

HALL'S NEW INTERPRETATION OF THE *OPUS POSTUMUM*

Bryan Wesley Hall, *The Post-Critical Kant: Understanding the Critical Philosophy through the Opus postumum*
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Over the last two centuries, the work of Immanuel Kant has been discussed intensively. One of the few blind spots in his writings has been the *Opus Postumum*, a collection of fascicles on which he worked at the end of his life. The main reasons why this text is so interesting is a comment of Kant in a letter to Garve. There he writes:

I see before me the unpaid bill of my uncompleted philosophy, even while I am aware that philosophy, both as regards its means and its ends, is capable of completion. It is a pain like that of Tantalus though not a hopeless pain. The project on which I am working concerns the “Transition from the metaphysical foundations of natural science to physics.” It must be completed, or else a gap will remain in the critical philosophy.¹

Since Kant was not able to finish his project, scholars still wonder what that gap is that Kant believed to have found in his critical philosophy and what the cryptic title ‘Transition from metaphysical foundations of natural science to physics’ could mean. All we have for answering these questions is a pile of handwritings. The value that scholars ascribe to these documents thereby varies heavily. While some see it as the product of the dementia that Kant suffered from during his last years, others read it as a profound and serious revision of his critical philosophy. Bryan Wesley Hall, author of ‘The Post-Critical Kant’, belongs to the latter category. His book gives an original and deep analysis of the *Opus Postumum* and its purpose for the critical system. After an introduction to the structure and history of the manuscript, Hall proposes a list of criteria an interpretation of Kant's *Opus Postumum* has to meet. The interpretation has to be consistent with the manuscript itself (1) and with Kant's critical philosophy (2). Furthermore, it should be plausible (3) and consistent with Kant's remark that without filling this gap, the critical philosophy would stay incomplete (4). As Hall points out, all previous interpretations are in conflict with at least one of these criteria. His own reconstruction tries to avoid these mistakes. It

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consists of five chapters (partly already published as papers) that I am going to sketch below.

In the first chapter of his book, Hall identifies the gap in the analogies of experience of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. From his point of view, it arises from Kant's ambivalent use of the concept of substance. On the one hand, Kant holds 'substances' (written by Hall with a lower case 's') as those things which underlie empirical objects, while its properties can change. On the other hand, Kant uses the term 'Substance' (written by Hall with an upper case 'S') to identify something eternal and omnipresent whose quantity remains constant. Hall shows that Kant uses both meanings of substance in the analogies of experience. The concept of substance thereby needs by Kant to identify a single empirical object, while the concept of Substance is necessary for the unity of our spatiotemporal experience. This ambivalent usage of the concept of substance creates a gap which Kant cannot fill by the category of substance from the *Critique of pure Reason*.

Large parts of the *Opus Postumum* deal with the concept of ether in various ways. Following Hall, the crucial role of ether for epistemology is to fill the gap in the analogies. The ether is an omnipresent and eternal medium that fills space fully. Hall therefore suspects the ether to be the Substance that Kant required in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Furthermore, Kant used the concept of ether in the *OP* to solve problems of his theory of matter. But this attempt, as Hall believes, is *not* the transitional project itself. The purpose of the second chapter is to discuss the natural philosophical role of the ether. Hall therefore analyses the changes that occurred to this conception from the critical to the postcritical period, focusing on its role in natural philosophy. He first discusses the background of Kant's theory of matter and his critique of atomism. He then continues to analyse Kant's approach to solve problems of his general remarks to the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, by introducing an oscillating ether. Hall concludes that Kant's approach stays circular and defective nonetheless.

