

BOOK REVIEWS

values hold the key to a world that looks different from the troubled world we live in” (121).

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Sebastian RÖDL. *Self-Consciousness and Objectivity: An Introduction to Absolute Idealism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018. 208 pp.

A good number of contemporary analytic philosophers are proponents of what Jan Bransen calls the “engineering conception of philosophy”. They see philosophy as a “large series of small problems”, resulting in something “that looks most like filling out a huge and boring cryptogram” (review of Alfred R. Mele’s *Backsliding: Understanding Weakness of Will Analysis* 73/3 [2013]: 585-587). According to this conception of philosophy, it is all about defending one’s view against rivals, about finding the right balance between biting a counterintuitive bullet on one end or paying a theoretical price on the other end. There will be plenty of room for all involved to develop and defend their very own view – there is always some detail, some ‘small problem’, on which to differ.

Sebastian Rödl’s approach to philosophy is radically opposite, and in *Self-Consciousness and Objectivity* he brilliantly illustrates and defends this conception. He states in the introductory chapter that his book “[...] propounds no theses, advances no hypotheses, does not recommend a view, or position; it does not give arguments that are to support a view, it does not defend a position against competing ones” (6). Philosophy, Rödl suggests, is *the science without contrary*. This is to be taken quite literally: philosophy deals only in thoughts that have no contrary, that are impossible to deny, not because we find ourselves psychologically unable to do so, but because they *have no negation*. There is thus not a multitude of philosophical positions one can choose to defend: either the philosopher succeeds in formulating what has no contrary, or he or she does not, and thereby fails to think a coherent thought at all. So in philosophy, “[i]t will make no sense to think of oneself as defending or attacking positions. It will be pointless to bite bullets. This science [i.e. philosophy] will be a perfectly de-militarized zone. It will be equally senseless to think of oneself as putting one’s money somewhere, as hedging one’s bets, as paying a price. This science will be a perfectly extra-economical zone” (15).

How could one ever arrive at such an extreme view of philosophy? According to Rödl, this conception emerges as we reflect on what it is to think, or in his preferred terminology, to *judge*. The very first result of this reflection is that judgment is both *self-conscious* and *objective* – the two notions that constitute the book’s main topic. We briefly explain Rödl’s take on each of these in turn, in order to acquire some perspective on the tension between them that the book aims to thematise.

If I judge that things are a certain way, I take it to be valid so to judge. Now, this thought of my judgment’s validity is not *external* to judgment. “[My] judgment and [my] thought of it as valid are but one act of the mind” (2). Indeed, *taking it to be valid* to judge

that *p* is to judge that (come to be of the mind that) *p*. This feature of judgment is its *self-consciousness*: “[...] the internality to what is thought of its being thought” (7). Here, then, we find a judgment without contrary: ‘judgment is self-conscious’. Can we deny it? Easy enough, one might suppose. We just add a negation: ‘judgment is not self-conscious’. But what does this say? That it is one thing to judge something and another to take it to be valid to judge it. It follows that judgment and self-consciousness can, in principle, come apart: there can be judgment without a consciousness of its own validity. Suppose, now, that you judge, in this way, that it rains. Is it raining, according to you? ‘I have no idea’, you must say: nothing in what we supposed you to be conscious of, in your ‘judgment’, tells you whether or not it is raining. For, we assumed, it is one thing to judge, and another to think that what one judges is true. Thus the very notion of judgment falls apart when we try to deny its self-consciousness. It thus transpires that ‘judgment’, in ‘judgment is not self-conscious’, is meaningless. It is like ‘Green ideas sleep furiously’. The familiar words trick us into supposing that they make sense, but that is mere appearance. ‘Judgment is self-conscious’ is truly without contrary.

The preceding paragraph is a hopelessly abbreviated attempt to display Rödl’s exploration of the self-consciousness of judgment in the first four chapters of the book. According to Rödl’s project, the realization that judgment is self-conscious is in an important sense not a *discovery*. It is not a judgment *about* judgment – Rödl offers no higher-order *theory* of self-consciousness, and indeed, the above considerations form the core of his diagnosis of the futility of any such account (chapter 2). Rather, the realization that judging and taking it as valid to judge cannot come apart is *itself* something that is contained *in* the act of judgment. Philosophy, the science without contrary, is the articulation of what we are conscious of *in* making any judgment whatsoever. In other words: it is the articulation of self-consciousness. It is because of this understanding of philosophy that the book is aptly subtitled *An Introduction to Absolute Idealism*.

The second feature of judgment that Rödl explores is its *objectivity*. When I judge that things are so, then my judgment is objective: its validity depends *only* on how the relevant things are. In particular, its validity does not depend on any characteristic of *me*, the judge, the thinker. Yet, as we have just seen, it seems that this cannot be. When I judge that things are so, the judgment *is* my taking it to be valid. I am necessarily involved in the judgment: my consciousness of its validity is inside the judgment, is not a separable element in it. So it seems that judgment can be objective only if it is not self-conscious.

