

BOOKS

WHY IMMANUEL KANT STILL HAS MORE TO TEACH US


*A new introduction to the great philosopher's work foregrounds its
revolutionary nature and far-reaching impact.*

By Adam Kirsch

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Kant's life was famously dull, but he was less of a hermit than is often supposed. Illustration by Jan Robert Dünneweller

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In April, 1745, God appeared to a Swedish civil servant named Emanuel Swedenborg in a London tavern. Swedenborg was no wild-eyed prophet but, rather, a fifty-seven-year-old scientist and engineer who had worked for years for the Swedish crown as an administrator of mines. However, travelling around Europe while on leave, he had begun to have intense dreams about Jesus Christ, in which everyday details were shot through with mystical bliss. In one, Jesus borrowed a five-pound note from someone, and, Swedenborg recalled, “I was sorry he had not borrowed it from me.” Finally, God showed himself while Swedenborg was at dinner, taking the form of a man who told him not to eat too much.

From that night until his death, twenty-seven years later, Swedenborg devoted himself to conversing with “spirits and angels” and writing down the mystical truths that they told him. As Swedenborg’s fame spread across Europe, in the seventeen-sixties, he came to the attention of a junior professor of philosophy at the University of Königsberg, in eastern Prussia, named Immanuel Kant. Then in his late thirties, Kant considered himself, as he wrote to a friend, free of “any trace of a way of thinking inclined to the miraculous.” Yet he admitted to being interested in Swedenborg, especially because the man’s powers of clairvoyance seemed to have been vouched for by credible witnesses.

Kant had a lot in common with the Swedish mystic. He, too, was a northern European, a Protestant, and a man of science. At a time when philosophy and “natural philosophy”—the scholarly pursuits that developed into today’s natural sciences—were not yet entirely separate, Kant published work not only about metaphysics and ethics but also about physics, cosmology, and earthquakes. In his first book, “Thoughts on the True Estimation of Living Forces,” published in 1749, Kant wondered how the human body, which is entirely material and physical, is related to the human mind, which doesn’t seem to be. “How is it

possible for a force that produces only motions to generate representations and ideas?” he asked.

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But, if what Swedenborg wrote was true, spirit and matter might not be so divided, after all. Kant ordered Swedenborg's books from London and told a friend that he was waiting for them with longing. Yet when he eventually wrote about Swedenborg, in the short book "Dreams of a Spirit-Seer" (1766), it was with sarcasm. The Swedish mystic, Kant now believed, was "the worst of all dreamers," his books "utterly empty of the last drop of reason." The real source of Swedenborg's visions, Kant joked, was bad digestion: "If a wind should rage in the guts, what matters is the direction it takes. If downwards, then the result is a fart; if upwards, an apparition or a heavenly inspiration."

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Still, reading Swedenborg hadn't been a complete waste of time, because it led Kant to an important truth. Swedenborg had convinced himself that the spirit could, like matter, be perceived with the senses, but Kant concluded that the task of philosophy was to distinguish those two realms—to show what kinds of truths we can hope to know from experience, and what kinds we can only ever imagine

or make up stories about. “Metaphysics,” he wrote, “is the science of the boundaries of human reason.”

That may not exactly sound like a call to arms, but the title of an expert and engaging new introduction to the philosopher encourages us to think otherwise. “Kant: A Revolution in Thinking” (Harvard), by Marcus Willaschek, translated by Peter Lewis, argues that what made Kant revolutionary was his contention that to understand anything—science, justice, freedom, God—we first have to understand ourselves. Willaschek, one of the world’s leading authorities on Kant and the editor of the standard German edition of Kant’s works, writes, “Kant placed the human at the center of his thought like no other philosopher before him.” As Willaschek demonstrates, Kant believed that his ideas would change humanity’s understanding of its place in the world as profoundly as the Copernican revolution had changed our sense of Earth’s place in the cosmos.

