

**Introduction**

1. Syllabus. Annotate with “A” and “B” marginal pagination.

Other post-CPR writings by or from Kant too, falling into three classes:

(i) **minor publications** derived from lectures on logic, anthropology, and religion (you might find the first two of some use)

(ii) *Nachlaß* : the notes Kant wrote for his lectures and various other jottings and sketches, including an important unfinished work left at his death known as the *Opus Postumum*

(iii) **Lectures notes taken by students** in Kant’s courses.

The complete edition of Kant’s philosophical writings as it stands to date (more is to come) of **29** huge volumes, including **nine** volumes of **published material**, three volumes of correspondence, **eleven** volumes of **notes** and other materials Kant left unpublished, and so far **three** volumes of notes taken by Kant’s **students**.

2. Kant published the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, at the age 57: very late by the standards of most philosophers: Berkeley and Hume had written their most important works by their mid-twenties, virtually all other great philosophers by their mid-forties; the only comparable case to Kant is that of John Locke, who published his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in 1689 also at the age of 57.

3. The *Critique of Pure Reason* also had an enormously long gestation period. What is known as the **pre-Critical period** of Kant’s career came to an end in **1770** with the composition of the treatise known as the *Inaugural Dissertation*. This is the earliest work Kant was willing to include in his authorized edition of the complete works.

4. Before then, Kant had written numerous short texts in **philosophy** and **science**. From the start, he was concerned with the questions that were to occupy him in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but his early efforts, though good enough to earn him a reputation as one of the best philosophers of the day, are not of enduring significance.

They are not original enough, they are tentative, they constantly run aground on ill-formulated questions and inadequate answers. In accordance with Kant’s wishes, and good sense, we shall ignore them in this course.

5. The *Inaugural Dissertation* is another matter. I recommend it to you, but I do not require you to read it. Everything in it Kant considered to be of lasting value was taken over into the *Critique* in a much improved form; and the rest he discarded as a relic of the time when he was still too much under the influence of **Leibniz** and **Wolff**.

6. Kant wrote the *Dissertation* in a hurry. It was the sort of work required of anyone upon elevation to the rank of professor. Kant had only a very short time to put it together, and this at a time when his ideas were undergoing profound and rapid change.

The change dates from the publication of a work by **Leibniz** in 1765 called the *New Essays on Human Understanding*. This is a work Leibniz wrote towards the end of his life, for the purpose of engaging the English philosopher John **Locke** in correspondence; when he learned of Locke's death in 1704 he stopped work at it even though it was very nearly complete, and never tried to publish it. It then languished among the mountain of papers Leibniz left at his death in 1716 (some of which are still appearing), not to be rediscovered and published until 1765.

7. The *New Essays* is written as a dialogue, one character representing the **empiricist/materialist** view (Locke), the other the **rationalist/idealist** (Leibniz). Although Kant knew both philosophers thoroughly and there was nothing terribly new in the work, the juxtaposition and confrontation of these two philosophies rekindled his then waning interest in metaphysics and epistemology by persuading him of the need to find a third way: a path that was neither empiricist nor rationalist, which saved the existence of matter but without giving it unlimited, unqualified validity. So, he set aside his scientific work and applied himself to the task of finding a new way forward in philosophy.

8. The *Inaugural Dissertation* represents the first fruit of this endeavor. In it, Kant distinguishes **two worlds**, a **sensible** world which we know by means of experience and an **intelligible** world knowable only by pure reason; the first is ideal, existing only relative to humans (our sensory and psychological make-up), the second being the true reality, of which our knowledge is very limited and uncertain.

To that extent, the theory is very like Leibniz. But there is one topic that divided empiricists and rationalists on which Kant did make a revolutionary breakthrough in this tract: **space and time**. The theory of space and time is the main survivor from the *Dissertation* – it is introduced early on in the *CPR* as the foundation for all that follows, just as, after finishing the *Dissertation*, it was the essential starting point for the reflections on which Kant embarked and which took an entire decade to reach fruition.

9. It is virtually impossible – although that hasn't prevented many from trying – to reconstruct the development of Kant's thought during the period between the *Dissertation* and the actual composition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which took a mere six months. Initially, Kant expected it to require only a short time to rewrite and expand the *Dissertation* into a treatise suitable for publication. But new thoughts kept arising at this point, forcing him to postpone its completion. To those expecting his ms. he begged their patience for a few more months. Then when that time passed, he assured everyone that his text would soon be ready, that all the major questions had been solved and only a few details needed to be settled. That again proved too optimistic. Then he more or less fell silent and throughout the course of the 1770s said little and published virtually nothing.

