

# Kant's Life and Works

ALLEN W. WOOD

Immanuel Kant was born April 22, 1724, in Königsberg, East Prussia, a seaport located where the River Pregel flows into the Baltic Sea. In Kant's time, the city was an isolated eastern outpost of German culture (though it was occupied by Russian troops for several years during Kant's lifetime). Most of the city was leveled by British and American bombing, or by Soviet artillery, prior to its invasion by the Soviet army in 1945. After the war it was ethnically cleansed of its German population, renamed Kaliningrad (after a thoroughly hateful Stalinist henchman), and became, what it still is, an isolated western outpost of Russian culture. For nearly 40 years of the twentieth century, as the headquarters of the Soviet Baltic fleet, it was entirely closed to foreigners and to most Russians as well.

The Lutheran cathedral at Königsberg, located on a large island in the middle of the Pregel, remained a bombed-out ruin until the Gorbachev era, but it was substantially rebuilt and renovated during the 1990s. In Kant's day, the main building of the University (no longer extant) was located nearby on the same island. Kant refused on principle to attend religious services at the cathedral, since he thought such exercises constitute "superstitious counterfeit service" of God, true service of whom consists only in good conduct of life, not in slavish praise or fetishistic rituals attempting to conjure up the divine presence. But Kant spent considerable time in the building, since the cathedral contained the University library, where Kant not only often studied, but also served for a time as librarian.

Kant's tomb, appropriately located *outside* the cathedral on the side (and to the left of the altar), is now pockmarked from wartime shrapnel, but it remains largely intact, never needing to be rebuilt. It somehow escaped demolition by allied bombs, and later also from the Russian invasion, reportedly because one Soviet general (having better than average education) ordered that it (together with a statue of Schiller that still stands elsewhere in the city) should be spared the destruction his troops were triumphantly wreaking on the rest of Königsberg. Since the war, the new Russian population of Kaliningrad has kept Kant's tomb constantly adorned with flowers. To this day it is customary for marrying couples to visit it. Apparently the austere rationalist philosopher Immanuel Kant – Lutheran by upbringing but in his maturity always deeply suspicious of popular religious superstition in all its forms – was the nearest imitation of a local Orthodox saint that this old German city had for the new population to venerate.

## Early Years

Eighteenth-century Königsberg, at the Eastern corner of the Baltic, was connected to the rest of the world through its access to the sea, and boasted a rich and curiously varied intellectual culture. In that sense, it was not culturally isolated, and Kant was not the only Königsbergian to make important contributions to literature and philosophy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless, Königsberg is hardly the place from which one might have expected the greatest revolution in modern philosophy to spring. Nor was Immanuel Kant, judging from his family or his social origins, the sort of person from whom one would have expected such a thing. He was the second son, and the sixth of nine children, born to Johann Georg Kant, a humble saddler (or leather-worker) of very modest means, and Anna Regina Reuter, daughter of a member of the same saddler's guild. Kant believed that his father's family had come from Scotland (and that the family name had been spelled "Cant"). He was proud to claim a heritage that would affiliate him with men he admired as much as he did Hutcheson, Hume, Lord Kames, and Adam Smith. More recent research has shown, however, that he was unfortunately mistaken on this point of his genealogy, probably misled by the fact that more than one of his great uncles had married recent Scottish immigrants. Kant's ancestors, for as far back as they can be traced, were entirely of German stock; his father's family came from Tilsit.

Kant's parents were devout Pietists. Pietism was a revivalist movement that arose in the seventeenth century and had a great impact on German culture throughout the eighteenth century. It is comparable to other contemporary religious movements, such as Quakerism or Methodism in England, or Hassidism among central European Jews. (We should never forget that the "age of reason" was also an age of religious enthusiasm.) Kant's family pastor, Franz Albert Schulz, was also rector of the newly founded Collegium Fredericianum. Noticing signs of exceptional intellect in the humble Kant family's second son, he arranged an educational opportunity for Immanuel that was surely rare for children of his parents' social class. At the Fredericianum Kant was taught Latin and enough else to enter the university at age 16. However, he found the atmosphere of religious zealotry, especially the intellectual tyranny of the catechism, insufferably stifling to both mind and spirit. In the course of a short treatise on meteorology, he later wrote about the catechisms that "in our childhood we memorized them down to the last hair and believed we understood them, but the older and more we reflective we become, the less we understand of them, and on this account we would deserve to be sent back to school once again, if only we could find someone there (besides ourselves) who understood them better" (8.323).<sup>1</sup>

Attempts are frequently made to identify Pietist influences in Kant's moral and religious thought. But virtually all explicit references to Pietism in his writings or lectures are openly hostile. He typically identifies Pietism either with a spirit of narrow sectarianism in religion or with a self-despising moral lethargy that does nothing to improve oneself or the world but waits passively for divine grace to do everything. Perhaps his mildest remark is one that defines a "Pietist" as someone who "tastelessly makes the idea of religion dominant in all conversation and discourse" (27.23). Kant's philosophy was in turn regarded with hostility by most of the influential Pietists in Königsberg.

## Academic Career

Kant entered the University in 1740. This was the same year Frederick the Great became King of Prussia. The year is also significant in the intellectual life of Germany because one of Frederick's first acts was to recall Christian Wolff from exile in Marburg to his professorship at the University of Halle, thus offering symbolic support to the intellectual movement known as the *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment), of which Wolff was considered the father. Seventeen years earlier, Wolff had been summarily exiled by Frederick's father, Friedrich Wilhelm I, from Prussian territories under the influence of Pietists in the Prussian court. They objected to the way the enlightenment had made the German universities places of dry scholastic reasoning, rather than religious inspiration and moral exhortation. They also found objectionable Wolff's fascination with "pagan" thought (he was, for instance, one of the first Europeans to undertake the philosophical study of Confucian writings, which he treated in an alarmingly sympathetic spirit). They were equally horrified by some of his philosophical doctrines, such as that the human will is subject to causal determination under the principle of sufficient reason (though Wolff did not deny freedom of the will, but was what we would now call a "compatibilist" or "soft determinist"). The struggle, both within the universities and in intellectual life generally, between Wolffianism and Pietism was decisive for the intellectual environment in which Kant came of age.