And they did, for philosophy at least, igniting the most fertile period in Western thought since Plato and Aristotle. Willaschek offers a gauge of Kant’s influence by looking at the term “critique,” which Kant used in the titles of his three major books: the “Critique of Pure Reason” (1781), the “Critique of Practical Reason” (1788), and the “Critique of Judgment” (1790). At the time, the word *Kritik* was a relatively new addition to the German language, and Kant was the first to use it in a title. Today, Willaschek writes, “the catalog of the German National Library contains no fewer than twenty-four thousand works with the word ‘Kritik’ in their titles.”

More broadly, he observes, Kant’s ideas about the mind shaped the development of “psychology, anthropology, and the more recent social sciences.” In the twentieth century, philosophers of science grappled with Kant as they tried to make sense of the baffling discoveries of relativity and quantum physics. The

American transcendentalists took their name from one of Kant's key technical terms: "I apply the term transcendental," he wrote, "to all knowledge which is not so much occupied with objects as with the mode of our cognition of these objects." Ralph Waldo Emerson was thus waxing Kantian when he declared, "I become a transparent Eyeball; I am nothing; I see all."

The central insight that these disparate thinkers took from Kant is that the world isn't simply a thing, or a collection of things, given to us to perceive. Rather, our minds help create the reality we experience. In particular, Kant argued that time, space, and causality, which we ordinarily take for granted as the most basic aspects of the world, are better understood as forms *imposed* on the world by the human mind.

The parallel with Copernicus turns out to be apt. Before Copernicus and Kepler and Galileo, people assumed that the sun and the planets revolved around the Earth, and justifiably so—that's how it appears to us when we look up at the sky. It took a lot of close observation and ingenious reasoning for astronomers to understand that this was a trick of perspective, and that in fact it is the Earth that revolves around the sun. Similarly, it is natural for human beings to assume that the way the world appears to us—extended in three dimensions, constantly moving from the past into the future, changing as its different elements interact—is the way it really is. But, Kant maintained, this is also a trick of perspective. Space and time do not exist objectively, only subjectively, as forms of our experience. He wrote that it is "from the human point of view only that we can speak of space, extended objects, etc."

This thinking led Kant to a more pessimistic conclusion than Copernicus's. Whereas humanity did eventually arrive at a correct understanding of the solar system, it is impossible for us to ever know "things in themselves"—what Kant called "noumena." We have access only to "phenomena"—the way things look to us, given the kind of mind we have. "What things may be in themselves, I know

not and need not know, because a thing is never presented to me otherwise than as a phenomenon,” Kant insisted.

This is an “unsettling” message, Willaschek writes: “It seems to rob all the things around us of their solidity, so to speak, and to transform them into mere figments of our imagination.” In fact, Kant didn’t intend to make us doubt the evidence of our senses. Instead, he reasoned, it is because all human beings experience the world through the same categories of time and space that scientific knowledge is possible. Science claims to deal with the world only as we perceive it, not as it is “in itself,” and to that extent it is completely reliable. Anyone who measures an object in free fall in a vacuum will find that it accelerates at thirty-two feet per second squared; we don’t have to worry that this is a “figment of our imagination.”

But Kant’s theory of knowledge poses a serious problem for any kind of religion or philosophy that claims to tell us about ultimate truths and eternal essences, such as God. If our minds are unable to reach beyond the limits of time and space, then metaphysical knowledge is a contradiction in terms. “The notion of a Supreme Being is in many respects a highly useful idea,” Kant granted, but it is only an idea. “It is incapable of enlarging our cognition with regard to the existence of things.”

Is it possible to live a meaningful existence in the absence of God and other absolute truths? This would become the central question for modern Western thought, and it was Kant who first posed it in all its complexity. The answer he offered was actually more hopeful than those of many writers who came after him. He believed that it was possible to live a good and moral life while accepting the boundaries of our understanding. But he was certain that, in philosophy as in astronomy, the “discovery of our deficiencies must produce a great change in the determination of the aims of human reason.”