10. Among the few revealing tidbits of information from this period is a letter Kant wrote to a young friend of his, Marcus Herz, in Feb. 1772. He informed his correspondent that he had discovered that the account of metaphysical concepts like cause and effect given in the *Dissertation* "still lacked something essential." There he had maintained that these concepts cannot have their origin in experience; they must rather be originally present in the mind. But this provokes a question which he failed to take sufficiently seriously in the *Dissertation*: "if such

intellectual representations depend on our inner activity, when comes the agreement that they are supposed to have with objects?" The problem arises because of the absence of any causal connection between representation and object. The solution Kant settled on is one where the understanding itself, through its pure concepts, is the creator of those very objects we experience – but only as we experience them, the forms of their existence, but not the objects as they exist in themselves, distinct from the forms under which we experience them. So, again we get two worlds, a world of things that appear and a world of things as they really are; but the difference between the CPR and the *Dissertation* is that the pure concepts of the understanding are useless for knowing things as they are in themselves, whereas in relation to things as appearances – and this includes the whole of material reality as well as our self – they are constitutive of the objects – they produce nature as we experience it.

11. As Kant makes clear in the Preface to the *Prolegomena* (which I have placed on your first reading assignment), it was his recollection of the Scottish philosopher **David Hume's** treatment of the concept of cause and effect that set his alarm bells ringing and led him to formulate his problem clearly (Kant writes of Hume's wakening him from a dogmatic slumber).

Hume questioned whether this or any metaphysical concept exists. He too realized that such concepts cannot be acquired from experience, but he also came up with arguments that Kant found irrefutable to show, first, that pure reason too cannot be the source of these concepts, and second, that even if it were, there is nothing reason alone can do that can prove or otherwise guarantee that these concepts have the slightest objective validity (whether there is anything in reality that it is true of). For even if it is true that it is necessary for us to *think* that every object has a cause, what do objects care how our natures oblige us to think them? *Thinking* something to be so does not make it actually *be* so; and this is just as true of those thoughts our natures oblige us to think about objects: just because we have to *think* of the objects so doesn't in any way entail that the objects themselves have to *be* so.

12. By the time of the letter to Herz Kant had a neat solution to Hume's first point – that pure reason is not a source of metaphysical concepts – that appears for the first time in the *Critique*. But it was the second point that caused him most trouble: explaining how it is an object can conform to a concept that neither is caused by it nor causes it. Although Kant rejected Hume's solution to the problem, which involved substituting ersatz psychological surrogates which are obtained from experience in the place of genuine metaphysical concepts, he could envision no solution that did not limit the application of these concepts to objects given in experience, that is, to objects insofar as they are experienced. Beyond experience, these concepts have no validity of objects.

13. This is where the idea of a critique of pure reason arises. The traditional conception of **pure reason** views it as a means for obtaining objective knowledge that does not depend on experience and so permits us to know things that experience alone could never teach us, esp. objective proof of the existence of God, of the freedom of the will, and of the immortality of the soul. For example, it purports to prove the existence of God by arguing that an endless causal regress, where the cause of each effect is itself the effect of some prior cause, is, if analyzed carefully, inconsistent with the principle that everything has a cause.

However, if, as both Hume and Kant supposed, the principle that every existence must have a cause has validity of objects only so far as they are experienced by us, and not independently of their relation to our experiencing consciousness, then pure reason cannot utilize the principle beyond the scope of experience. And since an uncaused cause is something we can never meet with in experience, it follows that pure reason simply lacks the competence to form any judgment about the existence of God in this manner. In this manner, reason is chastened, humbled, but in such a way as to make room for faith.

14. Kant promised Herz that he would have his a treatise containing his worked-out solution to the problem of the objective validity of metaphysical concepts ready by the end of the year. That was 1772. Matters continued this way through 1773, 1774, 1775, and so on till 1781, the year in which his silence ended.

15. Once the *CPR* appeared, it was the world that seemed to fall silent, while Kant waited impatiently for a response of some sort. He had already established his reputation as a major thinker in Germany and his book had been eagerly anticipated by philosophers there; so it was not at all that his book was ignored. Yet, even Kant's friends remained silent.

16. It was not just the novelty of Kant's ideas, and his declared opposition to all the prevailing philosophical schools of the time, that caused the problems. It was also the sheer the difficulty of his thought, which remains just as daunting to philosophers today as it was then (not to mention students). Kant's writing is unique. It is extremely **dense** and at the same time so **abstract** that, although its genius is unmistakable, it can be almost indecipherable. A whole industry has grown up around Kant interpretation, but one could be forgiven for thinking that its main result has been to multiply disagreements and make matters even obscurer.

The problems do not stem from lack of information or ill-formulation; there are indeed lacunæ, possibly a few inconsistencies, but the problem really lies with the extreme difficulty of the thought itself. There simply is no simple, straightforward way to understand him; one can only do one's best, go as far into the complexity as one can, but in the end you may finish this course with as little clear idea of what Kant is saying as when you began it.