The first study Kant took up at the University was Latin literature, which left its mark in the numerous quotations from Latin poets that constitute almost the only literary adornments in Kant's philosophical writings. But soon he came under the influence of those at the university who taught mathematics, metaphysics, and natural science. The best known of these was Martin Knutzen (1713–51), whose early death (it is sometimes speculated) might have deprived him of some of the philosophical influence that was later to be exercised by his most famous student. Knutzen is sometimes described as a Wolffian, but he was more a Pietist critic of Wolff than an adherent. Further, it is at best an oversimplification to think of Kant as "Knutzen's student." For one thing, Kant's talents were apparently not much appreciated by Knutzen. He never regarded Kant as among his better students, and this unfortunate fact was largely responsible for what, with hindsight, we now see as the extraordinarily slow development of Kant's academic career. Moreover, Kant's magisterial thesis was completed in 1746 under the direction of Johann Gottfried Teske (1704–72). This makes it more accurate to describe Kant as "Teske's student," though Teske was a natural scientist with few broader philosophical interests. The thesis itself was mainly an elaboration of Teske's researches on combustion and electricity. In fact, all the writings Kant published before the age of 30 were in natural science – on topics in Leibnizian physics, astronomy, geology, and chemistry.

Kant left the University in 1744, at the age of 20, to earn a living as a private tutor, which he did in various households in East Prussia for the next decade. The most influential of his employers was the Count von Kaiserlingk. Even in later years he maintained a social relationship with this family, especially with the Countess. During these years Kant was twice engaged to marry, but both times he postponed marriage on the ground that he was not financially solvent enough to support a family, and

both times his fiancée tired of waiting and married someone else. By the time he was financially in a position to marry, he had come to appreciate – probably under the influence of his friend Joseph Green – the independence of a bachelor's life, and had resolved to do without a wife or family.

Kant returned to university life in 1755, receiving the degrees of Master and Doctor of Philosophy, and obtaining a position as *Privatdozent*. This means he was licensed to teach at the University, but was paid no salary, so that he had to earn his living from fees paid him by students for his lectures. Since his livelihood depended on teaching whatever students wanted to learn, he found himself lecturing not only on logic, metaphysics, ethics, natural theology, and the natural sciences – including physics, chemistry, and physical geography – but also on practical subjects that were related to them, such as military fortification and pyrotechnics. For a considerable time Kant devoted his intellectual labors mainly to questions of natural science: mathematical physics, chemistry, astronomy, and the discipline (of which he is now considered the founder) of “physical geography” – what we call “earth sciences.” This work culminated in *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755). In this essay Kant was the first to propound the nebular hypothesis of the origin of the solar system. But the financial failure of its publisher had the effect of almost totally suppressing it, and it remained virtually unknown for many years, until after Laplace had put forward essentially the same hypothesis with greater mathematical elaboration.

In the same year, however, Kant also began to engage in critical philosophical reflections on the foundations of knowledge and the first principles of Wolffian metaphysics, in a Latin treatise *New Elucidation of the First Principles of Metaphysical Cognition*. Here he subjected central propositions and arguments of the Wolffian metaphysics and theory of knowledge to searching criticism, and we find the earliest statement of some of Kant's characteristic thoughts about such topics as causality, mind–body interaction and the traditional metaphysical proofs for God's existence.

Many years later, in the Preface to his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783), Kant made the assertion that it was the recollection of David Hume that first awoke him from his “dogmatic slumbers.” There is a literature in German that attempts (rather desperately, in my judgment) to give some sort of biographical substance to this remark.<sup>2</sup> Far more plausibly, Kant's point in making it was to invite his audience (assumed to have been taught Wolffian philosophy) to find its own path to his critical philosophy through reflection on Hume's skeptical challenges. The juxtaposition of Humean skepticism to Wolffian dogmatism may have been a striking way for Kant to raise the fundamental issue of the possibility of metaphysics, and is certainly indicative of Kant's lifelong admiration for Hume's philosophy. But it is most unfortunate that the remark has been taken as an authoritative autobiographical report about his own philosophical development. For when it is interpreted as saying that Kant began as an orthodox Wolffian metaphysician, only to be roused from complacent rationalism by Hume's skeptical doubts, the remark simply does not correspond at all to the facts of Kant's intellectual life. (As a statement about his own intellectual development, there is probably greater truth in Kant's later assertion that it was the problems of the four antinomies of reason, with which he became occupied in the 1770s, that “woke him from his dogmatic slumbers” (12.258).) A student of the development of Kant's philosophy finds that he was never an orthodox Wolffian, but from the very start took a

critical stance toward some of the most basic tenets of Wolffian metaphysics. His rejection of the “dreams of metaphysics” was perhaps even more extreme in his satirical essay *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (1766) than it was later in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). In that sense, there never was any “dogmatic slumber” from which to awaken: the long course of Kant’s development toward the position of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (and just as significantly, beyond it) was always a restless searching that was terminated only by his eventual decrepitude and death.

A wider philosophical audience was first attracted to Kant’s writings in 1762, when he entered a prize essay competition on the foundations of metaphysics. Moses Mendelssohn won the competition, but Kant’s essay, *On the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morals*, won second prize, was published in 1764 along with Mendelssohn’s winning essay, and received notable compliments from Mendelssohn (with whom Kant was always on terms of mutual admiration and respect).

Kant’s interest in moral philosophy developed relatively late. In the prize essay, as well as his earliest lectures on ethics, he seems to have been attracted by the moral sense theory of Francis Hutcheson. But he was soon to become convinced that a theory based on feelings was inadequate to capture the universal validity and unconditional bindingness of a moral law that must often challenge and overrule corrupt human feelings and desires. His thinking about ethics was dramatically changed about 1762 by his acquaintance with the newly published writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: *Émile, Or on Education* and *Of the Social Contract*. Pietism had already taught him to believe in the equality of all human beings as children of God, and in the church universal, encompassing the priesthood of all believers, to be pursued as a moral ideal in a sinful world of spiritual division and unjust inequality. These convictions now took the more rationalistic form of Rousseau’s vision of human beings, free and equal by nature, who find themselves in an unfree social world where the poor and weak are oppressed by the rich and powerful. Soon Kant began defining his own ethical position through emphasis on the sovereignty of reason, associating his moral philosophy with the title “metaphysics of morals.” However, it was another 20 years before Kant brought his ethical theory to maturity. In the meantime, the task to which he devoted his principal labor was that of reforming the foundations of the sciences and discovering the proper relation within them between empirical science and the claims of *a priori* or metaphysical knowledge.

Kant’s closest friend during his youth was Johann Daniel Funk (1721–64), a professor of law, who led a rather wild life and died at an early age. Like his friend Funk (and contrary to the grossly distorted traditional image of him), Kant was always a gregarious man, thought of by those who knew him as charming, witty, and even gallant. Compared to Funk, however, he was also much more self-controlled and prudent. His sociability included regular play at cards and billiards, which he did with notable shrewdness and skill. Kant’s winnings often supplemented his meager academic income. After Funk’s death, Kant made his longest and most intimate friendship, with the English businessman Joseph Green (1727–86). Green was an eccentric bachelor and a man of very strict and regular habits. It is probably through Green’s influence that Kant acquired many of the characteristics pertaining to the (often highly distorted) picture that was later formed of him. From quite early on, Kant invested his savings in the mercantile ventures of the firm of Green & Motherby, which was profitable

enough to provide Kant with a comfortable fortune by the time he gained his professorship in 1770.

