

“Immanuel Kant,” *Library of the World’s Greatest Literature*, Vol. 15, Charles Dudley Warner (ed), New York: R. S. Peale and J. A. Hill, 1897, pp. 8477-8485.

IMMANUEL KANT

(1724-1804)

BY JOSIAH ROYCE

THE external events of the life of Immanuel Kant are neither numerous nor startling. He was born in Königsberg in East Prussia, in the year 1724, on the 22d of April. He died in his native place on the 12th of February, 1804. He never traveled beyond about a distance of sixty miles from the city; was never occupied except as scholar, private tutor, university official, and writer. He saw very little of the great world at any time. He was not celebrated, in any national sense, until he was nearly sixty years of age. His personal relations were for the most part, and until his later years, almost as restricted as his material circumstances. He was in all the early part of his life decidedly poor. By dint of very strict economy he acquired a moderate amount of property before his death, but he was never rich. He carefully avoided all roads to purely worldly position or power. Yet by dint of intellectual prowess, fortified by a profound moral earnestness,—although one somewhat coldly austere,—he acquired an influence over the thought, first of his country, and then of Europe, which has been in many ways transforming. Amongst philosophical thinkers he stands in the first rank in the very small group of those philosophers who can be regarded as genuine originators. As an original thinker, in fact, he is the only modern philosopher who can be put beside Plato and Aristotle. Other modern thinkers have represented individual ideas of more or less independence and importance; Kant alone has the honor of having transformed by his work some of the most fundamental tendencies of modern speculation.

Of Kant the man, numerous characterizations have been given by his friends and admirers. Most of these accounts relate especially to his appearance and life in his later years. Of his youth we know much less. On his father's side Kant was of Scottish descent, his grandparents having emigrated from Scotland to East Prussia. Kant's parents were members of the Pietistic party in the Lutheran Church, and Kant's early education was thus under influences decidedly emotional in their religious character,—although the poverty, the hard labor, and the sterling character of his parents prevented the wasting

of time in devotional extravagances such as often characterized the Pietistic movement; and the philosopher later looked back upon his early training not only with a deep feeling of devotion, but with a genuine intellectual respect. The family was large. There were three sons and seven daughters. One of Kant's brothers later became a minister. One of the sisters survived the philosopher. But six of the children died young; and Immanuel himself inherited a delicate constitution which had a great deal to do, in later years, both with the sobriety and with the studious contemplativeness of his life's routine. At eight years of age, Kant attended the gymnasium called the Fredericianum, in Königsberg. Here he spent eight years and a half, much under the eye and the influence of the director of the gymnasium, Dr. F. A. Schultz,—Pietist, professor of theology, and pastor. Schultz was a scholarly, independent, and extremely active man,—severe as a disciplinarian, stimulating as a thinker and worker. As Kant himself grew into youth, he formed literary ambitions, showed skill as a Latin writer and reader, but gave no evidences as yet of philosophical tendencies. He was not regarded as an especially promising boy: he is said to have been sensitive; he was certainly weak in body and small in stature. He entered the University in 1740; struggled with poverty and pedantry for about four years; was influenced by the philosophical teaching, especially of Martin Knutzen; and earned some necessary means as private tutor. A familiar anecdote of his university period relates that Kant occasionally was obliged to borrow clothing from his friends while his own was mending; and the story adds that on such occasions the friend might be obliged to stay at home himself. In any case, Kant's university life is described as one of few recreations and of pretty constant labor. Its result was seen at once after graduation, however, in the somewhat ambitious publication with which Kant's literary career opened. This was a study of the then current problem of the theory of kinetic forces,—or "living forces," as in the terminology of that time the title-page of this essay calls them. The essay was at once philosophical and quasi-mathematical. It was not in any positive sense an important contribution to the discussion; but it was obviously the work of a man in earnest. It was written in a spirit that combined in an attractive way ambition and modesty; and it contained in one passage a somewhat prophetic statement of the course that Kant had laid out for himself.

Kant's mother died in 1737. In 1746 his father followed. The years immediately subsequent to his university course, and to the publication of the foregoing treatise, were passed as private tutor; and it was at the beginning of this period that Kant traveled farthest from his native city. Our philosopher's work as tutor in private

families was of considerable advantage for his knowledge of the world, and brought him into contact with somewhat distinguished local magnates. Nine years in all were passed in this occupation.

