

Kant

DIE REVOLUTION DES DENKENS.

431 pages

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Kant: a thinker in his time, for our time

April 22, 2024, will mark the 300th birthday of Immanuel Kant – the most important German philosopher and one of the most important thinkers in the Western world. Experts and the public will celebrate this event with articles, conferences, exhibitions, anthologies, and congresses. At the East Prussian State Museum in Lüneburg, an extension will be opened which will be dedicated exclusively to the great Königsberg philosopher. The Berlin Brandenburg Academy will publish a new edition of the works of its former member. But does a “dead white man” with questionable views on women, Jews and people of color deserve our attention at all? Does Kant, does Kant’s thinking, still have any relevance in the 21st century?

That this is not merely a rhetorical question becomes clear when one considers the great historical distance that lies between Kant and us. Kant was a citizen of the kingdom of Prussia and thus a subject of the Prussian king. When Kant was born in 1724, Prussia, which ceased to exist in 1918, was still a new state, only 23 years old. When Kant died in 1804, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, which dates back to the 10th century, was still in existence – it did not come to an end until two years after Kant’s death with the so-called “Reichsdeputationshauptschluss.” Universities, such as the “Albertina” in Königsberg, to which Kant belonged as a student, lecturer and professor for over 50 years and which he twice headed as rector, were corporations under their own law, with their own jurisdiction and penal power. Kant witnessed the Seven Years’ War and the American and the French Revolution. His famous essay on the Enlightenment (“Enlightenment is man’s exit from his self-inflicted immaturity”) marked a high point, but also the end of this epoch of European thought. He might have been able to imagine the world order of the Congress of Vienna in 1815, which was based on nation states, but he certainly could not have imagined the social and political developments of the 20th century, with its ideologically motivated wars and genocides. Kant lived in a feudal society and for decades had a servant named Martin Lampe. He wrote letters and essays with a goose feather on paper that was so expensive he had to use it several times over. He would have appreciated the means of communication of the digital world, but they were unimaginable to him. Kant advocated equality before the law for all citizens but excluded women and wage laborers from this equality. He criticized colonialism but believed in the superiority of the Europeans. He had Jewish friends but expressed contempt for Jews in general.

If, despite its historical remoteness and its period-specific prejudices, Kant’s philosophy is still relevant to us today, then it is certainly so not as a topic of historical erudition or a source of learned quotations, but rather because of its diagnostic and critical potential, its power as a practical orientation, and the conceptual possibilities it can still open up for us.

Thus, important and much-loved aspects of Kantian philosophy will have to be set aside when it comes to explaining its current significance. In a broader public, for instance, the name Kant is primarily associated with the “categorical imperative,” which requires us only to act according to rules that can also apply to all other people. This is undoubtedly one of Kant’s most important philosophical achievements. But even after two hundred years of interpretation it is by no means clear what this imperative actually requires us to do. Quite to the contrary, in controversial cases we must already know which rules are morally permissible in order to apply the categorical imperative correctly. Therefore, as Kant knew very well, it cannot provide us with an ethical orientation that we cannot gain by other means as well.

For other reasons, Kant’s current importance cannot, for example, lie in his critique of the arguments for God’s existence for which he was famous (and notorious) in his own time. In Kant’s time, it was revolutionary to claim that one can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God, and that one can rationally believe in God precisely because we cannot know whether He exists. Today, this has become

a commonplace. So if Kant's current significance is to consist not only in his historical influence on our current thinking but in the fact that his philosophy continues to challenge and inspire us today, we must look elsewhere.

Of course, a whole range of aspects of Kant's philosophy is relevant in this respect: Kant's concept of moral autonomy, his concept of human dignity, the idea of global peace, the Kantian conception of the Enlightenment, and much more. Beyond that, however, there are also some very general features of Kant's thinking that are worth remembering and that demonstrate Kant's present significance in a special way, because they react to deep-seated contradictions and tensions that continue to shape our thinking.

Immanuel Kant was first and foremost a synthetic thinker who repeatedly succeeded in combining seemingly irreconcilable statements, theses and theories, in overcoming superficial contradictions and one-sidedness, and thus in arriving at views that do justice to their respective subject matter in all its complexity. The best-known example of the synthetic power of Kantian thinking is the overcoming of the opposition between empiricism and rationalism in the thesis that knowledge requires both a basis in experience and a rational structure. A similar combination of the seemingly irreconcilable is found again and again in Kant's thinking and is perhaps its most characteristic feature. We will consider three examples of this in the introduction, in which the current relevance of Kant's thinking is particularly evident: first, the combination of a critique of reason and trust in reason; second, the connection between anthropological realism and moral idealism in politics; and third, the combination of individual striving for happiness and morality in Kant's ethics.

Critique of Reason and Trust in Reason. Kant was a sharp critic of human reason – and at the same time its most vehement defender. How can this be? By “reason” Kant means in this context “the entire upper cognitive faculty” (KrV A835/B863), which we can translate for our purposes as the ability to arrive at objective knowledge of the world through logical reasoning, starting from sensory perception and conceptual thinking (cf. KrV A288/B355). There have been many critics of reason, thus understood, in the history of Western thinking. The ancient skeptics had tried to show that rational thinking inevitably involves us in contradictions, which we can only escape by abandoning any claim to rational grounds and objective truth. Michel Montaigne took up this idea in the sixteenth century and, like David Hume 200 years later, drew the conclusion that reason is incapable of giving direction to our actions. Montaigne stands in the tradition of a fideistic understanding of Christianity, i.e. an understanding of Christianity that is critical of reason and based solely on faith, which goes back to the Church Fathers and includes, among many others, the young Kant's Pietist teachers. In Kant's time, these anti-rational sceptics and fideists were opposed by the champions of reason and the Enlightenment who, like Christian Wolff, made rational thinking the sole yardstick of knowledge and lifestyle. Kant himself was close to this rationalism, but he also took up the skeptics' impulse to criticize reason and argued in the Critique of Pure Reason that rational thinking, independent of experience, entraps us in false conclusions and contradictions. But from this Kant draws the conclusion not that we should renounce reason as a source of knowledge, but rather that we should subject it to a critique that precisely determines its reliability and scope. This is necessarily a critique of reason by reason itself, for, according to Kant, we do not have another cognitive faculty that could take over this task. Kant opposes philosophers such as Friedrich Jacobi, among others, who wanted to replace orientation by rational thinking with an appeal to faith and feeling. Human reason, i.e. the orientation towards reasons and objective truth, is fallible and limited in its scope but nevertheless indispensable.

