

The Kantian Reformation

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ποῦ σοφός; ποῦ ὁς γραμματεὺς; ποῦ συζητητῆς τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου;¹

“Enlightenment is man’s exit from his self-incurred minority,” wrote Immanuel Kant in 1784, in his famous answer to the question “What is enlightenment?” (8:35)² Kant proceeded to explain that self-incurred minority was the “incapacity to use one’s intelligence without the guidance of another” (9:35). Not through lack of intelligence, but through laziness and cowardice, most of mankind had looked to “alien guidance” rather than relying on its own powers of reason. *Sapere Aude!*—Dare to know—became the watchword of the Enlightenment, as it was of Kant’s own life and work.

While not yet living in an “enlightened age,” Kant assured his readers that they were living in an “age of enlightenment” (8:40). The way to the ideal lies not through revolution, for that only brings “new prejudices, [which,] just like the old ones, will serve as the guiding reins of the great unthinking masses” (8:36). Rather, he says, “true reform” is a “state of mind,” and, “All that is required for this enlightenment is *freedom* and particularly the least harmful of all that may be called freedom, namely, the freedom for man to make *public use* of his reason in all matters” (8:36).

¹Notes

Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? (1 Corinthians 1:20)

² Immanuel Kant, *Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* Trans. Thomas K. Abbott in *Basic Writings of Kant*, ed. Allen W. Wood (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 135. Subsequent references to *What Is Enlightenment?* are from this edition.

Alongside Immanuel Kant's emphasis on reason ran another thread. That was his lifelong concern with morality. Particularly in this regard, the quip that Kant's mature philosophy was nothing more than a working out of what he believed when he was twelve years old strikes home. Having been raised in a devout pietist household, "moral goodness became finally the central motif of his whole philosophical system."³

This essay will examine the connection between these two strains and at the same time note the relation to the spiritual and intellectual roots from which they sprang. To that end, the article will look at Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, as he sought to save philosophy from skepticism by shifting the very foundation. Following that, it will turn to the second critique, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, to examine the central role that morals played in Kant's system. A third section will consider *Religion within the Boundaries of Pure Reason*, noting how his philosophy contrasts with the theology of the Lutheran Reformation. Kant's system not only forever changed philosophy, but it also profoundly affected almost every area of human thought. This is why we can call his work the Kantian Reformation.

The First *Critique* and the salvation of philosophy

The starting point for Immanuel Kant's philosophy is his so-called Copernican revolution. In his Preface to the Second Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant spoke of it as "assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition" rather than the other way around (B xvi).⁴ Kant explained, "This would be just like the first thoughts of

³ Theodore M. Greene, ed., "Introduction," *Kant Selections* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), xx.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Paul Guyer. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Subsequent references to this work are given in the text.

Copernicus,” who developed his heliocentric system by shifting to a different vantage point for the human being. In the case of Copernicus, the shift meant repositioning human beings from the center of the universe.

In rethinking their vantage points, at first it may seem that Copernicus and Kant moved in different directions. Copernicus had moved from a geocentric (anthropocentric) system to the heliocentric model. Kant seemed to move in the opposite direction—from an object-centered philosophy to an observer-centered one. Yet, in a sense, both Copernicus and Kant moved man into what can be considered a more important position. In the old Ptolemaic system, hell was pictured at the center of the earth, while heaven with its perfection was above. Ironically, in pulling man away from the center, the Copernican shift moved away from “the realm of imperfection, populated by bodies composed of the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water.”⁵ Heaven, in turn, was considered “the realm of perfection, populated by bodies composed of an incorruptible element—the ‘quintessence,’ or fifth essence.”⁶ In declaring that the object conforms to the perceiver, Immanuel Kant was doing much the same thing.

This shift parallels what was taking place in other fields at about the same time. In literature, for instance, while Milton had sought to “justify the ways of God to man,”⁷

Alexander Pope declared,

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan,
The proper study of mankind is Man.⁸

⁵ Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton, *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 61.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ John Milton, *John Milton Selected Poetry* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 62.

⁸ Alexander Pope, *Poems* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 121.

