

Proops, Ian. *The Fiery Test of Critique: A Reading of Kant's Dialectic*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2021, xiv + 486 pp.

The Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* contains Kant's negative assessment of many doctrines of traditional metaphysics. Yet despite being the lengthiest part of the book, it has in the past received less attention than Kant's positive arguments justifying his transcendental idealism in the Transcendental Aesthetic and Analytic. This attitude has changed in recent decades and at least a couple of influential monographs have been devoted to it (Grier 2001; Willaschek 2018). Unlike previous anglophone works, the more recent literature takes seriously Kant's aim of providing a unifying analysis of the faculty of reason that explicates the motivation behind metaphysical thought, in addition to Kant's criticism of major arguments about the soul, the world-whole and God. Proops' book does an excellent job on both fronts, providing not only extremely detailed reconstructions of the arguments in the Dialectic, but also a convincing case for what unifies them. Additionally, Proops also presents the historical-intellectual context of Kant's arguments, showing an erudite command of diverse historical sources, including obscure notes and treatises of now-forgotten figures.

Proops' interpretation is propelled by a novel picture of the overall strategy of the Dialectic. The main theme, expressed in the title of the book, is the metaphor of the critique of pure reason as a 'fiery test': a metallurgical procedure of melting a sample of metal in order to discover nuggets of precious metals in it (p.10). The emphasis on this metaphor means that the Dialectic is not an entirely negative assessment of traditional metaphysics. The Dialectic instead operates on the assumption that there are things of value to salvage from the tradition. This yields an unorthodox

claim about two ‘silver nuggets’ surviving the test: empirically based beliefs in the afterlife and an intelligent author of nature. The second methodological feature Proops identifies is the skeptical method labeled as an interpretation of Pyrrhonism, which for Proops does not mean indifference but rather a careful scrutiny of disputes, “postponing judgment until the question has been examined from all sides” (p.31). This method is best exemplified in the antinomies and yields a ‘nugget of gold,’ namely an indirect proof for transcendental idealism as the only solution to the contradictions of rational cosmology.

After presenting these aims in the introduction, the book follows the main structure of the Dialectic and analyzes all three parts: rational psychology, rational cosmology, and rational theology. The only discrepancy with the structure of the Critique is that the doctrine of transcendental illusion, central to Kant’s grounding metaphysical errors in the faculty of reason, is included in the first part on rational psychology. At the end of this part, Proops presents the first silver nugget, the empirical analogical argument for the afterlife, attributed in Kant’s lectures to the less-known Scottish philosopher David Fordyce. The argument proceeds from the general teleological principle that all capacities of a creature have the purpose to be fully developed, i.e., there are no potential capacities without use. Since human capacities do not reach their full potential in this world, there should be an afterworld in which these capacities continue to develop. Highlighting Kant’s fondness of this argument and locating it in many of Kant’s lectures is an intriguing contribution, but I am not sure about its place in the Dialectic. While the passage from the B paralogism uses this analogical and teleological reasoning, it seems that Kant emphasizes its moral significance, “in accordance with principles of the practical use of reason” (B424). From all the talents, Kant emphasizes “chiefly the moral law in him” as being purposive “to make himself a suitable citizen of a better [world]” (B425-6). Kant does indeed mention that belief in the afterlife

is a kind of doctrinal belief in addition to being a moral belief (A827/B855). But from the single sentence in which it is mentioned it is not clear what is the contribution of this belief to the theoretical interest of explaining nature, the interest which justifies the more important belief in a wise creator. I tend to see belief in immortality here as a derivative consequence of the general belief in the purposiveness of nature.

For reasons of limited space, the rest of the review will focus on the part on rational theology. Proops dedicates a chapter to each of the theistic arguments (the ontological, the cosmological and the physico-theological), and a final one to the regulative use of the ideas of reason. Proops, however, does not discuss the first three sections of Kant's chapter on rational theology, which include the reconstruction of the idea of God, 'the transcendental ideal,' and its relation to the transcendental illusion. As I will discuss below, this is unfortunate, as it misses an implicit connections between Kant's pre-critical 'only possible argument' (OPA), the critical idea of God and the regulative idea of systematic unity.

Chapter 14 reconstructs and defends Kant's refutation of the ontological argument. Proops shows in great detail why Kant's famous objection that existence is not a predicate targets specifically the version of the argument offered by Leibniz and his successors Wolff and Baumgarten. To put it very succinctly, Kant's arguments work by showing that Leibniz's stance on the Euthyphro problem regarding the priority of the goodness of the world to its actuality is inconsistent with treating existence as a reality. According to Leibniz, God chose to actualize this world because it is the best; the world is not the best because God chose to create it. But this means that the concept of this world already contained the maximal reality in the divine mind and that creating it did not add any reality. Proops claims that this argument would not work against Descartes' original ontological argument because Descartes' voluntarism denies the priority of the

Good over God's choice of actualizing the good. Proops, however, argues that Kant also has the resources to refute the Cartesian version by questioning our ability to cognize the real possibility of a most perfect being (p.362). But this solution is problematic. An objection based on the impossibility of cognizing real possibility does not apply only to the ontological argument nor even only to the concept of God. It could be applied to any noumenal object because being independent of the conditions of possible experience means also being independent of any knowable condition of real possibility. But this restriction on cognizing real possibility depends on accepting transcendental idealism and hence cannot be used as part of the Dialectic which aims to show the fallacies of rationalistic metaphysics without presupposing transcendental idealism. Therefore, if the 'existence is not a predicate' objection is ineffective against Descartes, then Kant's case against rational theology is shakier than Proops admits.

