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Yirmiyahu Yovel: *Kant's Philosophical Revolution: A Short Guide to the Critique of Pure Reason*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. 112 pp. ISBN 978-0-691-18052-6.

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Yirmiyahu Yovel was my teacher at the New School for Social Research, NY. He was a towering figure: elegant, cosmopolitan, with a mellifluous voice – a kind of philosophical Scheherazade who took his students on magic carpet rides to visit the worlds of his favorite thinkers. He told his stories effortlessly, avoiding jargon and hardly consulting his notes, and as his thoughts unfolded ripe from his mind it seemed they had been maturing there for years. His capacity to capture the gist of a philosopher with a few decisive strokes often left us breathless.

Yovel's latest book, "*Kant's Philosophical Revolution: A Short Guide to the Critique of Pure Reason*", has the feel of his lectures. The text is a little more than a hundred pages long, cut with Ockham's razor to produce an arresting narrative. This is how he describes the project in the Preface:

This short book is intended to help readers find their way through the web of Kant's classic. It is intended not as a defense, or evaluation, but as a descriptive explication. Leaving many secondary matters on the sidelines, I distilled the major issues and arguments and present them in the order in which they arise in the book. The result is an interpretation carried out by a systematic exposition. (ix)

This type of bird's-eye view is well suited to approaching the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which Yovel considers "[p]erhaps the most influential book of philosophical modernity" but recognizes to be "one of the hardest to read," since "[b]oth in substance and in style it often makes the reader wonder where the argument goes, or how to understand a difficult idea or tortuous sentence" (ix). As with the pyramids and other sublime things of overwhelming magnitude, "to get the full emotional effect" of Kant's first *Critique* "one must neither come too close [...] nor be too far away" (KU, AA 05: 252). This is the position Yovel aims to maintain throughout the book, hovering above the argumentative details that fuel scholarly debates but can occlude the larger picture, yet not so far removed from Kant's text as to lose sight of the argument. Such a balancing act requires a great deal of philosophical self-restraint, leaving much unsaid in order to express more incisively what one must. And although we can fault Yovel's account for not being comprehensive (e. g., the entire Doctrine of Method is omitted from the discussion, and the Transcendental Dialect receives short shrift in a scant sixteen

pages), a few omissions are a reasonable price to pay for the synoptic and panoramic vistas of Kant's monumental book that it provides.

"The text," Yovel tells us, "is based on the introduction to my Hebrew translation of the *Critique of Pure Reason*" (ix), published in Tel-Aviv in 2013. The English version is a stand-alone piece that appeared almost simultaneously with Yovel's death from cancer in 2018. It can be read as a testament to future students (its similarity to my graduate school notes is uncanny), but it is also a helpful guide for the specialist, since it contains numerous lessons in strategic forgetfulness that counteract scholarly shortsightedness. First-time readers of the *Critique* needing a scout to venture into the wilderness of Kant's argument would benefit the most.

Yovel's book is divided into two parts: a concise reconstruction of "Kant's philosophical revolution" (a motto that serves both as title and as guiding thread), and a longer second section, "[f]ollowing Kant's Argument," which analyzes in one fell swoop the bulk of the *Critique*, from the Introduction to the end of the Transcendental Dialectic.

Although Part I draws primarily on the two Prefaces, it has a programmatic role in Yovel's book as a whole, since it is here that he lays down his interpretative cards. Given the strategic importance of this score of pages, I will devote most of this review to summarizing it. Kant's philosophical originality, Yovel argues, lies "in a completely new understanding of the concept of object, or objective being, and its relation to human knowledge" (1). While "philosophers since ancient times" believed that human knowledge "must fit the structures and features of an object that stands in itself independently" from us, "[t]he Kantian revolution abolishes the object's metaphysical independence and makes it depend on the structure of human knowledge" (1–2). Instead of copying cognitive patterns from the world, "Kant's bold idea" is that the mind "*dictates* these patterns to the world" (2). Yet in so doing, it does not create "the world *ex nihilo*"; rather, it "constitutes a cosmos from chaos" (2) by endowing the crude materials supplied by the senses with "the unity, the permanence, and the necessary relations by which the objective state of affairs (in short, the object) is constituted" (3).

