

Immanuel Kant

Great German philosophers
whose influence was and continues to be immense;
born in Königsberg East Prussia, in 1724,
died there in 1804

His life, philosophy and views.



Kant's home →

Königsberg, with Kant's house in the front/left and the castle in the background

Kant with consulting visitors



Konigsberg is known today as Kaliningrad which is next to the NE border of Poland near the coast of the Baltic sea.

Kant was impressed by science and was a competent physicist, astronomer, geologist and mathematician.

He was deeply influenced by David Hume which I noted last time and also by Rousseau.

(I drew most of the material for this talk from the notable book, which greatly influenced the process of my de-conversion in 1968, *Six Secular Philosophers* by Lewis White Beck. The list of his works was drawn from the current EB DVD.)

The religious influence in Kant's life came from the sect known as the Pietists. Pietism was a religious movement in Germany somewhat like Methodism, which appeared later in England. The Pietists, or at least those Pietists close to Kant's own humble family, placed great and indeed almost exclusive emphasis upon upright behavior and simple faith, and they had no truck with ritualism or theological dispute.

Later, when he attended school, he was exposed to a more excessive kind of Pietism with an overemphasis upon public worship and on the depravity of little boys who did not gladly take to it; and it so bored and offended him that from that time on he never voluntarily entered a church and never had much good to say for the organized forms of religion, though he remained abreast of theological literature.

Now I'll move onto his philosophical ideas.

Had a mass of publications

(1755; Kant's Cosmogony . . . , 1900 and 1968; Universal Natural History and Theories of the Heavens, 1969);

(1755; Eng. trans. by F.E. England in Kant's Conception of God, 1929);

(1762; trans. in Kant's Introduction to Logic and His Essay on the Mistaken Subtilty of the Four Figures, 1963);

(1763; Enquiry into the Proofs for the Existence of God, 1836);

(1763; An Attempt to Introduce the Conception of Negative Quantities into Philosophy, 1911);

(1764, 1766, 1771; Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime, 1960);

(1766; Dreams of a Spirit-Seer, Illustrated by Dreams of Metaphysics, 1900; Dreams of a Spirit Seer, and Other Related Writings, 1969);

(1770; Kant's Inaugural Dissertation and Early Writings on Space, 1929)

(1781; rev. ed., Kritik der reinen Vernunft, 1787; **Critique of Pure Reason**, 1929, 1950);

(1783; **Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics**, 1951);

(1785; The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics, 1938; The Moral Law; or, Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals, 1948; **Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals**, 1969);

(1786; Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science, 1970);

(1788; **Critique of Practical Reason**, 1949);

(1790, 2nd ed. 1793; Kant's Kritik of Judgment, 1892, reprinted as Kant's Critique . . ., 1914; new version, Critique . . ., vol. 1, Kant's **Critique of Aesthetic Judgment** and vol. 2, Critique of Teleological Judgment, 1911–28, republished 1952);

(1793; 2nd ed., 4 pt., 1794; Religion Within the Boundary of Pure Reason, 1838; **Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone**, 2nd ed., 1960)

Major works of primary interest to us

- **Critique of Pure Reason;**
- **Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics;**
- **The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics;**
- **Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals;**
- **Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science;**
- **Critique of Practical Reason;**
- **Critique of Judgement, Aesthetic Judgement and vol. 2, Critique of Teleological Judgement;**
- **Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone**

His most important book was the *Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1781. This vast and difficult masterpiece of philosophy had as one of its purposes to show that human knowledge is not able to extend to things **which cannot be experienced**. In this respect, Kant's conclusions are somewhat like those of Hume, but they are reached by a very different route.

Kant denies that we can have any knowledge of God. Philosophers who had believed that they could prove the existence of God had transgressed the limits Kant found in knowledge. But instead of just writing off these proofs as illegitimate because they belonged to metaphysics, Kant showed, by long and intricate arguments, that the proofs for the existence of God are fallacious.

There are three classical arguments for the existence of God, and Kant examines each. They are:

- the ontological;
- the cosmological;
- and the teleological (or argument from design).

