

CRITICAL DISSONANCES: On Efraín Lazos's *Disonancias de la Crítica*¹

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Efraín Lazos's *Disonancias de la Crítica* provides an original approach to key issues about Kant's critical method, and also displays a deep knowledge of specialized analyses and discussions in Kantian philosophy from the 1960s onwards. In *Disonancias*'s epilogue, Lazos quotes lyrics from a characteristically discordant Jimmy Hendrix song, that I also take to heart as a reviewer in 2018, in the sense that this book originally appeared in 2014:

If I see you no more in this world / I'll see you the next time... / But don't be late / don't be late

The essays collected in this volume provide cutting-edge, sharp interpretations of much-discussed issues in Kant's philosophy. Lazos focuses on four central issues in Kant's system of reason: conceptualism, epistemic humility, transcendental invulnerability, and the abstraction thesis. Each interpretation is supported by a long-standing acquaintance with Kant's texts and a sound knowledge of their reception by Kant-scholarship, especially in English-speaking countries. More generally, Lazos takes a subtle hermeneutic line in critically assessing Kant's and post-Kantian philosophy, leaving untouched in Kant's corpus what Alfred Hitchcock so famously called "MacGuffins," namely, cinematic plot devices whose apparent burning significance for the characters is actually irrelevant to the viewers.

What does Lazos mean by "dissonances"? Here is what he says in the Preface:

[T]he Kantian city, [which is] very old, overpopulated, and lopsided, is still in constant construction. What is normal in this city are the permanent contrasts; for this reason, the chaos and dust clouds here and there are perfectly normal, and so are their overwhelming moments of clear sky and their niches of beauty and sublimity; Traffic jam and congestion are normal, but also the dizzying speed and open space. It happens, however, that the rhythm of the city is increasingly marked by dissonance, not by the permanent desire for traditional harmony; and the dissonance, we know already, is the music of the future. (Lazos 2014:15)

I would add to this wise overview of the "Kantian city," that it has also been increasingly occupied in the last decades by an interpretative trend that tends to focus narrowly on the genealogy of Kant's formulations and his vocabulary, thus making it very hard for interpreters to go beyond Kant's words, especially for philosophers who attempt to do philosophy *after* Kant and not just *in the shadow* of Kant. In my view, to read Kant narrowly in this way is to create as it were a philosophical *superego* that hinders contemporary philosophy from updating itself in order to face current challenges.

Most decidedly, Lazos's book does not belong to this narrowly-focused, atrophied trend. Lazos is interested in doing philosophy *after* Kant, and also fully conscious of the main contributions to Kant-interpretation flowing from the so-called "Pittsburgh School" (Sellars, Rescher, McDowell, and Brandom), as well as from Allison, Guyer, Hanna, and Kitcher, and

¹ Lazos, E. (2014) *Disonancias de la Crítica: Variaciones sobre cuatro temas kantianos*. México City, ME: UNAM.

other North American Kantians, and engages with them as critical discussants, thereby making manifest his own certainties and doubts.

As Lazos notes on the last page of the book —*audiatur et altera pars*— critical discussions and replies are welcome. So in what follows, I shall also try to respond to that request to engage with his interpretations.

The first part of the volume tackles different readings about the connection between intuitions and concepts in the *Elementärlehre*, with the aim of highlighting some critical flaws in McDowell's reconstruction of the relationship between these two elements of cognition.

I agree with Lazos's negative take on the Conceptualist reading of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. For I also think that Kantian Conceptualism glosses over the connections and differences between intuitions and concepts from the point of view of the transcendental schematism of the pure understanding, which necessarily depends on a coherent cooperation between the aesthetic or sensible, and the discursive or intellectual, features of the human mind.

Lazos's arguments made it clearer to me that Kantian Conceptualist approaches jeopardize the systematic independence of the Transcendental Aesthetic, which in turn entails adverse consequences for providing a coherent reconstruction of the whole first *Critique*. In view of Lazos's claims, I would like to propose that we characterize Conceptualism as the result of an unbalanced account of the constitution of cognition or *Erkenntnis* in the *Critique*, that above all overlooks the Schematism as the key to the first *Critique*. More specifically, this lack of balance inhibits interpreters from providing an accurate account of the *Elementärlehre*.

Along these lines, I would like to focus on the following critical claims made by Lazos about McDowell's Conceptualist reading of Kant:

McDowell's Conceptualism not only offers a flat version of psychological independence, but also deforms the cooperation of intuitions and concepts in empirical cognition. Since intuition can only contribute to knowledge provided that its content is already conceptual, it is evident that sensibility, rather than cooperating with the understanding, is subject to it. And submission is not cooperation. (Lazos 2014:35)

According to my own account of the Schematism section, it establishes that the intuitive content of our representations must be subjected to some discursive or intellectual determination via cognitive processing. Yet this "submission" of intuition to the discursive intellect does not undermine the fact that according to a synthetic exposition —as the *Elementärlehre* requires— intuitions and the logical function of unity accorded by concepts jointly guarantee their heterogeneity as distinct sources of every cognitive operation of the mind. Without distinguishing these cognitive elements, I think Kant's cognitive method becomes a much fuzzier enterprise than it should be.

