

BOOK REVIEW

R. Lanier Anderson, *The Poverty of Conceptual Truth. Kant's Analytic/Synthetic Distinction and the Limits of Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. xviii+408.

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Much has been written on the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgements, yet Lanier Anderson's elaboration on this longstanding topic is in many respects fresh. Not only does Anderson succeed in throwing light on Kant's intellectual struggle towards a fully fledged analytic-synthetic distinction, he does this against the backdrop of Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy. This kind of contextualization, sometimes lacking in Kant scholarship, is very welcome. It also has the consequence that *The Poverty of Conceptual Truth* is not just another book on Kant, but also on eighteenth-century German philosophy more generally. In addition, a Quinean-minded, or anyone who thinks that the analytic-synthetic distinction has become obsolete, should find many parts of the book interesting.

The Poverty of Conceptual Truth is divided into an introduction and four parts, followed by an epilogue and three short appendixes. The structure is clear and the order of presentation leaves nothing to be desired. What is more, the book is extremely well written from beginning to end, both stylistically and from the practical point of view. It is long but the sections are short. There are summaries and conclusions that keep the reader informed of the progress of the main arguments. In all, this is a reader-friendly book.

Both Kant's 'pre-critical' and 'critical' views are considered as the book unfolds. One of Anderson's theses is that a fully worked out analytic-synthetic distinction was a late finding (circa 1772, well after the so-called *Inaugural Dissertation* of 1770). Therefore, Kant could not have worked out the notion of synthetic *a priori* judgement by the time he was already writing or at least making plans for the *Critique of Pure Reason* (pace, e.g. Adickes). Whilst fully aware of the fact that there are traces of the distinction already in the 1760s, Anderson emphasises how Kant's earlier view on analyticity and syntheticity was at best 'epistemological' or 'methodological'. 'Synthetic' and 'analytic' referred to two different but reversible cognitive procedures. It was only closer to the *Critique* that Kant realised that there is 'irreducible syntheticity' and thus 'ineliminably' synthetic judgements, i.e. judgements the contents of which simply cannot be represented through any kind of analysis of concepts.

To put it differently, as Anderson sees it, Kant was long committed to the idea that the constituent concepts of a judgement have to be in a containment relation. Accordingly, the fully fledged analytic-synthetic distinction was not possible until Kant saw that the containment view cannot hold good for judgements *per se* but only for genuinely analytic judgements. I doubt, however, whether Kant actually held on to the containment view or predicate-in-subject theory of truth for as long. Take, for example, the *Inaugural Dissertation*, a propaedeutic to a new kind of metaphysics. In that text, Kant first seems to take intuition as merely subjective and even convertible to a representation of understanding. However, eventually he comes to emphasise how not everything can be achieved *via* concepts, including truth. In particular, Kant's 1770 view on incongruent counterparts already suggests that there is irreducible syntheticity, i.e. that not all claims can be turned analytic.

Be that as it may, as *The Poverty of Conceptual Truth* progresses, the focus shifts from the logic of judgements to the failure of purely 'analytic' metaphysics, as Kant's critical position receives more and more attention. Although Anderson is clearly sympathetic towards the Leibnizian-Wolffian especially in the early parts of the book, Kant eventually emerges as the champion also on Anderson's treatment. As can be expected, the fully fledged analytic-synthetic distinction plays a key role in the downfall of speculative or 'conceptualist' metaphysics.

What is more surprising is that Anderson's interpretation relies less on some of the other key elements of Kant's critical philosophy – elements often considered to be crucial for Kant's mature position. For example, there could be more about Kant's theory of sensibility, or at least the exposition could have been more explicit, and there is basically nothing about transcendental idealism. Now one might worry, for instance, that if the ultimate question is how synthetic *a priori* judgements are possible, then the issue stands ultimately on the notion of sensible *a priori*, which in turn depends on transcendental idealism. However, this does not seem to be even an issue for Anderson. Given the emphasis on the logical aspects of judgement, perhaps this is a minor worry. In addition, in the *Critique* Kant gives a more prominent place to the analytic-synthetic distinction than he does to transcendental idealism. Then again, even if one puts transcendental idealism aside, the fully fledged analytic-synthetic distinction clearly goes hand in hand with Kant's new theory of sensibility, and that too shows a major – if not Kant's biggest – break with tradition.

Indeed, there is not only a paradigm change going on with respect to certain issues and how they should be handled, but also a drastic shift in a philosophical world view as a whole. Anderson is, of course, aware of this, but I do not think he emphasises the matter enough. Instead, for example, he wants to be careful not to rely too much on Kant's intuition-concept distinction, as that would only beg the question against the Leibnizian-Wolffians. Whilst this might be technically true, such carefulness understates the thoroughness and novelty of Kant's position. Besides, Anderson himself seems to rely quite heavily on Kant's notion of a concept, according to which concepts are inherently general and unable to represent individuals, whereas the speculative metaphysician, modelling everything according to a divine intuitive intellect, operates with an altogether different notion of a concept.

