

Inga Römer

Kant et la métaphysique pour l'homme

Presses Universitaires de France, Paris

2024, pp. 416, € 34.00, ISBN 9782130870791

Davide Puzzolo

Università degli Studi di Padova

Inga Römer's *Kant et la métaphysique pour l'homme* is an ambitious and insightful study on the concept of Metaphysics in Kant's thought, explored through a systematic engagement with the key texts following the critical turn, from the *Critique of Pure Reason* to the *Opus postumum*.

The text presents a broad Introduction (pp. 11-59), focused on an overview of the fate of metaphysics in contemporary philosophy and the reception of Kantian thought in Germany in the 20th century. It then discusses the first metaphysical interpretations of Kant (Paulsen, Vaihinger, Adickes), which contrast with the typically epistemological reading of the Neo-Kantians; the debates – often ideological and nationalist in nature – regarding the political consequences of Kantian metaphysics (Bauch, Wundt, Heimsoeth); and finally, the ontological interpretations of transcendental philosophy (Hartmann, Heidegger). Römer notes that these traditions, in different ways, tend to overlook Kant's project of a *practical-dogmatic metaphysics*. The main objective of the book is thus to clarify what Kant means by this notion.

In the first part (pp.61-93), Römer shows that Kant's critique of metaphysics targets the possibility of a theoretical knowledge of the objects of *metaphysica generalis* (things-in-themselves) and of *metaphysica specialis* (soul, world, God). However, "this result, which earned Kant the reputation of being a radical critic of metaphysics, is nonetheless only the first step of his argument" (p. 61). The impossibility of theoretical metaphysics opens the path to a moral-practical one. Römer reconstructs Kant's argument in the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, focusing on how common reason leads to the formulation of the categorical imperative and the justification of its binding force. Yet, this bindingness remains "precarious", for the recognition of the validity of the moral law is not in itself sufficient for human beings to act

in accordance with it (see p. 93). This tension motivates Kant to critically ground a new *metaphysica specialis*, a “critical special metaphysics”, centered on the doctrine of the highest good and the postulates of freedom, immortality, and God.

Part two (pp. 95-261) traces how this doctrine evolves in later works. Römer begins with the second *Critique*, where Kant links the realization of the highest good to the practical postulates. However, the author argues that the account remains unclear and Kant himself seems dissatisfied (see p. 103). The role of the soul’s immortality is ambiguous, appearing to conflict with the principle *ultra posse nemo obligatur* (see p. 105). Likewise, the postulate of God raises difficulties: if only God can harmonize virtue and happiness, then human responsibility seems to be undermined, creating a tension between moral effort and divine intervention.

According to Römer, in order to make the obligation to promote the highest good comprehensible, it is necessary to go beyond the second *Critique*, referring instead to works such as the *Critique of Judgment*, the *Religion*, and the *Metaphysics of Morals*. In these texts – albeit in different ways – Kant seems to suggest that the realization of the highest good involves the human duty to establish a legal order and an ethical republic in the world (see p. 131), within which each human being acts to promote the happiness of others and, consequently, a universal happiness. However, the secularization of the highest good could result in the postulates of God and the immortality of the soul becoming superfluous. Indeed, the soul’s immortality seems increasingly absent in the later works. God, by contrast, retains a systematic role: while the establishment of an ethical community should remove the obstacles human beings place on each other, divine providence is still needed to overcome nature’s hindrances. As Römer puts it, “the highest good becomes a real possibility through reasonable faith that the world is made in such a way that the highest good can indeed be realized within it” (p. 150). This faith is identical with the faith in a God who has organized the world in such a way as to make it permeable to our moral ends.