This deep-rooted tension between a critique of reason on the one hand and trust in reason on the other, to which Kant reacts, runs through our modern self-understanding and shows up again and again in the most varied ways. To name just one current example: In many European countries, we are currently experiencing conflicts between a technocratic governing elite on the one hand and

emotionally heated protest movements on the other. Without wanting to reduce these conflicts to that aspect alone, they are at least also about the contrast between a naïve trust in reason on the one hand and an exaggerated skepticism of reason on the other. This becomes particularly clear when one considers the contempt that angry citizens of various stripes have shown for the official media and science and how political dissatisfaction goes hand in hand with opposition to vaccinations, climate change denial, and conspiracy theories. Populists and autocrats around the world are currently taking advantage of this skeptical attitude.

It would be not only a political mistake but also an intellectual mistake to react to this irrational attitude by insisting on the irrefutability of certain scientific statements, for example about climate change and vaccination risks. Equally unhelpful is the repeated claim in the political arena that there are no alternatives to certain measures, whether the construction of a power line or the raising of the retirement age – however sensible these measures may be. In view of the virtually innumerable practical alternatives that exist always and everywhere, the claim that there is no alternative can only mean that there is no rational alternative. But in fact, no concrete political measure is without a rationally justifiable alternative. All too often, politics is a sequence of missed opportunities that were missed precisely because a particular option was wrongly considered to be without alternative. Nor is any scientific statement irrefutably certain. In fact, the history of science is largely a graveyard of disproved theories, and there is no reason to believe that our current theories will fare any better than their predecessors. It is obvious that excessive trust in one's own rational capacities and insights, whether in science or politics, is just as misguided as the wanton renunciation of reason and science and an exclusive orientation towards feelings and intuitions.

But how can one avoid the one mistake without falling into the other? This is precisely where taking recourse to Kant can help us. Human reason is fallible, even self-contradictory, and our knowledge is limited and uncertain in detail. But rather than drawing the conclusion that we should therefore renounce rational insight and well-founded knowledge, we should instead establish and acknowledge the limits of our reason and knowledge claims. This is not easy, and it places a burden on each of us. The fact that climate change is man-made is by no means “scientifically proven” but rather our best scientifically confirmed hypothesis thus far, and in principle it could turn out to be wrong. Nevertheless, and this is the burden we must bear, we must make this hypothesis the basis of political decisions that deeply affect our accustomed ways of life – decisions for which we cannot claim that they are without alternatives. It is not only ‘angry citizens’ who find it hard to come to terms with the fundamental uncertainty of scientific knowledge and the limits of human reason. We can learn from Kant that this is possible without losing trust in reason and science.

Anthropological realism and moral idealism in politics. This brings us to a second respect in which Kant's way of combining seemingly irreconcilable views can still inspire and challenge us today. Kant's writings on politics and history are permeated by a truly amazing combination of anthropological realism and the highest of moral standards. According to Kant, all philosophical questions ultimately converge in the question: “What is man?” And according to Kant, at least a partial answer consists in the sobering information that man is made “of crooked timber” from which “nothing quite straight can be made” (8:23; cf. 6:100). Kant's utterances about human beings, their motives and intentions, the honesty of their utterances, and the reliability of their self-assessments, are marked by a deep skepticism: People are by nature morally corrupt egoists who artfully deceive themselves and others about their own selfish motives. Political institutions are always threatened by the fact that people tend to abuse them for their own benefit. Law and peace are opposed by the human tendency to breach treaties and resort to violence; states and politicians are primarily interested in increasing their power rather than in peaceful cooperation. In short, Kant is a political realist who has no illusions about the moral and social qualities of human beings.

This is not the image of Kant that prevails in the public and in political science, however. Here, Kant is considered a political idealist who believes in progress and enlightenment. Politics must submit to the highest moral and legal requirements, and even seemingly utopian goals such as “perpetual peace” are in principle attainable and politically meaningful.

The surprising thing now is that both descriptions are true: Kant’s political philosophy is realistic and idealistic at the same time. Kant is an anthropological pessimist and a moral idealist. He sees people as egoistic and politically seducible, and at the same time he maintains that politics is subject to the moral demand to realize law and justice completely and to secure peace permanently.

The current relevance of this aspect of Kantian thinking should be obvious. The hopes for progress and global democratization and a lasting world peace order, which seemed justified at the turn of the millennium, have evaporated. In many places, politics is determined not by democracy and the rule of law but by an unscrupulous striving for power, the dismantling of democratic and constitutional structures, and the instrumental use of aggression and disinformation. In view of these developments, one could become a cynic and attribute these developments to the insurmountable stupidity of human beings, who deserve to be cheated and exploited. Kant was by no means unaware of such cynicism, but he did not succumb to it. The reason is that we must not succumb to it: It is an imperative of moral selfrespect to hold fast to the political goals of the rule of law, liberal democracy, justice, international cooperation, and global peace. In other words: Without the rule of law, democracy, and peace, a life of dignity is impossible.

