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Reviews

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Ameriks' latest volume represents yet another major contribution to our understanding of Kant and his place within the history of philosophy.¹ Ostensibly, *Kant's Elliptical Path* is a scholarly treatment of the development of Kant's thought throughout his career. It assuredly is that, but it is also much more, since it plumbs the depths of Kant's entire Critical project by revealing the crucial systematic roles of freedom, reason, and religion, and shows their relevance both for the course of post-Kantian German philosophy throughout the nineteenth century and for our philosophical interests and ambitions today. Along the way, we are treated to an unusually broad range of kinds of discussion: detailed interpretations of particular passages that can appear problematic or are often misunderstood, remarks about the linguistic nuances of German terms which can easily get lost in translation, helpful interpretive hypotheses regarding Kant's views on crucial points, and, of course, broader considerations of Kant's overall project and commitments.

Ameriks' book comprises an introduction and then fifteen substantive chapters, which are divided into three parts. The introduction offers an innovative narrative of Kant's overall development that provides an indispensable context for each of the parts and chapters that follow. Its defining claim is that once Kant was 'turned around' by reading Rousseau in 1763–4, his basic views, e.g., about the primacy of practical reason and the importance of absolute (libertarian) freedom, morality, and certain religious beliefs (involving God and immortality), did not change fundamentally, even if later developments (such as Transcendental Idealism) proved to be 'ideal means [. . .] to fill out a systematic defense that allows for a return to his deepest pre-systematic beliefs' (p. 1). Crucial to Ameriks' understanding of Kant's development, however, is not only that Rousseau was important and that there is a basic continuity to some fundamental aspects of Kant's thought, points on which many (if not all) scholars agree, but also that there is an elliptical movement to Kant's career, with the 'heavens above' and the moral 'law within' serving as distinct foci, that precludes either a simple linear or purely circular movement, because of various (theoretical and practical) complications that take Kant further away from his starting point before he is able to return to it. Further, late in the book Ameriks uses the image of an elliptical path to put much of post-Kantian philosophy into context, including figures such as Reinhold, the German Idealists (Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel), the early German Romantics (Novalis, Hölderlin, and Schlegel), Nietzsche, and various contemporary philosophers (such as MacIntyre, Cavell, Taylor, and Frank). Ameriks' narrative is thus not restricted to Kant, but provides a useful perspective well beyond, one that he even takes to recommend a certain conception of hermeneutical philosophy today.

The first part, on Kant's pre-Critical period, has a first chapter, 'Kant, Human Nature, and History after Rousseau,' which describes various ways in which Rousseau influenced

Kant in the 1760s. From Kant's perspective in 1763–4, Rousseau's 'key discovery' required uncovering the 'long hidden [. . .] "law" of the complex dynamic and broadly dialectical three-stage pattern of human history' (p. 41) and Kant came to see that science and theoretical philosophy, to which he had devoted himself early on, could have at most a conditional value. As a result, 'a radical turn [. . .] was needed to reverse the ever-growing tendency toward an entrenchment of privilege' such that one could better appreciate 'the basic human capacity to respect persons simply as such' (p. 43). Later in the 1760s, Kant then realized that 'he had to go beyond Rousseau and to find some suitable theoretical means for reconciling his commitment to absolute freedom while in no way taking back the empirical achievements of the Scientific Revolution' (p. 45), a process that set him on his elliptical path. The second chapter, "Reality, Reason, and Religion in the Early Development of Kant's Ethics," provides a historical and philosophical apology for taking the early Kant's views on ethics and religion to be both more realistic and more objective than alternative interpretations offered by Beiser, Rawls, and, especially Kuehn, who thinks, based on the Kähler transcripts, that Kant's views are 'more empiricist [. . .] yet realist in a practical but non-metaphysical sense' (p. 52) during this period. That the early Kant's views take this more objective form still allows for additional crucial steps in the Critical period, since space must be created metaphysically for the possibility of absolute freedom and a pure feeling of respect is needed for a tenable account of moral motivation.

