

Kant after 200 Years

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On the occasion of the 200th anniversary of Immanuel Kant's death on February 12, 1804 we honour Kant by discussing his philosophy and thereby expressing what his philosophy means to us. In doing so, we testify the continuing significance of this philosophy and its relevance for our own philosophising.

When this discussion takes place among philosophers from East and West, this indicates that Kant's philosophy has become a world philosophy for some time, in accordance with the cosmopolitan character of Kant's thinking.

In the course of the 200 years after Kant's death, there have again and again been attempts to portray his way of thinking as specifically German or even Prussian. But for Kant himself there was no question that in the end mankind as such, and in fact not only of his own age, was the addressee of his teaching and his works.

We honour a thinker most appropriately by thinking with and against him; and such a debate about Kant is today taking place all over the world. And this means that our present congress represents only a small part of what the after-life and

the challenge contained in Kant's thinking means for today's Kant-scholarship and for contemporary philosophy.

To speak about Kant means to speak about the Enlightenment. Kant attributed the practical maxim of self-thinking to the Enlightenment. This maxim is aimed at all human beings as such, which means that Kant regarded self-incurred immaturity (*Unmündigkeit*), consisting in the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another, as something that could be overcome by "resolution" and "courage".

At the same time, he denounced in satirically harsh words the social causes of the lack of enlightenment: "The guardians who have kindly taken upon themselves the work of supervision will soon see to it that by far the largest part of mankind (including the entire fair sex) should consider the step forward to maturity not only as arduous but also as highly dangerous. Having first made dumb their domestic cattle and carefully prevented these placid creatures from daring to take a single step without the harness of the cart to which they are tethered, the guardians then show them the danger which threatens them if they try to walk alone."

Laziness and cowardice of so large a part of mankind are here taken not only as causes of a continuing immaturity, but also as effects of the education by guardians who are interested in the prevention of enlightenment. It is the "vocation of all men to think for themselves" (AA 8, 36), and this activity has been suppressed by the "established guardians of the great mass" by subjugating the "public" under the "yoke" of immaturity and implanting prejudices into it. Through this a "reform of the way of thinking" is deliberately prevented by prejudices that "serve as a leash to control the great unthinking mass" (AA 8, 36). Yet for this enlightenment no new indoctrination is required, but all that is needed is freedom, "indeed the most harmless among all

things to which the term freedom can properly be applied, namely the freedom of making public use of one's reason in all matters" (AA 8, 36). Thus, only the abandonment of the existing restriction imposed on the freedom of the public use of reason is required in order to bring about "enlightenment among men", which is in fact a self-enlightenment of the public.

Following the distinction between public and private law in the Roman law tradition, Kant defines the public use of one's own reason as the use "which a person makes of it as a man of learning before the entire reading public", i.e. "as a member of an entire commonwealth or even of the society of world citizens" speaking to "the public in the proper sense of the word, i.e. the world" (AA 8, 37f.). To renounce enlightenment for oneself or even for the descendants "means violating and trampling underfoot the sacred rights of mankind." (AA 8, 39) This is unmistakably the language of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Here we have the philosophical concept on the basis of which Kant made the concept of enlightenment his philosophical issue: the idea of the right of humanity underlying all natural and civil rights of humans. As it is well known, Kant stated only one innate and inalienable right of humanity: freedom as "independence from being constrained by another's will" (AA 6, 237). This too reminds of Rousseau. At the end of his short essay Kant, who could name his age the "century of Frederick", speaks about this royal legislator of external freedom who in Kant's view was at least partially enlightened: "I have placed the main point of enlightenment – i.e. men's exit from their self-incurred immaturity – chiefly in matters of religion. [...] But the attitude of mind of a head of a state who favours enlightenment in matters of religion proceeds even further." (AA 8, 41) This venerable monarch is said to realise

“that there is no danger even with respect to his lawgiving if he allows his subjects to make public use of their own reason and to publish to the world their thoughts on a better way of drawing up laws, even if this implies a forthright criticism of the laws already made.” (AA 8, 41) Enlightenment thus includes the freedom of public criticism of the current legislation, and from the natural human “propensity and vocation to free thinking” follows the development of the people’s ability to act freely. And this freedom constitutes man’s dignity which has to be respected by the government (AA 8, 41f.).

