

Eckart Förster

The Twenty Five Years of Philosophy, trans. Brady Bowman.

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Eckart Förster's *The Twenty Five Years of Philosophy: A Systematic Reconstruction* presents a novel interpretation of the development of German idealism that is rich in both historical depth and philosophical insight. As the title suggests, Förster investigates the twenty-five years beginning with Kant's claim that philosophy, in the strict sense of the word, was brought into existence in 1781 by his critical project in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and concluding with Hegel's claim in an 1806 lecture that the history of philosophy had reached its end. In seeking to furnish a sympathetic interpretation of this striking claim that there were, in fact, only twenty-five years of philosophy, Förster sets forth a historically nuanced and philosophically discerning interpretation of the central debates of the era.

According to Förster, the reason Kant could claim, without unwarranted hubris, that philosophy began with the advent of critical philosophy lies in Kant's conception of the critical project. As originally conceived, critical philosophy was meant to account for whether and how non-empirical reference was possible. Traditional metaphysicians took it for granted that reference to non-empirical entities (e.g. God or the soul) was possible, disagreeing primarily about how best to characterize the nature of these entities. By failing to address the prior question of the possibility of non-empirical reference and to provide a criterion to adjudicate between successful reference and merely apparent reference, the practice of metaphysics had overlooked its own foundation. The fact that the philosophical tradition neglected this foundational question motivated Kant to claim that, prior to his own critical project; there was no rigorous science of philosophy.

Yet Förster contends that Kant changed his initial characterization of his project in light of the Göttingen review and his subsequent discussion with Garve. First, in attempting to distance himself from Berkeley by arguing that our representation of space must be a priori, rather than empirically derived, Kant came to realize that he needed to provide a schematism of space to supplement the schematism of time and attempted to work this out in *The Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. Second, after facing Garve's objection, raised in private correspondence, that he had failed to justify his claims about our cognition of the moral law, Kant set out to account for how specifically moral knowledge is possible, a project he attempted to carry out in *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Förster argues that this shift signals a fundamental alteration in the critical project itself: it is now no longer a question of how a priori reference to non-empirical objects is possible but rather a question about the possibility of synthetic a priori cognitions such as knowledge of the categorical imperative.

Carrying out this project in the Second and Third Critiques, Kant maintains that to hope for the highest good, i.e. a world in which happiness is proportioned according to virtue, reason must believe in a supersensible ground to unify appearance and reality. Though reason is forced, on pain of internal contradiction, to believe in such a supersensible ground, Kant insists that this ground cannot be cognized by discursive beings like us. Förster argues that in sections 76 and 77 of the Third Critique, Kant then develops two contrasts with our discursive understanding: intellectual intuition and intuitive understanding. On this reading, an intellectual intuition is an intuition

capable of grasping things in themselves, whereas an intuitive understanding is something which cognizes a whole and, by cognizing this whole, cognizes also the parts constituted by it. Kant conceives of both of these non-discursive ways of knowing as belonging to divine cognition, which, through intellectual intuition, grasps all actuality via an awareness of which possibilities it has chosen to actualize in creation, and which, through intuitive understanding, grasps the totality of possibility by grasping its own essence.

When defined in terms of divine cognition, it is plausible to think these non-discursive ways of knowing outstrip our finite mental powers, but, Förster argues, the philosophers coming after Kant believed that non-divine versions of intellectual intuition and intuitive understanding were within our grasp. Indeed, Förster contends that the distinction between intellectual intuition and intuitive understanding resulted in two alternate directions in which post-Kantian philosophy developed. One route, taken by Fichte and Schelling, attempts to ground philosophy in intellectual intuition. Fichte argues that we have an intellectual intuition in the self-positing of the I and attempts to ground systematic philosophy in this intuition. Schelling eventually came to argue that the I is an insufficient starting point, since philosophy must account for nature in addition to consciousness. According to Schelling, philosophy requires a first principle that can account for the absolute identity of thought and being. He maintained that this first principle could be supplied by intellectual intuition, but one which abstracted from the I. Yet Förster challenges the coherence of this account asking “whether an intellectual intuition in which one abstracts from the intuiting subject can really amount to more than word-play” (248).