The point is that the very foundation had to change. In order to succeed, Kant could not play the same game as the Wolffians did, or simply proceed by making counterarguments against the establishment according to their rules. I wholeheartedly agree with Anderson that Kant "expose[d] a *systematic flaw* in the procedure of the traditional metaphysics" (327). It is just that Kant's critique was more than just about the procedure; it was about getting the theory of human faculties right, getting rid of all illegitimate hypostatisation and speculation, and, more generally, but perhaps also more importantly, about rethinking the human condition as a whole. In short, the problem of traditional metaphysics lies deeper than analyticity, even deeper than logic itself.

In any event, Anderson defends and usually explains his position well. In this respect, I have but one critical point to make. Anderson puts much emphasis on "the discovery of the properly *logical* analytic/synthetic distinction for judgment" (386). Indeed, this is one of the major points of the book: were the difference between the two kinds of judgement merely

'epistemological' or 'methodological', Kant's criticism would not hit its mark. But what exactly is a 'logical' distinction? Having read the book, I still wished there had been more thorough explanation on this.

Heavy use of the term 'logical' is made in other contexts as well. What is more, Anderson's use of the term differs from that of Kant. For example, Anderson demands that "intuitive representations [...] must themselves be distinguished from concepts in a fundamental logical way" (264), whereas Kant himself criticises Wolff for taking the "distinction between what is sensitive and what belongs to understanding [...] only logical".¹ (So, for Kant, a merely logical distinction is insufficient – whatever that exactly means.) There is also a sense in which for Kant analytic and synthetic judgements can be identical in their logical form even if they are different as far as their contents are concerned, whereas in Anderson's use of 'logical', analytic and synthetic judgements differ in their logical forms as well (384).

Somewhat curiously, Anderson ends his book by taking sides on the issue whether Kant is a 'conceptualist' or 'non-conceptualist' – Anderson analyzes the debate from the viewpoint of empirical concept formation and opts for a 'sophisticated' conceptualist interpretation of Kant's theory of cognition. Certainly, it would be unfair to focus too much on the epilogue in a short review. Epilogues are epilogues and should not steal the show. So I will limit my brief critical remarks to four interrelated points.

Firstly, the epilogue does not settle anything about the abovementioned debate. More crucially, given that the debate is so intimately connected to the issue about empirical concept formation, the cursory treatment of the former weakens Anderson's account of the latter in an unfortunate way. In all, it is a bit difficult to see how the epilogue as a whole relates to the rest of the book.

Secondly, Anderson does not pay any attention to the basic notions of the debate, such as 'content' or 'state'. Nor does he pause to explain what non-conceptual content might precisely be, or how it would relate to his earlier claims about "essentially non-conceptual knowledge" and "non-conceptual means for representing it" (224), or to the "representational content which can be rendered objective through categorical synthesis" (367 f.) mentioned in the epilogue. (What is *that* which can be so rendered?)

Thirdly, Anderson simply skips telling arguments for non-conceptualism. For example, Kant makes a stark thinking-intuiting distinction. Categories are coined by Kant as the preconditions of objective thinking, but he also claims that intuition can precede thinking. I find it difficult to see how the conceptualist reading can keep this distinction intact. Relatedly, if everything were dependent on the way understanding operates, or on "synthesis according to concepts" (354), then everything would also be 'discursive', which would leave little room for 'wholes' preceding 'parts'. But clearly, according to Kant, neither space nor time is represented as made up of 'parts'.

Kant also acknowledges animal perception or cognition. At the same time, he presumes that non-human animals cannot possibly possess concepts, including the categories. This suggests an independent role for sensibility, and given the importance of the

¹ Kant, Immanuel. 1770. *On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and the Intelligible World*, 387 (Ak. 2:395). In D. Walford/R. Meerbote (trans. & eds.), *Theoretical Philosophy 1755–1770*. Cambridge, 2002.

latter faculty in human cognition as well, what exactly, one may ask, is the relation between perception and the categories after all? Let me also add that Kant's notion of experience is far from innocent. Yet Anderson never stops to think about 'experience' even though he makes much use of it.

Fourthly, and finally, there might actually be more textual evidence in favour of at least some kind of non-conceptualist reading of Kant. The almost sole evidence for straightforward conceptualism is the Deduction, one of the trickiest of texts. Everyone who has read it carefully enough knows that the connection between the categories and perception must be very intimate. No one questions that. Also, given that the textual evidence – easy to cherry-pick to support your favourite ism – pulls in two directions so strongly in this case, perhaps one should not, as Anderson suggests, rely too heavily on a few passages. That said, I failed to see how Anderson's own approach is any different in this respect.

Such criticism aside, I found Anderson's book a very good read. It is generally well argued. The interpretations of Kant and Wolff and others are sound. Even though the issues are sometimes difficult and handled in a remarkably subtle way, Anderson's presentation is easy to follow. I recommend *The Poverty of Conceptual Truth* to anyone interested in the analytic-synthetic distinction, Kant's intellectual development and its context, the problems of speculative metaphysics, and judgement more generally.