The slow development of Kant's academic career corresponds to the long gestation period of the system of thoughts for which we now most remember him. Professorships in logic and metaphysics became open at the University of Königsberg in 1756 and 1758, but Kant did not even apply for the first, and with his still very limited qualifications he was routinely passed over for the second. After the recognition he received from Mendelssohn and the Prussian academy, he was offered a professorship of poetry at the university in 1764, but declined it because he wanted to continue devoting himself to natural science and philosophy. In 1766 he did accept a position as sublibrarian at the University, providing him with his first regular academic salary. But he declined opportunities for professorships in 1769, first at Erlangen and then at Jena, chiefly because of his reluctance to leave East Prussia, but also because he expected the professorship of logic at Königsberg would be available to him the following year. In subsequent years he had other opportunities (for instance, he was offered a professorship at Halle in 1778), but chose never to leave Königsberg. Just as Beethoven, the most revolutionary of all composers, wrote some of his most original music after he was totally deaf, so Kant, the most cosmopolitan of all philosophers, lived in an isolated province of northeastern Europe and never traveled farther than 30 miles from the place of his birth.

In the Latin inaugural dissertation he wrote on assuming his professorship at Königsberg, *On the Forms and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible World*, Kant took several important steps in the direction we can now see eventually led him to the "critical philosophy" of the 1780s and 1790s. By 1772, Kant told his friend and former student Marcus Herz that he was at work on a major philosophical treatise, to be entitled *The Limits of Sensibility and Reason*, which he expected to finish within a year. But it was nearly a decade more before Kant published the *Critique of Pure Reason*. During the 1770s Kant wrote and published very little. Despite his elevation to a professorship, Kant continued to live in furnished rooms on the island in the Pregel on which stood both the University building and the cathedral in which its library was housed. It would be another 13 years before he was able to purchase a house of his own.

Early in this "silent decade," however, Kant began lecturing on the subject of "anthropology," stimulated (or provoked) by Ernst Platner's *Anthropology for Physicians and Philosophers* (1772). Kant rejected Platner's "physiological" reductivism in favor of an approach that emphasized the practical experience of human interaction and the historicity of human beings. Yet Kant was always deeply skeptical of the capacity of human beings to gain anything like a scientific knowledge of their own nature, and he was especially dissatisfied with the entire state of the study of human nature up to now, looking forward to a future scientific revolution in this area of study (which he himself did not pretend to be able to accomplish). He lectured on anthropology in a popular style for the next 25 years. These lectures were the most frequently given and the most well attended of any he gave during his teaching career. Kant's ideas about anthropology exercise a powerful but subtle influence on his treatment of epistemology, philosophy of mind, ethics, aesthetics, and the philosophy of history, but it is an influence difficult to assess because Kant never articulated a systematic theory of

anthropology, and his published writing on anthropology was limited to a popular textbook derived from his lectures, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Standpoint* (1798), which he issued at the end of his teaching career.

## Years of Academic Success

Kant was born poor, and he remained poor – an unsalaried, marginal academic – well into middle age. But his investments with Green and his appointment to a professorship finally gave him a comfortable living. And by the early 1790s his lately acquired fame had made him one of the highest paid professors in the Prussian educational system. During the late 1760s and for most of the 1770s he lived, along with many others from the University, in a large rooming house owned by the publisher and bookdealer Kanter. In 1783, at age 59, Kant finally bought a home of his own – a large, comfortable house on Prinzessinstraße in the center of town, almost in the shadow of the royal castle that gave the city its name.

The *Critique of Pure Reason* was finally published in the spring of 1781 (less than a month before Kant's 57th birthday). Although Kant brought his labors on it to a conclusion very rapidly, in the space of about four months in 1779–80, this book had been nearly 10 years in preparation. Once the *Critique* was published, the evident originality of the thoughts contained in it and the difficulty of his struggle to achieve them both led Kant to expect that it would attract immediate attention, at least among philosophers. He was therefore disappointed by the cool and uncomprehending reception it initially received. For the first year or two he received from those whom he most expected to give his book a sympathetic hearing only a bewildered silence.

Kant found especially frustrating the review of the *Critique* published in the *Göttingen Learned Notices* in January 1782. It was ostensibly written by Christian Garve (a man Kant respected) but had been heavily revised by the journal's editor, J. G. Feder, a popular Enlightenment philosopher of Lockean sympathies who had little patience for metaphysics in any form and no sympathy at all for the new and seemingly abstruse project of "transcendental philosophy" in which Kant was engaged. The review interpreted Kant's transcendental idealism as no more than a variation on Berkeley's idealism – a reduction of the real world to subjective representations, based on an elementary confusion between mental states and their objects. The review, together with the evident incomprehension of the *Critique* by most of its earliest readers, caused him to attempt a more accessible presentation of his ideas in *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783). But Kant was not a good popularizer, and it would be several more years before the *Critique* began to get the kind of attention Kant had hoped for.

The first floor of Kant's house on Prinzessinstraße contained a hall in which he gave his lectures, and the kitchen where food was prepared by a female cook (he could now finally afford to hire one); on the second floor was a sitting room, a dining room, and Kant's study (where there reportedly hung over his writing desk the only decoration he permitted in the house – a portrait of Rousseau). Kant's bedroom was on the third floor. For many years, Kant had a personal servant, Lampe – who, however, was apparently given to drink, and was discharged in the late 1790s when he reportedly attacked his frail and aging master during a quarrel.

In the second-floor dining room Kant enjoyed his only real meal of the day, a dinner at which he usually entertained several guests. Königsberg was a seaport, and although Kant never himself ventured far from it, he took the opportunity to acquaint himself with many of the distinguished foreigners who passed through. By the time of these banquets (in the early afternoon), Kant had usually completed his main academic work. He rose regularly at 5 a.m., having only a cup of tea and a pipe of tobacco for breakfast. Then he prepared for his lectures, which he delivered five or six days a week, beginning at 7 or 8 in the morning. After them, he would go to his study and write until time for dinner. After his guests had departed, Kant would often take a nap in an easy chair in his sitting room (sometimes a good friend, such as Green, would nap in the chair next to him). At 5 p.m. the philosopher would take his constitutional walk, whose timing, according to the famous legend, was so precise and unvarying that the housewives of Königsberg could set their clocks by the minute at which Professor Kant walked past their windows. Yet the regularity of Kant's schedule, as well as his crochets about his health and especially his diet (he believed in eating a lot of carrots, and drank wine daily, but never beer) probably resulted less from a compulsive personality than from the necessity of an aging man, who had never been in the best of health, to keep himself strong enough to complete philosophical labors which he had not been able properly to begin until he was far into middle age. Kant's evenings were often spent socializing, either at Green's house, or Hippel's, or with the Count and Countess Kaiserlingk.