This thought will be familiar to readers of Thomas Nagel, for example, according to whom the “view from nowhere,” the truly objective view, requires us to “expel the first person” (1). But Rödl shows that this leads nowhere. In order to bring this out he engages with the work of Nagel and Adrian Moore (among others), who argue in their own ways that judgment’s ambition to attain objectivity requires the formation of an objective or ‘absolute conception’ (in Bernard Williams’ phrase) of reality – including an absolute conception of judgment itself. Such a conception of reality might, for example, be one in which no colour-concepts figure, since those are features of subjective perception and not of the objective world. But at the same time, such an account would

have to explain why it is that we *make* judgments involving colour concepts. The idea of an absolute conception, then, includes the idea of an explanation, and in that sense a transcendence, of subjectivity in objective terms. But this, Rödl contends, is a meaningless ideal: there can be no explanation of judgment that draws on things not known by me in that very judgment. In framing the idea of an external (and in that sense ‘absolute’) explanation of what I judge, we lose track of the putative object of this explanation. In attempting to explain the judgment independently from its validity, and thus in attempting to separate *what* we judge from *why* we judge it, the notion of judgment once again falls apart. The ideal of an absolute conception of reality (in Williams’ sense), Rödl contends, thus leads ultimately to the impossibility of comprehending our judgments as valid, and that is, as knowledge.

A correct understanding of objectivity, then, cannot be at odds with the self-consciousness of judgment. That our judgments *are* objective, are valid *of* reality, could not possibly be the result of an external, natural scientific explanation of judgment, as Moore and Nagel hope, but must rather transpire from an articulation of what is known in every judgment itself. This is why Rödl insists that absolute idealism should not be regarded as “a species of idealism”, the view according to which reality depends on the mind. “Absolute idealism is the most radical, the most thorough, and the only sound rejection of that” (6). Judgment, or self-consciousness, is not *opposed* to objectivity, or reality. Instead, objectivity *requires* that in making a judgment (a claim to knowledge) one understands that very judgment to be knowledge. Knowledge, in Rödl’s slogan, is self-knowledge: knowledge knowing itself *to be knowledge*.

In the second half of the book (chapters 6-10), Rödl endeavours to explain this understanding of the unity of objectivity and self-consciousness through an investigation of the way in which judgment depends on perception. We can attempt nothing more than a rough overview of his sophisticated argument here. Philosophy deals with what has no contrary, with what is known in every judgment. But judgments about reality are *with* contrary: they are either true or false, can be negated, etc. While ‘judgments without contrary’ are ‘self-validating’ (because they have no negation), judgments with contrary must be *validated*. Ultimately, this means they must be grounded in perception. From the perspective established in the first half of the book, this looks perplexing, for if empirical judgment is grounded by something *other* than itself, then it seemingly cannot contain an understanding of its *own* validity and hence cannot be a judgment at all. The alternative seems to be to say that empirical judgment can only be explained (validated) by another judgment, in which case we end up with an unsatisfactory form of coherentism. (This predicament will be familiar to readers of McDowell’s *Mind & World* [Harvard University Press, 1996] with which Rödl masterfully engages.)

This stalemate, Rödl thinks, can be resolved by recognizing that empirical judgments are manifestations of the *power of judgment*, and specifically, of a “[...] power to know through affection” (42). Powers explain their manifestations, except where these fail to conform to the power: then additional circumstances must be called upon that explain the divergence. A pear tree’s blossoming, for example, is explained by its power to bloom, and if it fails to blossom at the right time this is explained by something

external to the pear tree, e.g. a parasite or climate change. A power is, thus, a *concept*: it is the concept of its own manifestations, and distinguishes the successful from the unsuccessful ones. Similarly, a valid judgment is explained by being in accordance with its own concept: “[...] in judging, I think it valid so to judge, which is to say, I think my judgment to conform to its concept” (41), and that is, to its power. This power is the power of knowledge: a successful manifestation of the power of judgment is a successful judgment, and that is a true judgment. External circumstances are only needed to explain failures of judgment, hence those who think that knowledge, i.e. the successful manifestations of the power to know, requires externalist justification, e.g. by referring to an evolutionary selection of a reliable perceptual mechanism, are deeply misguided. “There is no externalist account of knowledge, no externalist epistemology” (34). If all this is right, then in explaining a judgment by referring it to the power of sensory knowledge, we are *not* explaining it by reference to something *other* than judgment: we are, rather, explaining empirical judgment by referring it to its *own* concept.