Read from notes

Ontological argument

The ontological argument was meant to prove the existence of God from the definition of God as a perfect being. Any characteristic (predicate) which is implied by the definition of a thing must apply to it. A perfect being, the argument runs, must possess all perfections, for otherwise it would not be perfect. Existence is a perfection; therefore God exists. Just as "triangle that does not have three sides" is a self-contradictory concept, so also "non-existent perfect being" is said to be self-contradictory.

Kant refutes this argument by showing that "exists" is not a predicate at all, and therefore it cannot be a predicate of a perfect being, even if a perfect being should in fact exist. Though in grammar the word "existent" is as good a predicate as the word "perfect" and each obeys all the grammatical rules for the use of adjectives, logically, from the standpoint of how these words behave in inference, they are quite different.

When one says of something that it exists, one is not ascribing a property to it, as when he says it is blue or it is perfect; a concept of a non-existent thing x contains all the predicates that the concept of an existing x contains, for "existence" is not a predicate contained in, and therefore to be proved by, a concept.

Kant's demonstration of this is sound, but it is very complicated—Kant is never easy to read—so we shall present a modern version of the critique of the ontological argument which is simpler and easier to follow.

Post talk addition for better communication

The question is: Is a judgment that asserts that something exists, e.g., "Cats exist," logically like one that ascribes a predicate to a thing, e.g., "Cats scratch"? If they are not logically as well as grammatically similar, then "exist" is not a predicate that can be found by analyzing another predicate, like "perfect." Take, says Professor C.D. Broad, a true statement, "Cats scratch." We can reformulate this sentence, and we find that the person who makes it means one of the following:

- (a1) If there were any cats, they would scratch; or
- (a2) There are cats, and they do scratch.

Now, on the assumption that "exists" is a predicate like "scratches," let us translate the sentence "Cats exist." We get:

- (b1) if there were any cats, they would exist; or
- (b2) There are cats, and they do exist.

Now (b1) is necessarily true whether there are cats or not, and it does not tell us that there are cats. And (b2) tells us that there are cats, twice. But if a man says "Cats scratch" and "Cats exist," he is saying something which is instructive

Post talk addition for better communication

—i.e., it gives us information—and which happens to be true but which might have been false. Yet if we think "Cats exist" is logically like "Cats scratch," i.e., if we think "exist" is a predicate like "scratch," we would really be saying something uninformative (b2) or something necessarily true whether there are cats or not (b1).

We now apply this paradigm to the judgements "God is perfect" and "God exists."
Translating as before:

(c1) If there were a God, He would be perfect; or
(c2) There is a God, and He is perfect.

(d1) If there were a God, He would exist; or
(d2) There is a God, and He exists.

But none of these proves that God does exist: (d1) is a tautology and is true whether God exists or not; (d2) merely tells us, twice, that God does exist. There is no way to go, logically, from (c1) to (c2) or from (c1) to (d2).

Post talk addition for better communication

The error of the ontological argument, therefore, is as follows. If "exists" is a predicate, then all statements that a thing exists (like [b1], [b2], [d1] and [d2]) are either logically necessary or uninformative, merely repeating themselves. But this is not the kind of truth we mean when we say a thing exists. To find out whether a thing exists, we have to examine facts, not just do logic to find out if the statement that something exists is logically necessary like "a is a." Hence the ontological argument, since it implies a false conclusion about how we get knowledge of existing things, is invalid.

The talk went on to consider the **Cosmological** and the **Teleological** arguments, i.e. the argument from first cause and the argument from design. See the speaker's notes for details about these. Here I'll just quote here that Kant had a special regard for the argument from design reflected in these words:

deserves to be mentioned with respect. It is the oldest, the clearest, and the most accordant with the common reason of mankind. It enlivens the study of nature. . . . It suggests ends and purposes . . and extends our knowledge of nature by means of the guiding concept of a special unity, the principle of which is outside nature.