But now we seem to face a dilemma. On the one hand, a disillusioned view of human beings shows that selfishness and inertia stand in the way of the realization of political ideals, but on the other hand, for moral reasons, we must not give up these ideals either. How can the two sides be reconciled? Kant’s solution is, first, that it makes sense to pursue these ideals and work on their realization as long as we are not sure that their realization is impossible. And we can by no means be sure of this, despite all our skepticism about the moral qualities of man. Second, in designing our political institutions, we must take the weaknesses of human nature into account, for example through the separation of powers, a system of checks and balances and, at the international level, effective arms control. This is not a particularly original idea (especially from today’s perspective). What is original and of great current relevance, however, is the consequence Kant draws from it: that the moral fallibility and political corruptibility of human beings is no reason to depart from the highest moral standards in politics – for Kant above all: perfect rule of law and lasting global peace – even one iota.

Political realists tend to adapt their political goals too easily to factual circumstances. Conversely, political idealists have a tendency to form an overly positive view of humanity, which repeatedly fails to take reality into account. We can learn from Kant to avoid both mistakes and to hold on to a realistic view of humankind without giving up our moral claims in politics. However, like the combination of a critique of reason and trust in reason, it is by no means easy to endure the tension in which these two attitudes stand. For this very reason, Kant’s philosophy can still stimulate and challenge us in this respect.

The relationship between happiness and morality. According to one of Kant’s remarks, philosophy ultimately aims at “general happiness.” This may come as a surprise, since Kant’s ethics focuses not on individual or collective happiness but on the good will of the agent. Its moral quality depends not on the intended or actual consequences of one’s actions but solely on the rule or maxim according to which one acts. We should follow maxims that can be general laws, or, what for Kant amounts to the same thing, we should never treat people only as means but always also as ends – and we should do so even when it is contrary to our self-interest, and thus to our happiness.

As Kant repeatedly emphasizes, the pursuit of happiness is not a source but an obstacle to moral action. The same applies at the collective level: State action does not aim to make citizens happy, but to secure their rights. If by utilitarianism in the broadest sense we mean the view that the goal of human action should be to maximize happiness, then Kant rejects utilitarianism at all levels: The right action for both the individual and the state is aimed not at maximizing individual or collective happiness but at respecting the dignity of every human being and protecting the resulting individual rights. The reason for this, according to Kant, is that only in this way are moral duties and civil rights compatible with the autonomy of the person, her free self-determination. The exclusive orientation toward happiness, according to Kant, is a form of heteronomy: If I pursue only my own happiness, I allow myself to be determined by my natural inclinations; if the State paternalistically seeks to maximize the happiness of its citizens, it presumes to judge for them what makes them happy. Both, according to Kant, are incompatible with human autonomy.

One can welcome the liberal thrust of this Kantian thought and still be concerned that Kant goes too far here. Since antiquity, ethics had viewed individual happiness as the highest good and ultimate goal of human action and had argued only about how to define it more precisely. And it has always been a criterion of good political rule that it should be concerned for the well-being of its citizens. This orientation toward happiness seems obvious – so much so that many take utilitarianism for granted. In Germany, for instance, in a decision deeply inspired by Kant's ethics, the Constitutional Court ruled that it was impermissible to offset the lives of innocent airplane passengers against those of a larger number of victims in a terrorist attack because this would violate human dignity and the protection of life. This ruling was met with incomprehension by large parts of the population because the idea that the death of a larger number of people also means greater damage – i.e. a greater loss of happiness – can hardly be dismissed. Almost all modern states see it as their duty to promote the happiness of their citizens; many of them base their policies on happiness indicators such as the World Happiness Report, which increasingly appear alongside purely economic parameters such as gross domestic product.

Neither the offsetting of lives nor the maximization of happiness by the state are acceptable from Kant's point of view. But this does not mean that Kant completely closes himself off from widespread utilitarian intuitions. Rather, he strives to integrate them into his ethics and political philosophy without compromising the value of autonomy and human dignity. First, according to Kant, the pursuit of one's own happiness is a necessary part of human nature. Second, it is even a moral duty to care for one's own well-being, provided that this is a condition for remaining capable of moral agency. Third, according to Kant, it is morally imperative to promote the happiness of others and to make their ends one's own. Fourth, the state may also concern itself with the happiness of its citizens, provided these citizens or their representatives support the appropriate laws. And fifth, the comprehensive goal of rational action, the "highest good," according to Kant, is by no means only the morally good will but a combination of moral action and individual and collective happiness. In other words, the highest good is a world in which all people are as happy as they deserve to be, considering the moral quality of their actions. It is such a world that Kant is referring to when he speaks of "general happiness" as the ultimate purpose of philosophy.

Kant's attitude towards happiness and its moral relevance is thus far more complex than the standard picture of his ethics would suggest. By making human happiness the object of moral duties and an element of the highest good, Kant gives it an intrinsic value that cannot be reduced to the value of reasonable autonomy and human dignity. That it is morally imperative to promote human happiness already presupposes that happiness is something good and worth striving for. Without this assumption, it would be completely unclear why a person's happiness or unhappiness should be morally relevant at all. To put it more technically: According to Kantian ethics, happiness is a conditional good – i.e., it is only good if it can be achieved in a morally permissible way. But it is not a derived good – the value of

human happiness is neither merely that of a means to the end of fulfilling one's duty nor derived from the categorical imperative or values such as autonomy and dignity. Human happiness or well-being is an original good that cannot be reduced to anything else (even if only under the condition of its moral admissibility). This is a very abstract thought and thus difficult to grasp, but if we think about the tasks and limits of the welfare state, about 'happiness indices' or the offsetting of human lives, it can help us to resist the temptation to pit autonomy and human dignity against happiness and well-being.