In point of fact, in this context, one might raise the following question: does the conceptual determination of intuitive materials entail an ultimate overcoming of the independence of intuition in Kant's account of cognition? My view is that Kantian Conceptualism fails to grasp the originality of Kant's claims, since the outcome of the account provided by the *Elementärlehre* neither overlaps with nor supersedes an account of the cognitive process *as a whole*, which, in turn, views cognition as the result of a "submission" to discursivity. Put differently, I think that Kant's distinction between intuitions and concepts heeds the requirements of a holistic approach to cognition. At the same time, the independence of sensibility is consistent with the full discursive or intellectual determination of the cognitive-semantic materials given by intuition, which guarantees that no mental content will be wasted or excluded by this process.

According to Kant's method, every bit of cognitive material has to be illuminated by conceptual functions, so that even *empirical concepts* (A220/B 267) should be brought under the highest intellectual unity of synthetical apperception (see §19 of the Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts in the B edition), without renouncing the intuitive specificity of the cognition that is yielded. Lazos regards Kant's account of empirical concepts as a crucial case-in-point for grasping the interaction between intuitive and conceptual data, since they are based on an original intuitive input before taking on a discursive or intellectual aspect. In turn, Lazos highlights the fact that empirical concepts clearly allow the survival of intuitional content after intellectual determination:

Empirical concepts, on the one hand, depend causally on sensation and, on the other, structurally depend on the pure intuitions of space and time, as well as on categories. The function of concepts, when dealing with empirical synthesis, is exercised, not on a sensible but blind mass, rather on a diversity of intuitions already articulated, on the one hand, according to space-time conditions and, on the other, organized discursively according to categories. The understanding, in short, produces its own empirical content (the only one that can be objective, if the Transcendental Deduction has any truth), although it does not produce it autarkically, by itself. (Lazos, 2014:50)

In this text, Lazos highlights Kant's claim that empirical concepts could not be empty of all representational content, even if pure concepts of the understanding, as logical functions, are quite different. In fact, the pure concepts or categories of the understanding require, in order to provide representational content, that they be used correctly as logical functions. Therefore, the pure concepts also need to be made sensible (A 51/B 76) in order not to arouse any suspicion about the legitimacy of the way they are used, such that, if they are not legitimately used, they pay the price of being cognitively empty.

As opposed to these requirements, the general logical operations of comparison, reflection and abstraction can be cognitively neutral, whereas "categories cannot be cognitively neutral" (Lazos 2014:55). Indeed, categories cannot remain cognitively neutral at this stage of mental processing, since they are expected to achieve "objektive Bedeutung," i.e., objective meaning, and at the same time they have to heed not falling into an illegitimate use, pretending to determine objects that could not be given by any experience (A88).

Lazos gives Conceptualism one last chance, when he wonders whether the categories might positively meet the demands of a Kantian Conceptualist reconstruction. Yet his final evaluation of this possibility is quite obvious, as the following text shows:

[T]he categories are not the only structural conditions of human cognitive experience. So, to put it in a jargon that is not entirely Kantian, the system of concepts and judgments, and the system of intuitions and sensations, can operate, and do operate, separately. But experience, which, as we saw, is for Kant the fundamental locus of objective thinking, is possible only through the articulated interaction of both systems. (Lazos, 2014:59)

I agree with the conclusion that Lazos draws from his assessment of different Conceptualist interpretations of Kant's Critical theory of cognition. Nevertheless, I should also add that, even if reference-to-intuition is the basic condition for giving "sense and meaning" [*Sinn und Bedeutung*] (B 149) to the categories, such a thesis does not decide the polemic about the cognitive independence/dependence of intuitions in relation to the logical functions of the understanding.

My reluctance to accept Lazos's account of the flaws of Kantian Conceptualism has to do with his resistance to see the original heterogeneity of intuitions and concepts transformed into a posteriori "submission," insofar as the intuitive features of cognition contribute to the final cognitive product only under the determination of the categories. In a nutshell, my point is that even if categories must always acknowledge the cognitive priority

of intuition for generating full-blooded cognition, this initial material input could not lead by itself to a successful epistemic outcome. Thus a kind of weak Conceptualism would better fit with Lazos's argument, as a way of supporting an adequate reconstruction of Kant's account of the structures of cognition.

