

**Idealism with Realism: Kant's 'Middle Ground'**  
*Idealismo con realismo: el 'fundamento intermedio' de Kant*

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**Review of: Lucy Allais, *Manifest Reality: Kant's Idealism & his Realism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. ISBN: 978-0-19-874713-0.**

This review must begin with a disclaimer, or perhaps even an apology. I am a scholar predominantly interested in Kant's political philosophy and it has been years since I have read the first *Critique* – or any of the three, to be honest. Jumping into it through Lucy Allais's thorough and detailed book was therefore a daunting task, albeit one which I wholeheartedly enjoyed after warming up to it. While painful at times, reading Allais's work opened up some locks regarding my own thoughts on Kant's political thought and provided support for my previous conviction that in order to make a full sense of his political philosophy and moral theory underlining it, one has to go back to the *Critiques* and the overall metaphysical system Kant provides – something I try to emphasise in my own work concentrating particularly on Kant's conception of the state, structure of international society, and vision of world politics. Keeping that in mind, in what follows I will try to offer a review of Allais's intriguing book through the lenses of Kantian international political theorist. I acknowledge that this means leaving out some of the important contributions that the book makes to a particular reading of the first *Critique*.<sup>1</sup>

The thrust of Allais's argument in *Manifest Reality* is that while Kant's concerns in the *Critique* are to large extent epistemological, his transcendental idealism 'must be

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<sup>1</sup> For previous reviews and discussion on Allais's book, see 'Author meets critics' section in *Kantian Review* 21(2) of 2016 in which Allais replies to comments of her book provided, among others, by Paul Guyer.

understood as containing substantial metaphysical commitments (p. 7),’ ones that fundamentally affect his theory of mind-dependent reality of things and how they appear – or, to use Allais’s terminology, *manifest* – to us. Throughout the book Allais beautifully illustrates and convincingly argues for what I perceive as a Kantian ‘*middle ground*’, which aims at accommodating competing philosophical concerns between idealism and realism, on the one hand, and epistemology and metaphysics, on the other hand; a unique position that grounds Kant’s critical metaphysical project. Allais provides an overwhelmingly thorough analysis of both original text and scholarly interpretations and shows why she thinks that Kant’s idealism cannot be interpreted either as phenomenalism or brute noumenalism and, at the same time, cannot rely on pure empiricism or realism either.

The book is divided in three parts. In the first part, Allais gives a comprehensive account of other scholarly texts on Kant’s epistemological and metaphysical position. As she outlines her reading of Kant in Chapter 1: ‘Kant’s distinction is based on epistemological considerations, and has epistemological consequences, but it also involves metaphysical claims about what exists and about the mind-dependence of the aspect of reality of which we can have knowledge (p. 11)’. She irrevocably demonstrates why the previous interpretations are not sufficient and how there is therefore a need for an account that takes seriously Kant’s commitment to transcendental idealism as a theory of appearances that provides us an understanding of our relationship to both the world out there and to the things in themselves.

She furthermore shows how Kant is indeed committed to transcendental idealism and not only as an epistemological approach or method but as a critical metaphysical project. She stipulates how Kant’s account is incompatible with phenomenalist idealism through his commitment to ‘robust empirical realism’ that does not deny the existence of mind-independent world but instead guides us to a substantial sense of mind-dependent appearances of objects in the world out there. Finally, she provides evidence on how Kant thinks that the things which appear to us indeed have a way in which they are in themselves and this way of being in themselves is independent of their appearance to us.

In the parts two and three Allais lays down her own positive contribution by introducing the idea of ‘manifest reality’. According to her, the most plausible way to make sense of Kant’s account of appearances is to conceptualise them as manifestations. To illustrate why this is the case, Allais offers an analogy with colour and exemplifies how colour manifests – rather than merely appears – to us. Following Allais, the essential manifestness account of colour is one in which ‘colour is a directly perceived quality of things that does not present us with things as they are in themselves (p. 104)’. She then goes on to discuss essentially manifest qualities in order to show the importance of relationality of objects of our intuition. Objects, she says, have essentially manifest qualities ‘which belong *only* to the perceptual appearances of objects: qualities which

objects have as they are presented to subjects but which they do not have as they are apart from their appearing, as they are in themselves (p. 117, emphasis hers)'. The metaphysical status of colour, Allais argues, is fundamentally dependent on essentially manifest qualities that are dependent on our relationship to the object. By making sense of mind-dependent and mind-independent qualities of objects, we can make sense of Kant's complex account of transcendental idealism with realism as well. As Allais puts it, 'Kant thinks... that the essentially manifest qualities of things we are able to cognise exhaust the characteristics of spatio-temporal empirically real objects. He thinks that empirical knowledge and science give us knowledge only of essentially manifest objects and does not need anything more. (p. 135)'

