

Karin de Boer: *Kant's Reform of Metaphysics: The Critique of Pure Reason Reconsidered*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 273 p. ISBN 978-1-108-84217-4

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Kant describes the task of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) as “a critique of the faculty of reason in general” (KrV, Axii) that is meant to serve as a “propaedeutic” or preparation for outlining a positive metaphysical system that he divides into “the metaphysics of nature as well as of morals” (KrV, A850/B878, see also A841/B869). Although Kant never fully executed his plan to publish a metaphysics of nature (aside from what might contribute to that end as is contained in the first *Critique* and his 1786 *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*), he did eventually publish the *Metaphysics of Morals* after decades of announcing that he had been working on it.¹ In *Kant's Reform of Metaphysics*, Karin de Boer takes this “relationship between critique and system” (258), as she puts it, seriously. Arguing against Moses Mendelssohn and others who claim that Kant was primarily engaged in an “all-crushing” critique of metaphysics (1), de Boer endeavours to show that “the *Critique of Pure Reason* seeks to *reform* rather than *abolish* the metaphysical systems exemplified by the one that Christian Wolff published in 1719–20” (1, my emphasis). The book is an excellent contribution to a rapidly growing trend in Kant scholarship that gives proper attention to his intellectual context. In the following, I briefly summarize the book's 8 chapters while highlighting how it takes account of this intellectual context. I conclude with a few critical remarks that are meant to draw attention to how the discussions in de Boer's thought-provoking book might be extended.

In Chapter 1, de Boer seeks to clarify “which metaphysical system or systems Kant considered to call for [...] a reform” (16). The chapter has five main sections: after an introduction, section 2 discusses Kant's assessment of Wolff in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and other texts from the same period, 3 outlines relevant elements of Wolff's metaphysics in order to argue that Kant and Wolff had more in common than is often assumed, 4 briefly discusses Crusius's criticisms of Wolff, and 5 sketches the controversies surrounding attempts to reconcile Leibnizian monadology and Newtonian physics in Wolff, Crusius, and Kant's earlier self. A particularly interesting part of the chapter is de Boer's claim that Kant rejected what she calls “continuism”, that is, the “pernicious assumption common to the metaphysical systems of

¹ For an account of this see Kuehn (2010).

Wolff, Crusius, and the tradition they drew on, namely, the assumption that sensibility and thought are nothing but two different ways to obtain knowledge of things” (17).²

Chapter 2 considers how Kant conceived of the aim and main arguments of what would become the first *Critique* in the late 1760s and early 1770s. De Boer focuses on the early instance of the act of critique she finds in the *Inaugural Dissertation*, but she goes on to argue that the first *Critique* assesses the metaphysical systems of Kant’s predecessors according to two criteria: intellectual purity and objectivity (71). She argues that these two kinds of critique are complementary and do not entail the impossibility of metaphysics, but “specify the conditions under which the discipline might be turned into a science” (12).

Chapter 3 analyzes Kant’s multifaceted use of the term ‘transcendental’ against the background of how the term was used in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy. De Boer utilizes this analysis to argue that Wolffian ontology and transcendental philosophy have more in common than is widely assumed, namely they both “provide a comprehensive account of the cognitive elements presupposed in any cognition of objects” (12). The novelty of the first *Critique*, she claims, consists in the investigation into metaphysics that Kant calls transcendental critique. A highlight of the chapter is de Boer’s examination of Kant’s criticism of the ways in which his predecessors and contemporaries (especially Wolff, Tetens, and Lambert) used the terms ‘ontology’ and ‘transcendental philosophy’.

Chapter 4 considers Kant’s account of the thing in itself and the alleged inconsistency between his claims that things in themselves both cannot be known and yet are the cause of representations. De Boer seeks to shed light on this alleged inconsistency by distinguishing between the thing in itself as that which affects us and the thing in itself as merely our way of conceiving of something (102). She argues that this is simultaneously a distinction between the term ‘thing in itself’ as an object that affects our senses and the term ‘thing in itself’ and its cognates in the context of Kant’s critique of Wolffian and post-Wolffian metaphysics. De Boer argues that, in the latter context, ‘thing in itself’, for Kant, refers to “things that can be thought but cannot constitute objects of cognition” (13). She claims that it is the thing in itself in this sense that allows Kant to affirm the ideas of the soul, the world as such, and God as things that can be thought but not known.