The second part, which views all three of Kant's *Critiques* as defending the fundamental end of freedom and morality he had identified early in his career, contains chapters exploring the 'elliptical implications' of the first and second *Critiques* (in the first two sections) and then (in the third section) Kant's views on history in the mid-to late 1780s as well as his later views on religion and the end of creation in the final paragraphs of the third *Critique*. Accordingly, in the first section of this part, Ameriks articulates novel interpretations of some of the most central doctrines in Kant's first *Critique*. In a third chapter, "Kant's Idealism on a Moderate Interpretation", he offers a clear presentation of the 'moderate' interpretation of Transcendental Idealism he had begun to develop in earlier work,² explaining how appearances can be understood not as illusory, but rather as having an 'in-between status [. . .] that is higher than what is [. . .] merely subjective in an individual, psychological, and occurrent sense [. . .] but lower than [. . .] things in themselves' (p. 76), since they have a derivative, or conditioned kind of relational metaphysical status. Because things in themselves are understood primarily as not having that kind of sensibly conditioned status, his postulation of them can be understood as simply a reaffirmation of our pre-reflective realist commitments rather than the invention of something transcendent and wholly foreign to us. In a fourth chapter, "On Reconciling the Transcendental Turn and Kant's Idealism", he then shows how understanding appearances as 'public realities' (p. 107) that are sensibly conditioned, albeit in a way that entails things in themselves (which cannot, in the end, be sensibly conditioned), allows one to avoid demoting appearances in problematic, subjectivistic ways and also to steer clear of the extreme interpretations that Wood identifies (i.e., the Identity and the Causal Interpretations). In a fifth chapter, 'Idealism and Kantian Persons: Spinoza, Jacobi, and Schleiermacher,' Ameriks uncovers how Schleiermacher, in private notes on the first *Critique*, develops a reading of Kant that allows one to appreciate his attitude towards Spinoza, where, practical considerations aside, he wants to object to the idea that a mere mode (rather than a person) could think a thought, yet in a way that is consistent with the 'Critical limits' he insists on in the first *Critique* (p. 142).

The second section, which is focused on the elliptical implications of the second *Critique*, begins with "Kant's Ambivalent Cosmopolitanism", which shows, in contrast to

more naturalist and constructivist interpretations, such as Rawls' and Velleman's, how for Kant human beings must be both partly within the empirical world and partly without; for in addition to mere rationality, Kant is committed to "reason's unique capacity for aiming to determine—in both a causal and conceptual sense—the unconditioned [. . . which is such that] there is a sense in which this pure aspect of our will makes us partially otherworldly after all" (p. 153). In the seventh chapter, 'Is Practical Justification in Kant Ultimately Dogmatic?', Ameriks provides a nuanced, but extremely clear defense of a moral reading of Kant's famous 'fact of reason' against important proposals by Kleingeld and Sussman, who interpret that fact without invoking an explicitly moral consciousness in deducing morality. Though Ameriks acknowledges that assuming moral consciousness is controversial and can be viewed as dogmatic, he holds that it is unavoidable, since all non-dogmatic attempts fail on philosophical grounds. In the eighth chapter, 'Ambiguities in the Will: Kant and Reinhold, *Briefe II*,' Ameriks describes how Reinhold's characterization of the will purely in terms of what we might call freedom of indifference represents a significant and philosophically unfortunate departure from Kant's characterization of the will as a pure positive faculty, since Reinhold's characterization is unable to account for the kind of action-guiding force that Kant is able to provide by means of the close connection he draws between the human will and practical reason.

The third section of the second part begins with two chapters that focus on Kant's conception of history and its relation to freedom. The ninth chapter, 'The Purposive Development of Human Capacities,' argues that Kant displays an attitude of 'nonchalant ambivalence' during the mid-1780s about whether it is possible to assert freedom on grounds that would not be purely moral, an attitude that generates problems such that his position can seem to be 'dancing over an abyss' (p. 210). Kant also endorses a notion of historical development that is significant even as it falls short of the more robust views of his successors, who inaugurate a historical turn in philosophy. The tenth chapter, "Kant's Fateful Reviews of Herder's *Ideas*," describes the most important objections that Kant raises in his reviews of Herder's more naturalistic and anti-libertarian metaphysical view, arguing that although Kant and Herder are actually closer to each other than it might seem on many points, there is still 'a fateful final difference' (p. 235) due to their contrasting philosophical methods, since Herder is fundamentally committed to the study of detailed, historical events, while Kant attempts to identify a priori and 'pure' structures.

The final two chapters of the third section concern what Kant takes the final end of creation to be. The eleventh chapter, 'The End of the *Critiques*: Kant's Moral "Creationism",' argues that Kant has 'a *more objectivist* than subjectivist attitude toward the conclusion that persons have been created for a purpose' (p. 238), and describes not only the precise status of belief (which is actually more significant than knowledge in certain respects), but also the subtle but crucial differences between our attitudes towards freedom, on the one hand, and the postulates of God's existence and the immortality of the soul, on the other hand, where the latter involve an external riskiness such that it falls short of knowledge, as opposed to our immediate sense of freedom (as an internal matter fully under our control). The twelfth chapter, 'Kant and the End of Theodicy', addresses an important philosophical puzzle in the first two sections of Kant's major work in religion. How can Kant consistently reject appeals to miracles, understood as specific cases of supernatural interference in the natural world, at the same time that he himself insists on the 'effects of our own everyday absolute freedom' (p. 263) as well as some kind of supernatural assistance (insofar as God is postulated so as to render the highest good possible)? Ameriks' answer involves several points—including drawing our attention to

