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5. Immanuel Kant and Critical Idealism

Abstract

The ideas of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) are significant enough to be compared to a watershed in Western thought. In his mind were gathered up the major interests of the Enlightenment: science, epistemology, and ethics; and all of these were given a new direction which he himself described as another Copernican revolution. As Copernicus had shown that the earth revolved around the sun, rather than the sun around the earth, so Kant showed that the knowing subject played an active and creative role in the production of his world picture, rather than the static and passive role which the early Enlightenment had assigned him. This change of emphasis from object to subject can be seen in the appearance of the new word, *Weltanschauung*. And the form which this change took was one type of idealism, although different from the idealism of Berkeley. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Post-Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, Critical Idealism, morality, *Weltanschauung*

Disciplines

European Languages and Societies | History | Philosophy

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This is a part of [Section XII: The Post-Enlightenment Period](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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5. Immanuel Kant and Critical Idealism

The ideas of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) are significant enough to be compared to a watershed in Western thought. In his mind were gathered up the major interests of the Enlightenment: science, epistemology, and ethics; and all of these were given a new direction which he himself described as another Copernican revolution. As Copernicus had shown that the earth revolved around the sun, rather than the sun around the earth, so Kant showed that the knowing subject played an active and creative role in the production of his world picture, rather than the static and passive role which the early Enlightenment had assigned him. This change of emphasis from object to subject can be seen in the appearance of the new word, Weltanschauung. And the form which this change took was one type of idealism, although different from the idealism of Berkeley.

Kant can with equal justice be called the philosopher of the Reformation, the philosopher of the Revolution, and the father of contemporary philosophy. From the point of view of Western thought all of these titles are apt indications of his role. From the point of view of this chapter it is the last title which is of the greatest significance, because it indicates that it was Kant who set the direction of subsequent philosophy for more than a century, defining its problems as well as suggesting its solutions. While human problems often seem constant, the form that they take varies with the culture of a particular period; and our way of asking many of our most important questions is peculiarly Kantian: How can we balance the moral autonomy of the individual with the group's demand for authority? What is the difference between religion and ethics? Where, if at all, does science leave off and ethics begin? Can we ever get beyond our experience and see things as they really are?

Kant's influence on Western thought can also be seen in the suggested solutions to such problems, as can be gathered from some of the phrases which we often use in our ordinary

* Reprinted from Jeremy Bentham, An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation... (Oxford at the Clarendon Press: London, 1892), pp. 1-7, 24-32.

conversation. Our concern with the active and practical ("what you do is more important than what you say"), our concern with the moral nature of the universe ("you can't get away with that"), our concern with persons ("the supreme value of the individual person"), our concern with the relation between ethics and practice ("honesty is the best policy"), our concern with man's will and inner motives ("you can if you will only try hard enough"), and finally our interest in aesthetics and the ethical aspect of religion all have deep roots in the thought of Kant.

Immanuel Kant was born in Königsberg in East Prussia. His family were ordinary workers of strong pietistic background. Here he grew up, was educated, taught, and wrote. He scarcely ever left his home town, and never his state, despite offers of positions elsewhere. His whole life was so regulated that it is said housewives set their clocks by his afternoon walk. He enjoyed eating meals with others, especially with sea captains. Beyond these contacts he had very few relations with the outside world. Indeed, his life became the stereotype for the typical German professor.

Kant entered the university at Königsberg when the German Enlightenment was in full swing, and began to teach there in 1755. He was not promoted to full professorial rank until 1770, despite his twice applying for positions which had become vacant. His long wait for advancement was due in large part to the fact that Königsberg was founded as a purely Lutheran university, and there was some question as to how "pure" his piety really was. It was also due to the enthusiasm he had shown for Rousseau, one of the few people who made an important contribution to Kant's thought. Up to the time of his professorial appointment Kant had been working primarily on scientific problems, and indeed, if he had done nothing else, his reputation would have been well established in this field. But he was also interested in philosophical problems, and by the time of his inaugural dissertation the main lines of his even more important philosophical thinking were beginning to take shape.

From his pupils we learn that Kant was, especially in his early years, an excellent teacher. Within ten years of his promotion his presence made Königsberg one of the major universities of Europe. His teaching covered a wide range of subjects both scientific and philosophical; he was the first one to offer a course in physical geography in an European university. Such was his influence that soon his students were being appointed to faculty positions, as well as to administrative posts, throughout Germany. His teaching methods represented a combination of lecturing on the prescribed texts with the older medieval disputation. While this method did not serve to keep him from expressing his own opinions, it did serve to channel his creative work into writing.

Kant's writings ranged widely over the fields of science,

ethics, philosophy, and religion. Of all these the most influential were those on philosophy. Of the philosophical works there are three which are of outstanding importance: The Critique of Pure Reason (1781) which represented his epistemology; The Critique of Practical Reason (1787) his ethics; and The Critique of Judgment (1790) which included his aesthetics. In addition to these there are two other works which we should note: the Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785) and the Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone (1793).