Chapter 5 offers an interpretation of the A Deduction in light of Kant’s investigation into the conditions under which metaphysics is possible. De Boer argues that the section is not

² Although de Boer does not mention it, this seems similar to what Kuehn has called in several publications the “continuity thesis”, that is, the thesis that holds “the sensitive and the intellectual form a kind of continuum” (1995, 376) or that “the only difference between intellectual and sensitive cognitions is their degree of distinctness” (1995, 376; see also Kuehn 2001, 185–7).

primarily concerned with the conditions of the possibility of empirical cognition, but with the identification of the conditions under which the categories can be used to produce objects of a priori cognition as such (13). She claims that the deduction simultaneously judges “Wolff’s unqualified affirmation of the possibility of a priori cognition of objects and Hume’s unqualified rejection of the same” (13).

Chapter 6 argues that Kant’s account of the schematism of the pure understanding yields the same result as the transcendental deduction in the sense that both transcendental schemata and categories are “different instances of the a priori rules that determine how the mind can unify a manifold at all” (13f.). She thereby takes Kant to be arguing that Wolffian metaphysics ought to use categories independently of the sensible condition of any a priori cognition of objects, which means that a priori judgements about the soul or God, in Wolff’s system, do not amount to cognition of objects.

Chapter 7 considers the Appendix to the *Transcendental Analytic* entitled ‘On the Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection’, which de Boer claims contains Kant’s most systematic critique of the ontologies known to him. Since Kant conceives of this critique as a variety of transcendental reflection that is guided by four pairs of concepts, such as sameness and difference, she begins by briefly discussing Wolff and Baumgarten’s treatments of these concepts. De Boer concludes the chapter by outlining Kant’s understanding of the difference between a Leibnizian employment of the concepts of reflection and his own.

Chapter 8 considers what de Boer calls the “positive goal” (14) of Kant’s reform of the theoretical part of metaphysics, namely the system of pure reason that he intended to elaborate once the preparatory investigation carried out in the first *Critique* was completed. She argues that Kant’s critique of Wolffian metaphysics paves the way for a reformed version of both general metaphysics or ontology and of special metaphysics. A central claim of hers is that the first *Critique* “does not preclude the possibility of a comprehensive account of the purely intellectual determinations of the ideas of reason themselves” (14), thus Kant’s project in that text is less detrimental to special metaphysics than is generally assumed. She therefore seeks to highlight the common ground that exists between Kant’s projected system and the metaphysical systems of Wolff and Baumgarten. The chapter concludes by arguing that Kant’s later accounts of his intended plan for a system do not deviate from the plan outlined in the first *Critique*.

The book ends with a short Conclusion in which de Boer argues, among other things, that the *Critique of Pure Reason* possesses less “epistemological modesty” (255) than is commonly assumed. Interpreted from the vantage point of the metaphysical system he intended to write once the critique of reason was complete, “the *Critique* does not impose modesty on the human

mind as such, but merely restricts the sphere within which metaphysics can obtain a priori knowledge of objects” (256).

As should be clear from this summary, the book offers a rich discussion of how Kant’s conception of metaphysics can be clarified by situating his thought in relation to the thought of his contemporaries and predecessors. Readers interested in any of the above topics will find much to engage with and each chapter serves as a useful starting point if one wants to better appreciate the historical context of Kant’s thinking on these specific issues. In the remainder of this review, I raise two points of constructive criticism.

