

Karl Ameriks

Kant's Elliptical Path.

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Karl Ameriks' *Kant's Elliptical Path* argues that Kant's career and the reception of his philosophy revolved around Kant's conviction that freedom was the most significant aspect of our existence. The book discusses all the areas of Kant's thought and a wide range of his successors. Much of the material has appeared elsewhere, but all of it has been updated and revised. The book devotes significant attention to recent work on Kant by Sanford Budick, Robert Hanna, Pauline Kleingeld, Jane Kneller, Manfred Kuehn, David Sussman, David Velleman, and others.

The book is organized in terms of the chronology of topics, beginning with Kant's pre-critical views about freedom and morality and ending with reactions to Kant by the Romantics, Nietzsche, and later philosophers. I will briefly describe each chapter and then conclude with a few evaluative comments.

Chapters 1 and 2 concern Kant's pre-Critical development. Chapter 1 concerns the most dramatic change in Kant's views throughout his career. Based on his reading of Rousseau in the 1760s, Ameriks claims, Kant came to believe that the moral (as opposed to scientific) vocation was the highest calling of humankind, and that a basic understanding of freedom and morality was part of unchanging human nature. Defending this understanding became the central role for the rest of Kant's philosophy. In Chapter 2, Ameriks argues that, after reading Rousseau, Kant's views on freedom remained basically fixed and rationalist, and that he never seriously considered an empiricist approach. Prior to the first *Critique*, however, Kant did not have a consistent explanation of the sort of freedom he believed was essential to morality.

Chapters 3 through 5 focus on the first *Critique*. Chapter 3 details and defends Ameriks' 'moderate' interpretation of Kant's idealism, according to which spatiotemporal objects have a partly subjective, partly objective status. This interpretation is a version of the 'one-world' or 'two-aspect' approach, but is unapologetically metaphysical in its orientation. Ameriks argues for his reading partly by unpacking the terms 'transcendental' and 'ideal,' and partly by contrasting his reading with that of Robert Hanna. The terminological argument is picked up again in Chapter 4, which aims to show that this reading of Kant's idealism is consistent with his epistemological 'transcendental turn.' A key piece in Ameriks' discussion is the proposal that the *Critique* assumes some form of perceptual realism from the beginning, as opposed to building up to some kind of realism using idealist premises. Ameriks contrasts his reading with those of Allen Wood, Henry Allison, and Rae Langton. Chapter 5 focuses on Schleiermacher's discussion of Kant and Spinoza, and Kant's opposition to Spinoza's idea that we are modes rather than substances. Kant's opposition is puzzling, given the metaphysical agnosticism he advocates in the Paralogisms. Ameriks highlights several puzzling features of Kant's discussion and concludes that Kant reached a clear position only in the B edition. Ameriks also argues for a modest reading of Kant's claim in the second *Critique* that Spinozism is the only alternative to transcendental idealism.

Chapters 6 through 8 discuss Kant's mature views on freedom and morality. Chapter 6 discusses the extent to which Kant ties the world to the human standpoint. Ameriks argues that Kant held a form of 'ambivalent cosmopolitanism,' according to which *human* reason is embedded in the world, but does not create moral obligations in any strong sense (as on constructivist readings of Kant). Rather, our *not-specifically-human* faculty of reason elevates us above the natural world. A crucial move Ameriks makes here is to distinguish Kant's robust notion of acting in accordance with reason from the weaker notions of acting for a reason and being rational in acting. Chapter 7 argues that Kant's account of morality's authority is ultimately dogmatic, in the sense that Kant does not offer an *argument* for the authority of morality based on less controversial premises. Ameriks denies that such dogmatism is a philosophical fault, especially in light of the failures of neo-Kantian attempts at such arguments. Chapter 8 discusses the contrast between Kant and Reinhold on the relationship between reason and the will. Ameriks notes some problems with Reinhold's definition of the will in terms of the choice of selfishness, problems which highlight the value of Kant's definitional connection between reason and the will.