This last work was published after Frederick the Great (1740-1786) had died, when there was a new king and a new officer in charge of education, both of whom were interested in stamping out any possible religious or political heresies. Kant's enthusiasm for the thought of Rousseau and the French Revolution which was then in full tide, plus the very title of the book, strongly suggested the probability of less than orthodox opinions. He was called to account and forced to refrain from teaching or publishing on the subject of religion. This prohibition he accepted, and kept until the king died. But he was well aware that in so doing he was not playing the role of a Socrates. He explained his conduct by stating: "Recantation and denial of one's inner convictions is base, but silence in a case like the present is a subject's duty. And if all that one says must be true, it does not follow that it is one's duty to tell publicly everything which is true."

Each of Kant's major works is called a critique, and his philosophy is often called a critical philosophy. However, a critical philosophy is not necessarily merely negative or skeptical; in the sense in which he used the word a positive or constructive element was always involved. Yet it cannot be denied that Kant's position was radically critical, especially of those whom he called dogmatists. One of his primary aims was to show that many of the things which the dogmatists tried to prove by reason were impossible to prove because human reason was not equipped to do what they demanded of it.

These dogmatists represented the philosophical tradition known as rationalism. German rationalism tended to emphasize the powers of human reason in the attempt to obtain knowledge. First of all, the rationalists pointed out that thinking is often able to proceed a priori, which is simply to say that reason does not always have to consult experience, but can go before it, in order to verify the truth of what it knows. Such a a priori truth had, in addition, a superior kind of certainty. We do not, for example, have to know anything about the weather in order to know that it will either rain on July 4, 1999, or that it will not. Such truths may be trivial, but they provided the rationalist with the hope that perhaps there were other truths, equally evident and equally independent of all sense experience, which were not so trivial. Acting on the presupposition, at least partially supported by their work in mathematics, that such truths do exist and can be discovered by human

reason, the rationalists brought forth "proofs" for such "facts" as the creation of the world, the existence of God, freedom, and immortality.

By means of these proofs the rationalists claimed to establish the truth of certain facts about the world in a manner which was both nonempirical and independent of all revelation. Kant began his career as such a dogmatic rationalist, and never abandoned the view that reason could proceed a priori in certain matters. He noted, however, that the rational dogmatists often fell into a trap, one which he described as resulting in the "antinomies" of reason. When it engages in the construction of such proofs as those of God, freedom, and immortality, reason ultimately contradicts itself, because there are equally good arguments both for and against such things. Each argument proves its position by pointing out the "absurdities" in its opposite. There was no way, Kant felt, to resolve such a contradictory situation if one were simply limited to the choice between two such opposing lines of argument. Each side had equally good arguments. But, reason could not rest in contradiction, and Kant must, therefore, somehow resolve the contradiction. The way he took was certainly radical. He simply prohibited reason from engaging in such proofs. The rationalists had erred in claiming that there was an inherent harmony between our reason and nature such as would enable reason to proceed on its own into areas where human experience could not follow. The antinomies were, therefore, proof that reason did not constitute or determine the nature of reality. Where reason leads to contradiction, reason must be in error; and, where reason cannot find a way to correct its errors, there reason does not belong.

Kant himself gave David Hume the credit for having awakened him from his "dogmatic slumbers." The major impetus toward Kant's independent position was provided by Hume's analysis of the concept of causality. Hume had maintained the principle that every event has a cause could not be demonstrated: it could not be deduced a priori from some other principle or a posteriori from experience. Nor could it be accepted as self-evident, as we can imagine events without causes. Kant found this conclusion irrefutable, although he did not agree with it. As a Newtonian scientist, he felt that the principle of causality was obviously an a priori one because we do, in one way or another, know in advance that every event must have a cause.

Kant concluded that causality, and principles like it, did not describe the world of nature. They were, rather, only rules according to which men must reason if they wish to organize their experience of nature. As such they were neither dogmatic nor constitutive of nature, but rather critical and regulative of thought. When the scientist uses reasons to organize the data of his experience he must look for causes and assume that they are there. He does this because he would not be rational if he did otherwise, and not because he knows for a fact that the causes are there.

Note that the principle of causality regulates reason only in its dealing with sensible experience such as we associate with science and its investigations. Outside this realm the rule of causality simply does not apply. And it does not apply precisely because it is a principle of reason which tries to construct a science of experience. The dogmatic rationalists had been using reason to establish factual claims outside experience, such as the existence of God, and only paradox could result from such an illegitimate activity.

Causality is not, of course, the only regulative principle. Kant thought, for example, that Euclidian geometry was eternally valid for all experience precisely because perception automatically imposed such a structure on experience. Such principles represented the form imposed on the matter of experience by a reason which sought to understand that experience. Nor were such regulative principles confined to the work of reason when it was trying to construct a science of experience. Reason concerned itself with the practical decisions of daily life as well. Here also there were rules to be followed; and it was these rules which were the subject matter of his discussion of morality.

