

BOOK REVIEWS

Seifert, Josef. *Back to 'Things in Themselves': A Phenomenological Foundation for Classical Realism* New York: Routledge. 384 pages, ISBN 0-4157-0307-0. Reprinted 2013 & 2015 (orig. published 1989). eBook published Hoboken: Taylor and Francis. 2013.

Josef Seifert's long out of print treatise on phenomenology as a foundation for Classical Realism has finally been republished by Routledge and is now available as an eBook as well. An abstract written by the publisher describes the work as "...an enlightening dialogue with Descartes, Kant, Husserl and Gadamer..." where "Seifert argues that the original inspiration of phenomenology was nothing other than the primordial insight of philosophy itself, the foundation of *philosophia perennis*." His purpose is to show how rethinking its methodology reveals a "objectivist" philosophy in complete continuity with the classical philosophers of Plato, Aristotle and Augustine. In doing so he demonstrates Husserl's approach to the principle back to 'Things themselves' among idealist and empiricist critics. To supplement his argument/proof he counters Kant, whose assertions attempted to discredit "the knowability of things in themselves." Over the critical discourse of the book the *Augustinian cogito* is revealed as embodying not only the truth and the essence, but the very existence of 'personal being.'

The book is divided into three parts. Particularly insightful is his extensive "*Analytical Table of Contents*" which immediately precedes his *Preface* and expands the two page *Table of Contents* into an eight page meticulous and exhaustive outline. Here he details each component of his view that Phenomenology is "the method which leads us to see essences in what they themselves are."

I have reproduced the two page Contents below for a quick overview:

Part I: The classical principle of phenomenology: 'Back to things themselves'

1. 'Back to things themselves:' Rethinking Husserl's maxim and the nature of philosophy

2. Critique of *epoché*

Part II: The cogito and indubitable knowledge

Introduction to Part II

3. Do Kant's reasons for transcendental philosophy deserve for it the title 'critical

philosophy?'

4. Does Husserl's transcendental phenomenology prove phenomenological realism to be uncritical?

5. Indubitable knowledge of real being and of necessary essences in the *cogito*

Part III: Objective knowledge of 'things in themselves'

Introduction to Part III

6. What are 'things in themselves?'

7. Can human knowledge of 'things in themselves' be 'objective?'

8. Beings which claim to 'be in themselves'

9. Indubitable and infallible knowledge of 'things in themselves:' phenomenology as noumenology

Part I: The classical principle of phenomenology: 'Back to things themselves.'

Seifert begins by defining the classical basis of phenomenology. He points out oppositional aspects of constructions, reductionism, premature systematization or causal explanations along with similar forms of obliteration or "doing violence to the given." He immediately brings Husserl's maxim into consideration by relating how beginning with philosophical analyses with causal explanations prevents one's true understanding of 'things themselves.' He contends that adequate causal explanations are impossible unless one can return to things in themselves. Then he proceeds to explore how phenomenology as realism may affect these concepts. Next – he discusses considering phenomenology in light of atheistic, or 'mystical' and alogical aspects. He then addresses metaphysics, proof, and speculation. He also asks: "...is 'phenomenological realism' naïve?" in light of society and history and language. Finally he critiques *epoche* as the foundational moment for methodology by defining the various meanings of *epoche*, ideation, and phenomenological reduction. This is followed by discussions of individual (autonomous) existence, the unique existential question of 'God,' and then comparing a critique of *epoche* methodology for analyzing 'essences' as well as exploring 'necessary' essences. He then offers a "radical critique" of 'transcendental reduction' as the proper method for any knowledge of the necessary essences.

Part II: The cogito and indubitable knowledge: critique of the motives which led to transcendental philosophy and transcendental phenomenology, and a defense of the transcendence of man in knowledge.

In the middle section of his work, Seifert asks if "Kant's reasons for

transcendental philosophy would be more appropriately be called ‘critical philosophy.’” In exploring Kant’s motives for the ‘Copernican Turn,’ he outlines criticisms of various causes for Kant ultimately turning to transcendental idealism. He then brings into view a detailed in-depth critique of Husserl’s transition through various transcendental-ontological views of the world and self, culminating in relating philosophy to other disciplines and sciences. He continues by discussing ‘transcendental’ and ‘pure’ ego and critiques universal constitution as inseparable from transcendental idealism. He finishes the middle section surveying the “Indubitable knowledge of truth in the *cogito*” and defining the characteristics of absolute and essential necessary facts. In this discussion he considers: the strict and general rules of the universal over the particular, timelessness and eternity, indestructibility, immutability, incomparable intelligibility, *injudicabilitas* in the foundation of rational knowledge and *apodictic* certainty and cognitive infallibility.

Part III: Objective knowledge of ‘things in themselves;’ constituted, unconstituted, and unconstitutable being.

In the final third Seifert brings together phenomenology in light of realism versus the noumenology absurdity. He asks if one can know ‘things in themselves’ and considers if such a claim might be nonsense. He points out contradictions in the concept of man, his insight into his own being, how objective can one view himself, and if this knowledge or awareness is in itself accessible or valid. He juxtaposes the mind of the individual in truth seeking or knowledge as opposed to a societal truth or knowledge of self. A key to understanding this dichotomy is explored in “Important senses in which we can know ‘things in themselves’ with a critique of Kant and Husserl.” This ranges from considerations of the ‘true being (or essence and existence) of things opposed to the objects of error and deception. He covers the various sources of the claim to ‘ontic’ autonomy and heteronomy and that ‘Being in itself’ can be the authentic essence of a things versus merely the exterior, superficial aspect of an entity. He then methodically defines and explores: the many meanings of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective;’ relating these aspects to ontological categories; epistemological categories; purely ‘functional concepts;’ as “predicates of attitudes, judgements, or methods; and as logical categories. He finishes with a fascinating discussion of “Beings which claim to ‘be in themselves’ as opposed to “mind constituted” beings. He proposes that the indubitable and infallible knowledge of ‘things in themselves’ reveals phenomenology as noumenology.

Though the main audience for Seifert's expansive work is scholars and philosophers – it can be an invaluable encyclopedic resource for students of philosophy and academics in other disciplines. This reissue is a welcome necessary reference for those seeking a complete reading, insights and assessment of Josef Seifert's seminal life work.

Nancy Anna Daugherty, California State Polytechnic University at Pomona. Email: nadaugherty@cpp.edu.