Chapters 9 through 12 concern teleological themes in Kant's mature thought. Chapter 9 focuses on the 1784 'Universal History' essay as a window into Kant's general attitudes concerning history. Ameriks argues that Kant's views in the mid-1780s were fundamentally ambivalent, largely because he had yet to reach the view that freedom can be shown only from the perspective of practical reason. As a result, Kant's essay makes stronger teleological claims than it should. Chapter 10 concerns Kant's reviews of Herder's work. Ameriks distinguishes seven objections Kant raises against Herder, most of which arise out of their different attitudes towards naturalism and the methodology of metaphysics. Chapter 11 offers a detailed reading of the final sections of the third *Critique*. In addition to offering insightful comments on the different levels of Kant's metaphysics, Ameriks argues that Kant seriously endorses faith based on moral/teleological grounds. At the root of this, Ameriks proposes, is our awareness of our own freedom, which Ameriks holds is more objective for Kant than the other moral postulates (the existence of God and the immortality of the soul). Chapter 12 discusses a puzzle about Kant's negative attitudes towards accepting miracles, given his own positive attitude toward religious hope. Ameriks aims to solve the puzzle by focusing on lawfulness. Kant's chief opposition to miracles, he holds, concerned miracles as violations of laws, whereas his religious hope was fundamentally based on the moral law.

Chapters 13 through 15 discuss the development of these themes in later thinkers' work. Chapter 13 argues that Hölderlin and Novalis develop Kant's core interest: helping humans appreciate the unchanging value of their autonomy. This comparison provides an occasion for Ameriks to discuss the role of imagination and of astronomical analogies in Kant's work, including the 'Copernican revolution.' Chapter 14 argues that Nietzsche's mature philosophy aims to show that existence can only be justified aesthetically, tying this to the development of the idea of tragedy after Kant in light of the perceived failure of Kant's positive project. Chapter 15 focuses on the role of interpretation in philosophy after Kant, with special attention to Richard Rorty. Ameriks uses Harold Bloom's theory of creative misreading to offer an optimistic vision of what philosophy can still accomplish: a properly general appreciation of the historical, subjective, and aesthetic aspects of our experience.

The chief value of Ameriks' book as a whole, I think, is its demonstration of how a broader historical and philosophical perspective should shape our reading of the details of Kant's work. Chapter 7, in some ways the heart of the book, is a clear example of this. If Ameriks is right, it is a

mistake to expect Kant's ethics to offer a persuasive anti-skeptical argument. Instead of trying to find hidden arguments of that kind, we would do better, Ameriks implies, to re-think the role that arguments play in foundational normative issues for Kant and for us. I fully agree with Ameriks here.

I will finish with a couple minor reservations. First: The organizing metaphor of the elliptical path is suggestive and memorable, but ultimately seemed more misleading than helpful. A planet in an elliptical orbit does not *develop* in virtue of completing an orbit, but the real point of Ameriks' picture is a sort of development (even given certain fixed points). As the later parts of the book show, Ameriks is aware of the potential value of imagination and metaphor in philosophy, but his main metaphor was stretched too far to be of much use. Some of the more minor but less metaphorical themes Ameriks mentions (such as reason's being defined in terms of the unconditioned, and Kant's radical egalitarian epistemological and metaphysical views) held up better. Second: at various crucial points, Ameriks claims that Kant takes certain commonsense views as default (e.g., the view that there exist multiple mind-independent objects). I myself think that Ameriks is right about this, but his discussions here are unlikely to persuade readers with contrary inclinations. After all, Kant's mature work contains many warnings about relying on commonsense and many explicit affirmations of the purity of his transcendental philosophy.

To close, I want to emphasize one of the distinguishing values of Ameriks' reading of Kant. Many commentators come to accept some overall story about Kant's career and, more often than not, that story leads them to misread or ignore the details of what Kant actually wrote. Though Ameriks has a story to tell, his work remains focused on the intricacies of Kant's actual writings, and his interpretations of particular passages are always well-reasoned, and often persuasive. *Kant's Elliptical Path* will be an important work for any reader of Kant.

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