Förster favors instead the second route, pursued by Goethe and Hegel, that attempts to ground philosophy in intuitive understanding. According to this model, though we start with an awareness of individual phenomena, we can nonetheless come to intuit a whole by focusing on the transitions that occur between them and, in seeing this whole, retroactively perceive how these transitions were, in fact, necessary. Goethe came upon this method through his botanical studies and his research on color in conjunction with his reading of the Third Critique. Hegel, introduced to Goethe’s approach through his friend Schelver who ran the botanical garden at Jena, attempted to apply this methodology to the realm of Geist. By thinking through the transitions between the various shapes of consciousness, Hegel argues that we come to an absolute idea from which we can then deduce each of those shapes. By furnishing such an absolute idea, Hegel claimed to have brought an end to philosophy since we now have scientific knowledge of a whole in which all its parts are necessarily related. Yet Förster notes that the end of philosophy need not consist in a closed Hegelian circle, but may instead take its inspiration directly from Goethe’s alternate bottom-up path which, starting with particular phenomena and searching for their corresponding ideas, will always encounter novel phenomena to be explained.

Though impossible to adequately convey the riches of Förster’s narrative in such a short summary, it is worth noting the way in which he places two overlooked philosophers at the very center of the story: Jacobi and Goethe. According to Förster, these two thinkers decisively shaped both the goal and content of philosophical debate by establishing the relevance of Spinoza to their generation. On the one hand, Jacobi was of fundamental importance in shaping the way that subsequent philosophers would read both Kant and Spinoza. By identifying the core of Spinoza’s philosophy with the expression “from nothing nothing comes” rather than, as Spinoza himself claimed, the concept of substance, Jacobi presented a very Kantian Spinoza, interpreting Spinoza’s system through Kant’s pre-critical *Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* which argued (a) that being is a positing rather than a property and (b) that

possibility as such presupposes the existence of a necessary ens realissimum. By reading Spinoza through Kant, Jacobi thereby also read Kant through Spinoza, arguing that Kant was, despite his protestations to the contrary, a Spinozist. For Jacobi Spinozism is the only rational philosophy, but since such rationality eliminates freedom, reason needs to be transcended with a leap of faith.

On the other hand, Goethe presented a more positive picture of Spinoza. For Goethe Spinoza is primarily concerned not with the grounding of finite entities in an ens realissimum, but rather with a *scientia intuitiva* that provides knowledge of “a thing’s properties through its essence” (93). This is the kind of knowledge possessed, for example, when one sees that the angles of a triangle must equal 180 degrees by understanding the essence of a triangle. Goethe claimed that such Spinozism did not result in fatalism since the necessity at issue is a necessity that flows from the inner essences of things. Förster then provides a detailed account of how Goethe went on to develop this basic idea of a *scientia intuitiva* into a rigorous methodology through his investigations of botany and color.

In sum, Förster’s book clearly succeeds in providing a bold, detailed, and sympathetic reconstruction of the twenty-five years of philosophy from 1781 to 1806. As in all worthwhile philosophy, the originality and power of his interpretation will generate particular points of dispute. For example, in light of the availability of more minimal accounts of conscious awareness at the time (e.g., *Gefühl*), Schelling’s attempt to maintain intellectual intuition while abstracting from the explicit self-positing of the I may not be doomed to failure. Or Hegel’s later methodology of pure thinking set forth in *The Science of Logic* may not fit into Förster’s Goethean framework without remainder. But regardless of how one decides such specific historical questions, Förster should be applauded for contributing to our understanding of this important period of the history of philosophy by providing, not only specific interpretations of the arguments of Kant and his immediate successors, but also an intriguing and plausible narrative that tells us about the development of non-discursive models of cognition in what may be the most interesting twenty-five years of philosophy.¹

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