For Immanuel Kant, the new perception meant saving philosophy from skepticism. The great British Empiricist David Hume—whom Kant honored as holding “the highest” place among philosophers⁹—had no room for a philosophy that did not deal with what can be analytically established or empirically tested. Hume said: “If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.”¹⁰

Kant pointed out that Hume had not considered all the options: “David Hume, who among all philosophers came closest to this problem, still did not conceive of it anywhere near determinately enough and in its universality” (B 19). Rather than simply putting thought in two categories—analytic and synthetic—Kant set forth four: (1) Judgments that are analytic and a priori; (2) Judgments that are analytic and a posteriori; (3) Judgments that are synthetic and a priori; (4) Judgments that are synthetic and a posteriori.¹¹ In effect, this would allow that certain legitimate areas of human endeavor lie outside the boundaries of pure reason.

Much of the first *Critique* had been aimed at the concept of the autonomy of the individual thinking human being. Rather than being a mere passive recipient of sensory input, the human mind interacts with and acts upon the outside world. In the first *Critique*’s discussion of “Pure Principles of the Understanding,” Kant established the idea of schemata, that necessary link between intuition and pure concepts. Not only do the

⁹ John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 145.

¹⁰ David Hume, *Hume Selections*, ed. Charles W. Hendel, Jr. (New York: Scribner’s 1955), 192-3.

¹¹ Julius Sensat, Philosophy 453, Notes 1, “Need for a Critique of Reason,” University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee, Fall 2001.

schemata give order to our intuitions, but they also function as conditions of the determination of objective appearances in time.¹² Exactly how schematism works, however, Kant acknowledges, “is hidden in the depths of the human soul” (B 180-1).

In showing the limitations of reason, Kant set the boundaries of the Enlightenment. For Hume metaphysical questions—e.g., concerning the soul—had been outside the realm of intelligible discussion: “Every step I take is with hesitation, and every new reflection makes me dread an error and absurdity in my reason.”¹³ Hume’s caution and devotion to reason alone involved religious skepticism, as evidenced in his *Of Miracles and the Origin of Religion*.

As we shall see, in positing his practical reason, Kant was able to avoid Hume’s skepticism. It appears that Kant had not only saved philosophy from skepticism, but in addition had opened the door for faith. As we turn to the Critique of Practical Reason, Kant’s attitude toward faith and morality come into view.

The Second Critique, faith and the centrality of morality

The transition from the *Critique of Pure Reason* into his second *Critique*, which deals with practical reason, marks a movement toward the center of Kant’s entire project—the moral law. Just as it was necessary to establish the autonomy of *reason* interacting with the world of objects, so it is now vital to demonstrate the autonomy of the *will* in moral action. Kant’s Copernican revolution sees man as the center both of thought and of action, in particular moral action. If reason is a distinctively human trait, then reason

¹² Cf. Sebastian Gardner, *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 165-71.

¹³ As quoted in Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation, The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York and London: Norton, 1966), 66.

making moral decisions is what gives value to human life. Moreover, this decision-making process—that is, the will—must be free. If it is not, then the very idea of the moral law becomes meaningless.

Yet in moving into this new area, Immanuel Kant seems to contradict what he has already established, namely, that reason cannot deal with issues beyond what we empirically know. This elicits the criticism expressed by Julius Sensat, that Kant’s argument for freedom “is at complete odds with the limitations Kant’s transcendental idealism imposes on the justification of theoretical claims . . . There is good reason to believe that Kant came to this realization and adopted a completely different way of authenticating the moral law in the second *Critique*.”¹⁴

In the entrée into practical reason—by way of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*—Kant was trying to offer a philosophical rationale and replacement for the theological concept of the moral law that is at times called the natural law. One of the chief biblical *sedes*, or seats, for this doctrine is Romans 2:14-15: “Indeed, then Gentiles, who do not have the law [i.e., the written Mosaic law], do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.”¹⁵

Both the classic Christian doctrine of the moral law and Kant see the individual as having a moral sensibility. Yet there are significant differences; in Paul’s expression in the Romans passage, the moral law is simply “written on [people’s] hearts.” Like the natural knowledge of God (see, for example, Romans 1:18-20), this natural knowledge of

¹⁴ Sensat, Notes 11.

