

**KANT AND KANTIAN THEMES IN RECENT
ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY**

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Abstract: This article notes six advances in recent analytic Kant research: (1) Strawson's interpretation, which, together with work by Bennett, Sellars, and others, brought renewed attention to Kant through its account of space, time, objects, and the Transcendental Deduction and its sharp criticisms of Kant on causality and idealism; (2) the subsequent investigations of Kantian topics ranging from cognitive science and philosophy of science to mathematics; (3) the detailed work, by a number of scholars, on the Transcendental Deduction; (4) the clearer understanding of transcendental idealism sparked by reactions to Allison's epistemic account; (5) the resulting need—prompted also by new studies of the thing in itself—to face up to the old question of the philosophical defensibility of such idealism; and (6) the active engagement with Kant's ethics and political philosophy that derives from Rawls's and others' work.

Keywords: Kant, Kantian themes in recent philosophy, transcendental deduction, causal principle, transcendental idealism, thing in itself, Strawson, Allison.

In the view of many analytic thinkers, Kant remains the greatest philosopher since antiquity, and his ideas are an important presence in analytic and Anglophone philosophy today. The theme of our symposium echoes Kant, who investigated the “real progress” of metaphysics since the time of Leibniz and Wolff. In this spirit, I will focus on real advances in Kant studies over the past fifty years.

Although the logical positivists' attacks on metaphysics owed much to Kant as well as to Hume, the positivists' rejection of the synthetic a priori and of other Kantian views led them to downgrade his work. Similarly, and though Wittgenstein's writings are imbued with Kantian themes, ordinary language philosophy attacked systematic thought of Kant's sort and its metaphysical underpinnings. The radical doubts that were raised about the analytic/synthetic, a priori/a posteriori, and necessary/contingent distinctions by American descendants of the pragmatists, such as W. V. Quine and Morton White, also did not favor Kant.

The tide turned in 1959 when P. F. Strawson published *Individuals*. Strawson argues for a metaphysics that investigates the ontological conditions that must hold given that we can use language to refer to, and to predicate properties of, entities in the world. This Kantian project (compare: what is required if we can know synthetic truths a priori?) was followed by Strawson's groundbreaking Kant book, *The Bounds of Sense* (Strawson 1966).¹ This book constitutes the first major progress in recent work on Kant. Strawson abandons Kant's transcendental idealism, which he reads in traditional ontological fashion as holding that the objects of our knowledge are mind-dependent, spatiotemporal entities that also have an unknowable, nonspatiotemporal noumenal existence. He regards this idealism as based on unsuccessful arguments and unknowable noumenal claims. He takes the defensible part of Kant's work to specify the essential elements in any conceptual scheme that self-aware, sensing beings like us can employ: for example, our experience is temporal, is ascribed to a being possessing unity of consciousness, and is consequently a knowledge of category-subsumed objects that are distinct from our experience itself. While rejecting Kant's defense of the causal principle, Strawson supports a version of the Transcendental Deduction, and he endorses many of Kant's criticisms of traditional metaphysics. If he is right, many major Kantian views can be defended without the trappings of transcendental idealism.

Strawson's independence of mind and clear presentation of precise arguments had a tremendous influence. Kant's ideas entered mainstream analytic thought. These ideas—about space and time, indexical and first-person reference, predication, substance, causality, a priori knowledge, and the nature of the objects of our knowledge—provide topics on which much later theoretical philosophy focuses. So Strawson's work (and that of his successors, such as Jonathan Bennett's 1966 and 1974) made Kant our contemporary.

The period since Strawson's work has amounted to something of a golden age in Anglophone and analytic Kant research. Many philosophically alert scholars began to investigate particular Kantian views. As a result, we have a better understanding not only of Kant's texts but also of the truth or falsity of the claims that they express. The appearance of this work amounts to the second major progress that I will note. There is no space to list all this work, even in the References section, but I should mention Arthur Melnick's, Eric Watkins's, William Harper's, and others' studies of the Analogies of Experience, Gordon Brittan's and Michael Friedman's work on Kant's philosophy of science, Patricia Kitcher's relating of Kant to contemporary cognitive science, Rae Langton's and Robert

¹ Wilfrid Sellars's important reconstructions in the same period (Sellars 1968) also helped to draw attention back to Kant. So did Graham Bird 1962 (and later writings), Robert Paul Wolff 1963, and Lewis White Beck's scholarly commentaries.

Adams's work on things in themselves (now followed by Desmond Hogan's highly original scholarly investigations), Carl Posy's intuitionistic reading of transcendental idealism, Kenneth Westphal's reconstructions, and the research on Kant's philosophy of logic and mathematics carried out by Charles Parsons, Jaakko Hintikka, Friedman, and others (including Robert Hanna, Lisa Shabel, Emily Carson, Daniel Sutherland, Manley Thompson, and myself). In addition, Paul Guyer's detailed commentary on the first Critique (Guyer 1987) and his many other writings have contributed greatly to the study of many of these topics, including especially Kant's refutations of idealism. And James Van Cleve (1999) has written one of the most incisive works on the first Critique to have appeared since Strawson's and Bennett's volumes. I note below a third significant commentary, by Henry Allison (1984).²

In this same period, Guyer, Van Cleve, I, and several others studied the *Transcendental Deduction of the Categories* (Guyer 1987 and other work; Van Cleve 1999; Howell 1992).³ Ignoring differences of detail, we agree on the basic structure of the argument, from the holding of unity of apperception to a category-subsumed unity of objects that are known through, but are distinct from, our experiences. I believe that as a result of this work many textual mysteries about the Deduction have vanished. If we are right, a point of cardinal philosophical importance also follows: at least in the form in which Kant presents it, the reasoning of the Deduction is not sound. Because the Deduction is the central argument of Kant's theoretical philosophy and has had great later influence, these results count as a third piece of progress in recent work on Kant. Besides this work, I should also note Dieter Henrich's exceptionally significant essays (in Henrich 1994) on the proof structure of the Deduction and on Kant's treatment of self-awareness.