Parenthetically, Proops' reference to the distinction between logical and real possibility is confusing at times (e.g., in the claim that the third and fourth antinomies cannot establish even the logical possibility of the thesis; see pp.280, 330). Proops bases this claim partly on the expression 'in itself impossible' (A562-3/B590-1), but I see no evidence that it refers to logical impossibility rather than real impossibility.

Proops' treatment of the cosmological argument in chapter 15 is similarly thorough and enlightening. Kant famously rejects the cosmological argument by showing its dependency on the ontological argument. Proops' interpretation of this dependency is somewhat unorthodox. While most interpretations locate the dependency in the transition from the existence of some necessary being to the existence of the most real being (*ens realissimum*), Proops argues that Kant concedes the existence of the *ens realissimum*, and only questions the transition to the *necessary* existence of the *ens realissimum* (pp.380-1). Proops has an intricate argument for this interpretation based

on the identification of contingency with possible existence in some other way, and necessity with essentially unimodal existence (existence in only one way). In addition to the opaque passages in the critique, Proops supports this interpretation with additional passages from the lectures and by identifying Kant's main target in Wolff's version of the cosmological argument. Although the details of this interpretation are convincing, I wonder again whether it weakens Kant's case against the cosmological argument more than Proops admits, since it allows theists to maintain the existence of the *ens realissimum* by abandoning the demand that 'necessary being' be identified with 'conceptually necessary being' (p.387).

The 'silver nugget' of rational theology lurks in the third type of proof, the physico-theological proof (chapter 16). When downgraded from a dogmatic proof to an empirical-analogical argument, it can base a doctrinal belief in a very great and wise Author of Nature (p.421). This belief is conducive for investigating the seemingly end-directed phenomena in nature. Here Proops makes an intriguing reference to Kant's pre-critical discussion of teleology in the second part of OPA which has not received much attention in the growing literature on this work. Yet, on my view, Proops misses an important context that affects the plausibility of the conclusion about doctrinal belief in the existence of God. The teleological argument of OPA is not meant to be an independent proof for the existence of God, but rather to show the usefulness of the conception of God as the ground of all possibility advanced in the a priori argument of OPA. The a priori conception of God is useful because it leads to the right use of physico-theology, which proceeds from the unity of essences and laws in nature rather than from speculating about specific divine purposes. While Proops discusses the revised method of physico-theology at length, he does not discuss its connection to the underlying a priori conception of God. This same conception of God as the ground of all possibilities is reintroduced implicitly in the section of the

transcendental ideal (A573/B60I). It is also referred to explicitly in Kant's lectures on theology (28: 1036). Yet Proops does not mention the a priori argument of OPA and its aftermath in the transcendental ideal. This rare omission is understandable given the comprehensiveness of the book, but it leads to a blind spot about the relations between the doctrinal belief in God, the regulative idea of God and the regulative idea of systematic unity (discussed in chapter 17).

Proops treats the idea of God and the idea of systematic unity as two separate regulative ideas (p.451). The former idea guides the formation of a system of concepts of natural kinds and laws of nature, while the latter points out purposiveness in nature. But Kant explicitly states that the regulative idea of God is justified by and subordinated to the idea of systematic unity: "the idea of that being [God], means nothing more than that reason bids us consider every connection in the world according to principles of a systematic unity" (A686/ B714). This separation draws Proops' interpretation of doctrinal belief as based on empirical physico-theology closer to the dogmatic type of physico-theology Kant rejects. For example, the recurrent references to examples such as the beneficial geography of riverbeds (pp.428, 451) obscure Kant's resistance to attributing specific purposes to nature in contrast with purposiveness in the sense of generic systematicity. This is another manifestation of the problem in Proops' original yet controversial thesis that dogmatic metaphysics can be pruned to produce 'silver nuggets' of doctrinal beliefs as empirically grounded hypotheses. The resulting empirical idea of God as a very wise creator comes closer to the hypothesis of direct provision and falls short of reason's regulative idea of God as a ground of the systematic unity of essences and laws of nature. A final note about this chapter: I must commend the richness of the background material provided to explicate Kant's chemistry and astronomy examples. This is a great resource for anyone interested in Kant's relation to the scientific context of his time.

The above reservations I have about some of the arguments do not detract from my great appreciation of Proop's impressive project. The book is one of the most thorough and rich monographs devoted to the Dialectic. The detailed yet lucid commentary, the careful reconstruction and evaluation of the arguments, and the erudite engagement with the historical background in philosophy, theology and science make it an invaluable contribution. I highly recommend the book to anyone interested in Kant's critical philosophy.

Bibliography

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