Such a revolutionary ambition was fitting for a philosopher who did his most important work in the age of the American and French Revolutions. Yet in his personal life Kant was the opposite of rebellious. Willaschek organizes his book around themes—with chapters devoted to Kant’s ideas on education, revolution, wit, science, and even extraterrestrials (he believed that they *must* exist)—rather than chronologically, mainly because Kant’s biography is terrifically dull.

He was born in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad), a bustling but remote port town, in 1724, and died there in 1804. Apart from a couple of teaching stints in nearby towns, he never lived anywhere else or even visited another city. He never married, saying that by the time he earned enough money to support a wife he no longer wanted one. There is no evidence that he ever had a love affair or a sexual encounter.

The central relationship of Kant’s life was with the University of Königsberg, where he enrolled as a student at the age of sixteen and taught for forty-one years, with a few years’ break when he worked as a private tutor. This was an era when most professors weren’t paid salaries, living instead on lecture fees from students. Unlike some of his colleagues, Kant had no family money to fall back on—his father was a poor saddle-maker—so, as Willaschek writes, he lectured on “logic, metaphysics, mathematics, and physics, and later supplemented these subjects with several others: physical geography, mineralogy, mechanics, general philosophy, practical philosophy, ethics, anthropology, natural law, natural theology, and pedagogy.” He was far from expert on all of these subjects, but what mattered was quantity. Kant taught for eighty-two consecutive semesters without a pause, initially for up to twenty-four hours a week, though later in his career he cut back to sixteen.

All this does not mean that he was a hermit or a bore. Kant had an active social life and was known for being well dressed. He emphasized this sociability to a younger philosopher when admonishing him for spending too much time with books; only by being in the world was it possible to educate oneself, Kant insisted.

Later in life, though, he became more withdrawn as he focussed on writing: all his most important books were published after he turned fifty-five.

Perhaps the best-known thing about Kant as a person is that he was so regular in his habits that the people of Königsberg set their watches by his evening walk. Like many emblematic stories about famous people, this turns out to be not quite true. It was actually Kant's good friend Joseph Green, an English merchant, who was fanatically punctual; a Königsberg wit wrote a satirical play, "The Man of the Clock," that is thought to be based on him. Kant's biographer Manfred Kuehn writes that "the neighbors could set their clocks in accordance with the time at which Kant left Green's house in the evening" because Green had an ironclad rule: "at seven o'clock the visit was over."



"We've met, Steve. It's me. I'm a good boy."

Cartoon by Sofia Warren



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By 1792, when France deposed King Louis XVI and proclaimed a republic, Kant was nearly seventy and had spent decades living sedately among Königsberg's "better," often aristocratic, social circles." It would have made perfect sense if he had joined them in deploring "the dispossession, expulsion, and murder of the French nobility," Willaschek writes. Yet he made no secret of sympathizing with the Revolution, quoting what the aged Simeon said about the birth of Jesus in the Gospels: "Lord, you may now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen

your salvation.” For Kant, the Revolution seemed to put into practice the ideal that he placed at the center of his own thought: emancipation—setting human beings free so that they could be in charge of their own lives.

In 1784, after a German magazine cheekily asked if anyone could define the fashionable term “enlightenment,” Kant rose to the challenge with an essay that is now possibly his most widely read work. Called “Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?,” it begins with a simple but thrilling definition: “Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage.”

Tutelage is the condition of being a minor in need of a guardian. Throughout history, Kant says, that is how most human beings have thought of themselves. Afraid to trust their own judgment, they have looked to authorities to tell them what to do. “If I have a book which understands for me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a physician who decides my diet, and so forth, I need not trouble myself,” Kant writes. But, at last, ordinary people were starting to realize that they have the right and the ability to think for themselves. “Have courage to use your own reason!—that is the motto of enlightenment,” he proclaims.