From the vast universe of Kant's thought, which ranges from the foundations of physics to art theory and from logic to physical geography, we have here considered three (of many) aspects that make Kant's current significance particularly evident – aspects that open up intellectual space that might otherwise have remained closed to us. These were: the combination of a critique of reason and trust in reason, of realism and idealism in politics, and of autonomy and happiness in ethics. In all three areas, Kant's special ability to combine the seemingly contradictory and incompatible in thought becomes apparent. Not least because of this synthetic character of his thinking, Kant's philosophy is still of unbroken relevance today.

Of course, this does not mean that there are not also numerous aspects of Kant's thinking that are untenable from today's perspective. These include not only outdated scientific claims, such as Kant's view that physical space can only be Euclidean (a view that was defeated by Einstein's theory of relativity) but also the fact that Kant thought of the "rational beings" that he placed at the center of his philosophy primarily as white men, while he gave only limited credit to women and people of color in terms of their ability to reason, and thus their humanity. Even though Kant conceded extensive rights to women and ultimately rejected the conception of different human races (which he had long defended) and criticized colonialism, we cannot ignore Kant's sometimes misogynous, racist, and anti-Semitic statements – here, Kant was mistaken.

It would be too easy to explain these errors as arising from their historical context alone. Of course, Kant succumbed to the same prejudices as most of his contemporaries. But these contemporaries were not Kant; they did not have his critical acumen, his independent judgment, and above all, his visionary understanding of human dignity and political freedom and equality. It is therefore a sad fact that Kant fell short of the insights of his own philosophy on these central points. On the other hand, though, this very fact constitutes another aspect of Kant's importance to the present: His example can alert us to the fact that, like Kant, our own knowledge and ethical outlook undoubtedly contains many errors and blind spots. The commitment to unprejudiced criticism, insight, and enlightenment that we can learn from Kant may not be infallible, but it is just as indispensable in our time as it was in Kant's own.

Objectivity (almost) without Object

Immanuel Kant sits in his rented rooms in wintery Königsberg, writing to his student and friend Marcus Herz in Berlin, to whom he has long owed a letter. The date is February 21, 1772. Kant is 48 years old and has been Professor of Logic and Metaphysics at the University of Königsberg for two years, where he had previously studied and where he had long worked as a poorly paid private lecturer (“Magister”) and sub-librarian. As a newly appointed professor, Kant had had to submit a Latin dissertation, which was published as a book in the same year, 1770. In it he had argued the radical thesis that space and time are by no means, as Newton had held, objective quantities – containers for things and events, as it were. Nor are they mere relations between things and events, as Leibniz believed. No, space and time are nothing but subjective forms in which we humans perceive reality with our senses. Without beings like us, according to Kant’s radical thesis, there is no space and time. For this very reason, our senses merely convey a distorted picture of reality – namely, as it appears to us in space and time. How things really are can only be grasped by pure thought: not with eyes and ears, but with abstract concepts such as “thing,” “substance,” “accident,” “cause,” and “effect.”

Marcus Herz had taken part in the required defense of Kant’s dissertation as a respondent and a year later had even published a German version of this work under his own name. In the meantime, he had left Königsberg to complete his medical studies in Berlin. In his letter Kant tells Herz, his “worthy friend,” about his current philosophical projects and, above all, about doubts he’d had in the meantime concerning some of the theses of his dissertation – not concerning his account of space and time, which Kant would from then on essentially retain, but about the theory of concepts such as “substance” and “cause.” Such concepts, according to Kant, cannot be gained by comparing sensory perceptions, noticing their commonalities. If we compare beeches, oaks and firs, we can form the term “tree” to capture their common characteristics. The Scottish philosopher David Hume had shown, however, that this cannot work for concepts like “substance” and “cause”: A substance is that which remains the same throughout all changes; a cause is that which is always followed by a certain effect. As finite beings, however, we cannot compare all (potentially infinite) changes; nor can we determine whether the same cause is in fact always followed by the same effect – even in cases long past or lying in the future. Terms like “cause,” “substance,” “change,” etc., are basic concepts of metaphysics. If we cannot explain how we come to possess these concepts and how we can use them meaningfully, then it is questionable how there can be such a thing as metaphysical knowledge at all. As Hume showed, these terms cannot be based on perception and observation. But then what are they based on?

The traditional answer from rationalist philosophers like Plato, Descartes, and Leibniz is: These terms belong to the basic equipment of our mind; they are “innate” or, as Kant prefers to say more precisely, they are a priori (independent of sensual perception). This is exactly what Kant had claimed in his dissertation. But now it had become clear to him that this gives rise to a problem: If concepts such as “substance” and “cause” originate in our own minds but, as Hume showed, nothing in the reality we can perceive exactly corresponds to them, how do we know whether these concepts can apply to anything in the world at all? After all, there are terms like “unicorn” and “golden mountain” that our minds can form, but to which nothing corresponds in reality. Is it perhaps the same with “substance” and “cause”? In fact, the problem with these concepts seems to be even worse; if unicorns existed, we could at least recognize them. But if Hume is right, we would not be able to recognize substances and causes even if they existed, because they would lie beyond anything we can perceive.

