

Vaihinger, Hans (1892) *Commentar zu Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Zweiter Band. Stuttgart: Union Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft.
Watkins, Eric (2019) *Kant on Laws*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ryan S. Kemp and Christopher Iacovetti, *Reason and Conversion in Kierkegaard and the German Idealists* New York: Routledge, 2020 Pp. xi + 181 ISBN 9780815396314 (hbk), £120.00

While Kant's three *Critiques* provide a lens for observing the post-Kantian idealist trajectory, Ryan S. Kemp and Christopher Iacovetti's *Reason and Conversion in Kierkegaard and the German Idealists* employs Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* to sharpen our view. They thereby expand our understanding of German idealism and its interrogation by Kierkegaard, while suggesting fruitful ways of connecting post-Kantian idealism with contemporary work on conversion, radical transformation, and transformative experience. Kemp and Iacovetti frame the half-century from Kant to Kierkegaard as an attempt to explain the possibility of conversion – the normative death of shedding one's foundational value. Kant's *Religion* bequeaths to post-Kantian philosophy three explanatory models according to which a new foundational value is spontaneously chosen, rationally affirmed or caused by an external act of grace. Kemp and Iacovetti argue that German idealism leads historically and conceptually to Kierkegaard's view that conversion is a function of external intervention, a faith-based challenge to modern ethics according to which ethical and religious commitment differ only in degree. After summarizing the book's chapters, I offer some critical remarks.

Chapter 1 traces Kant's move from *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, which seems to preclude immoral action insofar as a will determined by inclination is inactive when transgressing morality, to the *Religion*, for which actions are morally significant insofar as they reflect one's chosen character, a product of *Willkür*. This move trades the no-bad-action problem for the no-uncharacteristic-action problem, however, by raising the question how evil persons become good – how moral conversion is possible (p. 16). Kant considers and rejects three explanations. Since freedom is lawful willing, lawlessly spontaneous *Willkür* cannot explain conversion. Since moral rigourism rules out incremental conversion, conversion cannot be rational. Since appeals to grace are admissions that we lack insight into conversion, conversion must be inexplicable (p. 22).

Chapter 2 presents Schelling's explanation of conversion to a philosophical system – Spinoza's freedom-denying dogmatism or Fichte's freedom-affirming criticism – as a spontaneous choice. Kemp and Iacovetti argue that Schelling defends criticism's superiority on the grounds that dogmatism is theoretically consistent, practically realizable, yet inherently deluded. Since Schelling regards philosophy's goal of unifying subject and object as theoretically impossible, its pursuit must be a practical task driven by one's foundational disposition, whether a dogmatist's serenity or a critic's vigour. One thus converts to a system by spontaneous choice – on dispositional, not rational, grounds. Kemp and Iacovetti claim that Schelling thinks dogmatists suffer the delusion of intellectually intuiting the subject-object unity, which critics rightly

treat as a regulative ideal, and misconstrue this unity's pursuit, which presupposes the freedom that dogmatists deny (pp. 34, 37–8).

Chapter 3 presents Fichte's view that grace renders systematic conversion externally caused, hence unfree, and that rational conversion assumes common standards lacking between idealists and dogmatists, whose worldviews are wholly incommensurate (p. 53). Kemp and Iacovetti argue that conversion is retrospectively rational only given a new foundational value, whereas the possibility of conversion is a question posed prospectively (pp. 59–60), one whose answer lies for Fichte in spontaneous choice.

Chapter 4 details Hegel's explanation of cultural conversion as a retrospectively necessary history in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Although this history is rationally affirmable, a reader finds herself in it only by spontaneously surrendering her foundational position (pp. 74–8). Hegel offers her terms that she must understand, not from her position, but as a historically formed consciousness committed to observing how culture takes on successive shapes whose rational fulfilment lies in philosophy (pp. 79–83). Kemp and Iacovetti argue that Hegel's account of conversion is either rational yet non-Socratic – demanding the surrender of one's foundational position to its rational fulfilment – or, which they endorse, spontaneous yet Socratic – providing all positions access to philosophy's standpoint (pp. 86–7).

