

BOOK REVIEW

Ido Geiger, *Kant and the Claims of the Empirical World: A Transcendental Reading of the Critique of the Power of Judgment* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022 Pp. xiv + 225 ISBN 9781108834261 (hbk) £75.00

Catherine Wilson once described Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* as 'a long, worried, ambivalent book about evolution, beauty, and living forms' (2008: 98, n. 63). Her pithy remark might explain a widely acknowledged feature of scholarship on the third *Critique*, namely its piecemeal character. The apparent ambivalence of Kant's work – moving as it does across aesthetics and philosophy of art, philosophy of biology and the general theory of science, and even philosophy of religion and the final end of human existence, all the while elaborating his baroque philosophical psychology – has led to a suitably fragmentary body of secondary literature. One interpretative challenge, thus, has been to present a unified reading of the treatise, which would show a single overarching thesis running through its fascinating discussions of beauty, sublimity, art, biology, cognition and religion.

Ido Geiger's new monograph takes up this challenge, but with qualifications. Rejecting 'collaged' readings of the third *Critique* (p. 50), he offers a partial remedy to the problem of its unity. The remedy is partial inasmuch as the thesis Geiger sets out to defend – that the principle of purposiveness is a transcendental condition of empirical cognition – only addresses one of the questions Kant identifies as his concern and, indeed, not the principal question. Geiger's account deals with the narrower of the two 'transition' problems Kant raises in the Introductions: the transition from an account of the universal, transcendental laws of nature to an account of its particular, empirical laws. In Geiger's preferred formulation, this problem amounts to articulating 'the transcendental conditions of a particular empirical experience and knowledge of nature', as opposed to the general conditions of experience laid out in the first *Critique's* Analytic of Principles (p. 10). The account presented here sets aside, however, the central problem of the third *Critique*: that of bridging the 'incalculable gulf' between nature and freedom, or between the respective claims of epistemic and moral rationality, with which Kant aims to bring the critical enterprise to a close (*CPJ*, 5: 175). Readers expecting an interpretation of the third *Critique* as a unified whole guided by that task, as advertised in the front matter of the book, will be disappointed. Geiger openly admits this limitation, stating plainly in his introduction that such a reading is not on offer – notably, the sections on the sublime and on fine art as well as the *Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment* are excluded from his account, as is Kant's intriguing and, for the main transition problem, crucial discussion in the *Methodology of Teleological Judgment* of physico- and ethico-theology. In brief, with regard to the unity of the third *Critique*, Geiger's reading avoids being a collage only by passing over what is arguably the book's central concern.

That said, with respect to his specific objective, Geiger presents a compelling and provocative argument for the thesis that the principle of the purposiveness of nature

specifies a transcendental condition of empirical cognition that completes Kant's account in the first *Critique*. Contrasting his interpretation on this point with Rachel Zuckert's (2007), Geiger emphasizes that, whereas Zuckert sees the third *Critique* as concerned with further demarcating the limits of knowledge, he reads it as filling a gap left over from the first *Critique* (p. 12). Put differently, Geiger takes more seriously than most Kant's claim in the Preface to the third *Critique* that a 'critique of pure reason would be incomplete' if the power of judgement were not treated separately as a faculty of cognition (5: 168). The gap in question has to do with the thematic continuity of Kant's discussion of the systematic unity of nature in the first *Critique*'s Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic with that of the third *Critique*'s principle of the purposiveness of nature. Indeed, Geiger's book is reasonably read as taking its cue from the near-universal dissatisfaction with Kant's account in the Appendix of why we must represent nature as a unified conceptual whole. Geiger himself has written on the Appendix (e.g. Geiger 2003), and the present account of the cognitive import of reflective judgement builds on that work. To the expected protest on behalf of the completeness of the first *Critique*, Geiger pleads for a fair hearing, for readers 'not to dismiss a claim I attribute to the third *Critique*, simply because it conflicts with what they think Kant says in the first *Critique*' (p. 14). It is a request I think we ought to grant, as Geiger's interpretation of the grounds and the cognitive significance of the principle of purposiveness is rich, fertile and will doubtless repay careful attention.