Kant's use of the terms *Wunder* (miracle) and *Bewunderung* (admiration)—but perhaps the most basic is that he treats miracles as fundamentally different from the other two kinds of non-natural causal factors since miracles require violations of the natural order, whereas the others are consistent with such an order.³

In the third part, Ameriks proposes understanding several major post-Kantian philosophers as offering “extensions of and alternatives to Kant's Elliptical path” (p. 279). Thus, in the thirteenth chapter, “On the Extension of Kant's Elliptical Path in Hölderlin and Novalis,” Ameriks draws on important work by Kneller to show how detailed readings of some of Hölderlin's and Novalis's most important poems can be read as extending Kant's project through ‘energetically advancing the general Enlightenment goal of a thoroughgoing realization of human autonomy [...] not only by appreciating this goal from the cosmopolitan perspective of reason but also through giving it lasting motivational force by creating strikingly imaginative reconceptions of the broadly religious Ideas [...] contained in the Postulates’ (p. 282). The fourteenth chapter, ‘Kant, Nietzsche, and the Tragic Turn in Late Modern Philosophy,’ argues that Nietzsche is best understood as developing an alternative to Kant's ‘elliptical return to a basically rationalist position,’ since he emphasizes ‘a new non-rationalist understanding and prioritization of the aesthetic, tragic, and historical character of human existence’ (p. 304). One especially useful feature of this chapter is its genealogical explanation of how the concept of tragedy took on such a central role in German philosophy from Lessing and the high Enlightenment (1), through Kant and his followers (2), to the early German Romantics (3), the German Idealists such as Hegel (4), and Hegel's successors (5). He thus sketches how one could renounce ‘the age-old ambition of constructing a timeless anonymous system, based on [...] demonstrations of scientific, moral, or religious principles’ in favor of a hermeneutical conception of philosophy that is simultaneously historical, aesthetic, and subjective by focusing ‘on the felt peculiarities of human experience as such’ (p. 322). The fifteenth and final chapter, ‘Interpretation after Kant,’ provides a broad perspective on and evaluation of the conceptions of philosophy of Kant and his followers, arguing that Kant's readers were forced to take up ‘the hermeneutical task of explaining in detail why [...] the Critical project was deeply misunderstood by its first readers and even Kant himself’ (p. 325), a task that amounts to nothing less than ‘the long nineteenth-century's Interpretive Turn [...] whereby a highly influential “visionary company” of philosophers began to organize their writing primarily in terms of the hermeneutical enterprise of understanding and improving upon their modern predecessors in a detailed sequential manner’ (p. 326). Drawing on aspects of Bloom's views on literary succession, Ameriks also provides a decisive criticism of Rorty's proposal to, in effect, eliminate philosophy in favor of literature as based on positivistic assumptions, offering in its place a conception of philosophy as a distinct discipline ‘that can try to explain the general relation between the distinctive new practices of modern science and the remaining fundamental practices of human beings—especially ethics, politics, religion, and aesthetics’ (p. 331). In this way, philosophy today can turn ‘more and more to interpreting, in its own argumentative way, the historical, subjective, and aesthetic dimensions of human life that no other disciplines treat in their full generality’ (p. 332), an ‘Interpretive Turn’ that allows it to ‘resituate itself in partial autonomy with respect to literary culture as well as science’ (p. 342).

Though it would be impossible to capture every main aspect of Ameriks' extraordinarily rich and nuanced interpretation here, this brief summary expresses at least some of the most significant specific theses for which he argues. However, several other, more generic features of his book are also striking. Whereas it is commonplace for Kant scholars

to seek to clarify some specific topic in Kant, such as causality or Transcendental Idealism,⁴ or else to offer a systematic interpretation or commentary on (part of) one of Kant's works, such as the first or second *Critique*,⁵ it is noteworthy that Ameriks provides an unusually broad and comprehensive view of Kant's thought, focusing on what his most deeply held beliefs are, on how they hang together, and on what the underlying dynamic is that moves his position forward over three central decades of his career. Undertaking such a project might well be overly ambitious for those early in their careers, but it is entirely appropriate, and even welcome, when Ameriks, with the benefit of decades of reading and reflection, helps us to see the possibilities here. Another distinctive feature of Ameriks' work here (as elsewhere) is the remarkable depth and subtlety of his interpretation, which takes on philosophical, historical, and textual forms in seemingly equal measure. Finally, Ameriks' ability to relate his interpretation of Kant to the views of other major Kant scholars in such profitable ways as well as to major currents in the history of philosophy that lead from Kant to today is extremely rare and a model that historians today, myself included, would do well to emulate. These virtues thus make for an outstanding contribution.