The second part of the book tackles Kant's idealism, discussed in relation to the early reception of the first *Critique*, insofar as it focused on the capacity (or incapacity) of the human discursive intellect to grasp in some or another way the noumenal reality itself that is supposed to lie behind the phenomena. In this connection, Lazos's claims are insightful, and, in my view, succeed in comprehending a wide range of Kant-interpretations and Kant-scholarly discussions, which he reviews with a many helpful suggestions for the reader.

Here Lazos confronts Allison's account of Kant's phenomenalism in *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, highlighting the usefulness of characterizing the distinction between phenomons and noumena in terms of an epistemic "two-aspect" theory, but also pointing out that such a doctrine does not adequately handle the complexity of this deep Kantian problem—or MacGuffin. According to Lazos, the central point of Kant's phenomenalism depends precisely on the question of the alleged human capacity able to go beyond the phenomena and thus have access to "really real" entities, so that even if the noumenal approach might be considered as a possible operation *in abstracto*, it would be beyond doubt that the only way in which a specifically human discursive intellect can achieve cognition, refers exclusively to phenomena. From this perspective, Kant's model of cognition is said to be a relational one, without any expectation of overcoming the "human standpoint" that characterize finite beings like us.

Lazos also reacts to Langton's account—in *Kantian Humility*—of Kant's phenomenalism, an interpretation that aims at furthering Strawson's claims, drawing in some measure a link between Kant's phenomenalism with the one supported by Berkeley. Langton holds that the two-aspect theory is best understood as a two-property theory: intrinsic properties and relational properties. Lazos looks at criticisms of Langton's views by Ameriks, Allais, and Van Cleve, and draws the conclusion that human sensibility is the key element that confirms our inability to have cognitive access to noumenal beings.

I completely agree with this second vindication of the cognitive role of sensibility, but once more I would suggest adding to Lazos's suggestive critical account some nuances that might inflect his thoroughgoing disavowal of any possible confrontation between the human subject and a cognitive object's noumenal features. More precisely, I would like to make some critical remarks that spin off what Lazos says here:

The impossibility of accepting Berkeley's theistic metaphysics does not come from a methodological requirement that we could ignore; it comes, instead, from the limits of human reason in empirical cognition. These limits are traced by the subjective conditions of human sensibility. As has been said, although the idea of a spiritual world whose members maintain special relationships with each other is intelligible, we do not have sufficient resources in our cognitive endowment to be able to evaluate it. (Lazos 2014:149)

I agree with Lazos's aim of choosing an idealist path to Kantian humility, a position that in my view correctly claims that Kant's cognitive anthropology and the structures attributes to our cognitive faculties remain very far from the spiritualistic point of view that Berkeley adopts. Yet I do not share the idea that the human inability to grasp any part of the noumenal backdrop of experience excludes *any* influence of the human understanding, for example, via *thinking* about noumena. Some Kant-scholars, like Gérard Lebrun, the author of *Kant et la fin de la métaphysique*, whose work is in many ways complementary to Strawson's *The Bounds of Sense*, argue in this connection, that adequately characterizing the limits of sensibility shows in up Kant's analysis of pure reason itself, hence emphasizing that

it has not *only* a negative meaning. or example, the concluding paragraphs of the *Prolegomena* offer a clear account of the cognitive content of the very idea of the limits of sensibility—hence in my view, Lazos’s line of argumentation could have been benefited by a discussion of these passages.

Moreover, in these texts, Kant openly claims that there is a type of cognition based on the very idea of a limit, that distinguishes between, on the one hand, the manifest reality we are able to cognize and the unmanifest reality that lies beyond the scope of our finite condition. My concern is that a too-narrow construal of the intuitional limits of human cognition cannot acknowledge Kant’s recognition of the existence of cognitive contents that are not *completely* empty and meaningless, although they do not directly or even indirectly refer to any part of experience as such. On the contrary, *the idea of the totality of human experience* has a cognitively significant impact on the human mind, as the two sections of the *Appendix to Transcendental Dialectic* of the first *Critique* affirm, even if the idea of this totality belongs to the regulative function of judgment, and not to its constitutive function, in relation to the phenomenal realm.

In my view, Lazos’s account of Kant’s idealism yields an adequate description of the limitations that human finitude impose on our cognition. Yet, what remains not altogether clear in Lazos’s account is how non-empirical concepts can refer to human experience as a whole, in a vague way, and—as a *conceptus vagus*—can import some kind of sense, if not full-blooded meaningfulness, into the purely rational part of the Critical method.