Chapter 5 shows why, for Kierkegaard, Judge William cannot rationally coax ethical conclusions from A's foundational commitment to reflective aestheticism, which avoids despair through constant variation. A rather needs a seducer to provide a new foundational commitment, his conversion to which is thus non-rational and non-spontaneous. Kemp and Iacovetti parallel A's immunity to William's rational appeal to ethics with Kierkegaard's claim that we only understand sin through revelation (p. 111). Chapter 6 shows why Kierkegaard generally endorses a grace explanation of conversion, according to which certain subjective experiences inculcate new normative possibilities inaccessible by choice or reason. Kemp and Iacovetti argue that Kierkegaard regards all, not just Christian, conversion as the product of external intervention (p. 116). An agent passively receives the condition of conversion, whether ethical or religious, and realizes the practical ideal it affords, transforming into action the thought that captivates her imagination (pp. 120–3).

In chapter 7, Kemp and Iacovetti argue that the post-Kantian trajectory through spontaneous, rational and grace explanations of conversion leads beyond modern ethics, since ethical norms are unjustifiable if their grounds are personal and contingent rather than universal and necessary (p. 139). If commitment to ethical norms depends on subjective experience, it is as easily preserved as lost. Kierkegaard shows that ethical norms demand trust absent justification, a double movement of resignation and faith in which one sacrifices false rational assurance for one's ethical commitments in order to sustain hope for their vindication (pp. 141–2). This teleological suspension of the ethical consequently faces the anxiety of pursuing an ideal that lacks evidence (pp. 162–5). Kemp and Iacovetti's Kierkegaardian position is that, with no rational bridge for ethical conversion, one's normative outlook rests on no more, and no less, than ethical faith (pp. 169–70).

I turn now to critical remarks.

Kemp and Iacovetti argue that Fichte's account of conversion is spontaneous because he denies that a dogmatist has reason to convert and regards dogmatism

as refutable only from an idealist standpoint (pp. 54–7), citing his claim in *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* that ‘self-sufficiency’ grounds the ‘entire refutation of dogmatism’ (Fichte, SW I. 439; cf. 510). Yet in that text Fichte argues that a dogmatist refutes herself, since positing the Not-I as absolute is a normative and thus ‘free act of thinking’ (Fichte, SW I. 425). As he says in *Wissenschaftslehre Nova Methodo*, a dogmatist’s spontaneous act contains her own ‘antidote’ and so she ‘will finally be won over to idealism’ (Fichte, GA IV/2. 16). In *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, moreover, he says that dogmatists who abstract from the I to posit the Not-I ‘think unawares of the *absolute subject as well as contemplating this [Not-I]*’, ‘unwittingly subjoin in thought the very thing from which they have allegedly abstracted, and contradict themselves’ (Fichte, SW I. 97).

This complicates Fichte’s explanation of conversion. As Kemp and Iacovetti note, Fichte posits a ‘natural propensity toward dogmatism’, a ‘disposition’ into which all are ‘born’ and which precedes the passage to idealism (Fichte, SW I. 434, 484, 511). However, a dogmatist’s passage is impeded by no ‘innate difference between human beings’ and ‘derive[d] only from [herself]’. Whence this spontaneity whereby it is ‘probable’ that she will ‘have succeeded in overcoming the very incapacity’ for which Fichte ‘reproache[s]’ her and convert to idealism (Fichte, SW I. 506–7, 511)? Whence the ‘self-sufficiency’ that grounds the ‘entire’ – hence also a dogmatist’s own – refutation of dogmatism? A possible source is neither internally chosen nor externally graced, but externally summoned.

