Book Review

For the Love of Metaphysics: Nihilism and the Conflict of Reason from Kant to Rosenzweig, by Karin Nisenbaum. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xii + 280.

In the Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant warns that freedom and morality 'give way to the mechanism of nature' if we defer to reason's speculative use, which, since it is restricted to the 'natural necessity' of appearances, renders its 'practical extension [. . .] impossible'. It is in light of this that he resolves to 'deny knowledge in order to make room for faith' of the sort that can withstand 'all unbelief conflicting with morality' (Kant Bxxvii-xxx). Kant concludes in the Doctrine of Method that, by preventing speculative 'devastations' to freedom and morality, critique allows us to 'return to metaphysics as to a beloved from whom we have been estranged' and to pursue the 'essential ends of humanity' to which mathematical, scientific, and empirical knowledge have 'value' strictly as 'means' (Kant A849-50/B877-8).

This foregrounds Kant's claim in the Dialectic of the *Critique of Practical Reason* that 'all interest is ultimately practical and even that of speculative reason is only conditional and is complete in practical use alone', from which he infers that we avoid 'a conflict of reason with itself', not by a '*contingent*' juxtaposition of speculative and practical reason, but rather by a '*necessary*' union of speculative and practical reason in which 'the latter has primacy' (Kant AA 5: 121, emphasis in original). It is for the sake of practical knowing, on whose actuality its object is grounded, that there is theoretical knowing, whose actuality by contrast is grounded on its object. And it is for the sake of practical self-knowing, which produces its object, that there is theoretical other-knowing, which by contrast receives its object (see Engstrom 2013, pp. 145-6).

German idealism radicalizes the primacy of practical reason, using various argumentative strategies to prove that reason is the all, that is, that reason is unconditionally self-knowing and unconditionally actual such that it produces and grounds its object in every respect (see Hegel GW 12: 238). It is only by proving the identity of reason and the all, or of thought and being, that idealism can overcome presuppositions that leave Kant's practical turn

vulnerable to speculative devastation by arguably more rigorous rivals like Spinoza.

Karin Nisenbaum's *For the Love of Metaphysics* interprets German idealism as an evolving response to Kant's practical resolution to the conflict of reason, a dialectic that reveals reason as an activity that cannot be reduced to nature (Jacobi), that must be actualized as a system (Maimon), that must ground moral obligation (Fichte), that must ground the subject-object relation (Schelling), and that must affirm the value of the world (Rosenzweig). The thread that unites these responses, she argues, is our freedom to actualize reason as unconditioned, a freedom to which we must not only commit ourselves, but with whose capacity for evil we must reconcile ourselves and to whose responsibility for others we must pledge ourselves.

Moreover, Nisenbaum's book defends the view that freedom can never fully actualize reason as unconditioned on the grounds that this is a task for finite beings, who must strive endlessly to realize the identity of reason and the all. For such beings, philosophy can never achieve its end and therefore cannot vindicate Hegel's claim in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* to 'lay aside the title "*love* of *knowing*" and be *actual knowing*' (Hegel W 3: 14, emphasis in original), for which reason Nisenbaum excludes Hegel from her account.

Analysing core German idealist primary texts and drawing on a range of recent secondary literature, Nisenbaum offers a lucid and accessible discussion of the post-Kantian inheritance and transformation of the conflict of reason. In what follows, I will provide a short summary of each part of the book and then raise some questions about Nisenbaum's interpretations of several of its main figures.

Part One explains Jacobi's charge that transcendental idealism annihilates what it explains and Maimon's charge that it leads to scepticism.

According to Jacobi, transcendental idealism explains the independence of objects in terms of the experiencing subject, thereby denying the objects' real independence. While this specific charge conflates transcendental and empirical reality, Nisenbaum notes that Jacobi's deeper worry is that, by indulging philosophy's general demand for explanatory conditions, idealism employs the understanding *qua* inferential faculty unchecked by reason *qua* perceptual faculty, comprehending endless explanations without apprehending the facts and values that render such explanations world-responsive rather than frictionless (Nisenbaum 2018, pp. 26-8). Consistently indulging philosophy's demand by applying the principle of sufficient reason to the all entails the denial of individuals with intrinsic features or worth and thereby entails nihilism, a charge for which Jacobi coins the term and which he levels against all of philosophy. Jacobi's solution to nihilism is to return, via a rehumanizing leap or *salto mortale*, to reason's natural faith in such grounding facts and values as that I freely strive among other embodied persons to achieve moral ends that are set by God (Nisenbaum 2018, pp. 43-4).