While he had this regard he nevertheless concluded it was invalid. *So about 250 years ago he showed that it is impossible to prove the existence of God.*

Post talk addition for better communication

The conclusion of the Critique of Pure Reason is that no theoretically valid arguments for the existence of God can be given, because Kant thought that these were the only three possible rational arguments. The Critique of Pure Reason did not deny the existence of God; it only denied that we could **know it**. He said: "I have found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith."

though Hume and Kant sound as though they were saying the same thing, in fact they were not. Hume **contrasts reason with faith**, and when he recommends faith he knows that it will be taken with the proper grain of salt. Kant **contrasts faith with knowledge**, not with reason, because he believed that there was a reasonable form of faith, faith that a rational man could not fail to have and remain rational in tracing out the implications of his experience. Such faith is rational but it is not knowledge; yet it is not a blind faith

When Kant makes room for rational faith in his philosophy, it is without the skeptical and perhaps ironic attitude with which Hume had recommended faith just a few years earlier. Faith for Hume, as for most theologians, is something outside the realm of reason; faith for Kant is only one of the aspects of reason, the other being knowledge.

Rational faith is based on morality, not on science and speculative philosophy. We must therefore look briefly at Kant's ethical theory as expounded in his second great work, the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Kant made a sharp distinction between actions which are moral and those which are merely proper or prudent.

Read from notes

How Kant rehabilitated the concept of God

He thought ...it is inconceivable that in a rational world, moral values should be permanently out of concord with our other legitimate values and inescapable desires, as they often seem to be in this vale of tears. The highest good in the world is not stark virtue, but happiness proportional to and dependent upon virtue. Virtue is not happiness, but it is worthiness to be happy

It was therefore for the sake of morality that Kant denied knowledge in order to make room for faith. The faith he provided a place for was not faith in contrast to reason, but faith as an adjunct to moral reason. It is rational, but it is not knowledge.

It is not even a substitute for knowledge. We do not go a certain distance toward God, as it were, along the path of knowledge, and then finish the journey by an act of faith, as in the philosophy of St. Thomas. The whole movement of the mind toward God is from the beginning a morally motivated movement, not scientifically motivated or guided. The resulting conception of God is a wholly ethical one. The only valid theology is ethico-theology, and all the attributes we properly ascribe to God are either moral (holiness, beneficence, justice) or are derived from them. This conception, Kant argues, is less anthropomorphic than that of those who use the argument from design, for we have a purely rational conception of moral attributes, independent of their embodiment in human form.

Kant held that there is an evolutionary progress in morality from a state of nature, in which there is war of each against all, through civil society in which men are held together in uneasy peace through the externally imposed decrees of a powerful ruler, to an ethical commonwealth, or a community in which men hold themselves together by their reverence for law and by trying to **treat each other as ends in themselves**. Moral law is then regarded as if it were a divine command, and the ethical commonwealth is a people united by common allegiance to a supposed author of these commands, namely God. The ethical commonwealth is, therefore, the Kingdom of God or the Church Invisible.

I mentioned that the purple highlighted phrase was a way of saying Kant's ***Categorical Imperative***. This says that any behaviour we choose to adopt must pass a test that we can logically allow to be universalised, that is, we can accept every other person in our community or the larger body politic or the world behaving in a similar manner.

Thus for example to behave dishonestly to get unfair benefits, like many bankers did leading up to the global financial crisis, cannot be universalised because if everyone so behaves the community would break up in disorder; which the global financial system did just that.

So behaving dishonestly does not meet the Categorical Imperative.

It is Kant's key synthetic a priori principle which can (should) be applied to our practical (behavioural) reasoning to determine whether or not one can act in a certain way and conform to morality.

It is thereby a basis for secular ethics.

From discussion which followed I agreed that Kant stands on one side of a divide in the theory ethics – in fact its primary representative. It exemplifies “deontological” ethics which focuses on logic and ethics in contrast to “teleological” ethics which focuses on the the rightness and wrongness of the consequences of behaviour.

Post talk addition for better communication

Kant thought Hume conflated two dimensions or distinctions: a priori/a posteriori with the analytic/synthetic. In the table below are some examples of where statement categories belong.

Judgements	A priori logical	A posteriori empirical
Analytic (sentences which are true by virtual of meaning of terms)	$6 \times 5 = 30$ A bachelor is an unmarried man	none (contradictory)
Synthetic (sentences which require experience of how the world works to understand)	Causal relationships (Hume put these under a posteriori and therefore uncertain. Kant argued that certain empirical relationships which require experience to understand are order imposed on experience by us).	The cat sat on the mat. The earth orbits the sun