The goal of the French revolutionaries was liberty, but Kant’s ideal was significantly different. He called it “autonomy,” from the Greek words for “self” and “law.” Liberty implies a lack of constraint; we are free when no one can stop us from doing what we want. Autonomy means living by rules that we choose to accept because we decide that they are reasonable. As Kant puts it, a free will is “subject to the law, of which it can regard itself as the author.”

“For Kant,” Willaschek writes, “it is this autonomy of humans, the capacity to impose moral laws upon ourselves, that forms the basis of our special dignity.” Accordingly, he formulated an entirely new definition of morality, one that has

been enormously influential in the modern world, even though in some ways it is deeply counterintuitive.

If you asked an ordinary European in Kant's lifetime what makes an action wrong, the answer would probably have involved God. Things like murder, theft, and adultery are wrong because they are sins, prohibited by God in the Bible, and sinners are punished in this world or the next. Many people today would say the same thing. Another kind of answer focusses on consequences: an action is wrong if it causes people to suffer. This idea is rooted in basic human sympathy, but in the nineteenth century it would be systematized as utilitarianism—the idea that the standard of morality is what brings the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people.

Kant's understanding of right and wrong is far more abstract, having nothing to do with piety or pain. In "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals"—one of his more accessible books, though he acknowledged that it had a "horrifying title"—he argues that actions themselves can't be described as good or evil. Those terms can be applied only to the human will, which is free to decide how to act in any situation. "It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will," Kant writes.

Ordinarily, we think of good will as a kind of emotion: a person of good will is happy when other people are happy. But, for Kant, emotion is irrelevant to morality. In fact, he believes that if you do the right thing because it makes you happy you don't have a truly good will, because you are acting out of a kind of self-interest. The only thing that should determine how we act is a pure sense of duty. When a man "does [an] action without any inclination for the sake of duty alone, then for the first time his action has its genuine moral worth," Kant writes.

We owe this duty not to God or to other people but to our own reason. Every time we face a moral choice, Kant argues, we should think as if we were

lawmakers, drawing up a rule, or “maxim,” for all of humanity to follow. If our reason approves of this maxim, then we are obligated to follow it, whether it benefits us personally or not. This is Kant’s famous “categorical imperative,” which he considers the essence of morality: “I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law.”

Kant offers a few examples of how this works in practice. “May I not, when I am hard pressed, make a promise with the intention of not keeping it?” he asks. For instance, can I borrow money knowing that I will not be able to pay it back? One way of answering that question is to look at what would be good for me in the long term. If I default on a debt, no one will lend me money in the future, so my own self-interest tells me not to borrow on false pretenses.

But to refrain from making a false promise for this reason would not be moral, Kant argues, because I would be acting “solely on fear of consequences,” not out of reason and duty. To act morally, I need to ask what would happen if everyone acted the way I do. And in a world where everyone makes promises that they do not intend to keep, Kant argues, “there could properly be no promises at all,” since no one would ever trust anyone else’s word.

This logical contradiction shows that when I break a promise I am not acting like a legislator, making rules for everyone to follow. What I really want is for everyone to follow the rule except for me, so that I can benefit by exploiting others’ trust. Kant insists that we have a duty to follow the categorical imperative even if it results in physical harm. In an essay from 1797, he considered a scenario in which a man allows a friend who is being pursued by a murderer to hide in his house. If the murderer comes to the door and asks where the intended victim is, does the man have a moral obligation to reveal the truth?

Surprisingly, Kant says yes—not because the murderer has a right to know the truth but because no human being ever has the right to lie. “To be truthful in all declarations is . . . a sacred unconditional command of reason, and not to be limited by any expediency,” he writes.

Although Kant’s definition of morality isn’t derived from religion, it makes the same kind of demand as many faiths: it urges us to forget our selves. Indeed, he compares this idea to “the passages from Scripture in which we are commanded to love our neighbor and even our enemy.”