On Maimon's qualifiedly rationalist view, explanatory conditions are elements of merely finite and hence dubious intelligibility unless they are shown to derive from a first principle that can ground their infinite and hence indubitable intelligibility. Nisenbaum reads Maimon's charge against transcendental idealism—namely, that it forsakes this first principle by dividing cognition into separate stems that each have their own brute conditions—as the charge that it fails to show *contra* scepticism how metaphysics is possible (Nisenbaum 2018, p. 64). Space and time are not brute forms of sensibility, for Maimon. Instead, they arise from the principle of determinability, which derives real unity from a predicate that is unthinkable without a subject and derives ever more specific unities from this unity, generating a series of synthetic judgments whose logical succession is representable temporally and whose logical simultaneity is representable spatially (Nisenbaum 2018, pp. 84-6). Our task, then, is to actualize the philosophical system that this succession composes in our pursuit of infinite intelligibility.

Part Two explains how, in light of Jacobi's and Maimon's challenges, Fichte proves that practical reason is unconditioned.

A transcendental argument is meant to demonstrate that a certain *a priori* condition is necessary for the unity, not simply of belief and action, but rather of myself as believing and acting. The presence of this condition amounts to the presence of the self-relation whereby I posit myself as unifying my beliefs and my actions. Nisenbaum claims that, for Fichte, self-positing is precisely this self-relating act of ascribing responsibility to myself for my speculative and practical commitments, an act that provides the ampliative as opposed to explicative step that is required by a transcendental argument (Nisenbaum 2018, pp. 123-4). She then argues that Fichte can show why there is nothing dogmatic about Kant's thought experiment in the second *Critique*, which is designed to elicit our respect for the moral law and thereby to serve as a deduction of freedom. Adopting the law requires subordinating my love of life to it, a performance that exhibits my ability to act on a principle independently of inclination and that therefore actualizes my freedom. To perform such an act just is to self-ascribe my responsibility for my commitments, that is, to posit myself (Nisenbaum 2018, pp. 135-7, 141). Since subject and object in this free performance are identical, neither is conditioned by the other, which accordingly proves practical reason's unconditionality (Nisenbaum 2018, p. 155).

Part Three explains how the unconditionality of the practical drives Schelling's account of the subject-object relation and Rosenzweig's account of the value of the world.

Schelling defends an anti-nihilist pantheism that is grounded on freedom. Schelling conceives freedom as the positive capacity for both good and evil in order to avoid Kant's problem of how evil is imputable to our will, given that reason cannot extirpate the moral law and given that we are not responsible for our sensible inclinations. Nisenbaum draws attention to Schelling's

distinction between God's existence and the ground of God's existence. While this ground yearns to actualize itself, we are the vehicle for its actualization, where goodness consists in our accepting responsibility for actualizing God's existence and evil consists in our refusing participation in this project and retreating toward a false sovereignty outside it (Nisenbaum 2018, pp. 193-4). Morality is accordingly the task of upholding the value of the laws that facilitate God's actualization, which Schelling regards as our unification of God's ground with its existence, an explanation of the subject-object relation in terms of the moral redemption of existence (Nisenbaum 2018, pp. 205, 208). Nisenbaum helpfully compares Schelling's ontology to perfectionist ethics, which conceives of the moral lives that we share with others as both a burdensome responsibility and the condition of our individuation. She also compares Schelling's ontology to the Kabbalistic concept of ẓimẓum, according to which the divine contracts itself in order for finite creation to exist and to refashion divinity through coordinated moral action (Nisenbaum 2018, pp. 204, 207).