The year 1755 begins a new and important period of Kant's career. In this year he became tutor, or *privat-docent*, at the University, defended a dissertation upon metaphysics as he took his place in the University, and published a treatise on the 'Natural History and Theory of the Heavens.' In the latter essay he not only showed in various ways the most important features of his earlier methods of work, but had the honor of forestalling Lambert and Laplace in a number of suggestions, which have since become famous, relating to the evolution of the solar system. From this moment dates a long-continued and extremely laborious effort towards self-development. As a university teacher, Kant was singularly successful. His range of lectures was large. Physical science, and especially physical geography, logic, and metaphysics were prominent among his topics. Affiliated at first with the then current highly formal and dogmatic Wolffian philosophy of the universities, Kant was from the outset an essentially independent expositor of doctrine, and soon became more and more an independent thinker. He united the necessarily somewhat pedantic method due to his own early training, with a marvelous humanity of spirit, and much brilliancy of expression as a lecturer. Some of his students listened with great enthusiasm. Herder, who attended his lectures in 1762 and 1763, never forgot, even in the midst of a bitter opposition which years later grew up in his mind towards Kant, the early influence of the master upon him. At the time or near it, the young Herder could hardly use expressions too enthusiastic concerning his master. "Heavenly hours" he names the time spent in such instruction. Kant, he tells us, unites learning and depth in the finest fashion with something resembling "the humor of 'Tristram Shandy.'" He is a profound observer "in the pathology of our mind," he shows "a creative philosophical imagination," and has his own Socratic method of bringing everything into relation with man. In æsthetic as in ethical directions Herder finds his teacher equally great. Kant is "altogether a social observer, altogether a finished philosopher, a philosopher of humanity, and in this humane philosophy a German Shaftesbury."

Some amongst Kant's writings belonging to this period show literary powers which make this enthusiastic characterization more intelligible than the writings of his later period would serve to do. Kant had unquestionably the power to become a popular writer of distinction, if not of extraordinary rank. But he was disposed to sacrifice his literary gifts for the sake of a cause which as the years went by became constantly dearer to him. For worldly distinction

he had small desire. University advancement came to him very slowly. Official favor he did not seek. His work as a teacher was always precious to him. But most of all he prized what he once called his mistress, namely Metaphysics. At certain central problems he worked with a constantly increasing devotion and intensity. His own contributions to philosophy became during the years between 1762 and 1766 somewhat numerous: but he himself, even at the time, made comparatively little of them; for he found them fragmentary, and as he himself says, regarded philosophical insight as an ideal whole, in which very little could be accomplished unless that whole were surveyed at a glance. Of his own development during these years, the philosopher himself has given us some indications in notes preserved among his papers. "Of my science," he says (namely, of philosophy), "I taught at first what most appealed to me. I attempted to make some contributions of my own to the common treasury; in other respects I attempted to correct errors: yet all the while I expected to extend the dogmas of tradition. But when one attempts with real earnestness to find truth, one spares at last not even his own productions. One submits everything that one has learned or has believed to a thorough-going criticism; and so it slowly came to pass that I found my entire dogmatic theory open to fundamental objections." Later on, Kant declared that he regarded all his metaphysical writings as rendered entirely worthless by his later critical philosophy. Thus unsparingly did the great critic assail his own thought first and most of all. He was even aware that in doing so he deliberately adopted, in his later treatises, a method of exposition that lacked all literary charms. "My method," he says in notes relating to his later style, "is not very much disposed to enchain the reader or to please him. My writings seem scholastic, dryly contemplative,—yes, even meagre, and far enough from the tone of genius. It seems, to be sure, as if there were nothing more tasteless than metaphysics; but the jewels, that are beauty's adornment lay once in dark mines, or at least were seen only in the dim workshop of the artist."

The fruits of Kant's long labors ripened first in the year 1781, when he published his 'Critique of Pure Reason,' the most famous philosophical treatise of the last two centuries. This theoretical treatise was followed by a more popular exposition of a portion of the doctrine of the 'Critique' itself in 1783. To this more popular exposition, which also contained extensive replies to critics, Kant gave the name of 'Prolegomena to Every Future Metaphysic.' In 1785 and 1788 he published works bearing on his ethical doctrine; in 1790 a philosophical treatise upon æsthetics, and upon the presence of design in nature; in 1793 appeared an 'Essay upon the Philosophy of

Religion.' During the years between 1781 and 1795 Kant also printed a large number of philosophical papers upon various subjects, ethical, historical, and polemical. The long period of preparation had thus given place to a time of great philosophical activity; but after 1795 the now aged philosopher began to feel the effects of his always delicate constitution with rapidly increasing severity. He grew unable to follow the current discussions which his own writings had by this time provoked. He planned a large philosophical work which was to set the crown upon his systematic labors; but he was unable to give this treatise any final form. His last few years were beset with increasing physical infirmity and mental ineffectiveness, although he preserved to the last his high moral courage and his rigid self-control. At the end he wasted away, and died of marasmus in 1804.