The freedom of reasoning, granted by Frederick, is therefore an external freedom belonging to the rights of humanity which remains incomplete as long as the lawgiver has not recognized that “the touchstone of whatever can be decided upon for a people lies in the question whether a people could impose such a law upon itself” (AA 8, 39). Here we have for the first time in Kant’s work the limitation of public legislation to the condition of juridical and political autonomy of the people. For the monarch this means that “his legislative authority rests precisely on this, that he unites in his will the collective will of the people” (AA 8, 40). Freedom of the public use of reason in matters of religion is thus only a privileged example for the use of external freedom in general which is in harmony with the right of humanity only under a legislation by the ideal “volonté générale”. Enlightenment as a historical process has the same goal as the history of human race in general, considered under ideas of practical reason: the establishment of a future lawful constitution of human society.

The age of enlightenment is at the same time “the real age of criticism”, as Kant formulates in the first edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*. As far as religion and legislation are unwilling to subject themselves under this criticism, they awaken “just suspicion” against themselves and cannot claim “the sincere respect which reason accords only to that which has

been able to sustain the test of free and open examination” (A XIn). Reason, in criticizing religion and legislation, examines them in the same way with respect to their justifiability before the tribunal of reason and demands their justification, as it submits itself to a strict self-criticism in the domain of metaphysics. The critical philosophy is therefore the philosophy of enlightenment par excellence.

For more than 200 years scholars of many countries have studied, analyzed, commented on, interpreted, and criticized the system of the three *Critiques*, the doctrinal exhibition of scientific metaphysics in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Science* and the *Metaphysics of Morals* as well as Kant’s attempt of a revision of transcendental idealism in the unfinished *Opus postumum*. Nobody can comprehensively report on the results of these lengthy and world-wide efforts, for they have obviously not come to a conclusion and are, as can be seen from this Kant conference, too, continued without a major interruption and again and again called into question. The history of Kant scholarship is also a history of renaissances and fashions and above all of the utilizations of the author and his works by far more than only one neokantianism. Nevertheless, the successive historians of philosophy have asked themselves what the results of this philosophy itself are and whereupon its often betrayed attractiveness for philosophers of many epochs and countries rests.

According to Kant, the division of philosophy, stemming from the school of Plato, into physics, ethics, and logic “is perfectly suitable to the nature of the subject” (AA 4, 387) and complete. Kant himself only added the necessary subdivisions of a metaphysics of nature and a metaphysics of morals. They deal with the laws of nature according to which everything

happens, and the laws of freedom according to which everything ought to happen in such a way that they as rational sciences establish and prove their laws from principles a priori, i.e. independent of all experience. If these are the contents of pure philosophy, one may ask what the results of Kant's philosophy are in these fields. Kant himself has attempted to expound his contribution to this metaphysics in its historical development and in confrontation with its Leibniz-Wolffian version in his unfinished *Prize Essay on the Progress of Metaphysics*. In doing so, Kant in fact claims that his new system that excludes all the others, among them all previous ones, is the only true system. But he does not want to deny the merits of the former philosophers because "without their discoveries and even their unsuccessful attempts [he] should not have attained that unity of the true principal of philosophy as a whole" (AA 6, 207). Thus Kant makes his claim realizing at the same time its historical relativity: "If, therefore, the critical philosophy calls itself a philosophy before which there has as yet been no philosophy at all, it does no more than has been done, will be done, and indeed must be done by anyone who draws up a philosophy on his own plan" (ibid.). For they all must presuppose that there can be only one philosophy.

The relation of metaphysics and critique is a central problem of Kant's philosophy. The *Critique of Pure Reason* is a treatise of the method of a priori cognition, i.e. an inquiry of the possibility of non-empirical knowledge in philosophy and mathematics. Metaphysics as a pure rational knowledge from concepts is indeed the object of criticism, but in its broader sense it also encompasses this criticism, insofar the *Critique* is itself a non-empirical investigation of all that can ever be cognized and known a priori. (B 869) In this broader sense metaphysics as metaphysics of nature and of morals and "especially that criticism of our adventurous and self-reliant reason [...] alone properly constitutes what may be entitled

philosophy” (B 878). If philosophy proper is above all a critique of pure reason based on principles a priori and thereby metaphysics, this critique can also be called in a precise sense “the metaphysics of metaphysics”, as Kant does in a letter to Marcus Herz (after May 11, 1781, AA 10, 269). Such an application of metaphysics to itself then means nothing else than that the *Critique of Pure Reason* is the methodically sought and systematically drawn up result of a “self-cognition” of reason, being at the same time an examination of its justified claims before a tribunal which this reason itself has not only instituted but also presides (A XI f.).