Thus Rödl is aligned with thinkers like McDowell, who believe that knowledge always includes an awareness of its own grounds. But unlike McDowell, Rödl does not think that this is the end of the story. As chapter 8 shows, it can seem that, in explaining a judgment as the manifestation of the power to know, we are simply *completing* the chain of questions ‘Why is this so?’, asked about a particular judgment, with a final ‘it is so’, after which further justification becomes impossible. The perceptual judgment, then, would appear to be ultimately self-validating after all. And so it would turn out to be no empirical judgment – no judgment about the objective world – at all.

Now Rödl explains that this paradox is the result of a mistaken conception of the power of knowledge, namely, as *a* power on the same level as other powers (e.g. the pear tree’s power to bloom, the ball’s power to roll). On that conception, an exercise of the power of knowledge would indeed have to be a concrete (and thus complete) particular happening that stands in need of no further explanation. But that this is a mistaken conception can be seen from the earlier identification of powers with concepts. As Rödl said, a power explains what, for example, the pear tree does by revealing this to be in accord with the concept of a pear tree. But the power of knowledge is not *a* concept. It is, after all, the power to deploy concepts in general – to deploy *any* concept (45). It is “the power *überhaupt*” (22). To understand its ability to justify empirical judgments without completing them, we thus have to comprehend the generality of the power of knowledge. In taking up this challenge, Rödl appeals to Aristotle’s distinction between first and second power (46-47), explaining how, roughly, the generality of the power of knowledge means that it must admit of a *determination* into a second power. In expounding the account of the self-conscious power of knowledge in terms of this Aristotelian structure, Rödl deepens the understanding of the notion of rational power in epistemology, and opens new avenues of exploration. In particular, his appropriation of the Aristotelian distinction raises the question how it can be reapplied to the subject of virtue and *practical* knowledge, which is perhaps the area from which the idea of an Aristotelian second power is most familiar to us.

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By thus developing the idea of the power of knowledge step by step, Rödl guides us through an ever deepening appreciation of the core problematic of his book. In the end it appears as follows: “Either we think absolute knowledge [knowledge without contrary] completes the judgment of experience. Then there is no such thing as empirical knowledge [...]. Or we think absolute knowledge is complete and therewith distinct from the judgment of experience, which is incomplete. Then absolute knowledge is empty and nothing at all” (60).

The way out is radical: it is *because* of their incompleteness that judgments with contrary are judgments *with contrary*. A judgment of experience is a rather peculiar sort of judgment: *so it is*, it says, and yet it leaves room for justification. (Seeing *that* something is the case does not in itself tell us *why* it is the case.) Since all judgment, including empirical judgment, is self-conscious, the empirical judgment knows that it is incomplete, that it is to be justified. So the longing for a ‘completion’ is misconceived: it would destroy its very object. Likewise, the idea that knowledge without contrary, *the science*, is complete in separation from the realm of judgments with contrary is misconceived: knowledge without contrary “[...] is nothing other than the thought of the validity of *empirical* judgment” (60). Rödl’s final sentence reads: “Judging anything at all, we recognize the difference of self-knowledge and knowledge of nature to be their identity, their identity, their difference” (61). Objectivity and self-consciousness turn out to be two sides of the very same, absolute idealist coin.

Having thus gestured towards the contents of Rödl’s book, it goes without saying that to anyone used to contemporary philosophy, this will be a truly thought-provoking, and sometimes mind-boggling read. Apart from the book’s larger aim of reconciling self-consciousness and objectivity, it engages with topics fundamental to analytic philosophy of mind, action, language, and metaphysics along the way. Rödl, for instance, offers new insights about the metaphysics of powers, and radically criticizes epistemic externalism, as well as the distinction between force and content, and the notion of a propositional attitude that comes with it (in chapter 2). At times, it might seem that Rödl’s criticism of fundamental contemporary philosophical theories is too destructive. For instance, if we follow Rödl in rejecting the force/content distinction, how are we ever to understand disagreement, which is normally explained in analytic philosophy as taking opposed attitudes to the same content? Here readers will certainly be left wanting to read more. But then again, as Rödl echoes Kant: although it is painful to be at sea, “[...] this is infinitely better than to be under the illusion of understanding” (13). If Rödl’s powerful critique is correct, then the force-content distinction *is* meaningless, and the challenge of doing the philosophy of mind and language without it should be welcomed.

Thus Rödl’s book is an invitation to rethink some of contemporary philosophy’s fundamental questions in a promising new light. Indeed, one of the many virtues of the book is the way in which it succeeds in rekindling systematic interest in authors such as Hegel, Wittgenstein, and Aristotle, by showing their relevance to issues in contemporary analytic philosophy, and all the while doing justice to the ideal of clarity to which the latter aspires.

As Rödl's book is no ordinary philosophy book, this is no ordinary book review. We did not set out to identify certain theoretical costs and benefits of the author's views. If Rödl is right, philosophy needs a radical reorientation (which will include a recognition that this implication is no thought at all).

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