First, de Boer is explicit that, throughout the book, she refers to “Wolffian” and “post-Leibnizian” metaphysics “indiscriminately” with the result that, among other things, Christian August Crusius is included in this camp and “might be considered a proponent of Wolffian metaphysics broadly conceived” (1n). At first glance, this claim might surprise readers familiar with Crusius’s philosophy, but later de Boer is careful to stress Crusius’s role as a sharp critic of Wolff’s metaphysics, rather than a proponent, as she discusses in detail in section 4 of chapter 1. Where de Boer’s discussion could have been refined, to my mind, was her depiction of ‘Wolffian’ metaphysics. More specifically, it would have been helpful to highlight both the ways in which Wolff’s own views developed over time as well as how his views were transformed by his followers and disciples such as Baumgarten. In chapter 8, for instance, de Boer aims to argue that “Kant’s projected system would have resembled Baumgarten’s *Metaphysics* in terms of both structure and content” (214). That Baumgarten is the appropriate figure in this context is likely, given Kant’s use of Baumgarten’s textbook in his courses on metaphysics, among others. But de Boer goes on to claim that the differences between Kant and Baumgarten illustrate “the distance between Kant and his predecessors”, or between Kant and “Wolffian metaphysics” more generally (223). While I do not wish to deny that there is much in common between Wolff and his followers such that, at times, it might make sense to refer to ‘Wolffian metaphysics’ in broad strokes, doing so occasionally obscures important differences. Consider the principle of (non-)contradiction, which de Boer discusses in section 3 of chapter 1 over the course of her discussion of the relevant elements of Wolff’s metaphysics that are important for understanding Kant’s later ‘reform’. Wolff’s understanding of this principle underwent some development, such that in the *German Metaphysics* he thought the principle of sufficient reason could be derived from the principle of contradiction (see Wolff 1720, §31), but in the later Latin *Ontology* he seems to think that the principle of sufficient reason requires no proof (see Wolff 1730, §75). Importantly, this is a development that Kant seems to have been aware of (see VMet/Mron, AA 29:788). Additionally, and as de Boer herself mentions (24), Wolff begins the ontology section of his

German Metaphysics by in some sense ‘deriving’ the principle of contradiction from the certainty of self-consciousness and our consciousness of other things (see Wolff 1720, §1–10). Baumgarten, however, simply begins his ontology by discussing the definition ‘nothing’, which leads him to assert that the principle of contradiction as “absolutely primary” (§7) without derivation. Fine differences such as these matter for our understanding of Kant since he was likely aware of them, which can become obscured if one speaks of ‘Wolffian metaphysics’ indiscriminately.

Second, and finally, de Boer is explicit that the book has a restricted scope in that it “largely abstract[s] from Kant’s practical philosophy, from the teleological orientation of his theoretical and practical works, and, more generally, from works published after the *Critique of Pure Reason*” (11). While this lack of a “holistic” (11n) approach is understandable (one can only cover so much in a single book), it is also somewhat surprising given the book’s overall aim. After all, an important piece of Kant’s projected metaphysical system that he *did* publish was the practical part, namely the *Metaphysics of Morals*, and as it happens this work contains material that would have been useful for de Boer to consider. For example: a main claim of de Boer’s is that “Kant’s critique of Wolffian metaphysics paves the way not only for a reformed version of general metaphysics or ontology but also for a reformed version of special metaphysics” (14); the distinction between general and special metaphysics being one that Wolff took over from the preceding tradition (see 1). What de Boer does not mention is that this distinction corresponds to that between general or ‘universal’ practical philosophy, on the one hand, and special practical philosophy or the doctrine of duties, on the other. This latter distinction was especially close to Wolff’s heart, since his first publication of note was a dissertation founding the discipline of universal practical philosophy, and he refined his thoughts on it until his death. Important for de Boer’s purposes is that this distinction is working in the background of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, since Kant discusses the “preliminary concepts of the metaphysics of morals (universal practical philosophy)” in the Introduction to the work (MS, AA 06:221–228), before moving on to discuss the two parts of ‘special’ practical philosophy, namely the doctrine of duties of right and virtue. Drawing on this material would have enriched de Boer’s discussion, so one the one hand her restriction of scope is unfortunate. On the other hand, this clearly illustrates that there are ways in which the book can lead to fruitful further discussion.

Kant’s Reform of Metaphysics will be of interest to Kant scholars of many persuasions, not only those sympathetic to reading Kant in his historical context. But all readers will come away convinced that reading Kant’s metaphysics within the tradition that preceded him, and in which he was working, has numerous benefits.

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