The place where Kant most systematically addresses the problem of the highest good as a cosmological problem is the *Critique of Judgment*, which, according to Römer, plays a propaedeutic role in relation to the establishment of a critical metaphysics. In this text, the question of the highest good is interpreted in the light of the teleological problem and of the reflective judgement on the

purposiveness of the world. This marks a progression beyond the second *Critique*, where a fundamental ambiguity persisted between the role of God and how the synthesis of virtue and happiness could be realized. In the third *Critique*, it becomes clear that faith in God “does not consist in believing in the existence of a being named God who would exist somewhere, accessible to us through a moral argument [...]; rather, the faith in question here is limited to a trust in the real possibility of achieving the highest Good in this world” (p. 185). For this reason, a proper understanding of Kantian metaphysics cannot avoid considering the question of practical reason “and what it allows in terms of metaphysics for the human being” (p. 206).

According to Römer, it is however in the *Progresses* that Kant first outlines a genuine metaphysics. The author focuses on Kant’s redefinition of *metaphysica generalis* as a kind of “regional ontology” – using an Heideggerian terminology – which is “limited to the possible objects of our experience, an ontology that would indeed be possible within the framework of a critical philosophy” (p. 210). However, this ontology seems to be excluded from proper metaphysics, which would instead now fully identify with *metaphysica specialis*, or better, with *critical special metaphysics*. Ontology is merely a vestibule to metaphysics, as the latter concerns the progress of reason from the knowledge of the sensible to that of the supersensible (see p. 215). We “make” ourselves the objects of special metaphysics “from the binding character of the moral law and our human constitution” (p. 224). These objects, however, are not mere fictions (as Vaihinger would argue) nor projections of anthropological qualities of human beings (as Feuerbach would state), but rather necessary grounds for the realization of the highest good in the world (see pp. 228-230). According to Römer, Kant’s metaphysics cannot even be reduced to a form of onto-theology, for it is more about human moral experience than about ontological claims regarding God as a self-subsistent entity (pp. 252-261).

The last section (pp. 263-362) examines the development of *metaphysica specialis* in the *Opus postumum*. Römer focuses on fascicles VII and I, the last written by Kant, where practical-moral themes dominate. The author shows the continuity between the *Progresses* and what Kant now calls “the highest standpoint of transcendental philosophy” (pp. 267-288). While the highest good is rarely mentioned in the *Opus postumum* (p. 290), Römer argues it still anchors Kant’s moral argument. As Kant stated in previous

works, the categorical imperative, through the mediating function of the highest good, leads us to admit the existence of God as its condition of possibility. Yet here, Kant is clear in affirming that the existence of God is not to be considered as the existence of a being *distinct* from us. Rather, “the meaning of the ‘existence’ in question can only be an *existence that we produce ourselves and through our rational faith*” (p. 299). This faith enables us to envision and transform the world through our moral actions, with God conceived as the true source of duty.

In this sense, according to the author, the idea of the “World” that appears in the final fascicle of the *Opus postumum* is to be understood as both a theoretical and a practical concept. It encompasses not only the totality of natural entities and the moving forces that connect them, but also the totality of human beings and the ethical moving forces that operate among them. God would thus seem to perform a function analogous to the one described in the *Religion*, as “sovereign of an ethical republic encompassing all humanity” (p. 281).

Römer also explores the function of “Man” as a *copula* between the ideas of God and World. In the manuscripts, Man becomes the intermediate concept (*Mittelbegriff*) connecting the two: by acting morally, Man “transforms the world so that it can be considered a divine predicate, constantly in becoming and guided by pure practical reason” (p. 349). In other words, it is human actions that must lead to the establishment of an ethical community (a moral world) of which God is the supreme legislator. It is also noteworthy that Kant replaces the soul with the idea of Man, emphasizing human agency in shaping ethical and legal structures guided by rational faith.

This also signals a shift in the very scope of transcendental philosophy. While in the first *Critique* the objects of transcendental philosophy, that is, the objects of possible experience, were only those given to sensibility and synthesized by the understanding, in the *Opus postumum* both God and the World are included within this field. As Römer writes, “there are now *two types of possible objects* for critical transcendental philosophy: objects possible for our sensible experience and objects created by ourselves and attested, in their objective reality in the practical sense, by a faith in the real possibility of the highest Good in the world” (p. 360).

