

The Philosophy of Kant

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Contents

<i>Abbreviations and References</i>	vi
Introduction	i
1 The Conditions of Knowledge	5
2 The Illusions of Speculative Metaphysics	38
3 Practical Philosophy	56
4 Aesthetics and Teleology	97
Conclusion	123
<i>Recommended Reading</i>	127
<i>Index of Subjects</i>	129
<i>Index of Names</i>	131

Introduction

THE EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES of Immanuel Kant's life can be simply and briefly described. He was born in the Prussian town of Königsberg (now Kaliningrad) on 22 April 1724. He lived there all his life apart from a brief period which he spent as a young man serving as a tutor, first in the family of the pastor at Judschen (from about 1747 to 1750) and then (from 1750 to 1754) at Gross-Arnsdorf, the estate of the Von Hülsens. He came of a relatively poor family (his father was a harness-maker); there does not seem to be any truth in the story that his paternal grandfather was an immigrant from Scotland, even though Kant himself believed it. His parents belonged to the Pietist movement, a branch of the Lutheran church which valued moral goodness and purity of heart more than dogma and outward forms. In spite of his modest circumstances, he was able to attend the local high school and eventually, in 1740, to enter the University of Königsberg as a student in the faculty of philosophy. After his employment as tutor referred to above, he returned to Königsberg and was appointed in 1755 to the post of *Privatdocent* (private lecturer) in the University. He gave regular courses of lectures, which continued after his appointment in 1770 to the professorship of logic and metaphysics. He gave up lecturing through weakness and ill health in 1799, and died on 12 February 1804.

Kant's lectures and writings cover a great variety of topics. Within philosophy in the narrow sense, he lectured on logic, metaphysics, and moral philosophy; in addition, there was a popular and often repeated course on physical geography, as well as others on anthropology, theoretical physics, and mathematics. His essays and books, especially those of his earlier years, are scarcely less wide-ranging. While a complete and adequate account of Kant's mental life would have to take all this into account, however, this book is concerned with his philosophical work alone; and within this field, a second limit is set on its scope, for a reason

which requires explanation. Some great philosophers have done much of their most original and important work early in their lives (Berkeley and Hume come to mind as extreme examples); others show a steady progress of thought from earlier work to later, the earlier not only giving clear indications of what the later developments were to be but also being philosophically important in its own right. Kant falls into neither of these categories. If he had died at the age of fifty-five, he would have been remembered locally as a stimulating and devoted teacher (in contrast to many of his contemporaries) and as the writer of some interesting philosophical essays; but no one would have placed him, as he is now securely placed, among the very greatest philosophers. Moreover, although the writings of his philosophical maturity, beginning with the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which was published in 1781 but on which he had been working for some years, can be shown to be not without their anticipations and preliminary exercises in his earlier work, they do represent a fundamentally new approach to philosophy, and are not the outcome of a steady process of development.¹ The position may be expressed briefly, and perhaps not too misleadingly, by saying that whereas Kant, in what has come to be called his pre-critical period, was prepared for the most part to engage actively in the current philosophical controversies of his day, his later 'critical' writings are aimed, not at contributing to philosophical controversy, but at resolving the disputes and disagreements of both contemporary and traditional philosophy by showing that, although each major position has something to be said for it, all are nevertheless inadequate because they have not inquired deeply enough into the capacity of the human mind for thought and the attainment of truth.

This book, then, attempts an exposition of Kant's mature philosophical thinking.² It does not attempt to trace the relation of his critical philosophy to the pre-critical, interesting and valuable though such an exercise might be;³ nor does it attempt to examine in detail its sources or

¹ See the Note on p. 4.

² It does not concern itself with the interpretation of the so-called *Opus Postumum*, a collection of unpublished material written towards the close of Kant's life, in which some scholars have seen signs of a radical departure from some of the principal theses of the critical philosophy, while others again have found in it little but confirmation of them.

³ The classic work on the development of Kant's philosophical thinking is H.-J. de Vleeschauwer, *La Déduction transcendentale dans l'œuvre de Kant* (Antwerp-Paris-The Hague, 1934-7). A condensed version of this enormous book appeared in 1939, and has been translated into English by A. R. C. Duncan under the title *The Development of Kantian Thought* (London, 1962).

stimuli in the philosophy of Kant's contemporaries and immediate predecessors.¹ Even with these limitations, the exposition is necessarily selective. The decision whether to discuss one topic and to ignore another, or to discuss one at length and another briefly, is one with which the writer of any short text on a great and prolific thinker is continually faced. Moreover, there are many places in Kant's work, especially perhaps in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where the interpretation of what he says is still a matter of intense controversy among scholars. It is impossible in a work of this scope to argue at length for and against different interpretations; and the reader may be left on occasion with the natural but erroneous impression that, whatever one may think as to the truth of what Kant says, there can be no doubt as to what he meant. It cannot be too emphatically stressed, therefore, that in its selection of what is to be expounded, in the relative space which it devotes to different topics, and in its interpretation of difficult and disputed passages, this book represents merely the judgement and opinion of one student of Kant and that that judgement and opinion might well be challenged, and quite legitimately challenged, on almost every point. There is no question of attempting an authoritative exposition of Kant, whatever that might be; and if anyone wishes to understand Kant there is no substitute for reading him. The most that one can hope for is that an exposition of this kind may make the reading of Kant a little easier; but it will not make it easy, for Kant is often an extremely difficult writer (perhaps the most difficult of all the great philosophers). This difficulty is due, not primarily to any deficiencies in Kant's literary style—his writing is sometimes careless, but the carelessness itself rarely causes difficulty to the careful reader—but to the extreme difficulty of the questions with which he is attempting to deal and to the fact that, as a pioneer in this kind of philosophical thinking, he has to develop his own style and terminology as he goes along. (When he is writing, whether early or late in life, on less difficult and abstruse topics, his style is more often than not admirably clear.) The primary object of this book, then, is expository; such criticism and assessment as it contains are subordinate to this main object. Many of Kant's views and arguments are, of course, open to criticism; but he has, more perhaps than most, suffered from the reluctance of philosophers to believe that one should try hard to understand a man's thought before deciding what is wrong with it; the most valuable

¹ A useful account for the English reader of some relevant contemporary German philosophy, especially that of Wolff, Baumgarten, and Meier, is to be found in T. D. Weldon, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (2nd edn. Oxford, 1958).

criticism of a great philosopher will come from within, as it were, after the critic has mastered his thought and made it his own, not from an external and superficial attitude.

NOTE

The publication dates of some of Kant's most important works are given below:

- 1755 *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*
- 1763 *The Only Possible Ground for a Demonstration of the Existence of God*
- 1764 *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*
- 1766 *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*
- 1770 Inaugural lecture: *Dissertation on the Form and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible World*
- 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason* (First edition)
- 1783 *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysic that will be able to present itself as a Science*
- 1785 *Groundwork, or Fundamental Principles, of the Metaphysic of Morals*
- 1786 *Metaphysical First Principles of Natural Science*
- 1787 *Critique of Pure Reason* (Second edition)
- 1788 *Critique of Practical Reason*
- 1790 *Critique of Judgement*
- 1792-3 *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*
- 1797 *Metaphysic of Morals*
- 1798 *Anthropology from a Practical Point of View*