Geiger's argument proceeds in two major steps, undertaken in chapters 4 and 5 respectively. The first three chapters – dealing with problems arising from the two Introductions (chapter 1), the relation of Kant's account of organismal teleology to natural teleology in general (chapter 2), and a brief endorsement of one interpretative pole of the Antinomy of Teleological Judgment, the one defended recently by Quarfood (2014) but in an earlier era by Cassirer (1918) and Adickes (1924) (chapter 3) – are largely preparatory, though the discussion of the concept of self-organization (§2.4) is noteworthy for its clarity and insight. Framing the five chapters are a brief introduction and a conclusion. The latter is somewhat misleadingly labelled, for it advances new claims concerning the philosophical upshot of the proffered reading while weakening the force of some of its exegetical claims. Briefly, the conclusion contains a sketch of how the particular version of conceptualism Geiger finds in the third *Critique* could be marshalled to avoid the 'Myth of the Given', by extracting from it a noncircular account of empirical concept acquisition that also respects the obduracy of perception. The proposal is interesting, but does not belong in a conclusion – another chapter laying out these lessons in more detail would have been better.

The heart of the interpretation begins to unfold in chapter 4. Geiger here makes good on his contention that Kant's 'deduction' of the principle of the purposiveness of nature does not, contrary to appearances, consist in the thoroughly dissatisfying argument in SV of the Introduction, where Kant seems to conclude that the principle is valid because of our understanding's (possibly pathological) need for order. Instead, he argues that it is Kant's influential discussion of human discursivity in §§76–7 that finally completes the deduction by anchoring the principle in the sources of cognition. On Geiger's account, indeed, Kant's primary goal in the entire *Critique* of Teleological Judgment is to ground the principle of purposiveness in discursivity,

and therewith to underwrite his claim that nature as a whole has to be conceived as a purposive unity. Briefly, the reason that we must represent nature as a conceptually purposive whole is because the nature of a discursive understanding is such that any empirical concept it comes to possess implicates a hierarchically organized, ideally complete system of other concepts to which it stands in part-whole relations – as the whole of which genus concepts ‘above’ it are parts, or as a part of species concepts ‘below’ it. Geiger’s convincing account of discursivity rests on treating concepts ‘as themselves parts and wholes’ (p. 128). In this account of the logical purposiveness of a conceptual scheme as grounding the assumption of the purposiveness of nature itself, Kant’s analysis of organisms, which has produced its own flourishing industry of Kantian ‘philosophy of biology’, has a strictly instrumental role. For Geiger, the deeper philosophical aim of the Critique of Teleological Judgement is to legitimate for subjective reflection the assumption that nature is organized into a purposive whole of empirical laws and kinds. The detailed analysis of organic beings just happens to be useful in virtue of the (socio-psychological) fact that most of us are ordinarily disposed to speak and think of organisms in terms of purposive self-organization.