In person Kant was small and spare, weak of muscle, and scarcely five feet high. His cheeks were sunken, his cheek-bones high, his chest was small; his shoulders were slightly deformed. His forehead was high, narrow at the base and broad at the top. His head was decidedly large in proportion to the rest of his body; and the capacity of his skull, as measured in 1880 (when his remains were transferred to a chapel raised in his honor), was declared to be uncommonly great. The physical details here given are found in much fuller statement in the excellent life of Kant by Dr. Stuckenberg, published by Macmillan in 1882. The physical habits of Kant have been often described in works of literary gossip. What especially attracts attention is that rigid regularity of routine which was determined by the philosopher's sensitive health. His constitution was intolerant of medicine; and he early learned that he could combat his numerous minor infirmities only by careful diet, by mental self-control (in which he acquired great skill), and by strict habit of life. His care extended to his breathing, in an almost Oriental fashion. He cured his pains, on occasions, by control over his attention; and by the same means worked successfully against sleeplessness. He was troubled with defective vision; and in general he narrowly escaped hypochondriac tendencies by virtue of a genuinely wholesome cheerfulness of intellectual temper. In intellectual matters themselves Kant was always characterized by an extraordinary power of thoughtful analysis; by a strenuous disposition to pursue, without haste and without rest, any line of inquiry which had once engaged his attention; by keen suspicion of all his instincts and acquired presuppositions; and by a somewhat fatalistic willingness to wait as long as might be necessary for light. No thinker ever had originality more obviously thrust upon him by the situation, and by his unwearied devotion to his task. From the outset, indeed, he had a sense that his work was destined to have important results; but this sense was something very far

different from vanity, and was accompanied by none of that personal longing for brilliancy and originality which has determined for good or for ill the life work of so many literary men and thinkers. Not naturally an iconoclast, Kant was driven by his problems to become one of the most revolutionary of thinkers. Not naturally an enthusiast, he was led to results which furnished the principal philosophical food for the most romantic and emotional age of modern German literature. Devoted at the outset to the careful exposition of doctrines which he had accepted from tradition, Kant was led by the purely inner and normal development of his work to views extraordinarily independent.

The process of his thought constitutes as it were one long and connected nature process, working with the fatal necessity of the ebb and flow of the tide, and is as independent of his personal caprices as of the merely popular tendencies of the period in which he grew up. Yet when Frederick Schlegel later classed the thinkers of pure reason with the French Revolution, as one of the characteristic processes of the century, he expressed a view which the student of intellectual life can well appreciate and easily defend. But the expression suggests not alone the importance of the critical philosophy, but also its character as a sort of natural development of the whole intellectual situation of that age.

Morally speaking, Kant was characterized by three features. Of these the first is his relatively cool intellectual attitude towards all problems. He has no sympathy with romantic tendencies; although later many a romantic soul came to sympathize profoundly with him. He is opposed to mysticism of every form; and not so much suspects the emotions of human nature, as clearly sees what he takes to be their essential and fundamental capriciousness. The second trait is a thorough regard for lawfulness of action. Reasonable guidance is for him the only possible guidance. Emotions must deceive; the plan of life is as plan alone worthy of consideration. Kant has small interest in noble sentiments, but very great natural respect for large and connected personal and social undertakings, when guided by ideas. The third characteristic of the philosopher, in this part of his nature, is that sincerely cheerful indifference to fortune which made him, amidst all his frequently keen criticism of the weakness of human nature and of the vanities of life, withal a critic who just escapes pessimism by dint of his assurance that, after all, reason must triumph in the universe. Kant was a fine observer of human nature, and as such was fond of lecturing on what we might call the comparative psychology of national and social types. He was widely read in the anthropological literature of his day. Accordingly, his observations on man's moral nature, in his lectures as in his

published treatises, often show the breadth of reading and the humane shrewdness of judgment which were the source of the charm that the young Herder so richly found in his teaching. Yet Kant's accounts of human nature, without being cynical, always appear somewhat coldly disillusioned. What saves this aspect of his work from seeming cynical is the genuine tone of moral seriousness with which he views the more rational aspects of human tasks. In one passage of his lectures on psychology, in connection with the theory of pleasure and pain, he briefly sums up his view of the happiness possible to any mortal man. This view at first sight is somewhat uninviting. From the nature of the case, Kant reasons, every pleasure has to be attended with a corresponding experience of pain. Life in general seems to be naturally something of a burden. Moreover, every human desire has by nature other desires opposing it. Our tendencies, as they naturally are, are profoundly deceitful. Yet despite all this, Kant asserts that life has its very deep comforts. But what are these? Kant replies:—"The deepest and easiest means of quieting all pains is the thought that a reasonable man should be expected to have at his control,—namely, the thought that life in general, so far as the enjoyment of it goes, has no genuine worth at all; for enjoyment depends upon fortune: but its worth consists alone in the use of life, in the purposes to which it is directed. And this aspect of life comes to man not by fortune, but only through wisdom. This consequently is in man's power. Whoever is much troubled about losing life will never enjoy life."