Rosenzweig echoes Jacobi's claim that the principle of sufficient reason, if consistently applied to the all, leads to nihilism and that we must therefore recognize that its use is limited by its presupposition of a particular value and a particular fact, namely, the value of the created world and the fact of our affirmation of it, a fact that, following Schelling, he thinks functions as the revelation of the world's creation by God (Nisenbaum 2018, p. 223). Nisenbaum observes that Rosenzweig conceives of this revelation in terms of the moral task of neighbourly love as commanded by God, our commitment to which is a contingent act of freedom (Nisenbaum 2018, pp. 230-5). In neighbourly love, I seek to awaken subjectivity in others who can join in the pursuit of shared moral ideals and thereby asymptotically converge with still others on a common form of life, that is, on a common confession of the name 'One' (Nisenbaum 2018, pp. 238-9, 246). The unconditionality of practical reason thus presents us with the infinite end of redeeming a morally fragmented world.

Nisenbaum concludes that German idealism inherits and transforms Kant's practical solution to the conflict of reason into the problem of how to affirm the value of human action and thus how to overcome the persistent nihilistic temptation of rejecting the reality and purpose of human finitude (Nisenbaum 2018, pp. 251-2).

For the Love of Metaphysics admirably contributes to the ongoing advancement of German idealist scholarship toward greater exegetical clarity and broader contemporary significance. It is with an eye toward these goals that I turn to consider some interpretive questions.

In the first edition of *David Hume*, Jacobi includes Kant among those who nihilistically overlook the fact that the understanding's inferential explanations presuppose reason's natural faith in basic facts and values, provoking Kant in 'What Is Orientation in Thinking?' to assert that his belief in God is

based on a need of reason as opposed to inclination. This leads Jacobi in the second edition to re-evaluate his charge and to approvingly acknowledge reason's priority over understanding in Kant's practical philosophy. Nisenbaum takes this as evidence that Jacobi likewise bases his belief in God on a need of reason, a need that she says is clarified by his critique of the understanding's inferential mode of explanation (Nisenbaum 2018, pp. 52-3). But is this an equivocation?

Jacobi describes Kant's practical philosophy in the second edition as undermining natural science 'for the love of metaphysics'. But he regards this love as licensing faith in God as 'a *power of providence and miracles*' that stands, not only 'above nature', but also 'outside [...] the good' (Jacobi 1994, p. 556, emphasis in original). Does such a belief in God involve what Kant regards as usurpatory concepts like 'fate' and 'fortune'? And does it subordinate the moral law rather than serve it as a postulate? If so, it seems that Jacobi's belief cannot be rationally grounded in Kant's sense.

Otherwise put, does a suitably univocal sense of 'reason' inform both Kant's 'Orientation' essay and Jacobi's claim that his own '*qualitative* distinction between reason and understanding' is 'at variance with Kant', whom he says confuses these faculties by subordinating each to the other (Jacobi 1994, pp. 546-7, emphasis in original)? Jacobi implies a negative answer to this question when he asserts the 'irreconcilability of the original presuppositions' of their respective views—his being a '*perception*' whose 'truth' is 'an incomprehensible miracle', Kant's being the 'quite opposite assumption (a hoary heritage of the schools) that *there is strictly speaking no perception*', but instead only representations that are frictionlessly reflected on by the understanding and reason (Jacobi 1994, p. 552, emphasis in original). He implies a negative answer once again when he asserts that Kant's philosophy yields 'a system of absolute subjectivity' that directly opposes the 'Jacobian doctrine', which yields 'a system of absolute objectivity' on the basis of a '*natural faith of reason*' that perceives the 'positive revelation' of God (Jacobi 1994, p. 552, emphasis in original).

The concern is that Jacobi's belief in God is arational. For Kant, the ground of belief in God is reason's moral law, whose necessity and configuration within the highest good warrant the practical postulates of God and immortality. The need of reason that supports Jacobi's belief, by contrast, depends on the revelation of God to our perception, the contingency of which is at odds with the necessary ground of Kant's belief.

This perceptual contingency is reflected in Jacobi's conception of moral identity, which he explains in the *Spinoza Letters* with the case of Sperchis and Bulis, two Spartans who, when faced with the power of a Persian prefect, are willing to subordinate their love of life, not to a universal moral law as in Kant's thought experiment, but rather to the contingent historical experience that forms their particular moral identity, an experience that accordingly puts them 'in possession of a truth that [others] lack'. Rather than 'boast

of any virtue', they profess 'their heart's sentiment' because, Jacobi says, 'their philosophy was just history. And can living philosophy ever be anything but history?' (Jacobi 1994, pp. 238-9). The basis of Jacobi's belief in God is thus less like Kantian reason and more like inclination than Nisenbaum suggests, putting him slightly out of step with the dialectic as she traces it from Kant to Fichte.