The second, more controversial, step of Geiger’s interpretation occupies the longest of the five chapters of the book – 62 pages in all. Indeed, chapter 5 may well be read as a stand-alone essay in defence of the view that nonconceptual aesthetic judgement is a necessary condition of the possibility of conceptual empirical judgement. Geiger’s account involves two main claims. First, pure judgements of taste result in a nonconceptual delineation of objects based on the pleasure occasioned by their mere spatial form, which in turn gives rise to a preliminary sorting of objects into natural kinds on the basis of spatial form; and second, this sorting of objects into kinds is what guides reflective judgement in its search for particular empirical concepts. (Geiger qualifies talk of objects and kinds at this level by speaking of ‘proto-objects’ and ‘proto-kinds’, to underscore that these are discriminated merely spatially and, hence, nonconceptually.) Much hangs on Geiger’s view that Kant’s emphasis on beautiful form as the object of pure judgements of taste has to do quite literally with spatial form – the shapes of flowers, crustaceans, hummingbirds or crystals – and, moreover, that such forms are the characteristic forms of natural kinds. As he puts it: ‘The guiding idea I am attributing to Kant then is that our pleasurable response to certain spatial forms of natural objects affords a first glimpse of where the causal joints of nature are located’ (p. 147). The aim of this interpretative strategy is clear: it is to rope Kant’s account of aesthetic judgement into his theory of cognition. Whatever other value they may have, judgements of natural beauty occupy a necessary role in the process of empirical concept acquisition inasmuch as they supply an initial taxonomy of objects into natural kinds and, thereby, a guideline for causal inquiry. Judgements of taste furnish a ‘revisable hypothesis’ or a ‘first conjecture’ about where the joints of nature are located, and in this consists their transcendental contribution to experience (pp. 164, 166). As with the analysis of organisms, for Geiger, the analysis of aesthetic experience ultimately serves to complete the account of the conditions of empirical cognition begun in the first *Critique*: ‘By saying that the objects of pure judgments of taste are paradigmatically the forms of natural kinds, I mean to be claiming that this is the reason Kant investigates pure judgments of taste’ (p. 150).

A great deal is packed into chapter 5, as Geiger ably tackles the ‘maze of interpretative controversies’ centred on Kant’s theory of aesthetic experience. He defends concrete positions on many of these topics in a way that draws them into his account of Kant’s conceptualism. For example, on the vexed issue of what Kant means by the ‘free play’ of the imagination and understanding upon which the experience of beauty rests, Geiger interprets the harmony of the faculties as amounting to ‘the promissory feeling that a sensible manifold can be brought under concepts’ (p. 189). The cognitive significance of spatial forms also explains, on his view, the universality of aesthetic judgements: we expect universal agreement with judgements of taste because they track the spatial form of objects that can be further investigated and subjected to cognitive judgement (p. 184).

As a reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgement, Geiger’s ingenious efforts are bound to meet considerable resistance, an eventuality of which he is abundantly aware. The key tension that runs throughout the chapter has to do with balancing Kant’s insistence on the nonconceptual character of aesthetic experience while making it relevant to the conceptual knowledge of nature – indeed, not just accidentally but ‘transcendentally’ relevant to cognition. It is one thing, after all, for conceptual inquiry to exploit pleasurable experiences in the context of discovery, and another thing altogether for the grounds of such experiences to constitute necessary, *a priori* conditions of cognitive validity. To Geiger’s credit, he recognizes such tensions with utmost candour. In the end, he tells us, what speaks in favour of his heterodox reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgement is its philosophical lesson, namely its promise for dealing with the Myth of the Given (p. 197) – all the more reason, then, to have included a substantive chapter on the philosophical payoff of a version of Kantian conceptualism rooted in the third *Critique* instead of the brief sketch we get in the Conclusion.

In sum, Geiger’s monograph is inadequate as a unified interpretation of the third *Critique*, at least on a meaningful sense of ‘unity’ that would require addressing all of the big questions explicitly raised in the text, and accounting for all of its substantive parts. His reading of Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgement in particular will no doubt raise plenty of eyebrows. At the same time, Geiger offers here an original, philosophically and textually well-motivated interpretation of Kant’s work from an epistemological interest. That the third *Critique* bears importantly on Kant’s theoretical philosophy independently of its relation to his practical philosophy has long been acknowledged. Geiger’s valuable contribution consists in systematically and thoroughly articulating that dimension of the work. *Kant and the Claims of the Empirical World* will certainly join Zuckert’s *Kant on Beauty and Biology* (2007) and Hannah Ginsborg’s *The Normativity of Nature* (2015) as a touchstone for future Anglophone Kant scholarship on the third *Critique*.

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