Current discussions also focus much attention on the interpretation of transcendental idealism. Work on these topics constitutes the fourth area of progress in contemporary Kant research. This area is especially associated with Allison's attempts, in Allison 1984, to defend Kant's idealism against critics such as Strawson (and, for that matter, Guyer, Van Cleve, and others, like myself, who question Kant's position here). Allison argues that Strawson rightly rejects any ontological view that accepts mind-dependent, spatiotemporal objects that also have an unknowable, non-spatiotemporal noumenal existence. But, Allison holds, Kant's idealism is

² In addition, Vadim Vasilyev has emphasized the long tradition of Russian Kant scholarship, work to which he and others of his past and present Moscow State University colleagues have contributed. It is regrettable that this Russian material is, for linguistic reasons, largely closed to Anglophone and Western European scholars.

³ I should mention also the different approach to that argument in Karl Ameriks 2003 and elsewhere. Many other scholars have made important contributions here and to research on the *Metaphysical Deduction*—Manfred Baum, Wolfgang Carl, Richard Aquila, Jonathan Bennett, Gerold Prauss, Michael Wolff, and Beatrice Longuenesse, among others.

not ontological but epistemic. Kant simply describes two ways in which the ordinary objects of our knowledge can be considered: in relation to the a priori conditions of our sensibility (and thus “as appearing” in our knowledge); and in independence of their satisfying those conditions (and so as they are “in themselves”). An object is, considered in itself, unknowable and nonspatiotemporal not because it exists in some cognitively inaccessible realm but simply because it is being considered in independence of its satisfying the epistemic conditions of spatiotemporality that it must meet in order to be known.

Allison’s work has had the valuable effect of forcing a reconsideration of transcendental idealism. We are now much clearer than before about what such idealism entails.⁴ In my view and that of many other scholars, we are also much clearer that Kant does not, in fact, hold Allison’s position. Rather, Kant is indeed an ontological idealist who argues that the nature of our cognitive capacities requires the above sort of cognition-dependent, spatiotemporal objects. Allison’s view is textually mistaken and philosophically problematic. Thus, as many critics argue, Kant’s fundamental claim that that we can know objects only as they appear to us (and not as they are in themselves) is a substantive, ontological thesis, not the trivial (or, as Allison says, the “analytic”) claim that the objects of knowledge must meet the conditions that are necessary for our knowledge of them.⁵ And, as Guyer has noted, if we recognize that Kant has not established his ontological idealism, then we have no need to turn to Allison’s interpretation in order to protect Kant from the effects of that idealism—namely, from Jacobi’s problem and others about unknowable, nonspatiotemporal noumenal objects. Allison replies to critics in the second edition of his book (2004), and the discussion is by no means over. But I do not think his replies succeed.

If we do accept Kantian ontological idealism, then it will be difficult to escape problems of the kinds just noted, however. So if we still hope to find a hidden truth in Kant’s idealism, it becomes urgent to discover whether there is any defensible position, even if it is not exactly Kant’s own, that is Kantian in spirit and treats the objects of knowledge as cognitively or semantically constrained. The fact that recent scholarship has seriously undercut Allison’s interpretation poses this problem with especial force.

⁴ Langton 1998 offers another important reading of Kant’s idealism: in talking of unknowable things in themselves, Kant does not introduce a realm of inaccessible objects. Instead, he holds that we cannot know the intrinsic natures of objects, only their relational properties of appearing to our cognitive faculties. This interpretation fits some pre-Critical (and first-Critique) texts. But I agree with Allison and Ameriks that it is not Kant’s considered Critical view.

⁵ There are other textual problems with Allison’s reading (it does not fit many texts, for example A27/B43); and it involves a fallacy. (To consider an object in independence of its satisfying the spatiotemporal conditions of our knowledge of it is not yet to consider that object as being positively nonspatiotemporal. Yet Kant argues that things in themselves are exactly such.)

Impressing this question on us is a fifth area of progress in recent Kant work. This progress is reinforced by the fate of several distinguished recent defenses of Kant-like views. Hilary Putnam, Michael Dummett, and Nelson Goodman have each developed unrealistic positions that, while differing from Kant's own idealism, still have a definite Kantian cast. (For these views and their relations to Kant's own position, see Van Cleve 1999, chapter 13.) It is important to ask whether their work provides a defensible successor to Kant. However, I agree with what I take to be the consensus of the critics, that none of these positions succeeds. So we are left with an acute form of the problem just noted—and with the question whether, from here on, the philosophical interest of Kant's work (as opposed to its historical and scholarly interest) will lie in the various nonidealist claims that Kant makes about particular matters of the sorts noted above. Such questions are perhaps the biggest issues that face those interested in Kant today.

Finally, I've focused above on Kant's theoretical philosophy. But of course Kant's ideas in ethics and political philosophy have also had immense influence during the past fifty years, especially within John Rawls's work. The new understanding of those ideas that this influence has yielded constitutes a sixth advance that has been made in recent Kantian investigations.

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