In his 1794 Jena lectures, Fichte suggests that idealism is achieved second-personally when he says that ‘just as we were ushered by birth into this material world’, so idealism ‘seeks – by means of a total rebirth – to usher us into a new and higher world’. Our ‘second birth’ elevates us from mere materiality to self-conscious materiality. Fichte adds: ‘The same difficulty that kept us from entering the first world also prevents us from entering this second one’. The difficulty of both emerging into materiality and rising to self-consciousness is our dependence on others: ‘parents’ must summon us by creating our existence, whereas a ‘teacher’ must summon us by inviting our self-conscious response (Fichte 1988: 202–3, 207). Of course, our second birth involves reciprocal dependence. To ‘communicate’ idealism to us, Fichte ‘has to ask’ us to posit ourselves (Fichte, GA IV/2. 28) yet cannot perform our conversion for us. He is this birth’s midwife just if we freely respond.

Perhaps this reciprocity combines elements of spontaneity and grace into a *fourth* conversion explanation not canvassed in Kant’s *Religion*. If a summons explains idealist conversion, it does so by providing insight into conversion while making freedom constitutive of it, avoiding, respectively, the grace model’s blindness (Kant’s charge) and freedom-denial (Fichte’s charge).

This fourth explanatory model may also capture Kierkegaard’s view that the condition of conversion is passively received yet actively realized. Just as Fichte’s student is summoned to overcome her dogmatic disposition by positing herself yet must perform this act herself, A requires a subjective experience to inculcate post-aesthetic normative possibilities yet must actualize these possibilities himself. Examples of a subjective experience in *Reason and Conversion* are typically second-personal – assaulting someone, falling in love, becoming a parent. Admittedly, Kemp and

Iacovetti describe Kierkegaard's conversion experiences as enticing one into a corner, subverting old possibilities and compelling new ones (p. 132). However, this is arguably reflected in the converting dogmatist, who cannot but respond freely once summoned.

Finally, Kemp and Iacovetti criticize my reading of Schelling's 'Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism' as pluralistic – as committed to the valid multiplicity of philosophical systems (Bruno 2014, 2016, 2020). However, the criticism faces problems on four textual points for which Kemp and Iacovetti offer little or no interpretation.

First, Schelling says the first *Critique's* method is 'irrefutable' since it is 'valid for all systems', whereas a system is 'refutable' by its 'opposite' and 'bears the stamp of individuality on the face of it because no system can be completed otherwise than *practically*, i.e., subjectively' (Schelling, *SSW I/1*. 301, 304). Fichte errs by identifying the *Critique's* universal validity with criticism (Fichte, *SW I*. 474; cf. 511), which Schelling regards as subjectively valid *qua* system, notwithstanding his own commitment to criticism. *Systems are subjectively valid.*

Second, Schelling says the *Critique* deduces the 'possibility of two exactly opposed systems' from 'the essence of reason', deriving the criticism–dogmatism dispute from an 'original opposition in the human mind' (Schelling, *SSW I/1*. 294, 302). *Systems' multiplicity is a priori.*

Third, Schelling says the system we choose depends on our 'freedom of spirit', on how we 'strive' to 'be what we call ourselves'. This is why dogmatism is an 'ethics', why Spinoza finds 'repugnant' a system lacking 'action', and why his freedom-denial is 'voluntary annihilation' (Schelling, *SSW I/1*. 284, 305, 308; emphasis added). *Systems exhibit rival freedoms.*

Fourth, Schelling likens intellectual intuition to 'death', saying that one who achieved it would 'cease to live', to 'be I' (Schelling, *SSW I/1*. 325). Professing intellectual intuition is a 'delusion' – unlike 'self-intuition', whereby we withdraw from sense-experience to what is 'in the strictest sense our own experience', namely, our freedom to decide to 'breathe life' into a system. Since we cannot decide this 'by arguing', self-intuitions are 'insuperable prejudices' (Schelling, *SSW I/1*. 308, 313, 318–19). *Systems presuppose brute decisions.*

Kemp and Iacovetti deny that Schelling is a pluralist partly by suggesting that he holds that criticism and dogmatism will coexist due to the empirical 'fact' that dogmatists fall short of 'Fichte's level of freedom' (pp. 30–1). However, Schelling holds this because systems are equally subjectively valid. Moreover, neither dogmatists' existence nor universally endorsed criticism can remove systems' *a priori* multiplicity. Furthermore, appealing to Fichte's erroneous claim to universal validity begs the question against rival freedoms.