In the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic, Kant claims that while the understanding unifies objects under concepts, reason unifies concepts under ideas in order to satisfy its demand for the systematic unity of cognition. Nisenbaum poses to Kant the question of why we should heed reason's demand for systematicity and argues that Maimon supplies an answer in the *Essay on Transcendental Philosophy*, an answer that she argues provides a development of Kant's doctrine of ideas. According to Maimon, we must heed the demand of reason because it realizes our vocation of representing the all as it would be represented by an infinite intellect, which we hypothetically assume in order to explain the framework in which we are entitled to cognition (Nisenbaum 2018, pp. 97-9, 101). The idea of the infinite intellect, Nisenbaum says, is actual, not in itself, but only insofar as it regulates our cognitive activity (Nisenbaum 2018, pp. 104-5). But is the question that is put to Kant well-posed? And is Maimon's answer, as presented, more satisfying than the response that Kant might provide?

Kant's view of reason in the Appendix is that if reason were to deny the demand for the systematic unity of cognition, it 'would proceed directly contrary to its vocation'. Indeed, he says that if we did not heed this demand, 'we would have no reason, and without that, no coherent use of the understanding, and, lacking that, no sufficient mark of empirical truth' (Kant A651/B679). Hence Kant infers that the very idea of systematicity 'is inseparably bound up with the essence of our reason', adding that this idea corresponds to the ideal of an '*intellectus archetypus*' from which the systematic unity of cognition would be derived (Kant A694-5/ B722-3). Since reason's demand for systematicity follows from its own nature, it seems that Nisenbaum's question to Kant of why we should heed it is not well-posed.

Moreover, Kant clarifies that reason's use in response to its essential demand is 'hypothetical' insofar as the 'universal'—namely, 'systematic unity'—by which it judges the 'particular'—namely, the understanding's cognitions—is 'assumed only problematically' as 'a mere idea', from which it follows that this use of reason, since the 'truth of the universal' does not follow from such use, is 'regulative' rather than 'constitutive' (Kant A646-7/ B674-5). Clearly, Maimon's view of reason shares central aspects of Kant's view. However, Nisenbaum identifies a divergent aspect, namely, Maimon's claim that the demand of reason is contingent (Nisenbaum 2018, p. 106). For Kant, were this demand contingent, we could ignore it and, *per impossibile*, 'have no reason'. But then not only can Kant dissolve the question of heeding

the demand of reason, but it is also unclear why we would follow Maimon by indulging it.

Nisenbaum claims that the Fichtean interpretation of Kant's deduction of freedom is a response to scepticism regarding our entitlement to conceive of ourselves as free, a response that she says does not refute the sceptic, but rather invites him to transform his own self-conception (Nisenbaum 2018, p. 131). But is this an accurate characterization of a Fichtean account of freedom?

In the *Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte distinguishes between critical scepticism, mere scepticism, and dogmatism. He attributes 'critical' scepticism to 'Hume, Maimon, or Aenesidemus [. . .] for it points out the inadequacy of the grounds' of knowledge and thereby shows 'where better are to be found. And if knowledge gains nothing as to content from this, it certainly does as to form—and the interests of knowledge are but poorly recognized in denying to the sharp-sighted sceptic the respect which is his due' (Fichte SW I:121n). Critical scepticism serves 'the interests of knowledge' by instructing us to discover its 'grounds', that is, the 'form' to which we are entitled for the very possibility of knowledge. This form is precisely the self-positing act of ascribing responsibility to myself for my theoretical and practical knowledge. Insofar as the critical sceptic 'points out' the need to apprehend this form, he earns our 'respect' and is thus not to be refuted. While this agrees with Nisenbaum's characterization of a Fichtean transcendental argument, it is crucial for Fichte that, in order to vindicate idealism as an unrivalled philosophical system, such an argument must refute both mere scepticism and dogmatism, which it does by showing that they are both self-refuting.