## Friendships

Kant's closest friend by far in his years of maturity was clearly Joseph Green, whose influence on him is hard to overestimate. Kant respected Green's judgment even in philosophical matters, to such an extent that it is reported he read every word of the *Critique of Pure Reason* to Green prior to its publication.

Another of Kant's friends was the mayor of Königsberg, Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel (1741–96), through whose help and influence he was able to purchase the house in Prinzessinstraße where he lived out his later years. Hippel was a remarkable man. He was not only active politically, but also intellectually. He was a learned and intelligent man, the author of whimsical, satirical plays and novels in the style of Laurence Sterne. He also wrote progressive political treatises defending the civil equality of Jews, and argued for a quite radical position on the social status of women, advocating the reform of marriage to ensure their equality with men in all spheres of life. Hippel's views on the emancipation of women were far in advance of Kant's own, even though at the time rumor had it that Kant shared in the authorship of these writings. Some of these rumors may have been benevolently intended toward Kant, but some surely were not, since like other defenders of women's rights in that time (such as William Godwin), Hippel was widely calumniated as an unprincipled sexual libertine. Kant refused to participate in these attacks on his friend's character, but he also publicly disavowed association with Hippel's "feminist" writings.

Another of Kant's notable friendships is even more curious – the one with J. G. Hamann (who was also a close friend of Green). Hamann was a thinker and writer of

great brilliance, but his views – like his personality – could hardly have been more different from Kant’s. Hamann was an eccentric religious thinker, who combined philosophical skepticism with fideist irrationalism. He had a troubled life-history, and lived an unconventional life (for instance, cohabiting with a woman he never married). Kant even seems to have helped him out financially for a time. Personally, Hamann was an imprudent, unstable, unhealthy man. Hamann’s writings are terse, impressively learned, full of idiosyncrasies, ironies, and inventive allusions, always tantalizingly (or infuriatingly) cryptic. He was a trenchant critic of the Enlightenment, including Kant’s philosophy, and a mentor of both the German counter-enlightenment and the *Sturm und Drang* literary movement. It says something very significant, and very favorable, about both men’s characters and the largeness of both their minds, that they were genuinely friends, and that their profound differences in style and outlook apparently never led to any significant personal estrangement.

Kant’s relation with other friends and acquaintances reveals a more ambiguous picture. During the 1760s he was close to the customs official Johann Konrad Jacobi and perhaps even more so to his wife Maria Charlotta.<sup>3</sup> But when she left her husband and took up with another acquaintance of Kant, master of the mint Johann Julius Göschel, after the divorce and remarriage Kant broke off relations with the adulteress and refused ever to see her or her new husband. He was not always so intolerant of sexual indiscretions, however. When his doctoral student F. V. L. Plessing<sup>4</sup> fathered an illegitimate child in 1784, Kant undertook the responsibility of conveying the necessary payments to the young woman, and may even have supplied some of the funds himself. Yet when in 1794 a troubled young woman, Maria von Herbert, sought the philosopher’s advice and consolation in a time of inner anguish and despair, Kant showed remarkable insensitivity to her feelings and her situation, dismissing her to their mutual friend Elizabeth Motherby as “die kleine Schwärmerin” (the little enthusiast), and citing her as a sad example of what can happen to young women who do not control their fantasies. Some years later, Maria committed suicide.

Students whom Kant regarded as straying from the proper path were sometimes dealt with unkindly. When Kant’s former student J. G. Herder criticized Kant in the first two volumes of his *Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity* (1785–7), Kant wrote superficially laudatory but plainly condescending reviews of Herder’s work, which infuriated his former student – who was himself a touchy and troubled person, all too easily offended. Despite a surprisingly warm tribute to Kant in Herder’s *Letters on the Advancement of Humanity* (1793), Herder’s last works were mainly devoted to anti-Kantian polemics. When Kant’s work on the Critique of the Power of Judgment took too much time for him to review the third volume of Herder’s *Ideas*, he tried to pass the dubious task of criticizing him along to another of his highly able students, Christian Jacob Kraus (who was the chief exponent of Adam Smith’s economic theories in Germany). When Kraus refused to comply with Kant’s wishes, they quarreled and their previously close friendship came to an end. Kant helped the young J. G. Fichte to begin his philosophical career by aiding him in the publication of his first work, *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* (1792). But in 1799, perhaps under the jealous influence of some of his students, Kant publicly denounced Fichte, disclaiming him as a follower of the Critical philosophy and citing the Italian proverb: “May God protect us from our friends, for we shall manage to watch out for our enemies ourselves” (12.371).

## Kant's Character

The complexity of Kant's conduct toward particular people naturally raises questions about what sort of man he was. Today, of course, just as in eighteenth-century Königsberg, this is a matter that must be up to each of us to decide for ourselves. I think that on the whole, Kant seems to have been neither a particularly admirable nor a particularly unlikable human being. Rather, like most human beings, especially interesting ones, his character contained a rich mixture of attractive and unattractive traits. He was hard-working, patient and utterly devoted to his work as a scientist, scholar, and philosopher, but he was also both shrewd and ambitious, never missing out on the personal advantages he gained through the professional success and prosperity he eventually achieved. He was a gregarious, sociable man, but sometimes quarreled with his friends, and a number of his friendships came to an abrupt end. Though Kant believed above all in thinking for oneself, in his habits and lifestyle he seems at times to have been curiously open to the influence of certain friends – early in life, to Johann Daniel Funk, later in life to Joseph Green. He had a fierce love of the search for truth and of independent thinking, but he could also be jealous of his reputation, and mean-spirited toward students or followers he thought had personally betrayed him. He was not always above the intellectual cliquishness and academic backbiting characteristic of his time (and of many intellectuals and academics in any time).

Now that Kant has been dead for over 200 years, however, it is worth asking how far it should matter to us at all, as students of his philosophy, what kind of man he was. (We know all too little about Aristotle's personality, for example, a fact that perhaps mercifully saves us from many irrelevant thoughts about his philosophy.) Judgments about Kant's character, as we make them, are most often ancillary to – or rationalizations of – our reactions to his philosophy – especially those reactions (favorable or unfavorable) that exceed our ability to provide rational support for them. So it is worth asking how far judgments about Kant's character could possibly provide us with anything we can honestly make use of as critics or defenders of his ideas. Kant is sometimes either reviled or ridiculed by critics for the inflexibility of his mode of life and the alleged inhumanity of some of his moral opinions – as on the subjects of sex, suicide, the place of women in society, or the duty of truthfulness, capital punishment, or the wrongness of resistance to authority.

