



Interview with Karin de Boer

Mahdi RanaeeUniversität Siegen. ✉ **Karin de Boer**KU Leuven. ✉ <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/kant.102193>

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ENG Abstract: In this interview, conducted by Mahdi Ranaee, Professor Karin de Boer discusses key aspects of her research in Kantian philosophy, with a particular focus on the *Critique of Pure Reason* and its historical context. She reflects on the interpretive challenges posed by Kant's texts, the influence of German Idealism, and her methodological approach to philosophical scholarship. The conversation also touches on the contemporary relevance of Kant's thought and the importance of situating his work within broader philosophical traditions.

Key words: Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, continental philosophy, publishing in philosophy

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MR: Professor De Boer. One of the main themes of your research has been Kant's philosophy. Could you please explain, firstly, what made you interested in Kant's philosophy and, secondly, what has made you continue to be interested in his philosophy?

KB: I cannot trace the origin of my interest in Kant's philosophy very well. I have a vivid memory of a class during which professor Peperzak, who at the time was a guest professor at the University of Amsterdam, explained the main ideas of Hegel's philosophy. I was moved by the beauty of it. I do not recall a similar experience in relation to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. However, I was impressed and inspired by a monograph written in Dutch by one of our professors, Otto Duintjer, on Kant, Heidegger, and transcendental philosophy. This monograph – as well as the continental orientation of the philosophy department at the time – clearly planted the seeds of the perspective on Kant I developed in later years.

During my PhD I taught a BA class on the history of metaphysics that included a few sessions on Kant. My PhD thesis – published in Dutch in 1997 and in English in 2000 under the title *Thinking in the Light of Time: Heidegger's Encounter with Hegel* – contains nine pages on the difference between Heidegger's and Hegel's reading of Kant. Yet I only started to study Kant's works, in particular the *Critique of Pure Reason*, more in-depth when I was an assistant professor at the University of Groningen (also in the Netherlands). I published an article on Hegel's relation to Kant in 2004 and I simply wanted to get a better understanding of the first *Critique* and Kant's theoretical philosophy more generally.

Teaching on Kant's first *Critique*, and the many exchanges with colleagues, PhD students and postdoctoral researchers in Leuven and elsewhere has been a great joy and source of inspiration. Part of my motivation to work on Kant is the view that much of mainstream Anglophone scholarship does not do justice to Kant's enduring attempt to reform the metaphysics handed down to him and the logic that informs the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Seen from my perspective, many of the criticisms of Kant stem from misguided assumptions that go back to at least neo-Kantianism and are repeated from generation to generation. I try to provide an alternative in the hope that young researchers will be inspired by it in the same way as I was inspired by the path that Duintjer had shown.

Maybe I should note that I do not consider myself a Kantian, in the same way that I never considered myself a Heideggerian or Hegelian. I am less interested in the content of their philosophies as in the forms of philosophical rationality that are enacted in works such as the *Critique of Pure Reason* or the *Science of Logic*. In the case of my first book on Heidegger and Hegel, for example, I focused on the method that informs Heidegger's analyses of human existence but that he does not explicitly discuss. This allowed me to show the relation between this method and his conception of the mode of temporality that undergirds philosophy itself. Similarly, my book on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* goes beyond its actual content by reconstructing

the outline of the metaphysical system Kant envisioned by never published. More recently, I have worked on the various methods Kant employs in the first *Critique* but, like Heidegger, does not explicitly discuss.

MR: *For the next question, I would like to discuss some of the ideas in your book, Kant's Reform of Metaphysics. But before I go into the content of the book, I would like to discuss your main influences in the book, namely Pichler, Wundt, Heimsoeth and Heidegger (p. 9). What distinguishes them from other readers of Kant, and what do you find inspiring in their work?*

KB: As a BA student, I was very much impressed by Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and I wrote my MA thesis on the method I took him to employ in this work. This thesis led to my PhD project on Heidegger and Hegel mentioned earlier on. In this context, I also studied Heidegger's interpretation of Kant. I was inspired in particular by his emphasis on Kant's engagement with Wolffian metaphysics. It is only much later that I realized that Heidegger's 'metaphysical' reading was indebted to authors like Wundt and Heimsoeth, who each in their own way challenged the premises of the dominant neo-Kantian readings of Kant in the early 1920s. I completely agree with Heidegger's criticism of these readings. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* does not primarily aim to provide the natural sciences with a foundation. Unlike Heidegger, I hold that Kant did not even aim to provide metaphysics with a new ground. The idea that a discipline needs to be grounded on a secure foundation is a neo-Kantian one that can be traced back to Descartes and, in post-Kantian philosophy, to Reinhold. Kant himself rather aimed to develop a properly systematic and coherent metaphysical system without resorting to an allegedly indubitable foundation. In 2019, I published an article¹ on this subject together with my former postdoc Stephen Howard.