Though Ameriks' provocative work is sure to stimulate many reactions on a wide range of topics, I focus on two that are particularly central to his overall narrative. The first concerns his emphasis on Kant's moral turn in the early 1760s in response to reading Rousseau. As we have seen above, Ameriks claims that Rousseau influenced Kant on a number of points—the three-stage law of historical development, the notion of autonomy, etc.—but what is especially striking is that Ameriks also claims that it was 'under the direct inspiration of Rousseau that Kant broke sharply from his earlier sympathy with a compatibilist understanding of freedom' (p. 39). Kant's shift from a compatibilist to an incompatibilist conception of freedom sometime between 1755 and 1781 has long stood in need of a proper explanation, so it would be a very welcome result to finally have one. Now Rousseau is an extremely important social and political philosopher, but it is less clear that he is especially interested in metaphysical conceptions of freedom, more specifically, that he is committed to a libertarian account of freedom. Now it may well be that Kant could find such an account even where none, or only a hint of a possible commitment to one, exists. However, it is also possible that he is not getting this conception of freedom from Rousseau at all. My own hypothesis is that Kant is influenced by Rousseau's emphases on the importance of freedom (since it is crucial for his conception of autonomy) and on the fundamentally moral character of human beings, but that once Kant becomes convinced of the importance of freedom and our moral character with Rousseau's help, he becomes (even) more open than he had been to the views of Christian August Crusius, who was the most important anti-Wolffian German philosopher of the middle of the eighteenth century and who had built his entire metaphysics around a libertarian conception of freedom. Thus, if one starts with Rousseau's influence, as Ameriks suggests, and then supplements it more fully with certain crucial aspects of Crusius's metaphysics of free will, we have, I think, a more historically satisfying explanation of Kant's conversion and development in the 1760s.

The second topic concerns Transcendental Idealism and the space it is supposed to create for freedom of the will. Part of Ameriks' distinctive view is to understand Transcendental Idealism's distinction between appearances and things in themselves as an ontological distinction between second-level, publically accessible, but sensibly conditioned entities that are metaphysically derivative (insofar as they cannot stand on their own, but require the existence of things in themselves), and a first-level set of sensibly unconditioned entities that can, in many cases, be conditioned in other ways even as they

are more fundamental than the appearances they condition. Though it would be quite useful to know why it is the case that things in themselves must be sensibly unconditioned and that appearances must be sensibly conditioned (if these are not true by definition), the point at issue concerns how it is that this distinction as such creates room for freedom of the will as Kant understands it. The fact that appearances are second-level entities that are sensibly conditioned (since they must be intuited in space and time) does not as such preclude freedom of the will, and asserting that there is a first-level reality that is not sensibly conditioned and on which appearances depend, also does not, as such, make room for freedom of the will; just because something is sensibly conditioned does not immediately entail that it is absolutely unconditioned, nor that it is free in the appropriate sense. Now it may be that Transcendental Idealism enables an important *first* step in explaining how free will might be possible, one that requires second and perhaps even third steps, but what is not yet clear is whether Ameriks' interpretation of this distinction provides any special explanatory advantage on this particularly crucial point.

These calls for further clarification and amplification concern how Kant comes to accept absolute freedom, what argument supports it, and how it is possible, all fundamental features of Kant's position, but they in no way detract from the important achievements that Ameriks' work presents. In fact, exactly the reverse is the case insofar as Ameriks' masterful volume has moved the state of the debate forward such that we can now hope for more satisfying responses to these calls.⁶

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NOTES

¹ Ameriks has published several substantive monographs on Kant prior to this volume, including *Kant's Theory of Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980, 2nd ed. 2000), *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), *Interpreting Kant's Critiques* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), *Kant and the Historical Turn* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).

² See chaps. 3, 5, 6 of Ameriks' *Kant and the Historical Turn* for earlier statements of the view.

³ For current reflections on the notions of the order of nature in modern philosophy, see the contributions in my *The Divine Order, the Human Order, and the Order of Nature: Historical Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁴ See, for example, Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) and Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) as examples of the latter and my *Kant and the Metaphysics of Causality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) as an example of the former.

⁵ See, for example, Béatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) and Lewis White Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996).

⁶ I thank Karl Ameriks and Clinton Tolley for helpful comments on the penultimate version of this review.