Of course it matters in evaluating Kant's views what conclusions they might lead to on these subjects. But often critics are less interested in this question (which may be difficult to decide) than in interpreting Kant's opinions as expressions of the kind of person he was, and in using our reactions to his character to color our reception of his philosophy. On some of these topics, the common image of Kant is all too accurate, while on others it is exaggerated and distorted. He was, however, an ardent supporter of the movement known as "Enlightenment" and his views on many subjects – politics, education, and especially religion – were on the whole quite progressive by the standards of the time. It is also remarkable that critics who typically attack others for failing to consider things in social and historical context often feel free to measure Kant's opinions by the same standards they would use to judge views voiced by someone living in our own day.

Kant is sometimes also criticized for the views on race that are expressed in some of his anthropology lectures and shorter essays. Here too there is sometimes distortion or exaggeration, since Kant had virtually no first-hand knowledge of non-Europeans and had to rely on travel reports (which he read avidly) for all his information about other peoples and cultures. Kant accepted some reports about nonwhite peoples that we would now regard as racist, but at times he also expressed skepticism about claims that nonwhites are intellectually inferior to Europeans, noting that the reports on this issue are contradictory (8.62). But on the subject of European colonialism in other parts of the world, Kant's opinion is consistent and (for its time) even extreme. Kant condemns without hesitation or qualification the injustice and hypocrisy of European imperialists who, he says, conquer other peoples in the name of visiting them and plunder and exploit them in the name of civilizing them (6.352–3, 8.357–60). Even if Kant accepted the racist view that nonwhites are intellectually inferior to Europeans, he definitely repudiated the practical corollaries of such a view for whose sake racists typically hold it.

It is a sometimes uncomfortable fact that the philosophers of the past whose thoughts we study with most profit were not especially fine human beings. The only way to deal with this fact is to face up squarely to the cognitive dissonance it occasions and then to resolve to set it aside as irrelevant to anything that could be of legitimate interest in deciding which philosophers to study. It displays a deplorable misunderstanding of what philosophy is – and what may be gained by studying it – to treat past philosophers as gurus at whose feet we are to sit in order to absorb their wisdom, or alternatively, to find in their unattractive personal traits and characteristics an excuse for not studying them at all. If a past philosopher, Kant for instance, was an admirable person, that still gives us no reason to study his philosophical thoughts if they were unoriginal or mediocre and do not repay our careful investigation and critical reflection. If the philosopher was a thoroughly unattractive character, or even if some of his opinions on morality or politics offend enlightened people today, it may still be true that his contributions to philosophy are indispensable to our understanding of philosophical problems and of the history of people's reflections on them. If we study the writings of the admirable philosopher in order to honor his virtuous character, then we are merely wasting time and effort that could have been better employed. By the same token, if we refuse to study the writings of the personally repulsive philosopher either because we think our neglect justly punishes him for his misdeeds or his evil opinions, or because we want to avoid being influenced by such a pernicious character, then all we accomplish by this foolish exercise in self-righteousness and closed-mindedness is to deprive ourselves of what we might have learned both from attaining to his insights and from exposing his errors. It is always sad to see philosophy students, and sometimes even professional philosophers, missing out on many things they might have learned on account of their moral or political approval or disapproval of the personality or opinions of some long-dead philosopher, who is far beyond their poor power to reward or punish. The only people we punish in this way are ourselves, and also those around us, or in the future, whom we might have influenced for the better if we had educated ourselves more wisely.

## Enlightenment and Philosophy of History

In the middle of the 1780s, Kant laid the foundation for much of nineteenth-century philosophy of history in several brief occasional essays. To a significant degree, Kant's thinking about history was prompted by his reading of Herder's *Ideas*. Herder saw himself as a critic of the Enlightenment rationalism Kant defended, and Kant's contributions to the philosophy of history were in part an attempt to vindicate the cause of Enlightenment in that debate. In 1786 Kant added to these reviews a satirical essay, *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*, parodying Herder's use of the Genesis scriptures in Book 10 of the *Ideas* to support his anti-Enlightenment theory of human history. But the *Conjectural Beginning* also makes some serious points both about the use of imaginative conjectures in devising such narratives and about the role of reason and conflict in the progressive historical development of humanity's faculties.

Another important short essay displaying the historical conception of Kant's philosophy was prompted by the published remark of a conservative cleric, who dismissed the call for greater enlightenment in religious and political matters with the comment that no one had yet been able to say what was meant by the term "enlightenment." Kant's response was the short essay *Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* (1784). Kant refuses to identify *enlightenment* with mere learning or the acquisition of knowledge (which he thinks is at most a consequence of that to which the term genuinely refers). Instead, Kant regards enlightenment as the act of leaving behind a condition of immaturity, in which a person's intelligence must be guided by another. Many people who are able to direct their own understandings, or would be able if they tried, nevertheless prefer to let others guide them, either because it is easy and comforting to live according to an established system of values and beliefs, or because they are anxious over the uncertainties they will bring upon themselves if they begin to question received beliefs or afraid of taking on the responsibility for governing their own lives. To be enlightened is therefore to have the courage and resolve to be self-directing in one's thinking, to *think for oneself*.

Kant also emphasizes that enlightenment must be regarded as a social and historical process. Throughout humanity's past, most people have been accustomed to having their thinking directed by others (by paternalistic governments, by the authority of old books, and most of all, and most degrading of all, in Kant's view, by the priestcraft of religious authorities who usurp the role of individual conscience). Becoming enlightened is virtually impossible for an isolated individual, but it becomes possible when the practice of thinking critically becomes prevalent in an entire public in which reigns a spirit of free and open communication between its members. Kant's proposals concerning freedom of communication in *What is Enlightenment?* are based not on any alleged individual right to freedom of expression, but are entirely consequentialist in their rationale and tailored to his time and place, designed to encourage the growth of an enlightened public under the historical circumstances in which he found himself.

One unjust calumny often directed against the Enlightenment is that it was a movement devoid of a sense of the historical or an awareness of the historical context of

human actions and endeavors. The charge is perniciously false, and especially so when directed toward Kant. What it often represents is a deceptive presentation of a different view of history from the Enlightenment's, or else an even shabbier attempt by nineteenth-century thinkers to pass off the Enlightenment's accomplishments in historical thinking as their own, or both of these at once. The *Critique of Pure Reason* (even its title) reflects a historical conception of Kant's task. Kant sees the "critique" as a metaphorical court before which the traditional claims of metaphysics are being brought to test their validity. His metaphor is drawn from the Enlightenment political idea that the traditional claims of monarchs and religious authorities must be brought before the bar of reason and nature, and henceforth the legitimacy of both should rest only on what reason freely recognizes. Kant's philosophy is self-consciously created for an age of enlightenment, in which individuals are beginning to think for themselves and all matters of common interest are to be decided by an enlightened public through free communication of thoughts and arguments.