How, Kant asks himself in his letter to Herz, can we know whether these terms refer to anything at all? “I asked myself: what is the ground that bases the relationship of what is called representation in us to the object?” If a representation is a sensual perception, the answer is easy, for it refers to the very object that causes it. When I see a tree in the yard, for example, my visual perception refers to that tree because the tree reflects light and thus affects my senses. But this explanation does not work for

a priori concepts, because they have their source not in external objects but “in the nature of the soul.” The question of whether and how they can nevertheless represent real objects and processes, or whether they are perhaps mere fantasies, is something that he now says he “had passed over in silence.”

Other philosophers, writes Kant to Herz, had referred to God at this point, who supposedly ensured that our a priori concepts were in agreement with reality. But Kant rejects this solution: “The deus ex machina alone,” i.e. the reference to God, “in the determination of the origin and validity of our cognitions is the most inconsistent thing one can choose.” It not only leads to “devout fantasies” but presupposes what is in question. After all, according to these thinkers, the concept of God itself would have to be a priori, not based on sensory perception. For this concept, too, one would therefore first have to explain how it can refer to its object, i.e. to God, at all.

In February 1772, Kant already had a name for the project of systematically canvassing all concepts a priori in metaphysics and morality and testing their validity: a “critique of pure reason” (Critick der reinen Vernunft). He announced to his friend that he would publish its first part on metaphysics in three months. In fact, it took nine years of intensive work until Kant was finally satisfied with his reflections and his magnum opus could be published in 1781.

What, then, is the solution to the problem of a priori concepts, discovered in the Critique of Pure Reason, that Kant explained to his friend Herz? It consists in a “revolution of our way of thinking” – that is, in the reversal of our original perspective on the problem. Up to now, Kant explains in 1787, it was assumed that our concepts must “conform to the objects,” that is, that our concepts must reflect whatever characteristics their objects happen to have. If by a “whalefish” I understand an animal that has the characteristics of a whale and is at the same time a fish, then there is nothing that corresponds to this term; if I apply it to whales, then I am wrong. In this respect, our empirical (i.e. experience-based) concepts must indeed be based on their object, and they can do so because we can check their appropriateness by means of perception and experience.

But if we assume the same direction of explanation for a priori concepts, the problem Kant describes in his letter to Herz arises: If the concept of substance were based on its object, this would only be possible if we could check it against experience and, if necessary, adapt it (just as the concept of ‘whale’ was adapted after it was discovered that whales were mammals). But precisely that, as Hume showed, is not possible with a priori concepts, because nothing can ever fully correspond to them in human experience. So Kant proposes that we reverse the direction of explanation: If a priori concepts do not conform to their objects, their objects must conform to our concepts!

But why should the objects oblige us in this way? Kant’s answer is highly complex, but the basic idea is that otherwise they would not be recognizable as objects for us. At least those things that we can cognize and of which we can have experience must satisfy the conditions under which cognition and experience are possible for us, because otherwise we could not cognize and experience them. It is just the same with sense perception: In order for me to see an object, it must reflect light. In order for me to hear something, it must generate sound waves. We can therefore know something very general about all perceptible objects, namely that they must satisfy the specific conditions under which they are perceptible to us. If it could now be shown that certain a priori concepts belong to the conditions that make objects perceptible to us in the first place, then these objects, in so far as we can have experience of them, would have to “conform” to these concepts. According to Kant, this is precisely the role of concepts such as “substance,” “cause,” and ten further concepts, which he, following Aristotle, calls “categories.” For instance, Kant argues that an event can be part of our human experience only if it has a cause; but then we can know a priori (i.e. independently of any concrete experience) that all events which we can experience must have a cause, and thus the notion of cause

has, as Kant calls it, “objective validity.” In this way, Kant explains, a priori concepts can refer to objects without going back to perceptions of these objects: By structuring every possible experience and thus making the very cognition of objects possible. This is what Kant claims to show in the most difficult and much discussed chapter of the Critique of Pure Reason, the “Transcendental Deduction” of categories.

This, in broad outline, is Kant’s answer to the question he posed in his letter to Herz in 1772. The answer, incidentally, parallels Kant’s theory of space and time, which he had already developed in his dissertation of 1770: Just as space and time are a priori representations that precede all experience and provide a framework for ordering our sense perceptions, so the categories are a priori concepts that allow us to combine and connect the contents of perception and transform them into representations of objects. The objectivity of experience (which is expressed, for example, in the fact that whales are not fish, even if we might mistakenly believe this) is thus at least in part the result of a subjective achievement, namely the structuring of perceptions in space and time in accordance with the categories of our understanding.

Kant compares his approach to that of Nicolaus Copernicus, whose heliocentric worldview was possible only through a change of perspective. This is why some speak of Kant’s “Copernican turn.” This comparison is not easy to grasp, however, and has often been misunderstood. Kant seems to have meant the following: If I observe the motions of the sun and other stars from the earth, it must appear to me as if the earth were stationary and the stars were moving. If, on the other hand, I assume with Copernicus that the stars are fixed and the earth rotates around the sun, then I can explain the apparent motion of the stars by the fact that I myself, as an observer on Earth, am moving around the sun (without noticing this). In this case, I can know a priori how the stars must appear to me, as an observer on the earth, namely in motion. In the same way, according to Kant’s “revolution in the way of thinking,” we can know a priori how empirical objects must appear to us, namely in space and time and structured by the a priori concepts of our mind, the categories.