It is the 'middle ground' that Allais attributes to Kant between the spatio-temporal reality and mind-dependent realm of cognition, I believe, that provides the most interesting food for thought for a Kantian political theorist. As Allais well summarises Kant's position in the very beginning of the book: 'Kant's position is a careful combination of realism and idealism, and of metaphysical and epistemological claims (p. 11)'. It is this position balancing between realism and idealism, on the one hand, and metaphysics and epistemological assumptions, on the other hand, that fundamentally grounds Kant's theses of ethical and political reality as well. In the end, Kant's ethics relies upon concepts such as *moral duty* and *free will* that are, in the sense, 'strange things' from the perspective of cognition – as it is the case that concepts and intuitions are presented by Kant as two separate ingredients of cognition (p.145).<sup>2</sup> In Allais's words: 'Transcendent metaphysics (which makes claims about things which are not possible objects of experience, thus which Kant thinks it is impossible for us to cognise) consists of making judgements using concepts for which we cannot have corresponding objects given in intuition (this is what wrong with it), but it certainly has some kind of content, *since some of its ideas play an important role in Kant's ethics* (p. 152, emphasis mine)'

While Allais herself says that she will not go into Kant's ethics in the book, her work has important overlap with the central questions in Kant's moral and political theory. One of my all time favourite quotes from Kant comes from *Groundwork* where he, when discussing about the feelings of happiness, states that '*... because happiness is not an ideal of reason, but of imagination, resting merely on empirical grounds of which it would be futile to expect that they should determine an action through which to attain the totality of a series of consequences which are in fact infinite (emphasis mine)*'.<sup>3</sup> Imagination, respectively, is 'the faculty for representing an object even *without its presence* in intuition (Kant in Allais, p. 156.)'. The way in which Kant talks about happiness in *Groundwork*, his

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent introduction to Kant's moral philosophy see Jennifer K. Uleman, *An Introduction to Kant's Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). In the book Uleman refers to the free will willing itself as a 'strange thing'.

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, edited and translated by Allen W. Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), [4:419] at p. 35.

foundational work on ethics, occurred into my mind when I was reading *Manifest Reality*. The reason for that is of course that the same kind of middle ground realm is dominantly present in Kant's work on politics and ethics as well.

In the part of *Groundwork* where the above happiness quotation is from, Kant writes beautifully about the possibility of knowledge in relation to duties: 'In fact it is absolutely impossible to settle with complete certainty *through experience* whether there is even a single case in which the certain maxim of an otherwise dutiful action has *rested solely on moral grounds and on the representation of one's duty* (emphasis mine).'<sup>4</sup> As the quote I think well illustrates, Kant draws the connection between experience and cognition throughout his work on ethics and highlights the difficult nature of ethical judgements that have to rely upon *something else* than mere experience and intuitions. He furthermore denies the role of nature as the source of moral judgements, because nature, the world out there, consists of nothing *in itself worthy of moral choice*. The empirical world, for Kant, cannot be the source of moral good. Yet, those familiar with Kant's work on politics in particular are well aware of the role nature and the world out there play in achieving ideal political ends, particularly that of 'perpetual peace'.

Kant's discussion of ideal forms of statehood is an illustrative example of this interplay between the empirical world and ideas in themselves. The state, for Kant, is 'a union of an aggregate of men under rightful laws. In so far as these laws are necessary *a priori* and follow automatically from concepts of external right in general (and are not just set up by statute), the form of the state will be that of a state in the absolute sense, i.e. as the idea of what a state ought to be according to pure principles of right'.<sup>5</sup> Statehood, then, somehow *manifests* itself to us, yet it is regulated by norms that are *a priori*. It is not purely ideational as it does have 'phenomenal incarnations' in different forms of statehood, but, at the same time, it fundamentally relies upon a concept that is separate from our cognised world. The complex relationship between ethics, which is *a priori*, and empirical world is present throughout Kant's work on politics, like the discussion about the imperative to reform towards highest form of the state, that of republicanism, proves:

... [t]he republican constitution is the only one, which does complete justice to the rights of man. But it is also the most difficult to establish, and even more so to preserve, so that many maintain that it would only be possible within a state of angels, since men, with their self-seeking inclinations, would be incapable of adhering to a constitution of so sublime nature. But in fact, *nature comes to the aid of the universal and rational*

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<sup>4</sup> *Groundwork*, [4:407], pp.22-23.

<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, 'The Metaphysics of Morals,' in *Political Writings*, edited by H.S.Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), at p. 138.

*human will*, so admirable in itself but *so impotent in practice*, and makes use of precisely those self-seeking inclinations in order to do so'.<sup>6</sup>

Here, nature – the empirical world – is seen as a *facilitator* of morality; an important yet distinct part of our moral universe and existence as moral agents. Just as the empirical reality is important to our cognition in which appearances manifest to us, so is the empirical world crucially important to our conception of morality, even though moral duty regulating both our ethical and political reality cannot be derived from the world out there. Kant is very much anti-naturalist with regards to his moral theory, in so far as the ultimate moral concepts such as duty cannot be grounded on anything external to us. In the same manner as the external world is separated from the appearances manifesting to us in cognition, so are moral choices and morality in general *experimentally distinct* from the practical reasoning and political prudence.



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<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, 'Perpetual Peace. A Philosophical Sketch,' in *Political Writings*, edited by H.S.Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), at p. 112.