It’s no coincidence that Kant ended up reformulating a religious ethic in rational terms. His work had two complementary goals: one destructive, the other constructive. In the “Critique of Pure Reason,” he shows that humanity cannot ever know the things we want to know most—about God, free will, and the true nature of reality. This was the achievement that earned him the sobriquet the All-Crushing Kant, leaving no traditional dogma standing.

But then, in the “Critique of Practical Reason” and the “Groundwork,” Kant turned to rebuilding. Reason and freedom, he argued, offer a better foundation for human life than authority and tradition. They can supply us with a sterner morality, a more just politics, and even a more peaceful international order. For Kant, putting “the human at the center of his thought” was, as Willaschek writes, an act of faith in our ability to live according to reason.

This faith is all the more moving at a time like our own, when the ideal of human reason is under attack both politically and technologically. Willaschek is concerned mainly with the first challenge; his primary motive in writing about Kant for a general readership is to ask how he can help us defend “our whole conception of liberal, rules-based democracies in the West.” In Europe, and especially in Germany, Kant has long served as a symbol and patron saint of the postwar liberal order. In the seventeen-nineties, he argued for democracy, cosmopolitanism, and the settlement of international disputes through “a

permanent congress of nations” instead of war. Two centuries later, the West, after destroying itself with irrational hatreds, finally seemed ready to put those ideals into practice, in the form of the United Nations and the European Union.

But now the Kantian consensus seems to be crumbling. Democratic countries are embracing authoritarian leaders; anti-immigration movements are insisting on exclusive national identities; and the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought war back to a continent that had grown used to what Kant called “perpetual peace.” In April, 2024, Olaf Scholz, then the Chancellor of Germany, marked the philosopher’s three-hundredth birthday with a speech attacking Vladimir Putin as the archenemy, not just of Ukraine and the West but of Kant personally —“diametrically opposed to all of his notions of human rights, freedom, autonomy and the dignity of each and every human being.”

At the same time, the rise of artificial intelligence is posing a quieter but even more profound challenge to Kantian humanism. Willaschek has less to say about Kant’s scientific legacy than he does about his political legacy, but both depend on Kant’s belief in the uniqueness of the human mind. “Man,” he wrote in the “Critique of Pure Reason,” is “the only animal that seems to be excepted” from the natural laws that govern plants and animals, because only we are capable of free thought and free will.

But the advance of A.I. technology may soon put an end to our species’ monopoly on mind. If computers can think, does that mean that they are also free moral agents, worthy of dignity and rights? Or does it mean, on the contrary, that human minds were never as free as Kant believed—that we are just biological machines that flatter ourselves by thinking we are something more? And if fundamental features of the world like time and space are creations of the human mind, as Kant argued, could artificial minds inhabit entirely different realities,

built on different principles, that we will never fully understand? These kinds of questions are discussed in the 2022 anthology “Kant and Artificial Intelligence,” in which one contributor observes, “You can easily get the impression that much of contemporary cognitive science is heavily influenced by Kant’s philosophy.”

Of course, it is impossible to draw a straight line from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first, or to say with certainty what Kant would have thought about Ukraine or ChatGPT. As Willaschek writes, “Kant does not offer any ready-made solutions to the questions of our age.” But what makes a philosopher great isn’t that they have all the answers; it is that they help us formulate our most important questions, even ones that they could never have anticipated. Kant, Willaschek says, “challenges us to critically examine them for ourselves and form our own judgment.” Perhaps the Kantian idea hardest to accept today is his confidence that humanity is able to do such difficult things, and wants to. ♦

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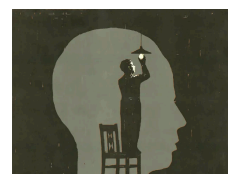
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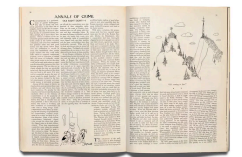


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