For nearly 20 years, Kant had intended to develop a system of moral philosophy under the title "metaphysics of morals." It is probably no accident that he began to fulfill this intention only after he had been provoked into thinking about human history and the moral predicament in which the natural progress of the human species places its individual members. The *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) is one of the classic works in the history of ethics, and (as its title implies) it proposes to lay the ground for Kant's ethical system. But it never claims to do more than provide the fundamental principle of the system. It discusses the application of the moral principle only by way of selected illustrations, and does not provide us with a systematic theory of duties. During the next decade, Kant continued to reflect both on the foundations of ethics and on the application of his ethical principles to morality and politics. But he presented something like an ethical system only at the very end of his career, in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797–8). Kant's ethical thought, and even what is said in the *Groundwork* itself, is often misunderstood because these later works are not taken into account in reading it.

In 1786 Kant's philosophy was suddenly thrust into prominence by the favorable discussion of it presented in a series of articles in Christoph Wieland's widely read publication *Teutsche Merkur* (called "Letters on the Kantian Philosophy") by the Jena philosopher Karl Leonard Reinhold. Reinhold's presentations of Kant did very suddenly what Kant's own works had thus far failed to do – namely, to make the theories of the *Critique* into the principal focus of philosophical discussion in Germany. Soon the Critical philosophy came to be seen as a revolutionary new standpoint; the main philosophical questions to be answered were whether one should adopt the Kantian position, and if one did, exactly what version or interpretation of it one should adopt. Soon there also arose a new kind of *critic* of Kant's philosophy – an irrevocably "post-Kantian" philosopher, whose criticisms were motivated by alleged unclarity and tensions within Kant's philosophy itself. These critics sought to absorb the lessons of the Kantian philosophy and yet also to "go beyond" it.

For this reason, and because of the misunderstandings to which Kant had discovered his position was subject, he decided to produce a second edition of the *Critique*, in which he could present his position more clearly. At first he thought he would add

a section on *practical* (or moral) reason, following up his treatment in the *Groundwork* (and also replying to critical discussions of that work that had appeared). In 1787 the new and improved version of the *Critique of Pure Reason* did appear, but by then Kant had decided that his discussion of practical reason would have to be too lengthy to be added to what was already a very long book, so he decided to publish it separately as a second “critique.”

Within a short time, Kant was working on a third project that was to bear a parallel title. Kant conceived of philosophy as an architectonic system, but it was never part of his systematic project to write three “critiques.” The *Critique of Practical Reason* grew opportunistically out of Kant’s desire to respond to critics of his *Groundwork*, and also from his decision to revise the *Critique of Pure Reason* – he originally intended to include a “critique of practical reason” in this second edition, but wrote a separate book when he saw that the length of this new section was getting out of hand. Kant’s reasons for writing the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* were complex, and a bit inscrutable, as is the work itself. Kant had been thinking for a long time about the topic of taste and judgments of taste, and wanted to come to terms with the modern tradition of thinking about these matters, found in such philosophers as Hutcheson, Baumgarten, Hume, and Mendelssohn. Judgments of taste, such as that something is beautiful or ugly, have the peculiarity that on the one hand they do not ascribe a determinate objective property to an object but report merely the subject’s own pleasure or displeasure in it, and yet on the other hand they do claim a kind of quasi-objectivity, as though there are some things which *ought* to please or displease all subjects. Kant was dissatisfied with both Baumgarten’s attempt to analyze beauty as perfection experienced by the senses rather than by the intellect and by Hume’s view that taste is merely pleasure or displeasure in an object considered in relation to certain normative conditions of experiencing it, such as disinterestedness. He wanted to understand how the workings of our cognitive faculties themselves, especially the harmony between sensible imagination and understanding required for all cognition, might play a role in generating an experience that was at once subjective and yet normative for all. But to solve this problem is far from being the whole motivation behind the third *Critique*.

The two main themes dealt with in this work – aesthetic experience and natural teleology – were both preoccupations of the Enlightenment’s critics, such as Herder. He also needed to clarify and explicate his own thinking about the status of teleological thinking in relation to natural science, a subject that had engaged him before both in essays about natural theology and the philosophy of history. But if we are to take him at his word, the main motive for writing the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* was to deal with the “immense gulf” that he saw between the theoretical use of reason in knowledge of the natural world and its practical use in morality and moral faith in God. It remains to this day a subject of controversy exactly how Kant hoped to bridge this gulf in the third *Critique* and how far he was successful. But the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* reveals Kant, now in his late sixties, as a philosopher who is still willing to question and even revise the fundamental tenets of his system. And to his idealist followers, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, it was the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* that seemed to them to show Kant as open to the kind of radical speculative philosophy in which they were interested.

## A Decade of Struggle and Decline

The final decade of Kant's activity as a philosopher was one beset with conflict, and well before the end of it, Kant's health and even his mental powers were very much in decline. As the Critical philosophy became increasingly prominent in German intellectual life, and as it came to be variously interpreted by different proponents and would-be reformers of it, Kant found himself defending his position on several sides, against the attacks of Wolffians such as J. A. Eberhard, Lockeanes such as J. G. Feder and C. G. Selle, popular Enlightenment rationalists such as Garve, religious fideists such as Wizenmann and Jacobi, or against a new kind of "Kantian" speculative philosopher, such as the brilliant Salomon Maimon. Kant's larger-scale published works during the 1790s, however, were devoted to applying the Critical philosophy to matters of general human concern, especially in the practical sphere – to religion, political philosophy, and to the completion of the ethical system he had for 30 years called the "metaphysics of morals."

Kant also came into conflict with the political authorities over his views on religion. From the beginning of Kant's academic career until 1786, the Prussian monarch had been Frederick the Great. Frederick may have been a military despot, but his views in matters of religion favored toleration and theological liberalism. Many considered him to be privately a "freethinker" or even an outright atheist. Frederick's death in 1786 brought to the throne a very different sort of monarch, his nephew Friedrich Wilhelm II, for whom religion was a very serious matter. The new king had long been shocked by the wide variety of unorthodoxy, skepticism, and irreligion that had been permitted under his uncle to flourish within the Prussian state and even within the Lutheran state church. Two years after coming to power, he removed Baron von Zedlitz (the man to whom Kant had dedicated the *Critique of Pure Reason*) from the position of Minister of Education, replacing him with J. C. Wöllner (whom Frederick the Great had described as a "deceitful, scheming parson"). Both the king and his new minister believed that the stability of the state depends directly on correct religious belief among its subjects, and hence that those who questioned Christian orthodoxy were directly threatening the foundations of civil peace. To them, Kant's attack on objective proofs for God's existence, and his denial of knowledge to make room for faith, seemed dangerously subversive. And his Enlightenment principles – that all individuals have not only a right but even a duty to think for themselves in religious matters, and that the state should encourage such free thought by protecting a "public" realm of discourse from all state interference – these seemed to the new King and his orthodox followers like recipes for civil anarchy.