These three traits of Kant's moral attitude towards life unite to give some of his more mature historical essays and critical studies a character which deserves to be better known than it now is, by students who are less interested in the metaphysical aspect of his doctrine. In judging the course of human history, Kant sometimes seems to be accepting the doctrine of Hobbes, that by nature all men are at war with all. In fact, however, Kant sees deeper. The situation has another aspect. The warfare is still fundamental. Every man is at war not only with his fellows, but by nature with himself. He desires freedom, but he desires also power. Power he can get only through social subordination. This, man more or less feels from the outset. His need of his fellow-man is as prominent in his own mind as is his disposition to war with his fellow. Kant accordingly speaks of man as a being "who cannot endure his fellow-man, and cannot possibly do without him." Thus there is that in man which wars against the very warfare itself; and Kant's general psychological theory of the inner opposition and division of the natural man comes to appear somewhat like the Pauline doctrine of the Epistle to the Romans. But Nature's chaos is Reason's opportunity.

It is upon this very basis that Kant founds his ethical theory; according to which the moral law can find in our natures no possible basis except the fundamental and supreme demand of the Pure Reason, that this universal but obviously senseless conflict shall cease through voluntary subordination to what Kant calls the Categorical Imperative. The Categorical Imperative is the principle of consistency in conduct; stated abstractly, the principle, So act at any time that you could will the maxim of your act to become a universal law for all reasonable beings. This maxim a man can obey; because he is not merely a creature with this nature, so capricious and so inwardly divided against itself, but a rational being with free-will, capable of subordinating caprice to reason. The whole moral law is thus summed up in the maxim, Act now as if your act determined the deed of every man for all time; or more simply, Act upon absolutely consistent principles. And now, in the course of history, Kant sees the progressive process of the realization of this one universal principle of the reason, in the organization of a rational human society.

Kant's true originality as a thinker lies most in his theoretical philosophy. Of this in the present place it is impossible to give any really significant account. If one must sum up in the fewest words the most general idea of this doctrine, one is disposed to say: Kant found philosophical thought concerned with the problem, how human knowledge is related to the real world of truth. This problem had assumed its then customary shape in connection with discussions both of traditional theology and of science. What we now call the conflict of religion and science really turned for that age, as for ours, upon the definition and the solution of this fundamental problem of the scope and the limits of knowledge. But what philosophers up to Kant's time had not questioned, was that *if* human knowledge in any region, as for instance in the region of natural science, has validity,—accomplishes what it means to accomplish,—then this validity and this success must involve a real acquaintance with the world absolutely real, beyond the boundaries of human experience. Thus materialistic philosophy had maintained that if natural science is valid, man knows a world of absolutely real matter, which explains all things and is the ultimate truth. Theological doctrine had held in a similar way that if the human reason is valid at all, then the absolute nature of God, of the soul, or of some other transcendent truth, must in some respect be within our range. Now Kant undertook, by virtue of a new analysis of human knowledge, to prove, on one hand, that human reason cannot know absolute truth of any kind except moral truth. Herein, to be sure, his doctrine seemed at one with those skeptical views which had questioned in former times the validity of human knowledge altogether. But Kant did not agree

with the skeptics as to their result. On the other hand, he maintained that the real success and the genuine validity of human science depend upon the very fact that we are not able to know, in theoretical realms, any absolute or transcendent truth whatsoever. For, as Kant asserts, in dealing with nature as science knows nature, we are really dealing with the laws of human experience as such, and not with any absolute or transcendent truth whatever. It is however the nature of the human understanding, the constitution of human experience, that is expressed in all natural laws that we are able to discover; in all the truth that science maintains or that the future can disclose. Thus, as Kant states the case, it is the understanding that gives laws to nature. And the limitation of knowledge to the realm of experience, and our failure to be able to know in theoretical terms any transcendent truth, are not signs of the failure of human knowledge in its essential human purposes, but are conditions upon which depends the very validity of our knowledge within its own realm. In trying to know more than the world of experience, we try an experiment which, if successful, could only end in making all knowledge impossible. Space, time, such fundamental ideas as the idea of causality,—all these are facts which represent no fundamental truth beyond experience whatever. They are facts determined solely by the facts of human nature. They hold within our range, and not beyond it. Of things in themselves we know nothing. But on this very ignorance, Kant maintains, is founded not only the validity of our natural sciences, but the possibility of retaining, against the assaults of materialism and of a purely negative skepticism, the validity of our moral consciousness and the essential spirit of religious faith. In this unique combination of critical skepticism, of moral idealism, and of a rationalistic assurance of the validity for all men of the *a priori* principles upon which natural science rests, lies the essential significance of the philosophy of Kant,—a significance which only a much fuller exposition, and a study of the history of thought, could make explicit.

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