

Immanuel Kant

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This is one of the short introductions to various notables that the Rowohlt Verlag has published during the years. It is not quite a biography, as the presentation is too brief, yet it is fuller than what you would expect from an encyclopedia, even an on-line one; nor is it of course a substitute for the works and achievements which have brought the volume into existence in the first place, but can only whet the readers appetite for the original sources.

The life of Kant was uneventful. It was confined geographically to Königsberg and its immediate surroundings, (Kant did not even travel to Danzig¹), and to his academic career, which was not particularly swift or brilliant initially. He was a man given to strict routines the interference with which caused him much discomfort and irritation, but those routines were apparently not the manifestation of rigidity, as in the cases of those tending to autism, but part of a conscious and determined effort to husband his mental and physical energies. His punctuality was legendary, but not as excessive as that of his British friend Greene, with whom he once arranged an excursion, the wagon to leave at seven sharp in the morning. Kant was two minutes late and had to see his friend in the hired vehicle pass him by with no intention to relent on what had been preset. Kant was a frail man of short height, whose most striking physical attributes were the liveliness and limpidness of his eyes. He dressed in fashion, reluctant to draw attention to himself, famously observing that it be better to be a fool in fashion, than one out of it. He was an eternal bachelor but not, at least in his youth, indifferent to the charm of women. Nor conversely. Of his surviving siblings he had little contact, preferring as friends those out of the family. He was not adverse to socializing but kept regular luncheons. He did not particularly care for philosophy during the discussions, they were strictly for entertainment and recuperation, thus many of his friends, such as the above mentioned merchant, had no academic connections. He had a succession of addresses and eventually settled in a big house spartanly furnished with little concession to personal taste and sentiment. More surprisingly he had very few books in his library, at most a couple of hundred, mostly given as gifts or for reviews, and hence more than liable to be given away. If he needed a book he had it ordered by his bookseller, more or less as we now order a book on-line. His interest in music was low, considering it the lowest of the arts, in particular as more than any other art form it was intrusive and caused a lot of unwelcome noise. One suspects that he did not hold the other arts in any high esteem either, with the possible exception of poetry, to which he had been exposed at an early age. Towards the end of his life, his mind started to falter, his once impeccable memory failed him more and more. This is a particularly sad and humiliating fate for someone whose life was so cerebral².

¹ He did, however, travel in his imagination and when he occasionally lectured on geography, he did it so vividly that the audience could not but think that he had actually visited the various places himself.

² Bringing home the fact that senility is a physical disease and not one of mental feebleness which can

It is the work that makes Kant interesting, anything else is only interesting as it refers to Kant himself. Thus the book contains some commentaries on his philosophy and tries to explain what was revolutionary about it. Kant was, like many philosophers of the Enlightenment of which he may be considered the most luminous representative but for the sake of his indifference to politics³, deeply disappointed with metaphysics and motivated by a desire to make philosophy more solid and scientific. The objects of the metaphysicians seemed to be only of their mind, and to what extent could they have any real reality? There were in the world real objects whom the mind had to perceive and comprehend with some effort, but the objects of the mind seemed to require no such effort as being inside the mind from the start. He formulated problems and he struggled with them for a long time, just as a scientist struggles with the empirical facts of the real world kicking back at him. For Kant philosophy was not just a rhetorical river that flows easily and cannot be stopped but a real struggle. For over ten years he was silent, something that would have been impossible today. He already had a reputation and people did expect more things from him. Eventually in 1781 his grand opus 'Critic [sic] der reinen Vernunft' appeared when he was already 57 years old. The fruits of a philosopher mature slowly. The title is ambiguous and intentionally so according to the author of this account. It could either mean that Reason is an object to be criticized, or it is the subject that criticizes. Both meanings are intended, we are assured, so the whole enterprise is a clever self-referentiality in which Reason criticizes itself, in particular mapping out its extensions and proper fields of inquiry. Kant makes a distinction between the dogmatist who reasons from analytic a priori, while the sceptic only admits synthetic a posteriori and thus only accepts what he perceives. To get out of those cul de sacs, the problem for pure reason is to understand how synthetic a priori are possible, and this constitutes the heart of the book. The most glorious example of the latter being mathematics.

The critique of pure reasons has to do with the 'Erkenntnis' problem, how can we achieve true knowledge of the world? This is in many ways the most central of philosophical problems, but perhaps not the most practical. In daily life the question of morality is what philosophers are actually asked to deliver on. In due time a shorter volume on practical reasoning would appear, but the work on it took its due time and preliminary studies such that of the metaphysical foundations of morality. Moral behavior is intimately connected with the freedom of will, and while men by no means is the pinnacle of physical development, his reason and his freedom to do so, distinguishes him among all creatures in the universe. He was looking for a priori laws of moral behavior, and he commented that two things filled him with awe. The starry vault above him, was one, and the moral laws within, was the other. He is also known for his maxim that one should always act as if ones choice of action could be adopted as a general law. He was aiming not for particularity but generality and universality beyond the accidentals of time and place. To act was not just a matter of conforming to law but to act in the spirit of it, would one only act in its letter, ones actions would become parodies and degenerate. Thus laws cannot be fully encoded

be if not cured at least postponed by vigorous mental activity

³ Voltaire, Montesquieu and Rousseau are traditionally seen as the personifications of the Enlightenment. Their thoughts and ideas, unlike those of Kant's, were widely appreciated and hence politically effective.

in words, they also conveys something deeper below. Any serious discussion of morality invariably leads to the religious sphere. Kant did not reject religion outright, for that he was far too honest, but he wanted to be clear about its domain. At an early age he had dismissed proofs of the existence of God as spurious and was careful in old age not to fall into the trap. Thus his last works were devoted to the connection between religion and pure reason. This naturally lead to what was considered heresy and he was rebuked by the Prussian king, and was forced to publicly back down. For the sake of his own conscience he reminded himself that even if you should only utter truth, you do not necessarily utter all truth. He also was careful to word his retraction as to it only to have validity during the life of the monarch.

For him Reason was the means by which mankind could liberate itself from the immaturity to which it had condemned itself, and the Enlightenment was putting this into practice. Consequently he welcomed the French Revolution but with the subsequent reign of terror he predictably became disenchanted.

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