This solution raises many questions, some of which are discussed in other chapters. Nevertheless, we can use it to clarify three central features of Kantian thinking. First, it is radical in that it is not satisfied with hasty solutions (the “Deus ex Machina”) and seeks to get to the bottom of the problem. Second, it contains a surprising combination of revolutionary and conservative moments: Kant turns the usual understanding of how concepts refer to objects upside down (“revolution in the way of thinking”) – but only in order to be able to hold fast to the traditional rationalist view, against Hume, that a priori concepts have “objective validity.” And third – indeed the central philosophical idea of the critical Kant – it leads us to the notion that objectivity is based on the achievements of the subject. Our thinking is objective if, rather than being arbitrary and valid only for ourselves, it corresponds to its object and is therefore comprehensible to everyone. The traditional view in both philosophy and common sense is that such objectivity comes about when our thinking “conforms to its object” – to a mind-independent reality. Kant’s radical and original idea, by contrast, is that objectivity in thinking is based on the fact that all thinking subjects must conform to the same necessary conditions (space, time, categories) in their perceptions and cognitions in order to be able to perceive and cognize anything at all. We can call this idea “objectivity without an object”: The object of experience is not independent of the conditions under which we can have objective experience of it, but is rather made possible by these very conditions alone.

In a late note, Kant goes even further and writes: “We make everything ourselves.” This is perhaps an exaggeration; in any case, according to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, there are also objects that exist independently of us – so-called “things in themselves.” They act on our senses and thus provide the material that we then structure according to space, time, and categories and process into representations of objects. So we do not make everything ourselves after all. But nevertheless, the specific properties of these “things in themselves” do not play a role in the objectivity of our cognition,

since all we can cognize in them are properties that are conditioned and shaped by our forms of cognition (space, time, categories). That we nevertheless perceive an objective reality shared by all is, according to Kant, due to the fact that we are all endowed with the same forms of cognition, which necessarily structure our cognition in the same way.

Kant is not one of those thinkers (like Leibniz or Schopenhauer, perhaps) whose philosophy can be traced back to only one basic idea. But if there is such a thing as a central idea in the thinking of Immanuel Kant, then it is probably the astonishing idea that the objectivity of our cognition is based not on the properties of the object, but on the activity of the cognizing subject. It is this idea that finally allows him, in the Critique of Pure Reason, to solve the problem he reported to Marcus Herz in February 1772. And it is the same idea of 'objectivity without an object' that underlies his ethics and aesthetics. That the same moral imperatives apply to all human beings, and that our aesthetic judgments are more than mere subjective preferences, are things that Kant similarly explains in terms of the necessary concordance of subjective intellectual achievements.

If we want to locate this Kantian thought within the history of philosophy at large, Kant positions himself between two opposing tendencies of Western philosophy. On the one hand, there are those, like Plato, Aristotle, and the Christian philosophers of the Middle Ages, who understood truth, beauty, and goodness as independent of man and his thinking: There is a reality given to us, which we can grasp in true judgements and whose ethical and aesthetic values we must only acknowledge. On the other hand, there are those, like some sophists in ancient Greece and David Hume in Kant's own time, who understood truth, beauty, and goodness as human productions, as a mere reflex of human subjectivity. To put this view in a nutshell: The true is what is considered true; the beautiful is what pleases; and the good is what we value. But since different people consider different things to be true, beautiful, and good, we are in danger of losing our grip on an objective reality. As Nietzsche argued 100 years after Kant's death, reality seems to dissolve into a myriad of individual perspectives.

Kant's grand project is to strike a balance between these two extremes. Yes, truth, beauty, and the good are products of the human mind – in this, Kant is a child of the modern age. But these productions are by no means arbitrary and accidental; they follow necessary rules that are the same for all human beings. Kant does not give up on the very objectivity that ancient and medieval (and also many modern) thinkers wanted to explain when he says that our thinking must "conform to the objects." But he explains it by arguing that things must conform to the necessary structures of our thinking in order to become objects for us. This is a very abstract thought, and it is still disputed whether it really works (i.e. whether it allows for an adequate understanding of the relation between thinking and reality). Nevertheless, there is no question that it is a revolutionary thought that has shaped the history of philosophy and intellectual history over the past 250 years like few others.

Kant closes his letter to Marcus Herz with a greeting to his Berlin friends and colleagues Mendelssohn, Sulzer, and Lambert (all important philosophers and at the time more famous than Kant). He begs their forgiveness for being behind in answering their letters because of his intensive work on the "Critick der reinen Vernunft." In fact, Lambert, whom Kant revered and who had raised an important objection to Kant's 1770 account of space and time in a letter, died in 1777 without Kant's having written to him again. Kant had not yet found the right response to Lambert's objection. He did not respond until 1781 – with the publication of the Critique of Pure Reason.

Human Beings as Ends in Themselves

On April 22, 1784, Kant celebrated his 60th birthday. An official celebration at the university had already taken place a few months earlier, at which Kant was presented with a medal by friends and students. It is unlikely that Kant himself organized another celebration for friends and students, on his actual birthday. But we can imagine that congratulators visited throughout the day and that his friends Green, Motherby, von Hippel, and others raised their glasses to him in the evening. At the age of 60, Kant was at the height of his philosophical development. Three years following the publication of the Critique of Pure Reason, he was finally able to turn to the long-cherished project of a “metaphysics of morals,” the “groundwork” for which he wanted to lay first. Even if the enthusiastic reception of Kant’s philosophy was only just beginning, on his birthday Kant deserved to be satisfied with himself and the world. Some of his closest students, including Johann Gottfried Herder and Marcus Herz, had become well-known figures in German intellectual life. Others, like Johann Schultz and Ludwig Ernst Borowski, held important ecclesiastical offices in Königsberg. Kant had close friends and a wide circle of acquaintances. Even though he might have liked to marry at a younger age, he had happily resigned himself to life-long bachelorhood in the meantime. Nevertheless, it was precisely at this time that Kant decided to make an important change to his outer circumstances: The philosopher bought a house.