The self-criticism of pure reason is then entrusted to philosophy’s art of examination (“Prüfungskunst”; B 174), and it is this critical philosophy which performs the investigation of the pure power of reason applying a standard which lies in reason itself. Of metaphysics Kant says that although it has not yet been able to enter the secure path of a science, it nevertheless is older than all other sciences “and would survive even if all the others were swallowed up in the abyss of an all destroying barbarism” (B XIV). According to Kant, this metaphysics, arising from an invariable human natural disposition, inevitably leads into illusion and contradictions because pure reason is, taken in itself, “dialectical”. But even after the disclosure and analysis of this dialectic reason remains the metaphysician which it is by its own nature: “some kind of metaphysics [...] has always existed in the world and [...] will always continue to exist” (B XXXI). Thus, for Kant metaphysics is an anthropological constant if only the human being is regarded as a rational being. Its present unfoundedness and the lack of justification of its claims in its history up to now do not abrogate its being a natural fact: “there has always existed and will always continue to exist some kind of

metaphysics” (B 21). That means, that even the skeptics as “pretended indifferentists” cannot escape metaphysics. Insofar as they think at all, they “fall back [...] into those very metaphysical assertions which they profess so greatly to despise” (A X).

Thus, to the continuation of metaphysics corresponds the lasting necessity of criticism. After the first *Critique* has revealed the impossibility of an ontology, a rational psychology, cosmology, and theology; after the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* has shown the impossibility of a physico-theology and thereby rationally destroyed every possible basis for the claim of the rationality of reality; and after reason has “by a scientific and completely convincing self-cognition” (B 877) demonstrated that every knowledge of the supersensible and supernatural is a figment of the brain – there remains the task of a metaphysics “purified by criticism” (B XXIV). Accordingly, Kant announces at the end of the preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* a work under the title “*Metaphysics of Nature*”, and he has at least published a preparatory work to this under the title “*Metaphysical Foundations of Science*”. The *Metaphysics of Morals* as a systematic doctrine of duties is the required complement to the completion of the whole system of metaphysics. This system of Kantian metaphysics is nothing other than the result of the “modest but thorough self-knowledge” (B 763) of reason.

This Kantian trust in reason that is behind his claim of the immortality of metaphysics is what makes Kant himself appear as irretrievably old-fashioned and outdated. Since Hegel’s death at the latest, philosophy is dominated by quite different types of critique of reason and of critique of the enlightenment compared with the Kantian version. This is well known, and it is not necessary to dwell on this topic here. But also on the side of a philosophy claiming to be scientific, of mathematics, and the sciences there have been raised objections to Kant’s philosophy.

Some of them are irrelevant, but others are well worth of discussion. This is also true of some of the objections raised against the critical moral philosophy, against Kant's conception of formal logic, and his aesthetics. The number of those criticizing Kant is incalculable even in other branches of his philosophy.

However, historians of philosophy, the apologists and critics of Kant apparently think that his philosophy is important enough to undergo the labours demanded by the study of his works from anybody willing to penetrate them up to this day 200, years after his death. This Kant conference, too, will give an example for this. Why don't we simply let the old man from the former Königsberg rest and proceed to the agenda of our own philosophical concerns? Almost 50 years ago, Julius Ebbinghaus wrote: "The times when the confrontation with Kant was regarded by the philosophers of Germany and in part among those of other countries as a necessary task, and even as an essential precondition of their own philosophizing have past. In the eyes of our contemporaries, the critical philosophy seems to be a chapter on which the files have been closed. And even more than that: in our time, Kant appears to many as a representative of views and convictions which many contemporaries boast themselves to have abandoned, or which they are striving with all their powers to get rid of."¹ I hesitate to decide whether this diagnosis of the situation is by now outdated. A conference like this needs not to be representative of the situation of contemporary philosophy which is anyway confusing and which does not exist as a homogenous phenomenon. And the public presentation of results of

¹ Ebbinghaus, GS 3, 151

international Kant-scholarship has its own utility within the context of the academic business and makes good sense with respect to the promotion of younger scholars. What this conference may be and probably will be is a forum for a particular kind of the public use of reason mentioned above, i.e. a use of reason by which an appropriate understanding and a critical evaluation of the documents and results of Kant's philosophy will be argued for.