Wöllner soon issued two religious edicts intended to reverse the effects of Enlightenment thinking on both the church and the universities, by subjecting clergy and academics to tests of religious orthodoxy concerning both what they published and what they taught from the pulpit or the lectern. The edicts put many liberal pastors in the position of choosing between maintaining their livelihood and teaching what they regarded as a set of outdated superstitions. Action was taken against some academics as well (especially critical biblical scholars), who were forced either to recant what they had said in their writings (which usually discredited them among their colleagues)

or else to lose their university positions (and with them any opportunity to teach their views at all). Writings on religious topics were also to be submitted to a board of censorship, which had to approve the orthodoxy of what they taught before they could be published.

By 1791 Kant learned from his former student J. G. Kiesewetter, who was a royal tutor in Berlin, that the decision had been taken to forbid him to write anything further on religious subjects. But by this time Kant's prominence was such that this would not be an easy or a comfortable action for the reactionary ministers to take. Kant had planned to write a book on religion, and did not let word of these threats dissuade him. But he very much wanted to avoid confrontation with the authorities, both in order to protect himself and on sincerely held moral grounds.

Kant was far from being a political radical on matters such as this. His political thought is strongly influenced by the Hobbesian view that the state is needed to protect both individuals and the basic institutions of society against the human tendencies to violent infringement of rights, and that in order to prevent civil disorder, the state must have considerable power to regulate the lives of individuals. *What is Enlightenment?* teaches that it is entirely legitimate for freedom of communication to be regulated in matters that are "private," dealing with a person's professional responsibilities. This principle might have been used to justify the very actions that had been taken by the Prussian government against pastors and even professors, insofar as their unorthodox teachings were expressed in the course of discharging their clerical or academic duties. He deplored Wöllner's edicts, of course, and regarded their application to the clergy only as having the effect of making hypocrisy a necessary qualification for ecclesiastical office. But it is not at all clear whether he regarded these measures as anything worse than disastrously unwise abuses of the state's legitimate powers. Kant sincerely believed that it is morally wrong to disobey even the unjust commands of a legitimate authority, unless we are commanded to do something that is in itself wrong. Even before anything was done to him he had made the decision that he would comply with whatever commands were made of him. This is all quite clear in Kant's first extensive presentation of his philosophy of the state in the second part of the three-part essay he wrote on the common saying, "That may be correct in theory but it does not work in practice." There he defends (against Hobbes) the position that the subjects of a state have some rights against the state which are binding on the government but not enforceable against the head of state. This means that there can be no right of insurrection, and that even the unjust commands of a legitimate authority must be obeyed by its subjects (so long as these do not directly command the subject to do something that is in itself wrong or evil). The application of this last principle to Kant's own situation is obvious: He had decided that when the Prussian authorities commanded him to cease writing or teaching on religious subjects, he would obey them.

But of course Kant had no intention of anticipating such commands, or doing anything merely to please authorities he regarded as unenlightened, unwise, and unjust. And he was determined to make use of all the legal devices at his disposal to thwart their intentions. In 1792, when Kant gave his essay on radical evil (which later became Part I of the *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*) to the *Berlin Monthly* for publication, he insisted on its being submitted to the censorship; when it was

rejected, he submitted the entirety of the *Religion* to the academic faculty of philosophy in Jena, which under the law was an alternative to the official state censorship. A first edition appeared in 1793, and a second (expanded) edition in 1794. Kant's evasion angered the censors in Berlin, however, and led them finally to take the action against him they had been planning. In October, Wöllner sent Kant a letter expressing in the king's name the royal displeasure with his writings on religion, in which "you misuse your philosophy to distort and disparage many of the cardinal and basic teachings of the Holy Scriptures and of Christianity" (7.6). It commanded him neither to teach nor write on religious subjects until he was able to conform his opinions to the tenets of Christian orthodoxy. In his reply, Kant defended both his opinions and the legitimacy of his writing about them, but did solemnly promise to the king that he would obey the royal command (7.7–10). Even the title of the *Religion* was carefully crafted by Kant in light of what he took the legal situation to be. Kant regarded revealed theology (based on the authority of the Church and scripture) as a "private" province of those whose profession obliges them to accept that authority. But when an author writes on religion apart from appeal to such authorities, basing his assertions solely on reason unaided by any appeal to revelation, he is writing for the "public" sphere. In fact, Kant's *Religion* is an attempt to provide an interpretation, in terms of rational morality, of central parts of the Christian message – original sin, salvation through faith in Christ, the vocation of the Church. Its principal aim is to convince Christians that their own religious beliefs and experience are entirely suitable vehicles for expressing the moral life as an enlightened rationalist philosopher understands it. No doubt Kant's rationalistic reinterpretations were (and still are) apt to seem abstract and bloodless to many Christians. There is no role in Kant's account of salvation for vicarious atonement made by the historical person of Jesus Christ. His rational religious faith has no room for miracles, disapproves of religious practices such as petitionary prayer, and Kant regards religious rites as "superstitious pseudo-service of God" when they are presented as necessary for moral uprightness or justification of the sinner before God. He directly attacks the *Pfaffentum* ("priestcraft" or "clericalism") of a professional priesthood, looking forward to the day when the degrading distinction between clergy and laity will disappear from a more enlightened church than now exists. (As I have already mentioned, Kant's own conduct reflected his principles. He refused on principle to participate in religious liturgies. Even when his ceremonial position as rector of the University of Königsberg required him to attend religious services, he always declined, reporting that he was "indisposed.")

The *Religion* has much to tell students of Kant's ethical theory both about its moral psychology and about the application of moral principles to human life. The essay on radical evil makes it clear that for Kant moral evil does not consist merely in determination of the will by natural causes (as it may sometimes seem to do from what is said in the *Groundwork* or even the second *Critique*). Instead, the essay on radical evil insists that all moral choice consists in the adoption of a maxim (whether good or evil) by a free power of choice, and thus transcends the natural causality Kant takes to be incompatible with freedom. It also coheres with Kant's philosophy of history in presenting the social condition, and the natural propensity to competitiveness awakened in it, as the ground of all moral evil. Part III of the *Religion* argues that since the source of evil is social the moral progress of individuals cannot come from their isolated strivings

for inner purity of will but can result only from their freely uniting themselves in the adoption of common ends. The ideal "realm of ends" is therefore to receive earthly reality in the form of a "people of God" under moral laws, who are to unite *freely* (not in the form of a coercive state) and *universally* (not as an ecclesiastical organization limited by creeds and scriptural traditions). The essence of religion for Kant consists in recognizing the duties of rational morality as commanded by God, and in joining with others to promote collectively the highest good for the world. It is in this free form of religious association, and not the coercive political state, that Kant ultimately places his hopes for the moral improvement of the human species in human history. The role of the state in history for Kant is not to provide the human species with its final aim, but rather to provide the necessary conditions of external freedom and justice in which the moral faculties of human beings may develop, and free (religious) forms of association may flourish in peace.