¹⁵ *NIV Study Bible*: New International Version translation, ed., Kenneth Barker (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985).

the law is not something that calls for defense or justification. It is an assertion, based ultimately on the belief that this law is built into human nature, given by God, just as the doctrinal expression of it comes by way of divine inspiration. Kant will not settle for such straightforward assertions, without their being justified or rationally explained. Moreover, in his system, the individual must arrive at the moral law through the use of practical reason, which involves the Categorical Imperative: “So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in the giving of universal law” (5:30).¹⁶

Kant emphasizes that while freedom cannot be accounted for in pure reason, it is a *sine qua non* of practical reason. The idea of morality, then, is central to Kant’s entire system, which has man at the center and establishes everything from that perspective. For Kant, pure reason and practical philosophy form a unified whole. On the one hand, pure reason calls for an acknowledgement of causality. On the other hand, practical reason means that we must have free will. Functioning in different spheres, the two are not contradictory, but complementary.

It is here that the concept of faith enters the picture. “Now, since the promotion of the highest good, and therefore the supposition of its possibility, is *objectively* necessary,” argues Kant, it follows that such possibility must be grounded. That grounding he refers to as “the ground of a maxim of assent for moral purposes, that is, a *pure practical rational belief*” (5:145-6).

Kant and Lutheran theology

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 164. Subsequent references to this work are given in the text.

Throughout his writings, Kant was concerned not only with philosophical and moral issues, but with theological issues as well. At the University of Königsberg, his wide range of teaching included ethics and natural theology. As will become evident, however, he had relatively little to say about Lutheran theology in particular.

The Reformation of the sixteenth century began in Germany with Martin Luther's rediscovery of the gospel. As a monk in the Roman Catholic Church, Luther had struggled for years with the concept of the justice or righteousness of God, a concept that Luther understood as referring to God's perfect holiness by which He condemns sinners. No matter what he did or how hard he tried, the monk realized that he still fell short.

Through his study of the Bible, Luther gradually came to realize that God's righteousness is imputed to sinners. It is a free gift of God's grace and believers take hold of it simply by trusting in Christ and His perfect righteousness for salvation. Luther himself described the experience of coming to this realization:

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the [biblical] statement that "the just shall live by his faith." Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the "justice of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.¹⁷

Thus began the Protestant Reformation. *Sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) became the three pillars of the Reformation. While good works played a role in the Christian life, they were a fruit of faith and not looked

¹⁷ As quoted in Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Meridian, 1995), 49-50.

upon as a source of salvation. Moreover, the reformers—who had come from a Scholastic background that had elevated the Aristotelian use of logic and reason—looked to Scripture and placed it above reason in spiritual matters.¹⁸

As Protestantism spread, it took on various traits as it took root, flourished, and became established in different lands. In France, it was relatively short-lived. Following the religious wars, Voltaire and the *philosophes* looked for the downfall of religion in general, and Christianity in particular: *Ecrasez l'infâme!* Crush the infamy.

The Church of England, from the time of its inception under Henry VIII, was a compromise between the ecclesiastical and political. As doctrine continued its retreat in the face of practice, theology gave way to deism and latitudinarianism. English philosophical interests soon eclipsed theological concerns. The first main British Empiricist, John Locke (1632-1704) still respected the written revelation as “infallibly true,” but he saw the diverse interpretations of Scripture as proof of the inadequacy of words to convey the truth.¹⁹ Instead, he turned to God’s revelation in natural religion.

In Germany, the Pietist movement developed under Philipp Jacob Spener (1635-1705) and his disciple August Hermann Francke (1663-1727). Reacting against the dead orthodoxy of much Lutheran theology of the day and the “widening gap” between a highly professionalized clergy and the laity, pietism sought to return to a simple religion of the heart. As Spener put it, “the Word must penetrate to our heart.”²⁰ Some have gone so far as to see the Enlightenment as an offshoot of Pietism. It is perhaps better to view

¹⁸ See, for example, Siegbert W. Becker, *The Foolishness of God: The Place of Reason in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1982).

¹⁹ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Roger Woolhouse (London: Penguin, 1997), 436.