The fact that "objectivity is a status that is *constituted* rather than immediately given or passively encountered" (2), Yovel maintains, is key to understanding Kant's preoccupation with the foundations of mathematics and the natural sciences. This is so "because it is on the scientific level of knowledge that the synthesis of the sensual materials that constitute an object is carried out" (3). Against the narrowly epistemological appropriations of Kant, which Yovel ascribes (without citing sources) to "[m]any English-speaking interpreters" and "neo-Kantian German scholars," he favors the "standpoint of the object" in order to "highlight the *Critique's* broader philosophical meaning (and role in modern thinking)" (3). As Yovel takes it, that meaning acquires a clear existential ring and

ultimately refers to the human condition, where finitude and infinity engage in constant battle. For, just as much as “Kant’s revolution places the human subject at the metaphysical/philosophical center,” it also insists that “reason, in all its doings, is inexorably dependent on the presence of sensible material [...] without which the spontaneous activity of reason could not take place, or would be meaningless and void of content” (4).

Yovel links this inner tension to the twofold character of the *Critique*, which can be read as having an affirmative and a negative aspect. Kant lays the ground for the affirmative dimension of his project in the Transcendental Aesthetic and the Analytic. For, Yovel maintains, by examining the nature and scope of our cognitive capacities, “the *Critique* itself offers a substantive theory, not only of self-consciousness but also of the foundations of the natural world” (6). This theory inaugurates a new type of metaphysics, a *critical* metaphysics, meant to vindicate the old queen of the sciences, which now lies “outcast and forsaken” following a long history of failed attempts to fulfil its promise of finding the supersensible foundations of the sensible world and explicating the meaning of being (84). Kant’s critical philosophy achieves both goals, for it maintains that “the conditions for *thinking* objects in nature are equally the conditions for these *to be* objects in nature” (6). Since we are dealing with a single set of conditions, Yovel explains, “in knowing the grounds of thinking natural objects we at once know the first grounds of nature itself, that is, we possess what Kant calls ‘a pure science of nature’” (6). It is in the a priori apparatus of human consciousness that Kant finds the “supernatural foundations” that old metaphysicians looked for in vain in a transcendent world. This discovery allows him to conclude that in order to determine the “meaning of being,” we must reverse the direction of the philosophical gaze: Instead of looking outwardly to an allegedly independent world, we must look inwardly, to the role the mind plays in constituting it. This reversal of attention, Yovel concludes, makes Kant a preeminently modern thinker.

Kant’s identification of the “science of consciousness” with the “science of being” contains an underbelly, however. This is the other, negative side of the *Critique*, which points to the harsh discipline required to accept reason’s boundaries and keep its tendency to contravene them in check. Although accepting our finitude is made possible by an act of self-cognition, it is not reducible to it. It presupposes, in addition, an “act of will” through which reason “determines itself [...] to respect those limits and prevail over the temptation to transgress them, a temptation that Kant sees as inherent in the nature of rationality” (7). If we read the *Critique* this way, Yovel reckons, we come to see that autonomy is not confined to the practical domain but rather informs our cognitive activity from the ground up. The “pain and sense of loss” entailed by “submitting to the limits of reason” (7) are the flipside of Kant’s affirmative project, a tribute that the arrogance of

our speculative reason must pay to the inescapable reality of human sensibility (i. e., our lack of “intellectual intuition”). Even if Yovel does not explicitly say so, his approach suggests that what motivates the Transcendental Dialectic is the correlate, at the level of theoretical reason, of “self-conceit” (*Eigendünkel*) – the noxious form of self-love that Kant discusses in his moral writings. So construed, the “logic of illusion” in the second major part of the *Critique* (with its host of ideas, paralogisms, and antinomies) expresses a form of heteronomy, a type of false consciousness by which reason, in a futile attempt to become one with the absolute, forfeits its responsibility for self-determination.