Kemp and Iacovetti suggest that dogmatists' delusion lies in misinterpreting self-intuition and espousing intellectual intuition (p. 34). However, this is the delusion of fanaticism, of which critics like Fichte are equally capable (Schelling, *SSW I/1*. 326–7). Moreover, although 'all contradicting systems' become 'identical' by indulging this delusion, they equally 'hold their own' by avoiding it (Schelling, *SSW I/1*. 331). Furthermore, Schelling coins 'dogmaticism' (see Nieke 1972: 278–9) to denote being

a 'slave of system' – being, like Fichte, so 'vain' as to champion intellectual intuition and 'blind' as to restrict others' 'freedom to decide' (Schelling, *SSW I/1*. 307n., 313).¹ Thus, not only are both dogmatism and criticism theoretically and practically realizable, but both are vulnerable to delusion. Non-fanatical systems acknowledge their brutally decisional grounds.

Unlike Fichte, Schelling does not argue that dogmatism is self-refuting. Kemp and Iacovetti are certainly right that Schelling explains system-conversion as spontaneous. But Schelling's pluralism in the 'Letters' is clear: 'nothing can be more unbearable than the despotism of narrow minds who cannot tolerate another system beside their own. Nothing can rouse the indignation of the philosophical mind more than the declaration that henceforth all philosophy shall be detained in the fetters of a single system' (Schelling, *SSW I/1*. 306).²

G. Anthony Bruno
Royal Holloway University of London, London, UK
Email: g.anthony.bruno@rhul.ac.uk

Notes

- 1 I erroneously say that 'dogmaticism' is *consistently mistranslated* in Schelling 1980 (Bruno 2016: 8, n. 15), but correct this to say that it is *inconsistently translated* (Bruno 2020: 134).
- 2 Thanks to David Suarez and the authors for helpful comments on this review.

References

- Bruno, G. Anthony (2014) 'Freedom and Pluralism in Schelling's Critique of Fichte's Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*'. *Idealistic Studies*, 43(1/2), 71–86.
- (2016) "'As from a State of Death": Schelling's Idealism as Mortalism'. *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, 8(3), 1–14.
- (2020) 'Schelling's Philosophical Letters on Doctrinend Critique'. In M. Acosta and C. J. McQuillan (eds), *Critique in German Philosophy: From Kant to Critical Theory* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press), 133–54.
- Fichte, J. G. (1962–2012). *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften [GA]*. Ed. R. Lauth, H. Jacobs and H. Gliwitzky. Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: Frommann-holzboog.
- (1965) *Sämtliche Werke [SW]*. Ed. I. H. Fichte. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- (1982) *Science of Knowledge*. Trans. P. Heath and J. Lachs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- (1988) *Early Philosophical Writings*. Trans. D. Breazeale. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- (1994) *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*. Trans. D. Breazeale. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- (1998) *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre) nova methodo*. Trans. D. Breazeale. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Nieke, Wolfgang (1972) 'Dogmatismus'. In J. Ritter, K. Gründer and G. Gabriel (eds), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 2. Basel: Schwabe Verlag.
- Schelling, F. W. J. (1856–61) *Sämtliche Werke [SSW]*. Ed. K. F. A. Schelling. Stuttgart: Cotta.
- (1980) *The Unconditioned in Human Knowledge: Four Early Essays 1794–1796*. Trans. F. Marti. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press.