²⁰ Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Kant as Philosophical Theologian* (London: MacMillan, 1988), 5.

the two as parallel movements. Bernard Reardon points out the relation between the two, and the ascendancy of the secular over the religious:

What pietism and rationalism had in common, then, was the conviction that the meaning and value of Christianity lie in its practical ethic. This they sought to emphasize either by reducing the actual content of Christian doctrine to the principle of ‘natural’ religion, or by virtually denying to such doctrine any speculative interest whatever. But rationalism proved much the more potent force intellectually, and although the influence of pietism was by no means eclipsed . . . the effect of rationalism was to present a challenge to orthodoxy such as very largely determined the nature and direction of theological developments in Germany throughout the nineteenth century. And the headwater of these developments was Kant, in whom an Enlightenment religion of ‘reason’ drew nonetheless on a tributary of pietism.²¹

Although Immanuel Kant had bad memories of his pietist school days, he always respected the simple faith of pietism. He later wrote, “One may say of pietism what one will; it suffices that the people to whom it was a serious matter [including his own parents] were distinguished in a manner deserving all respect. They possessed the highest good which man can enjoy—that repose, that cheerfulness, that inner peace which is disturbed by no passions.”²² The moral philosophy of Kant reflected that respect.

In reviewing Kant’s theology, Hendrikus Berkhof writes, “Even, and especially, when one admires the consistent moral rigor of Kant, it is still utterly astonishing that this great thinker in the homeland of Luther nowhere shows any sensitivity to the transmoral and anti-moral aspects of the gospel.”²³ It is somewhat striking how little he dealt with the gospel (grace) and its contrast with the law, that is, the moral side of religion, especially

²¹ Ibid., 16.

²² Ibid., 20.

²³ Hendrikus, Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology: Report of a Personal Journey*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 13.

since this is the center of Lutheran theology. Yet, given what we have seen, it is entirely consistent with Kant's project. Starting as he does with his Copernican revolution, his system cannot allow for the gospel, any more than it has room for the concept of revealed religion that is not within the bounds of reason alone.

Kant rejected the Roman Catholic doctrine of prevenient grace, divine help that turns us toward the good.²⁴ And he did retain a concept of justifying grace. Yet for Kant, the emphasis remained on morality. In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, he states, "Now conversion is an exit from evil and an entry into goodness" (6:74). For Kant, that goodness is not simply an imputed righteousness. Robert Merrihew Adams gets right to the point, when he says, "A version of this [justifying grace] is a part of Kant's theory, though of course not in the same form in which it is found in Luther and Calvin."²⁵ Christ becomes "the personified idea of the good principle" (6:60) and "it is our universal human duty to *elevate* ourselves to this ideal of moral perfection" (6:61).

While he may have left the door open for a rational faith—thus preserving the idea of God—in the end, it is a faith that continually needs to be reined in by reason. When all is said and done, Kant has displaced all three of the Reformation pillars—*sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*. In their place he offers reason, morality, and a reasonable faith.

Beyond the Enlightenment

In *The Story of Philosophy*, Will Durant remarks, "When in 1784, Lessing shocked Jacobi by announcing himself a follower of Spinoza, it was a sign that faith had reached

²⁴ See Robert Merrihew Adams, Introduction, Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

its nadir, and that Reason was triumphant.”²⁶ As we have seen, 1784 was also the year of Kant’s answer to “What Is Enlightenment?” The age of faith was giving way to the age of reason. But could reason carry the day? One might say that the Enlightenment is still a work in progress.

Since the early days of the Enlightenment, the intellectual history of Western civilization has largely been the attempt to find a worldview—*eine Weltanschauung*—to replace that of Christianity. In one way or another, the French *philosophes* and British Empiricists sought it in empirical knowledge. Immanuel Kant saw that a knowledge based in the outside world might lead to skepticism, as had been the case with Hume and others.

Berkhof notes that Kant’s later writings have been interpreted both as pantheistic and as atheistic. A quotation from one of those writings indicates why that should be the case: “Neither gods nor worlds exist but the totality of beings is God and world.”²⁷ When one’s

²⁶ Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Greater Philosophers* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1927), 278.

²⁷ Berkhof, *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, 17.

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God is not allowed to exceed the limits of a philosophical system, is not this what God must be—the sum of the world, which is either pantheism or atheism?

Interestingly, much of Western civilization has followed those two branches. In one branch, we see that capitalistic materialism and atheistic communism have been major movements since the time of Kant, both pushing out the spiritual to make way for material concerns. In the other branch, the New England Transcendentalism (named after Kant's Transcendental Idealism) of Ralph Waldo Emerson and others has spawned the New Age movement, which is grounded in pantheistic monism. We are still living in the legacy of the Kantian Reformation.

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