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of Yovel’s interpretation is that it frames the temptation to overstep our cognitive limitations in light of two key notions in Kant’s metaphilosophy: the “architectonic of reason” and the “history of reason” (15). These notions, which Kant develops in the last two chapters of his book, loomed large in Yovel’s other major text on Kant, his influential *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton, 1980, 1986). By using them as a foil here, Yovel upends the way readers normally tackle the *Critique*. His insight is that what Kant places last in the order of exposition should come first for the reader in the order of discovery. For, as Kant sees it, reason is a goal-oriented activity, driven by a number of interests that realize themselves in imperfect cultural formations throughout history. In his own time, Kant saw two of those interests clash: “the metaphysical interest of reason, embodied by Leibniz’s dogmatic rationalism, and the critical interest, expressed one-sidedly in Hume’s skepticism” (17). “Both [interests] are necessary conditions of rationality, yet they oppose each other in the contemporary philosophical culture” (19), urging human reason to find a way to reconcile them and supersede their conflict. The *Critique of Pure Reason* is the offshoot of such reconciliation.

Interpreted this way, Kant’s accomplishment, Yovel tells us in the concluding pages of his book, entails accepting that “the great metaphysical questions be recognized as meaningful and necessary even while critical reason determines they are unanswerable” (103). The positivist attempt to “silence such questioning or ‘cure’ the mind of it,” Yovel believes, is as irrational as the escapist projects that “abandon reason altogether in favor of answers offered by intuition, desire, a sense of need, a leap of faith, the power of tradition, or various forms of mystical revelation” (103). “[T]o deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” (KrV, B XXX) is to embrace “the *tension* between the meaningful questions and their impossible answer” (104), a tension that for Kant defines the human condition – the beauty and the plight of our finite rationality. Acquiring a critical self-awareness, then, “leave[s] a hiatus, a permanent fissure between the desired object and its fulfilment [...], which preserves the element of *eros* within the Kantian *logos* even at its highest achievement, and indeed as *part* of that achievement”

(104). As Yovel sums up this view in his final sentence, Kant must be placed in the company of Socrates, for the first *Critique* is a form of *learned ignorance*, the result of heeding “the ancient command ‘know thyself’ by means of speech and by means of silence, by asserting capability and by accepting finitude” (104).

Building on these interpretative assumptions, in the second part of his book Yovel provides “a brief account of the [*Critique*’s] main topics and arguments in the order of its chapters” (21). This is a take-by-take unfolding of Kant’s argument, a veritable “distillation” of Kant’s key thoughts (in some cases of no more than one or two pages). Yovel is not interested in discussing secondary literature or alternative readings but instead makes a point of frequently relating Kant to the views of his contemporaries and predecessors, in a deliberate attempt to travel from philosophical peak to peak and to avoid the comedown of scholarly minutia. This is particularly evident in his analysis of the Transcendental Deduction, arguably the most important but forbiddingly difficult part of Kant’s book. Yovel here uses Hume’s skeptical arguments regarding necessary connections between phenomena and against personal identity to set the stage for Kant’s Deduction. He shows how Hume’s doubts inform, respectively, Kant’s “regressive argument” (developed mostly in *Prolegomena*) and his “progressive” account, centered on the unity of apperception. What I found most interesting in Yovel’s perceptive analysis is that it shows how these two different lines of argument actually converge. As he puts it:

The identity of the subject makes possible the unity of the object, and *vice versa*, the unity of the object (the objective world) enables the subject to constitute and realize its identity. The regressive and the progressive arguments thus support each other in a constructive circle, and the Deduction responds in a single (if complex) stroke to Hume’s two challenges, concerning objective knowledge and the identity of the subject. (62)

There are other hidden jewels in this short book, which I will not discuss here. What it is important to make clear is that, as I see it, *Kant’s Philosophical Revolution* stands out in the secondary literature. Because of its unique combination of brevity and depth of insight, it is perhaps comparable to Gilles Deleuze’s *Kant’s Critical Philosophy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1963), which in a masterful seventy-five pages offered a systematic account of all three *Critiques*. Yovel’s book has a narrower scope but combines some of that Parisian flavor with the sparser style of Anglophone philosophy. Its cosmopolitanism bears witness to the character of its author.