy (102-9), and finally in two oft-ignored late essays on the history of philosophy (109-11). This overview demonstrates that the notion of a critique of reason remained central to Kant's thinking until the end of his philosophical career.

McQuillan's book makes an important contribution to the scholarship, not only by correcting for common accounts of Kant's rejection of metaphysics in favor of 'epistemology', but also by opening up the question of the nature and meaning of critique, as such. McQuillan deserves special praise for his lucid prose, for his attention to historical context, and especially for the grace and patience he exhibits as he guides readers through the dense arguments of Kant's pre-critical writings. I recommend the book to all students of the history of philosophy, Kant scholars and generalists alike. By way of conclusion, I want to raise two questions—questions alluded to, but not explicitly addressed by, McQuillan's account.

First, McQuillan's analysis of Kant's critique of reason raises the question of the nature of reason, as such. The answer to this question is necessary for explaining why humans undertake metaphysical inquiry and why such inquiry tends to lead to perplexities rather than knowledge. Accordingly, an account of Kant's conception of reason is vital for any explanation of why the search for a method of metaphysics is necessary and why reason stands in need of critique. Of particular significance in this context is the fact that Kant's confrontation with Rousseau in the 1760s led Kant to reinterpret the nature of reason as essentially spontaneous, purposive, and practical. McQuillan's excellent account of Kant's quest for a proper method of metaphysics would benefit from being read in conjunction with a careful examination of Kant's 'discovery' of reason's moral character. Such an examination would have to pay special attention to Kant's account of the relationship between metaphysics and morality in *Dreams of a Spirit Seer* and his subsequent articulation of the intrinsic

connection between the restriction of theoretical reason and reason's practical extension in the first *Critique's* Doctrine of Method. Kant's way of stressing the practical purpose of metaphysics in these passages indicates that Kant's critical philosophy may be grounded in a more radical transformation of metaphysical inquiry than McQuillan suggests.

Second, McQuillan's detailed examination of Kant's notion of a critique of reason raises the question of how such a critique is possible. How can one gain sufficient 'critical' distance from reason to subject it to a critique? What capacity undertakes the critique of reason? Such questions may seem stilted. Nevertheless, Kant suggests an answer, albeit a paradoxical one. For, even as it is the object of critique, Kant indicates that reason undertakes this critique. Put differently, the critique of reason is reason's self-critique. This fact emerges most clearly in the first *Critique's* Doctrine of Method, where Kant claims that his critique portrays reason's self-examination as it pursues self-knowledge. Kant concludes that reason's self-knowledge ultimately allows reason to become legislative and autonomous, determining its activity in terms of its proper *telos*. That critique is somehow grounded in reason's reflexivity and in its purposive character is a fact that warrants further reflection.

It is, perhaps, a strength of McQuillan's concise study that it does not violate the scope of its project in order to address the questions posed above. A more important strength, however, is that McQuillan gives us occasion to raise and reflect on these questions, which are vital not only for understanding Kant but for philosophical reflection on the nature and purpose of philosophy as it wrestles with that old Delphic injunction, 'know thyself'.

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