In the Conclusion (pp. 363-384), Römer provides a systematic summary of the work, aiming to demonstrate that for Kant,

metaphysics is a “metaphysics for the human being”, a discipline concerned with objects that human beings create for themselves rather than with supposed transcendent truths. The discussion then highlights the crucial shift introduced in the *Opus postumum*: whereas the objects of special metaphysics were previously categorized under what Kant referred to, in the *Progresses*, as “practical-dogmatic metaphysics”, in the manuscripts, they are replaced within transcendental philosophy itself. This shift underscores the role of philosophy, not just as a theory of knowledge (i.e., regional ontology), but also as a practical, ethical, and legal undertaking.

Römer’s text represents a competent, thorough, and insightful attempt to explore the notion of metaphysics in Kant through an engagement with nearly all the texts written after his critical turn. The author navigates the various works with expertise and precision, taking on the complex task of identifying both points of continuity and rupture, and thus highlighting the complexity of the Kantian notion of metaphysics and its relation to the moral and practical dimension. Especially noteworthy, in my view, is the attention given to two works that have received relatively little attention in the literature – the *Progresses* and the *Opus postumum* – to which Römer assigns a significant role in her argument. Rather than viewing these works as a late collection of notes lacking significant systematic value, they are taken as the theoretical culmination of a line of thought that is certainly coherent, yet not without shifts and ambiguities.

Since I cannot discuss the entirety of the book in detail, I would like to offer a few remarks specifically on Römer’s interpretation of this final phase of Kant’s thought. Although I agree with the author’s proposal to identify, in the final fascicles of the *Opus postumum*, a form of interpenetration between transcendental philosophy and metaphysics, I would be more inclined to emphasize the points of discontinuity with respect to the “critical” period. I believe, in fact, that Kant’s insistence on the analytic link between morality and religion effectively undermines the systematic function of the highest good as it had been outlined in earlier works. In this sense, I place myself within the interpretative line that Römer intends to criticize (see Adickes 1920, Kahn 2018, Fonnesu 2022). Furthermore, the connection with the Religion appears, in my view, less tenuous than Römer, following Förster’s interpretation, suggests (see Förster 2000 and also Blomme 2019, Tomaszews-

ka 2022). This assessment rests primarily on two considerations: first, the manuscripts contain no reference to the concept of an ethical community; second, it is difficult to justify the claim that, in the *Opus postumum*, the World functions as a sort of equivalent of the latter. In particular, I do not share Römer's view that the idea of the World possesses both a theoretical and a practical dimension. On the contrary, in numerous passages, Kant explicitly presents the idea of the World as the correlate of theoretical reason alone, while it is the idea of God that represents practical reason. These considerations lead me to think that the moral argument we find in the manuscripts cannot be traced back to any argument developed in the earlier texts, but rather represents a completely original attempt to articulate the relationship between morality and religion (see Kahn 2018, Puzzolo 2024).

Despite these interpretative differences, which I don't think have a significant impact on the overall aim of the text, I believe that Römer's book constitutes a fundamental contribution, on the one hand, to contemporary research concerning the concept of Metaphysics in the light of the critical turn, and, on the other, to the revitalization of the debate regarding the final phase of Kant's thought.

Bibliography

- Adickes, E., *Kants Opus postumum dargestellt und beurteilt*, Reuther & Reichard, Berlin 1920
- Fonnesu, L., *The Highest Good and Its Crisis in Kant's Thought*, in «Journal of Transcendental Philosophy», 3-3, pp. 369-384, 2022
- Förster, E., *Kant's Final Synthesis, An Essay on the Opus postumum*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2000
- Kahn, S., *Kant's post-1800 Disavowal of the Highest Good Argument for the Existence of God*, in «Kant Yearbook», 10, pp. 63-83, 2018
- Puzzolo, D., *Kant e l'Opus postumum. Verso una nuova concezione del trascendentale*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine, 2024
- Tomaszewska, A., *Kant's Rational Religion and the Radical Enlightenment. From Spinoza to Contemporary Debates*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2022.