I have already pointed to the characteristics of Kant's conception of philosophy which is determined by metaphysics and criticism. It is impossible to say that such a conception of which we still find traces within German idealism is presently embraced by many. But I myself do believe that it can be shown that philosophy, if it does not deal with the possibility of synthetic a priori judgments, their justifiability, and their applicability, has no longer a proper area of inquiry at all, cannot make a justifiable claim to be a science, and therefore loses its legitimation to exist as a self-contained discipline of human cognition and knowledge. If this is true, all those who have the interests of philosophy at heart will have to return to what Kant calls metaphysics and its criticism. Now, again according to Kant, philosophy taken objectively is only an Idea of reason meant to serve as an archetype for the estimation of all attempts to philosophise, i.e. of all subjective philosophy "the structure of which is often so diverse and liable to alteration" (B 866). Thus, the Kantian philosophy itself is only a "copy" which has to be likened to its archetype. "Till then", says Kant, "we cannot learn philosophy; for where is it, who is in a possession of it, and how shall we recognise it? We can only learn to philosophise, that is, to exercise the talent of reason, in accordance with its universal principles, on certain actually existing attempts at philosophy, always, however, reserving the right of reason to investigate itself those attempts in their sources, and to confirm, or to reject them" (B 866). For

ourselves, Kant's philosophy is such an existing attempt, provided by history, on which we exercise our own philosophising in order to confirm or reject it according to our own insight. Philosophy, in contrast to mathematics as the only comparable rational science, depends on such historical models.

Now Kant claimed for himself to have accomplished a revolution in the way of thinking within the history of theoretical philosophy. The negative result of this revolutionary remodelling of metaphysics is his thesis that there is knowledge only of objects of possible experience without thereby endorsing empiricism or the skepticism inevitably connected with it. For according to Kant there is a demonstrable non-empirical cognition of the empirical world with respect to its laws determined by the pure conditions of the possibility of experience. The theory of relativity and quantum physics have raised objections to the Kantian metaphysics of nature, appealing to quite different conditions of the possibility of experience which are not grounded in the knowing subject and its understanding. These objections amount finally to the abolishment of the concept of a law of nature which was generally accepted since the 17th century. In particular the relation of geometry and experience has again become a main problem of natural philosophy, especially since after the discovery of non-euclidean geometries in the 19th century Kant's theory of mathematics and its basic concept of construction are regarded as untenable. These problems and difficulties are being discussed to the present day, and this discussion cannot be considered as having reached a conclusion. But even a man like Ebbinghaus who cannot be blamed for a lack of knowledge or scrupulousness in dealing with Kant's philosophy, has not only stated in 50^{ies} that Kant's *Metaphysical Foundations of Science* were "an outdated book in

the 20th century” (GS 3, S. 162) but also said that in the proofs of the first and third analogy of experience, because of the conception of material substance contained in them, there must “be a mistake” (ibid.), as Kant himself seems to have seen in his *Opus postumum*.

One of the pre-eminent results of Kant’s practical philosophy is his new definition of the concept of practical philosophy itself. The human will as a natural cause is only then subjected to peculiar and independent practical laws if these laws as moral laws are based on the concept of freedom. For if moral philosophy rests on the concept of human happiness, as it does from the days of Plato and Aristotle, its practical imperatives (often against its own intentions) are mere rules for the production of an effect which are conditioned by a given nature of things, be it human nature or nature in general, however understood. Such imperatives Kant calls technically practical rules depending as mere practical corollaries on a theoretical knowledge of nature. Therefore they cannot ground a self-sufficient practical philosophy. Practical philosophy is only possible if there are specifically practical, i.e. morally practical principles or laws of human action which all of them take a concept of freedom as their basis (cf. AA 5, 172f.). As a law for the freedom of the will, therefore only the law of the capacity of the maxims of this will to serve as a universal law fulfils the required condition of the independence of all realisable ends. The law for the external freedom of human acting is the law of the restriction of this freedom to the condition of a necessary compatibility of all external freedom within a system of mutually interacting humans, i.e. the universal law of right. Only under such formal laws of pure practical reason there is possible a human practice which can be juxtaposed to all kinds of technical acting and completely independent of it.

As far as Kant’s conception of formal logic (which Kant was the first to call it “formal logic”) is concerned, his doctrine

of the concept and its opposition to intuition belongs to the most elementary requirements of an appropriate understanding of his *Critiques*. Nevertheless, it is, not without Kant's own fault, mostly and astonishingly misunderstood, in fact already since the days of German idealism. This is also true of Kant's doctrine of judgement. He claims to have supplied for the first time in the history of traditional logic (going back to Aristotle) a complete system "of the manifold in the form of judgements" (AA 20, 271). But he never actually demonstrated that all functions of the synthetic unity of concepts in judgement are deducible from his highest principle, the synthetic unity of apperception. Kant's refusal of such a deduction is the main reason why, even after its ingenious reconstruction by Klaus Reich, the completeness of the Kantian table of forms of judgement is still a matter of controversy.