Kant had been forbidden by the authorities to write on religious topics, but he had no intention of keeping quiet on other matters of general human concern, even when his views were likely to be unpopular with the government. In March 1795 a period of war between the revolutionary French Republic and the First Coalition of monarchical states was brought to a close by the Peace of Basel between France and Prussia. Kant's essay *Toward Perpetual Peace* should be read as an expression of support not only for this treaty but also directly for the First French Republic itself, since here he declares that the constitution of every state should be republican and also conjectures that peace between nations might be furthered if one enlightened nation transformed itself into a republic and then through treaties became the focal point for a federal union between other states. Kant begins with four "preliminary articles" designed at promoting peace between nations through their conduct of themselves under the present condition of incipient warfare and the diplomatic conduct surrounding it. The essay then proceeds to three "definitive articles" defining a relationship between states that will lead to a condition of peace that is not merely a provisional and temporary interruption of the perpetual condition of war but constitutes a permanent or "eternal" condition of international peace. This is followed by two "additions" outlining the larger philosophical (historical and ethical) presuppositions of Kant's approach, and an appendix in which Kant discusses the manner in which politicians or rulers must conduct affairs of state if they are to be in conformity with rational principles of morality.

*Toward Perpetual Peace* is the chief statement authored by a major figure in the history of philosophy that addresses the issues of war, peace, and international relations that have been central concerns of humanity during the two centuries since it was written. Kant drew his inspiration from the *Project for Rendering Peace Perpetual in Europe* by the Abbé de Saint-Pierre (1712), and comments on it by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1761). But his aims in *Toward Perpetual Peace* are much more ambitious in that their scope is not limited to the Christian nations of Europe but motivated by universal moral principles. His purpose is not merely to prevent the destruction and bloodshed of war, but even more to effect peace with justice between nations as an indispensable step toward the progressive development of human faculties in history, in accordance with the philosophy of history he projected over a decade earlier. *Toward Perpetual Peace* is perhaps Kant's most genuine attempt to address a universal

enlightened public concerning issues of importance not only to scientists and philosophers but vital to all humanity.

The history of Kant's conflict with, and for a time his submission to, the Prussian authorities regarding religion, has an unexpectedly happy ending. Friedrich Wilhelm II, typical of rulers in all ages who make a display of religious orthodoxy central to their conception of public life, permitted himself a private lifestyle that was morally unconventional, and the reverse of prudent, temperate, or healthy. When he died rather suddenly in 1797, Kant chose (in a spirit more wily than submissive) to interpret his earlier promise to abstain from writing on religion as a personal commitment to this individual monarch, and regarded the latter's death as freeing him from the obligation. The royal censors, who were always regarded within the hierarchy of Lutheran church as uncultured fanatics, probably never had the power to enforce their prohibitions against Kant anyway, and certainly lacked it once the king was dead. In the *Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), Kant had his final say on religious topics, framing his discussion in terms of an account of academic freedom within the state that vindicated his course of action in publishing the *Religion* several years earlier (the act that had provoked the royal reproof).

As for Kant's persecutor Wöllner, who had risen to the nobility from a rather lowly background on the strength of his devotion to the cause of religious conservatism, he had already been treated with conspicuous ingratitude by the fickle king whose religious prejudices he had done his best to serve. Soon after the death of Friedrich Wilhelm II, he lost whatever influence he ever had over Prussian educational and ecclesiastical policies, and eventually died in poverty.

## Old Age and Death

Kant retired from university lecturing in 1796. He then devoted himself to three principal tasks. The first was the completion of his system of ethics, the *Metaphysics of Morals*, consisting of a Doctrine of Right (covering philosophy of law and the state) and a Doctrine of Virtue (dealing with the system of ethical duties of individuals). The first part was published in 1797 and the whole in 1798. Kant's second task was the publication of materials from the lectures he had given over many years. He himself published a text based on his popular lectures on anthropology in 1798. Declining powers led him to consign to others the task of publishing his lectures on logic, pedagogy, and physical geography that appeared during his lifetime.

Kant's third project after his retirement is the most extraordinary. He set out to write a new work centering on the transition between transcendental philosophy and empirical science. In it Kant was responding creatively both to recent developments in the sciences themselves (such as the revolution in chemistry initiated by Lavoisier's investigation of combustion) and to the work of younger philosophers who took their inspiration from the Kantian philosophy itself (such as the "philosophy of nature" of F. W. J. Schelling, who was still in his early twenties). Kant's failing powers prevented him from completing this work, but from the fragments he produced (that were first published in the early twentieth century under the title *Opus Postumum*), we can see that even in his late seventies, Kant still took a critical attitude toward every philosophical

question and especially toward his own thoughts. Even while struggling against the failure of his intellectual powers, he was also fighting to revise in fundamental ways the critical philosophical system whose construction had been the labor of his entire life. In this way, the next generation of German philosophers, who saw it as their task to “go beyond Kant,” were thinking more fundamentally in Kant’s own spirit than have been the generations of devoted Kantians since, who ever and again want to go “back to Kant” and who tirelessly attempt to defend the letter of the Kantian texts against the attempts of his first followers to extend and correct his philosophy. Kant died February 12, 1804, a month and a half short of his eightieth birthday.

### Notes

- 1 Writings of Kant will be cited by volume/page number, in the form (v.p.), in the Akademie Ausgabe *Kant's Schriften* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1902– ).
- 2 For instance, see Hans Gawlick and Lothar Kriemendahl, *Hume in der deutschen Aufklärung: Umriss der Rezeptionsgeschichte* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1987).
- 3 One of Maria Charlotta’s extant letters to Kant reads: “I lay claim to your society tomorrow afternoon. ‘Yes, yes I will be there,’ I hear you say. Good, then, I will expect you, and then my clock will be wound as well” (10.39). Much is read into this last figure of speech by a few Kant scholars who apparently want to entertain the desperate hope that Kant may not after all have been a lifelong celibate.
- 4 The troubled, romantic Plessing was also an acquaintance of Goethe, and is the subject of his poem “Harzreise im Winter,” which later provided the text of Brahms’s *Alto Rhapsody*, op. 53.

### Further Reading

- Beck, Lewis White (1969). *Early German Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Beck, Lewis White (1995). *Mr. Boswell dines with Professor Kant*. Bristol, England: Thoemmes Press, 1995.
- Beiser, Frederick (1987). *The Fate of Reason*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cassirer Ernst (1981). *Kant's Life and Thought*, tr. James Haden. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Kuehn Manfred (2001). *Kant: A Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

