The Precritical Kant and So Much More

Critical Commentary on Martin Schönfeld's
The Philosophy of the Young Kant: The Precritical Project (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000)

Jennifer K. Uleman, *University of Miami*

This is a truly wonderful book.

I confess I hesitated to agree to adding to my workload reading and commenting on Schönfeld's *The Philosophy of the Young Kant.* And I suppose I wasn't sure what I would get out of reading about Kant's precritical writings. Truth be told, I am still not sure that *I* want to read all of Kant's precritical works themselves, but I am very happy that Schönfeld did, and I am very happy to have read Schönfeld's book, which I recommend heartily to all of you, whether or not you work on Kant.

"Whether or not I work on Kant?" That is a bit much, isn't it? In fact, no. Schönfeld's own introductory descriptions of what the book sets out to accomplish include setting the record straight on Kant's intellectual development, bringing attention to Kant's considerable precritical philosophical and natural scientific achievements, pointing up illuminating continuities between Kant's precritical and critical works, and motivating the crisis that led Kant to critique. These descriptions of that book's aims fail to mention that his book will also bring the reader up to speed on the entire intellectual climate in which Kant found himself. The book does so by discussing Kant's engagements with and contributions to that climate—a climate in which there was a lot going on. For example, Cartesians and Leibnizians debated whether there were two kinds of matter, living and dead, the forces and mechanics of which had to be described by correspondingly different principles—a debate Kant entered with his first published paper, written when he was twenty-three years old, "Thoughts on the True Estimation of Living Forces." The "metaphysicians" and the "mathematicians" debated divergent approaches to nature—one group committed to irreducibly qualitative differences among parts of nature, the other to nature's uniform quantifiability, one persuaded that mathematical descriptions of nature were doomed to remain "artificial" and partial, the other persuaded that mathematics is the descriptive language for things in themselves. Debates arose about kinds of causality—mechanistic, teleological, and so on—and the proper ways to investigate each. This period also witnessed arguments about the precise role of God in the world: creator, yes, and sustainer too. But how? Did God wind the watch? Did He tinker with it? Did He patch things up after messy miracles—miracles designed, after all, by Him to let us know about His

existence? Moreover, questions were raised about the ultimate purpose, or *telos*, of nature: Is nature's *telos* to reveal God? To sustain human existence? Or is nature's end simply the joint order and diversity of nature itself?

There was more: worries that a denial of mind/body interaction was tantamount to denying sin, which of course depends on sinful animation of the flesh: philosophers' dismay at Newton's lack of engagement with metaphysics, evidenced by a shruggy willingness to invoke God as needed; a proliferation of "physico-theologic" treatises arguing for God's existence from the designs of, among other things, rocks, thunder, fire, water, snow, grass, and bees. There were discussions of the isomorphism between logic and ontology. There was racism, Kant's own and that of the European Enlightenment in general, which Schönfeld discusses unflinchingly. Whether discussing central debates or reporting on local skirmishes, Schönfeld always tells enough that one can understand what is at stake and, for those readers not familiar enough with Kant's (or Leibniz's, or Newton's, or Wolff's) work to guess, Schönfeld elegantly describes ramifications. *Anyone* interested in early modern philosophy, or in any field that owes the terms of its problematics to early modern philosophy, to say nothing of anyone interested in Kant—pretty much anyone that is—should buy this book.

Before I conclude the paid portion of my remarks [smile], let me also mention how lively, and how full of truly engaging detail the book is. I learned not only about 18th century physics and metaphysics, but also about the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, about the only known female German philosopher of the age, Johanna Charlotte Unzer, about tides and coastal winds and the slowing of the earth's rotation, and more.

We have been asked to pose questions for the author. I have four. Two are rather technical, and ask for pointers on understanding critical developments in light of precritical claims, and two are quite general, asking about philosophical projects, overall.

1. The first technical question has to do with Kant's willingness to regard teleological causation as unproblematic. Schönfeld writes,

> [Kant] assumed the divine imposition of goals occurred in terms of final processes immanent to nature instead of external divine interferences.[1]
>
> [Kant] identif[ied] the causal vehicle of purposive events with the efficient causation of physical processes.[2]
>
> [F]or Kant . . . matter actually contained an urge to organize itself.[3]

As Schönfeld describes it, this urge was meant to work itself out in terms of attraction and repulsion and was describable by the laws of nature. So for Kant, teleological self-organization, far from disrupting or competing with mechanism, was written into the script of nature itself. Here is my question: The wills of all living things, including the wills of animals and other non-rational creatures, cause the realization of objects through representations of those objects. They do this

because the representations, as goals or ends, guide action. How might this seemingly teleological causation of the will fit into nature?

2. The second technical question has to do with Kant's ultimate resolution to the problem of determinism and freedom. Can consideration of Kant's early work point us toward the preferability, for Kant, of either a two-world or two-aspect solution to the problem of freedom and causality? Or does it point to neither of these?

3. The third question has to do with the conclusions Schönfeld draws from his study. At the end, we see Kant writing his review of Swendenborgianism, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, which Schönfeld, I think aptly, reads as Kant's own half-laughing, half-crying *reductio* of his own precritical dream of integrating the material and spiritual worlds into a single ontological reality. We see Kant abandon the dream of grand synthesis that characterizes the precritical period. Should we read this abandonment as a failure? And is the critical philosophy itself, complete with transcendental idealism and distinct phenomenal and noumenal realms, also a failure—a brilliant one, to be sure, but a failure? Or is it truly a move into bigger and better things? To put the question another way, should we regard Kant's critical philosophy as a failure, if one entirely inevitable or at least well motivated by the philosophical problems facing Kant? Or do the motivations to transcendental idealism still apply today?

4. The fourth question is the most general. There was, for me, something unsettling about reading about the 23-year-old Kant, trying, if unsuccessfully, to broker a peace between competing and seemingly incompatible views. There was something unsettling in reading about his early advocacy of "Bilfinger's rule," namely, the rule that

> . . . if men of good sense, who either do not deserve the suspicion of ulterior motives at all, or who deserve it equally, maintain diametrically opposed opinions, then it accords with the logic of probability to focus one's attention especially on a certain intermediate claim that agrees to an extent with both parties.[1]

What was unsettling was that these facts about Kant's intellectual biography threatened to subordinate Kant's arguments, including, ultimately, his critical arguments for transcendental idealism, to his own "peace-maker" tendencies. I thought: perhaps this threat, the threat that life will be drained out of the arguments themselves, diverted into biography, or psychology, or historical contingency, is why so many philosophers resist the history of philosophy. I wonder what Schönfeld thinks about this, and about the benefits and dangers of doing history of philosophy in general.

I think that is all. I am thankful to Schönfeld for writing an invaluable book.

Notes

[1] Martin Schönfeld, *The Philosophy of the Young Kant: The Precritical Project* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000) 107.

[2] Schönfeld 107.

[3] Schönfeld 111.

[4] Quoted in Schönfeld 59.

Works Cited

Schönfeld, Martin. *The Philosophy of the Young Kant: The Precritical Project.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.