Finally, I have to mention Kant's doctrine of the beautiful which follows from his new definition and new interpretation of aesthetic judgement. As in the case of practice whose originality he defended, Kant has for the first time established a delimitation of the beautiful from the pleasurable and the good in confrontation with empiricist and rationalistic theories of beauty. This new Kantian theory with its basic distinctions makes it clear that only in relation to the human being as such, in its twofold nature as a sensuous and rational being, the beautiful can be defined and that it is certainly not the "sensible manifestation of the Idea", as Hegel conceived it.

I have mentioned only a few of the, as I take them to be, unforgettable achievements of Kant's philosophy, leaving out much of what would deserve to be thematized. The criticism from which the critical philosophy has its name, as a public use of reason, is at the same time what brings about enlightenment

among humans which in turn follows as a call from the right of humanity. Enlightenment is therefore something more than the clarification of concepts and the analysis of the language of science. The present relevance of Kant's philosophy is particularly obvious with respect to its doctrine of public right, a paradigm of which is his essay *On Eternal Peace*, on which I want to add a few words.

According to Kant, the state of nature between both individual men and states is a state of war, i.e. a state of continuing mutual threat of individuals as well as states against each other, seeking their right by force. It is a command of juridically practical reason to abandon this state of war, and the establishment of a legal order between individuals and states is one of the highest duties of right. The eternal peace is accordingly a peace under the law by which not only the state of war is temporarily suspended in a mere armistice but by which external freedom of natural and moral persons is secured in a lasting manner. Kant calls this eternal peace the highest political good, i.e. a highest end required for the sake of the protection of the juridical mine and yours. Since the establishment of such a peace is commanded by reason itself, domestic policy as well as international policy between states is restricted by the condition that peace and law are thereby guaranteed in their possibility. With regard to international policy it follows that all political actions have to be submitted to the end of the preservation and protection of external peace. Only as a means for self-defense and self-preservation war is permitted. The legal authority to judge about the legality of international political action pretending to wage a just war must not be left to the acting state itself. Otherwise, the legitimacy of waging war would be pronounced by the interested party itself. Therefore, in order to secure the international peace of law, it is necessary for all states to establish a neutral and independent authority for the determination and enforcement of international rights, having a

monopoly on the use of force. Because of his philosophical justification of the necessity of a supranationally guaranteed order of world peace, Kant proves himself to be the heir of the peace conceptions in the natural law tradition including Grotius, Hobbes, St. Pierre, and Rousseau.

The main features of Kant's right of a state, his right of nations and his cosmopolitan right are grounded in ideas of reason whose relevance for contemporary world politics just rests on its independence of all historical events. A philosopher like Kant is certainly a child of his time, but if reason in the Kantian sense of the word has any meaning at all philosophy is equally certainly not "its time grasped in thought" (Hegel). Of philosophy is rather true what Kant says of the philosophical faculty: namely that it at any time, if "truth is at stake" (AA VII 34), belongs to "the left side", i.e. the side of the "opposition party" against the government in the "parliament of learning", "because without its strict examination and objections the government would not be sufficiently informed about things that will be beneficial or detrimental to itself" (ibid.). Kant's doctrine of right, as his moral philosophy in general, is usually regarded as formalistic. Max Horkheimer has commented on this: "Kant's formalism is so rich in content that from it follows the respect for every individual, the equal right for all the republic and the appropriate state of mankind."² These words agreeably differ from the nonsense one can read about Kant's moral philosophy in the much quoted *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. However Kant's doctrine of right, as any philosophy, can be misused. This happens for example if in

² Max, Horkheimer: "Kants Philosophie und die Aufklärung" (1962), in: Horkheimer: *Vorträge und Aufzeichnungen 1949-1973*, Gesammelte Schriften Bd. 7:170.

legitimising military force in warding off violations of human rights by the leadership of a state one forgets that according to Kant the only legitimate use of force between states is the one suited for the establishment of a world peace order. The United Nations of today are indeed a pale and imperfect reflection of what a world peace confederation and a world court of justice had to be. But whoever contributes as a self-appointed judge and advocate of ostensible cosmopolitan rights to the circumvention, weakening or even destruction of the UNO cannot refer to Immanuel Kant.

Such and other controversial issues that may arise from the Kantian philosophy stir only those who claim to know what they owe to this teacher of humanity.