

Remote Learning Module for 24 April 2020

Lecture Notes: Immanuel Kant. His Life & Times

Last time we completed our examination of Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, with special attention to his thoroughgoing endorsement of skepticism as the only proper philosophical response to the limits placed on our cognitive faculties by the conditions of sensory experience. Today we turn our attention to Kant, whose efforts to transform Hume's skeptical doubts into foundations for a new species of speculative philosophy would come to dominate the course of Western philosophy right down to the present day. Today, as I sit remotely to compose these notes, is the 22nd of April, thus permitting me gladly to wish Kant's ghost a Happy Two-Hundred and Ninety-Sixth Birthday!

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— Curriculum Vitae —

(1) Immanuel Kant was born on the April 22, 1724 in the port city of Königsberg, the capital of East Prussia (now within the borders of modern Russia). His father was a saddler of modest means; his grandfather, interestingly enough, was a Scottish immigrant. Moreover, like his illustrious Scots predecessor, David Hume, Kant also received an early religious education (in Pietism—a species of evangelical Lutheranism) against which he would revolt throughout the course of his philosophical career.

(2) Kant attended elementary school at the Collegium Fridericianum (known for its Pietist leanings), graduating at the age of fifteen. During his time there, like Hume, he took comfort in reading Latin classics to counteract the dogmatic excesses of evangelism that otherwise saturated the curriculum). He then went on to advanced studies at the University of Königsberg (also called the “Albertina”). He received his baccalaureate in 1746, and his Master's Degree in 1755. It was at Königsberg that Kant encountered the works of Christian Wolff (1679–1750), from which he would learn the essential tenets of Leibniz's sprawling philosophical writings. Wolff's textbooks were all the rage in German intellectual life at this time, and they so inspired the young Kant that he took up the study of philosophy with a single-minded passion that would carry him into his professional career, first as an unsalaried private tutor, at the Albertina, beginning in 1754, and eventually as a full-fledged, salaried professor in 1771 (at the ripe age of 47).

(3) It was also at the Albertina that Kant he became acquainted with Newtonian physics; we can see the very first inklings of his later so-called “critical philosophy,” in his subsequent effort to reconcile the fundamental dispute between Newton and Leibniz over the principles of mechanics. To be sure, this effort occupies center stage in Kant's first publication, in 1747: “Thoughts on the True Estimation of Living Forces.” As a private tutor, Kant mainly offered teaching in physics, mathematics, and geography, so it is no surprise that his early works (dating from 1747 to 1770) were exercises in natural science. In one of these scientific treatises, the *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755), Kant advanced his “nebular theory” about the formation of our Solar System within what we now call the Milky Way galaxy. In 1768, Kant produced “Concerning the Ultimate Ground of the Differentiation of Directions in

Space,” in which he defended Newton’s conception of absolute space against Leibniz’s relational theory (the dispute that, you’ll recall, fueled the Clark-Leibniz debates).

(4) At the same time, Kant began engaging with the moral philosophies of Hume and his Scots compatriot, Francis Hutcheson (to whom Hume himself credited the fact/value distinction), along with the several new, revolutionary works on politics and education of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. A rising star in the intellectual life of Königsberg, Kant was apparently well received at fancy social gatherings, parties, and musical events (although his reflections on music in later life were anything but enthusiastic). An oft-told tale of one of these events (devoutly to be wished in these, our days, of social distancing) has Kant being asked by a young female socialite whether the assembled revelers were living in an enlightened age; to which Kant is said to have replied, “Madam, we live in an Age of Enlightenment”—an appellation that stuck ever since.

(5) Having finally gained a professorship at Königsberg, Kant was required to deliver a public Latin lecture. Known now as the “Inaugural Dissertation,” this work (“Concerning the Form and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible World”) intimates the distinction that would become the hallmark of Kant’s First Critique: against Leibniz (or at any rate, Wolff’s take on Leibniz), Kant argues in the Inaugural Dissertation that what he later calls the “forms of sensibility” are entirely distinct from the “categories of understanding.” Ten years later, Kant shook the German intellectual world to its very bones with the publication of the first edition (known today as the “A-Edition”) of his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Here Kant brings to fruition the seeds he had sown in the Inaugural Dissertation. Leibniz had supposed that all human knowledge divides between *analytic a priori* and *synthetic a posteriori* judgements; similarly, Hume, although to quite different effect, distinguished between relations among ideas and matters of fact. In the First Critique, however, Kant proposed that both of these distinctions fail to capture the active contribution of the human intellect in the generation of knowledge—failing, that is, to take into account our *synthetic a priori* judgments: those we form in both mathematics and metaphysics.

(6) The initial reception to this radical re-thinking of epistemology was not at all favorable. To Kant’s dismay, many commentators took his project to be indistinguishable from Berkeley’s immaterialism. Undaunted, however, in 1783, he issued a shorter, introductory work that would make plain his resistance to both British Empiricism (the province of skepticism) and Continental Rationalism (the province of dogmatism): the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as a Science*. It would take another four years for Kant to revise his First Critique, with the publication of a Second Edition (the B-Edition) in 1787. In both the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Prolegomena*, Kant argued that human understanding is *structured* (you should recognize the influence of Hume here) *internally* so that the organization of our concepts, and the principles of our reasoning, determine the very laws of nature we recognize as operative in our experiences of the *external* world. It is from questioning the manner which our understanding is structured that we can come to know how the world *must be* conceived by us, although we can never know how the world is in-and-of-itself. To engage in this sort of questioning is to ask: What are the grounds for the very *possibility* of our experience of objects in the world? This quest after “grounds for the possibility of experience” is what characterizes all three of Kant’s major critical works, the other two being the 1788 *Critique of Practical Reason*, which asks after the grounds for the possibility of objective morality, of ethical judgments, and the 1790 *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, which asks after the grounds for the possibility of aesthetic judgments on the one hand, and teleological judgements, on the other hand—both of which involve the notion of purpose.

(7) In addition to these three “Critiques,” Kant produced his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (which he began 1785, and completed in 1797), and the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (which appeared in 1786). Besides the second part of the *Groundwork*, Kant’s later works included the 1793 publication of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in which we can see, as we saw in Hume’s *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, a final and uncompromising rejection of his early religious indoctrination. Kant left the teaching profession in 1796, and within a few months of his 80th birthday, died on the 12th of February, 1804, exactly five years before Charles Darwin came to life in Shrewsbury, England.

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On Monday, we’ll look to Kant’s First Critique, wherein he presents his Copernican Revolution for Thought, arguing that the entire prior history of Modern Philosophy misunderstood the problem of knowledge so thoroughly that nothing short of a wholesale reorientation of the relation between ideas and things can liberate our thinking from the chains of skepticism, on the one hand, and dogmatism, on the other hand. Be well everyone, and, remember: social distancing, however phenomenal, does save noumenal lives, thereby keeping our empirical and transcendental egos metaphysically united.