Kant had been living in various rented accommodations since the 1750s. At the beginning of the 1780s, Kant seems to have grown weary of his rented rooms and had saved enough money to look for a house of his own. On Christmas Eve of 1783, his friend Theodor Gottlieb (von) Hippel, at the time mayor of Königsberg, drew his attention to a suitable house that was for sale. Kant signed the purchase agreement only six days later. The house was not immediately ready for occupancy, however, and first had to be renovated and converted. Among other things, a lecture hall had to be created by removing a wall – at the time, lectures were held not in university buildings but in private rooms, usually in the lecturers’ homes. The renovation cost 2000 gulden, the house a total of 7500 gulden, or 2500 thalers. For comparison: Kant’s salary as a professor had been 160 thalers per year at the beginning (1770). In the 1780s, however, it is said to have been around 400 thalers, and finally even 750 thalers. Kant himself puts his financial assets in his will of 1798 at 42930 gulden (i.e. over 14000 thalers). The investments in the trading house of his friends Green and Motherby, which Kant had made over the years, would appear to have paid off.

The other construction site with which Kant was preoccupied at this time concerned moral philosophy. It would not be overstating things to say that the Critique of Pure Reason was a preliminary work for another project with which Kant had repeatedly dealt in essays, lectures, sketches, and notes since the beginning of the 1760s, namely laying out the philosophical foundations of morality. This was the project he now wanted to finally tackle.

The central philosophical question that occupied Kant in the period around his 60th birthday concerned the “binding nature” of moral rules and its ground: Why are human beings obliged to abide by moral rules and prohibitions such as the prohibition against murder, lying, or refusing to help others in need? In the course of the twenty years that Kant had been thinking about this question, it had become clear to him that the answers given up to then in philosophy had been insufficient: Neither divine commandments nor recourse to human nature or to society can adequately explain why we are obliged to obey moral rules.

There are three interrelated characteristics of moral imperatives that led Kant to the insight that reference to God, nature, and society cannot explain their validity: their strict universality, their categorical character, and the specific form of moral motivation.

Moral imperatives, according to Kant, apply equally to all people in comparable situations. It would be immoral to make exceptions for oneself with respect to moral rules the observance of which one demands of others. If there is some exception to a moral rule, then it must apply to everyone. For instance, it is wrong to kill people, except in self-defense. But this exception, if it is to be morally justifiable, applies not only to me but to everyone who acts in self-defense. Kant saw that a simple but very powerful test can be derived from this: If a certain way of acting is morally permissible, then it must be possible for all to act in this way. This is the central idea behind Kant's famous Categorical Imperative. Early formulations of this idea can be found as early as Kant's lectures on moral philosophy from the 1770s.

It follows from the universality of moral rules and imperatives that their validity cannot depend on the changing inclinations and motives of their addressees; they are therefore "categorically" or "unconditionally" valid, not just "hypothetically" or "conditionally." If, for example, the validity of a moral commandment were based on the fact that its addressee wants to avoid negative consequences connected with its non-observance (e.g. eternal damnation or social ostracism), then there might be people who are willing to accept such consequences. To them, then, the commandment would not apply; it would not be universally valid.

On the other hand, however, a moral imperative must be connected with a specific motive that makes it possible for its addressees to act accordingly always and everywhere. Against the mainstream of the European Enlightenment, which measured value in terms of usefulness to humanity and sought to trace morality back to considerations of utility, Kant insisted that moral imperatives must be obeyed for their own sake. A person who refrains from lying only because she is afraid of getting caught will give in to the temptation to lie if she is sure that her lie will not be discovered. Someone who observes moral rules but does so only because it is advantageous to himself does indeed act, as Kant later calls it, "in conformity with duty," but not "out of duty". In a lecture from the summer of 1784, which will be discussed in more detail in a moment, he explains this difference in a less charming, but vivid, way: "If a man marries a beautiful woman, he will love her out of inclination. If she is wrinkled through the years, and he still loves her, he will do so out of duty". Only someone who obeys moral imperatives for their own sake – that is, because it is the right thing to do – acts morally well not merely by chance. Only acting out of duty has, as Kant will call it, "moral value".

The fact that morality is characterized by the three features of universal validity, categorical character, and specific moral motivation had become clear to Kant in the course of the 1770s, in critically thinking through the views of ancient and contemporary philosophers such as Cicero, Seneca, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Baumgarten, and others. Only gradually did Kant become aware of the radical consequences for our understanding of moral obligation, namely that the validity of moral imperatives cannot be based on the will of God, on nature, or on the demands of society. It follows from these three characteristics that moral commandments must necessarily be accompanied by the motive of obeying them for their own sake (even if this motive is not always decisive). Kant would call this motive "respect" (more precisely: "respect for the law"). The attribution of moral commandments to the will of God, nature, or society, even if it were compatible with the general and necessary existence of this specifically moral motive, cannot explain that motive. Let us assume, for example, that moral imperatives apply to us because they are divine commands. If a motive to follow moral imperatives were to arise from this, then plausibly it could only do so by producing a desire, on the part of the addressee, to comply with the will of God. But such a desire cannot necessarily be presupposed in everyone; nor would it lead to the observance of moral commandments for their own sake. Recourse to nature (for instance the nature of man) or to the rules of society also cannot explain the bindingness of moral imperatives. It is often the case that we explain why people are willing to observe moral rules by appealing to compassion, or a desire for social recognition, or some other natural or social motive.

