

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Jill Vance Buroker. *Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason': An Introduction.* Cambridge Introductions to Key Philosophical Texts. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 336 pp. \$25.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-61825-0.



Ido Geiger. *The Founding Act of Modern Ethical Life: Hegel's Critique of Kant's Moral and Political Philosophy.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. xiii + 173 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5424-8.



James Phillips. *The Equivocation of Reason: Kleist Reading Kant.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. xii + 141 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5587-0.

Reviewed by Katherine Arens (Department of Germanic Studies, University of Texas at Austin)

Published on H-German (September, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Kantiana: Kant for Students and Students of Kant

The Kant industry is in full swing, with a new generation again assessing the vitality of German Idealism for a new era. The first work under review, Jill Vance Buroker's *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason: An Introduction*, does precisely what its title promises. The text starts with Immanuel Kant's biography and an overview of his projects,

including very useful helps for orientation within the work, such as a reproduction of the table of contents of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1788). This piece of material introduces a text that takes great pains to explain critical terminology and argument structure. Buroker provides an informative read-along of Kant's great master-

piece, and her commentary is aimed at an audience interested in the philosophical arguments in it and started by it, but not necessarily philosophically educated. Buroker makes an exemplary contribution to the pedagogical literature on Kant as she leads her readers through the *Critique*. She introduces all terminology on its own terms and as deriving from classical arguments in the history of philosophy, offering a fine basic critical apparatus for readers. Each phase of the argument, and each new argument, is always set into the context of the philosophical canon as known today, against names like George Berkeley, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, René Descartes, and John Locke, making the book a fine introduction to continental philosophy as well.

These contextualizing elements are supplemented by accounts of impact, as Buroker adds to each section brief discussions of recent debates about the arguments presented in Kant's texts, explaining significant challenges to and expansions on Kant's work. This contribution is particularly significant because what Buroker accomplishes in the process is the presentation to her readers of short definitions and explications of the standard arguments that define the discipline of philosophy—the list of arguments every philosophy major needs to be able to recognize, define, and reproduce as part of the discipline. *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* thus needs to be taken very seriously as a possible textbook or supplement to every class that includes Kant. It is not just a reference book, but also a fine tutorial on the basic argumentation tools needed by specialists in continental philosophy, as this tradition is known in the Anglo-American sphere. Moreover, it will replace many older favorites that serve the same function because it uses the new translation—and thus will help bring a new Kant to a new readership.

The second text under review, Ido Geiger's *The Founding Act of Modern Ethical Life: Hegel's Critique of Kant's Moral and Political Philosophy*, is a tight reception study, comparing Kant's source texts with G. W. F. Hegel's rereading of them around the fundamental issue of the motivation behind moral acts. In Geiger's reading, Kant considers moral motivations to originate in an individual's recognition that an intention must be considered universal, and thus is not motivated in the present. Hegel's account is traditionally read in opposition to that position, since he stresses individuals' acculturation as a ground for moral education. By rereading Hegel's interpretation of Antigone in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Geiger reconsiders this opposition, tracing instead how Hegel modifies (not rejects) Kant's claim for autonomous action. In this view, an individual needs

to be conscious of the universality of ethical claims for Kant's account to be true, but many individuals will not be conscious of the community for which the claim is valid and the greater historical whole posited in it. Yet, since history cannot be seen as just a progressive form of rationality and political life, Hegel stresses instead the politics of violent revolution and war as elements that ground a new philosophical positioning of the individual, a new sense of a situated but nonetheless universalizing ethical ground for judgment. Geiger thus creates a new script for the originating moments of the Idealist traditions. The text is clearly written and closely argued.

The third book under review explores the thinking of one of Kant's most famous students: Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811), the German author who, myth has it, read Kant, and then fell into a profound epistemological crisis about the ultimate unknowability of reality. In his book, James Phillips revisits Kleist's reading of Kant by placing both in the shared context of a late phase of the German Enlightenment. A minor member of a Pomeranian Prussian noble family with a tradition of military and state service, Kleist had seen military service in the 1790s, then studied philosophy at the Viadrina University, moving after 1800 to a ministerial post in Berlin. Yet, a year later, he took a leave of absence, and after a tour to Paris and Switzerland, turned to literature, after 1801. The last decade of his life was devoted to various attempts at literary breakthrough, creating a body of drama and stories that are part of the literary canon today, as well as several important aesthetics texts.

Phillips takes up this Kleist not as the Romantic that literary history has made of him because of his political rebellion, but as an intellectual trying to reconcile Idealism and the pragmatism that would bring political change: "Kleist continues the Enlightenment's struggle against dogmatism ... [he offers a] critique of the dogmas by which the modern age succumbs to obscurantism" (p. xii). The relativity of truth does indeed bother Kleist, but he is trying to define reason in practice in ways not done in pure theory—to move beyond Kant's ban on transgressing limits.

Phillips reads Kleist's classical tragedy, *Penthesilea* (1808) as a meditation on what is to be done in specific cases, when an absolute law is to be turned into specific forms of moral/ethical decisions. After that, Phillips takes up Kleist's most famous essay, "On the Puppet Theater" (1810), to speak about issues of embodiment in time and place. In each of these analyses, he offers ties to recent readings of Kantian problematics, especially ethics,

never losing sight of the overall problem for this late phase of the Enlightenment: how to acknowledge contingency without succumbing to despair and relativism. Overall, then, Philips offers a compelling new vision of what a “Kant crisis” may have meant. It is a well-written and well-argued piece of intellectual history.

These three texts all bear witness in their ways to a new generation of Kant research, a return to problems informed by intellectual history as well as theory, and a resetting of scholarly norms to include clear writing, engagement with peers, and historically valid interpretation. All are worth adding to your library.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Katherine Arens. Review of Buroker, Jill Vance, *Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason': An Introduction* and Geiger, Ido, *The Founding Act of Modern Ethical Life: Hegel's Critique of Kant's Moral and Political Philosophy* and Phillips, James, *The Equivocation of Reason: Kleist Reading Kant*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25169>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.