The fundamental concept in Kant's discussion of morals was duty. In this regard he was very much the child of his pietistic parents. A person's moral worth was determined by the motives of his actions. Just as Luther tells us that we are to obey the moral law out of our pure love and faith in God, without regard to the rewards which might derive from such actions, so Kant tells us that we are to obey the moral law out of pure respect for that law as such. The moral law commands us absolutely; and, as rational and moral agents, we are to obey it absolutely, without regard to the passions or desires which Hume and Bentham had thought so important, or for their gratifications.

In such a morality it is imperative that we know what our duties are. Kant does not allow us to derive them from any consideration of expediency, or from revelation. As rules or laws they cannot be derived from the study of experience, because statements containing what ought to be are of a completely different kind from statements concerning what is. All law presupposes a legislator, and in the case of the moral law, each rational agent must be his own legislator.

The will which legislates the moral law for itself, however, is not a purely subjective will, as the Romanticists had suggested. It is also objective because it is common to all rational beings. This regulative principle of the practical reason Kant calls the categorical imperative. It is the rule by which the rational will regulates itself according to the general principles of practical reason. Although Kant calls it the categorical imperative he gives it three different formulations. He asserts, somewhat mystically, that all three are the

same. The first and most important of these we will find in the selection which we are to read: "I should never act in such a way that I could not wish that my maxim should be a universal law." The second was: "Treat all persons, including yourself, as ends always, and never as means." And the third: "Act always as though you were both subject and sovereign in a kingdom of ends." In these ways he tried to make clear the obligation of the moral will, but without answering the demand to be specific.

By thus limiting reason Kant also freed faith, which made just as strong demands on him, from any dependence on dogmatic reason. He found it necessary, he says, "to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith. The dogmatic of metaphysics ... is the source of that unbelief, always very dogmatic, which is against morality." Because scientific reason was restricted in the ways which have been suggested to the world of human experience (phenomena in Kant's terminology), it was incapable of reaching the realm of reality external to that experience (noumena). Thus scientific reason could tell us nothing about those very things to which faith addressed itself: God, freedom, and immortality. Kant was, however, too much of a rationalist to leave these matters to unaided faith, as some romantic religionists had suggested. For him these things became the necessary consequences of his moral philosophy. All three were needed if the demands of the categorical imperative were to be upheld. The concept of moral action implies that such acts must be free, and that they deserve a greater reward than they can be assured of in this life, hence the necessity for God, freedom, and immortality. And so, instead of dogmatic proofs for such things, Kant gives us moral arguments for them. Without them the categorical imperative would be unthinkable. On the practical side also they are united because we are to fulfill the demands of duty as though these demands were the will of God.

These two aspects of Kant's thought, science and morality, were held together by means of a third aspect, his aesthetics. In turning to aesthetic feeling he thought that his major ideas could be brought into harmony without losing their unique roles and contributions. In the third Critique he attempted especially to delineate the role of aesthetics. But his last years were saddened by the increasing weakness of his mental as well as his physical powers. When he died he was buried in the cathedral at Königsberg, and over his grave were placed his own words:

The starry heavens above me,
The moral law within me.

However, Kant had also written that the starry heavens above and the moral law within "fill me with awe." And in this the voice of his pietistic background spoke once again, but in a different language, the language of aesthetics, revealing him as in many ways the summation of the Enlightenment as well as the harbinger of the future.

Because of Kant's interest in the problems of human action,

a discussion of his thought is a good place to call attention to a distinction which is sometimes important: the distinction between ethics and morals. These two terms are often used interchangeably, but they actually call our attention to different aspects of the same problem. Ethics was originally a Greek word and, as an integral part of that culture, served to call one's attention to the need for his making up his own mind concerning the standard for his actions, to arrive at a judgment with regard to what is meant by such things as the good, rather than to accept either traditional or current standards. For this Western Civilization is indebted to the thought of Socrates. Morals was originally a Latin word and served to focus attention upon the active and social aspect rather than the evaluative and individual aspect of human actions. One uses either ethics or morals, depending upon which aspect of human action he wishes to emphasize. For this reason we can take an ethics course in the philosophy department, while a sociology course may include the study of the morals of certain cultures.

The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785) followed after Kant's first Critique, which had been intended as an introductory study to the whole field of philosophy, but had not reached completion. In the Foundations, from which our selection is taken, Kant followed his usual method of analysis, attempting to show that the facts of moral experience needed the principles of reason to explain them, while these same moral principles needed to be justified in terms of experience. The strength of his position is found in his insistence on holding firmly to both sides of the moral discussion, the ought and the is. While the thoughts suggested in the first part of the Foundations were further elaborated in the second Critique, the earlier book established the basic ideas of Kant's thought in this whole area. It was to these that Schiller referred when he said: "Concerning the ruling ideas in the practical part of Kant's system only philosophers disagree, but men have always been unanimous."

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