17. These problems were compounded for Kant's contemporaries. For in our time Kantian ideas are part of the very fabric of modern thought; whether you know or not, you have been exposed to them from a wide variety of sources, even in this misological country. For, in the two centuries since the *CPR* was published, virtually every major strand of philosophical thought has been shaped by its relation to Kant: phenomenology, existentialism, scientific naturalism, logical positivism, and on and on; and from here it has spilled over into other disciplines and eventually trickled down to the very language and institutions of our society. So, for us, at some level or other, Kant is at least familiar, if still obscure. But in the 1780s he was something so totally new that no one knew how even to begin to place him.

18. For the first few years, only a couple of reviews appeared, but nothing more (the *PFM* ends with an appendix in which Kant castigates a reviewer – one's sympathies go out to the reviewer). The importance of the *Critique* was sensed but not understood; so except for scattered reading groups, the *Critique* met with little response from major thinkers of the day, and indeed by 1785

powerful resistance was beginning to form. It began to look as if the CPR might sink without first making a splash – a work much honored without being much read.

19. Things changed shortly after owing to an event that had very little to do CPR itself. One of the most important thinkers of Enlightenment Germany was **Lessing**. Among other things, he promoted tolerance for Jews, and Moses **Mendelssohn** was a dear and close friend (a long-time correspondent of Kant's too, Mendelssohn was a major thinker of the day, working very much within the tradition of Leibniz and Wolff).

At the time Lessing was dying, he was visited by a philosopher named **Jacobi**, to whom Lessing seems to have made a kind of confession: that he was a Spinozist. Now, to associate oneself with Spinoza in that period was to court accusations of heresy, of being a menace to the order and well-being of society, and in general of being an enemy to all things moral, ethical, and religious. This is curious because no philosopher ever assigned a greater role to God than Spinoza; but that is no matter – his name had come to be synonymous with the most dangerous sort of anti-religious atheism.

Jacobi published the notes he made from his conversations with Lessing after Lessing's death, in support of his (Jacobi's) own view that the single-minded devotion to reason would lead inevitably to Spinozism, and so to atheism and skepticism. In the tradition of certain strands of skeptical thought, Jacobi held that reason is self-nullifying: if left to its own devices without assistance from nature and from faith, it must inevitably founder. This, he claimed, happened to Lessing, and the message was clear: reason must not be elevated too high, but kept under the control of nature and faith.

Lessing's friends objected strenuously to the use Jacobi made of Lessing, just barely stopping short of branding him a liar. Mendelssohn, among others, published a response, which led to a brief public controversy, which seemed to end when Mendelssohn died (1786). However, Lessing's admirers remained concerned that the attribution of Spinozism to Lessing, if left unchecked, would tempt youths down that dangerous path, turn them against reason and toleration, an eventually bring about a new darker age. Reason needed a prominent defender and Lessing's friends summoned Kant to the lists. As a friend of Mendelssohn, if not to his views, they asked Kant to agree to speak out publicly.

Kant acceded, but in the process made clear that the real alternative to both Spinozism and Mendelssohn's Leibnizianism was his own new critical philosophy: this alone could save reason without threatening religion, this alone could preserve human freedom with denying that everything happens by a cause according to some law of nature.

20. The upshot was that by thus interfering in a major public controversy, Kant himself became controversial and, thanks to all this publicity, people began to take sides for and against *his* work. This meant that they had to read it and understand it; and this meant that the small band of Kantians that then existed found the doors of universities open to them and found students flocking to their lectures. From this point forward, the *Critique* assumed its place in the pantheon, becoming the dominant thought first in Germany and later throughout Europe.

21. Kant lived more than twenty years after completing the CPR, and published continually during that period. By the 1790s, major new thinkers came forward who sought to carry on Kant's work, the most important of whom was **Fichte**. After Kant publicly disavowed Fichte, the latter began

to advance his views in his own voice (until then he claimed only to be an exponent of Kantianism). Then two of Fichte's pupils achieved fame by building new philosophies on the foundations laid by Kant: **Schelling** and **Hegel**. And from Hegel (as much by opposition as anything else) were spawned existentialism and Marxism.

22. Hegel marks the end of the first phase of Kant's influence. Though it continued to be powerful after Hegel, there were not any philosophers of genius around to carry forward the Hegel line or to discover new aspects of Kant. This occurred in the second half of the 19th century, feeding into the two streams that today are called **analytic philosophy** and **continental philosophy**. The fountainheads of these two traditions – **Frege** and **Husserl** – were both profoundly influenced by Kantian thought: the problems he identified became their problems, the lines he sketched for solving them became their framework, and so forth. In addition, there was an important line of philosophers of science at the time who were so powerfully influenced by Kant as to become known as **Neo-Kantians**.

All in all, no one could philosophize in the 19th century without taking a position on Kant, either to build on his work or to try to tear it down. This is even true to this day; perhaps no philosopher of the past can be said to remain so vital and potent a stimulus as Kant: and this despite, or perhaps because, of the fact that no one is terribly clear about what he was saying.