The third part of the book tackles some Cartesian-inspired skeptical criticisms of Kant, taking into account Barry Stroud’s well-known arguments about Kant’s anti-skepticism. Lazos’s contribution to the debate about Kant, skepticism, and anti-skepticism asserts that Kant’s transcendental method removes the threat of global Cartesian skepticism, thus giving rise to a conception of human knowledge that is sharply different from the Cartesian conception and its associated metaphysics:

[T]he idea that motivates the [Cartesian] skeptical thesis is local; remember that the content of any veridical experience (e.g., seeing a church on fire) is indistinguishable from a non-veridical experience (e.g., hallucinating a burning church). The Kantian strategy, although not designed solely for that, concedes the local thesis [for the sake of undermining] the global thesis. In effect, the Kantian strategy accepts that the content of a veridical experience and of an oniric or hallucinatory one can be the same, case by case; but, if we do not share the Cartesian neurosis for demolishing [all our beliefs], it does not follow that the experience as a whole can be illusory. (Lazos, 2014: 204)

Lazos alludes here to Kant’s doctrine of *empirical realism* as a bulwark against the Cartesian global skeptical attack on knowledge. According to Kantian empirical realism, the individual subject can fall into error at a local scale, but not from a global standpoint, which then makes it possible to identify and correct the everyday illusions we encounter in our epistemic lives.

But my critical point, by contrast, is that the guarantees that intellectual normativity gives to Kant’s notion of certainty might well be subject to the same skepticism encountered by individual cases of knowledge, since also *the whole frame* could show similar flaws. In fact, Kant’s theory of experience is coherentist, hence individual experiences are legitimated by the unity of the whole of experience. Yet there is no trace in Kant’s Critical philosophy of a specific proof for the validity of the highest transcendental principles, since their transcendental function is always presupposed as a key feature of what Kant calls “transcendental truth.” On the contrary, such principles are confirmed by the solidarity of all the fragments of experience as a whole, as elements of a total cognitive landscape for humanity.

From this point of view, Kant's Refutation of Idealism directly rejects Cartesian epistemology, and, in turn, the Transcendental Deduction of the categories uses intellectual normativity to create a paved road that leads to the things as they manifestly are, yet never offers a direct proof of this conception of human knowledge. Thus, one could raise the following question: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* Who will guard the guards themselves? This is an intriguing question for this part of Kant's Critical project, since the way in which Kant orients human knowledge and make us aware of the limitations of our faculties could not be based on a direct proof.

The final part of Lazos's book focuses on the abstract character of the Kantian *cogito*, and critically addresses Patricia Kitcher's account, which Lazos characterizes as a merely Kant-inspired interpretation that does not in fact satisfy the purely functional features of the transcendental subject as Kant himself describes it. According to Lazos, any hypothesis about an existential content of the "I" will lead to failure, since the role it fulfills is merely functional, for the purposes of yielding an objective approach to manifest reality. In this connection, he criticizes Kitcher's proposal for an *indeterminate representational content* as the correlate of the "I think", for, in Lazos's view a purely logical function should not be confounded with any existential representational content, no matter how subtle. Lazos says:

[Kitcher], in effect, seems to assume that from the "I think" of transcendental (and not empirical) self-consciousness, some kind of existence is extracted that is neither phenomenal nor noumenal. And if one asks, then, what kind of existence is extracted from that?, her answer is ingenious, although unsatisfactory: the empirically determinable existence, although not determined, of a mere subject of thoughts. [...] My response, if the thesis of abstraction is taken seriously, is clear and categorical: the "I think" is an abstraction from the conscious contents of a person or empirical subject, and we do not existentially extract anything from an abstraction. That can certainly be uncomfortable and disappointing for those who seek self-knowledge in the philosophers' "I think", but there is no future in that illusion. (Lazos 2014:234)

My response to this issue is just to draw attention to the quite enigmatic meaning of some accounts that Kant gives of the "I think", which the *Prolegomena* calls "the feeling of the existence without any concept" (§ 46), while a famous passage of the *Paralogisms* in the first *Critique* (B 402) hints to a determination of the "thing" we are neither as a phenomenon nor as a noumenon. My suggestion is that such texts are not simply telling us that the transcendental subject is just a logical function. My impression is that they go further, showing us that the synthetic unity of apperception is the highest function of the discursive intellect, and, as such, it also has some direct phenomenological influence on the human mind. More generally, I am extremely interested in the affective or even emotional phenomenological consequences of the Kantian *cogito*, an issue that Kant-scholars like Kitcher, but also Béatrice Longuenesse, have closely studied.

In the end, my critical questions are intended simply to initiate a dialogue with Lazos's account of four key issues about Kant's Critical philosophy, and, at the same time, to show my indebtedness to him for having delivered to the Spanish-speaking world of Kant scholarship such an interesting and ground-breaking book, filled with personally engaging philosophical meditations and very subtle larger philosophical concerns.