Mere scepticism, which Fichte also calls 'thoroughgoing dogmatism', is self-refuting, for whereas philosophy is systematic, mere scepticism 'denies that our knowledge has any ground whatever' and so 'denies the very possibility of any system', but 'does so in systematic fashion, so that it contradicts itself and is totally unreasonable' (Fichte SW I: 120, 121n). Mere scepticism is thus theoretically self-refuting, that is, self-refuting in its very concept.

By contrast, dogmatism is practically self-refuting, that is, self-refuting in its very performance. Unlike mere scepticism, dogmatism explicitly purports to be a system, one that Fichte concedes in *Attempt at a New Presentation of the Wissenschaftslehre* is theoretically irrefutable (Fichte SW I: 429). Nevertheless, he argues in the *Foundations* that dogmatism is practically self-refuting and is, in this sense, 'unjust to itself'. Dogmatism's claim that the I depends on the not-I and thus is not free conceals the 'feeling of a necessary subordination' of the not-I to 'practical laws of the I', laws that prescribe 'something that *ought* to exist', namely, a morally meaningful world. The dogmatist's concealed feeling is an inescapably 'practical datum, not, as seems to have been thought, a theoretical one' (Fichte SW I: 121-2, emphasis in original). Fichte also argues that a dogmatist who abstracts from

the I in order to posit the not-I as an absolute substrate and hence as a first principle must 'think unawares of the *absolute subject as well* as contemplating this substrate', and so must 'unwittingly subjoin in thought the very thing from which they have allegedly abstracted' and thus 'contradict themselves' (Fichte SW I: 97, emphasis in original). In the *New Presentation*, Fichte articulates dogmatism's self-refutation by arguing that since positing a first principle is a normative and therefore 'free act of thinking', a dogmatist's act of positing the not-I as the determining ground of the I is a performative contradiction (Fichte SW I: 425, 434). Hence he says in the *Wissenschaftslehre Nova Methodo* that a dogmatist's act of positing contains the 'cure' and 'antidote' for her own position (Fichte GA IV/2: 16). It is only by distinguishing critical scepticism and mere scepticism from dogmatism, and by demonstrating dogmatism's practical self-refutation (a point at which Nisenbaum gestures (Nisenbaum 2018, p. 169)), that Fichte is able to conclude that 'the only type of philosophy that remains possible is idealism' (Fichte SW I: 438).

Nisenbaum rightly infers Fichte's limited commitment to the principle of sufficient reason from his presupposition of the matter of experience as distinct from its form, which latter is supplied by reason, and rightly notes that this leaves open the question of why there is this matter, that is, why there is something rather than nothing. She suggests that this unanswered question is evidence that Fichte abandons the German idealist project of providing a systematic account of intelligibility (Nisenbaum 2018, pp. 173, 177), that is, a proof of the identity of reason and the all. But would this not recommend her study's inclusion of Hegel?

In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel argues that since the 'truth' of being and nothing consists in the '*movement* of the immediate vanishing of the one into the other: *becoming*', nothing is always specifically 'the nothing of a certain something', namely, that which is coming or ceasing to be (Hegel GW 21: 70, emphasis in original). Hegel's argument implies that the question of why there is something rather than nothing dissolves. This is in contrast to Schelling, who continually regards this question as worthy of asking yet impossible to definitively answer (see Bruno 2020). Crucially, Hegel's dissolution of the question 'why something' serves precisely the German idealist project of proving the identity of reason and the all. In this respect, Hegel would have been a useful inclusion in the dialectic of Nisenbaum's book, his aim of converting love of knowing into actual knowing notwithstanding. Indeed, denying the possibility of this conversion would commit us to what Hegel regards as bad infinity and might thereby threaten to undermine the German idealist project.

These interpretive questions aside, *For the Love of Metaphysics* leaves the reader not only with a clear depiction of the significance of the conflict of reason, but also with a clear sense of how our lives are reflected in the terms of the developing post-Kantian response to this conflict, a response that is

increasingly sensitive to the stakes of nihilistic self-doubt, the character of human finitude, and the promise of shared moral striving. It is a welcome addition to Anglophone scholarship on the living potential of German idealist philosophy.[1]

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