MR: *Throughout the book, but especially in the chapter on the Transcendental Deduction, you prefer the first (1781) edition of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason to the second (1787) edition. There is no denying that there are major differences between the two, but the question remains whether these are merely methodological or substantive. Which side do you take?*

KB: I do not know the B-Deduction well enough to answer this question in very positive terms. I also do not know if it is possible to draw a clear line between the two options you present. It seems to me that Kant throughout his works tried to ponder the matter at hand from various perspectives, trusting that each of them would shed light on particular aspects of it. This attitude allowed him to abandon some of the assumptions that inform his early texts or present them in different terms. In each part of the 1781 edition of the *Critique* Kant elaborates on the question as to the conditions under which the human mind can generate a priori cognitions of objects from a particular perspective. I believe that Kant's 'perspectivism' also applies to the relation between the two versions of the transcendental deduction. Kant tried to carry out the task of the transcendental deduction by starting from a different point, but he did so in order to achieve the same result, namely, to demonstrate that producing objects of cognition requires not just the intellectual activity commonly attributed to the understanding but also the rule-bound syntheses carried out by the imagination. This demonstration suffices to limit a priori cognitions of objects to the sphere of possible experience and, thus, to counter the speculative elements of disciplines such as rational psychology and rational theology.

Seen in this way, Kant's decision, in the B-Deduction, to spend much less time on the account of the various syntheses carried out by the human mind makes good sense: he could have done so already in the A-Deduction without undercutting the main argument. In line with Heidegger, however, I believe that Kant's account of the role of the pure imagination in the constitution of objects in the A-Deduction is crucial to the argument as a whole and harder to understand by reading the B-Deduction. More generally, I prefer the first edition of the work to the second since many of the changes stem from Kant's attempt to defend the *Critique* against criticisms. In my view, the result is less coherent than the original edition.

MR: *One aspect of your work on Kant's metaphysics, and not just in the book, is your engagement with Kant's various notions of 'object' or 'thing'. Could you elaborate on what you see as Kant's overall picture—including the many different words that Kant uses for what we might in ordinary discourse just call object?*

KB: It is true that I find this a very intriguing subject. I published an article² on Kant's multi-layered conception of the thing in itself in 2014 and included a reworked version of it in my *Kant's Reform of Metaphysics*. I complemented my work on this topic in a recent article³, published in *Studi Kantiani*, on Kant's transcendental turn to the object. This article focuses on the distinction between the term 'object' in the sense of a material thing that exists independently of the mind and, on the other hand, the term 'object' in the sense of a content that is produced by the human mind and that, according to Kant, is nothing but the result of its explicit focus on the unity of a manifold of representations. By taking into account the specific aims Kant pursues in specific sections, it is possible to distinguish these various meanings and see that his analyses are much more coherent than is often alleged.

I consider Kant's account in the A-Deduction of the various ways in which the human mind engages in the objectification of its representations to be infinitely more important than his few comments on what I call 'affecting objects,' i.e., the material things that produce impressions in us. From Jacobi's attack on Kant in the Appendix to his 1787 book on David Hume onward, these comments – and the contradiction to which they are alleged to give rise – have attracted a disproportionate number of scholarly books and articles. This research

¹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09608788.2018.1450218>

² <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/kant-2014-0011/html>

³ <https://www.torrossa.com/en/resources/an/5738441>

has overshadowed the significance and originality of Kant's conception of object constitution and its impact on authors such as Fichte and Hegel. In my view, Kant's analysis of how the human mind produces objects of intuition, objects of thought, and objects of cognition, among others, illustrates very well the meaning of the term 'transcendental idealism,' which I take to be another element of Kant's philosophy that has often been misunderstood and rejected for the wrong reasons.

MR: You are very active in Kant scholarship, not only through your writings, but also through the online Leuven Seminar in Classical German Philosophy, which organizes regular talks and discussions on Kant and post-Kantian German philosophy. The seminar attracts a large audience from all over the world and I think has helped to shape the present landscape of Kant scholarship. Could you tell us a little more about it? How did it start, how is it going, and what are the plans for the future?

KB: In the early Spring of 2020, when the pandemic was spreading, we decided to organize the yearly Leuven Kant Conference online. We had started to use Zoom to communicate, and I loved it, but we had no experience with organizing online conferences. I believe we were one of the first to organize a relatively big philosophy event online. We had prepared everything in much detail and thanks to that it went very well. This experience, and other online events in which I participated, led me to the idea of the Leuven Seminar in Classical German Philosophy⁴, which we initiated in the Fall of 2020. It has always been organized by me, two or three postdocs who work with me, and in one case a PhD student. It is very inspiring to put together the program for each semester. We try to find a good balance between junior and senior researchers, male and female researchers, and researchers based in various parts of the world. For me, it is great to be able to foster exchanges between researchers whose work shares much common ground but who would not have been able to meet each other at conferences or in other ways. The Leuven Seminar also allows us to draw attention to recently published books, and the recordings of the sessions on YouTube are watched by many viewers. As regards the future: for now, I think we will continue to organize the series along the lines of past editions.