But this does not explain why one ought to observe moral rules even if natural and social motives happen to be absent. If moral imperatives must be observed always and for their own sake, then their observance cannot presuppose motives that feed from the agent's self-interest. Their justification therefore cannot refer to the changing interests of the agent. But on what, then, is their bindingness, their categorically obligatory character, based? This was the question, according to Kant, to which both he and his predecessors had thus far failed to provide a satisfactory answer. Now, at the age of 60, he had finally found that answer.

Around his 60th birthday, Kant began to write what was to become his most influential work, alongside the Critique of Pure Reason – one of the most important works in the history of ethics: the Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals. Kant had already made several attempts to put his thoughts on moral philosophy on paper, but only now did they take the form that would lead to the publication of his major ethical work. Like most of his books, Kant wrote it in an astoundingly short time, between April and August of 1784.

But before Kant could complete his foundation of ethics, his house had to be ready for occupancy. Kant had probably hoped to be living in his own house by the beginning of the summer term and to hold his lectures there, but the renovations proved to be more difficult than he initially thought. The craftsmen who had been commissioned had initially given him bad advice. The bricklayer delivered too many bricks; a bay window was to be demolished first, then saved, then demolished again. Finally, Kant commissioned the architect Fetter to carry out the construction work, since he himself, as he wrote to him, was “completely ignorant of such things.” Nevertheless, he was informed firsthand about the details of the reconstruction and the demands of the craftsmen. And so Kant spent part of his 60th birthday, four days before the start of the new term, presumably checking in on the construction site. He was able to move in only in May.

The summer term began on April 26. Kant held four lecture courses: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday mornings at 7 a.m. on logic, before an audience of 100, and Wednesdays on physical geography and practical philosophy. Moreover, Kant read natural law, before a registered audience of 23, on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays from 8 to 9 o'clock, immediately following the logic lecture. Like all Prussian professors, Kant had to give his lectures according to approved textbooks. However, he usually followed only their structure, deviating from them substantially in detail and openly criticizing the teachings contained within them. While Kant's lecture style in his early years is said to have been very lively and vivid, there are reports that this was no longer the case in the 1780s: “His lecture at times [lost] its vividness in such a way that one might have thought he would fall asleep, in which opinion one had to be strengthened when one suddenly noticed in his bodily movements a sudden gathering of his seemingly tired forces”. If one considers that Kant had already read his Introduction to Logic 43 times by 1784 – every semester from 1755 to 1770, and then every second semester – and almost always according to the same textbook, one can perhaps understand his fatigue.

With that said, there was no question of boredom when it came to the natural law lecture. The lecture, of which we have a thorough transcript, begins with a bang: “For the will of man, all nature is subject to the extent of its power, except other men and reasonable beings. ... only man can be regarded as end itself”. A little later, Kant uses for the first time in his documented work an expression that would come to characterize his moral philosophy like few others, that of an “end in itself”: “Man namely is an end in himself; he can therefore have only an inner value, i.e., a dignity”.

In front of his students and with noticeable enthusiasm, Kant develops a complex argument for this thesis: Everything that has a value is either a means or an end, where both possibilities are not mutually exclusive. Mere means have value only by the fact that they contribute as means to an end which itself has value. If this end is valuable only because its achievement is likewise a means to a further purpose,

then its value depends on the value of that further purpose. Therefore, for anything at all to have a value, there must be ends that have their value in themselves: ends in themselves. According to Kant, only human and other possible rational beings, who are free to set their own ends for themselves, come into question as such ends in themselves. One might dispute this assumption. But if one accepts it, it follows that human beings, and in nature as we know it they alone, are ends in themselves. From this Kant derives the famous demand that one should never treat other people only as means, but always also as ends.

This is an abstract argument for an abstract thesis. But what does it mean in concrete terms to say that humans are ends in themselves? What does it mean to treat someone not as a mere means, but as an end? Kant explains this immediately with examples from his own life – namely, his life as the builder and patron of a house: “Man is thus the end of creation; but he can also again be used as means by another rational being; but never is he a mere means, but at the same time end. E.g. if the mason serves me as means to build a house, I serve him again as means to obtain money”. That Kant is speaking directly from his own experience here is shown by his letter to his architect, Fetter, which he wrote on April 28, that is, one day before our lecture: “If the bricklayer, because of the overflowing bricks, should make words, he could be satisfied by my paying him a wage for driving”. The idea, then, is that I do not make someone who serves me or works for me a mere means as long as I pay them adequately for their services. By paying them, I in turn make myself their means (a means to get money), thus treating them as an end. Another example from the lecture reads: “If I make a contract with a servant, he must also be an end just as I am, and not merely a means. He must also be willing. In the letter to Fetter, Kant had written: “My wish is to save, but in such a way that the workers, too, can be satisfied” (ibid.). Kant thus not only explained his theory through examples from his daily life but also tried to bring his life as a patron and home-owner into harmony with his moral theory. The idea that workers and servants are to be treated in such a way that they “can be satisfied” and such that they “also are willing” what they are supposed to do would by no means have been self-evident to Kant’s students – young men mostly of the ‘higher classes.’ It is unlikely that they would have been bored by Kant’s lecture.

Kant used his lectures to confront his audience with the very philosophical questions and ideas that preoccupied him at the time he started writing the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. The lecture notes therefore provide a glimpse into Kant’s workshop. We can see his thoughts emerge, as it were, by comparing his theses and arguments in the lectures with those of the *Groundwork*. It becomes clear that central elements of Kant’s ethics, such as the concept of an end in itself, but also the idea of autonomy, only found their place in Kant’s ethics in the course of these few weeks. It was only then, shortly after his 60th birthday, that Kant found the answer to the question that had preoccupied him for twenty years, namely how moral obligation is possible. The key to answering it would be the concept of autonomy.