The two following chapters are the centerpiece of Hall's book. There, he analyses the ether deduction itself and the transition project. In contrast to Förster, Hall does not use all of the drafts in the *Opus Postumum* to reconstruct the deduction, but only those texts he believes to be closest to what Kant had in mind. He argues that Kant, in contrast to his project from the *Critique of pure Reason*, is trying to deduce a transcendental *material* and *formal* condition of experience. Such is necessary because it is the *sine qua non* of the unity of our experience. After a detailed reconstruction of Kant's deduction, where Hall shows the importance of the impossibility of an experience of empty space for the argument, he evaluates in great detail the validity of Kant's deduction. He reaches the conclusion that even though Kant's deduction is consistent it doesn't fulfill what it was originally established for. To achieve this, Kant would need to show that the combination of the transcendental material conditions and the transcendental formal conditions are sufficient for the unity of experience in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Hall's fourth chapter proceeds to investigate the changes that the transcendental formal conditions of experience from the *Critique of pure Reason* undergo.

In the last chapter, Hall analyses the clues the *Opus Postumum* can give us for the problem of affection. One of the oldest problems readers of Kant's first critique

had was the relation between the ‘thing itself’ and the appearances. If the thing itself would affect the subject, the thing itself would be object to the categories and therefore wouldn’t be a thing in itself. But if the appearances would be what affects us, Kant would come close to Berkeley’s idealism. A third possibility is the theory of double affection, viz. the idea that the thing itself affects the noumenal subject and the appearances affect the phenomenal subject, but this leaves us with other unsolved problems (e.g. some kind of pre-established harmony between the noumenal and the phenomenal subject). Hall uses the last chapter to give his own solution to this problem. To this end, he draws on the approaches of Adickes and Langton and investigates crucial parts of the *Critique of pure Reason* and the *Opus Postumum* for evidence. His solution is a revision of Langton’s theory that appearances should not be seen as particulars, but as intrinsic relations.

Hall’s book is a great contribution towards a better understanding of Kant’s postcritical writing. It is both insightful and well written. It provides the reader with a good introduction to the *Opus Postumum* and is also deeply engaged with the current debates around these texts. *The Post-Critical Kant* is therefore recommendable for both people that come in contact with Kant’s postcritical philosophy for the first time and experienced scholars. The problems that Hall’s book has emerge from the problems of the *Opus Postumum* itself. Because of its diversity, an interpretation of Kant’s final work is, and always has to be selective. This is also a difficulty that Hall faces. As he himself admits he ignores Convolut 1 nearly completely in his reconstruction of the transition project (see p. 12). This is also seen in the review of Stephen Howard.² He criticizes Hall also because of the four principles he establishes to define a good interpretation of the *Opus Postumum*. One of Howard’s points is that Hall’s second principle (‘A good interpretation should make Kant maximally consistent with himself’) mentioned above excludes interpretations that underline Kant’s “heresy” towards his own critical philosophy. In contrast to Howard, I believe a good interpretation has to find a compromise between staying true to the text and being consistent with what Kant wrote in the critical period. Only such an interpretation of the *Opus Postumum* can give us a deeper understanding of the defects that Kant saw himself in his own system and how he tried to correct them. This is exactly what Hall successfully presented in his book: An interpretation of central parts of the *Opus Postumum* and Kant’s latest perspective on crucial problems of his own critical philosophy. Hall’s criteria for a good interpretation are therefore of great worth to a better understanding of Kant’s last manuscript.³

References

¹ Letter from Kant to Garve from September 21, 1798. Kant, I., *Correspondence. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, trans. and ed. Arnulf Zweig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 551.

² Review by Stephen Howard on Bryan Wesley Hall, “The Post-Critical Kant: Understanding the Critical Philosophy through the *Opus Postumum*”, *Radical Philosophy* 195 (2016): 65-66.

³ Review by Veit Justus Rollmann on Bryan Wesley Hall, “The Post-Critical Kant: Understanding the Critical Philosophy through the *Opus Postumum*”, *Philosophical Review* (2015) [Online] Available via <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/61320-the-post-critical-kant-understanding-the-critical-philosophy-through-the-opus-postumum/>, cited 31.09.2015.