In 2024, I was also the initiator and one of the organizers of the Virtual Kant Congress⁵ (together with Andrew Chignell, Z Quanbeck and Luis Garcia). The idea was to celebrate Kant's 300th birthday by means of a series of sessions organized by Kant groups based in a particular country or region. In this way, many Kant scholars who could not travel to one of the many conferences were able to share their ideas and get to know each other or reconnect with old friends and colleagues. For me, this was a very rewarding experience even though some aspects of it were more challenging than we had expected.

MR: You are also active as one of the four editors of the Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie, and you are on the editorial boards of many other journals. How do you see the discipline today? What are the strengths of philosophy journals and what could be improved?

KB: In one sense, much of the way in which academic research in philosophy is conducted is problematic. The peer-review process takes a lot of time, many important journals are owned by large companies whose primary aim is to make money, and much of the content is not accessible by readers who do not have academic positions. Editors, reviewers, authors, and universities have little leverage to change the situation. Changes that are currently being made can be improvements, but it seems to me that they are quite marginal. Apart from the economic issues, the very idea of a peer-reviewed academic journal might be considered old-fashioned. Yet it seems to me that high-end academic philosophy journals are important in that they set the bar very high for potential authors, thus challenging them to push back their boundaries. In this way, the journals contribute to the fostering of serious and original philosophical research.

I also value the fact that academic philosophy journals, regardless of their role in the academic rat race, take decisions based on fair and careful deliberations, which means that they can foster a type of rationality that is increasingly threatened in contemporary media, culture, and politics. In this sense, they act as small sanctuaries.

Most importantly, perhaps, I hold that the articles published in journals such as *Archiv* allow its authors and readers to be part of something that Hegel would call 'spirit' – an incredible tangle of strands each of which testifies to philosophical rationality, that is, to forms of rationality that proceed by means of their own principles and do so in order to comprehend the forms of rationality of which human beings are capable. In this sense, engaging oneself with the history of philosophy means engaging with one of the highest achievements of human rationality.

MR: The quality of peer review is a common concern, especially for early career researchers. I find reviews valuable—even if a reviewer misunderstands my argument—because it signals that I need to be clearer in any case. However, challenges remain, such as the risk of confusing disagreement with poor quality. Based on your editorial experience, what do you think are the best ways to improve the peer review process?

KB: In the context of the Virtual Kant Congress, the UK Kant Society organized a panel discussion on publishing in peer-reviewed journals. I can recommend the video⁶ to all researchers. I agree that the quality of reviews can widely differ but it is hard to see how this can be remedied. Measures that are already in place include flagging reviewers who do not support their recommendation very well. Most editors base

⁴ <https://hiw.kuleuven.be/cmprpc/events/leuvenseminarinclassicalgermanphilosophy>

⁵ <https://www.virtualkantcongress.org/recorded-sessions>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqtueR4zGmY>

their decisions on two reviews, and it seems to me this is good practice. I further think it is important to invite reviewers from a large and global pool rather than to rely on a small pool of well-established scholars who share more or less the same perspective and might be less likely to foster innovation.

MR: Let me finish with a larger question. You see Kant as sifting the wheat from the chaff in the Wolffian tradition before him. If we, as philosophers of the 21st century, decide to sift the wheat from the chaff of Kant's philosophy, what should stay and what should go?

KB: Without the act of sifting the wheat from the chaff, philosophy would not have had a history. Throughout its reception, Kant's philosophy has been the subject of many sifting operations. From at least Reinhold onward, the idea was to separate the spirit from the letter of Kant's philosophy, abolish the latter, and develop the former in new contexts and by new means. Neo-Kantians intended to abolish the speculative aspects of Kant's philosophy and to develop his views on the principles of the natural sciences in new contexts. Clearly, in our time Kant, Hegel, and other philosophers who represent the canon of Western philosophy are scrutinized in view of their accounts of human races and hierarchical conceptions of world history. Evidently, researchers have very different opinions on the extent to which Kant's racist comments can be disentangled from his conception of world history and his critical philosophy as a whole. I believe that the debates on this issue are important, but I personally do not feel drawn to them. For me, it is more important to sift the wheat from the chaff contained in interpretations of Kant developed in early post-Kantianism, German idealism, and neo-Kantianism, all of which left their stamp on how we are reading Kant today.