

COSMOLOGY without HEADACHES

(Lecture Series)

(compiling, transcribing, researching, editing always in progress)

LECTURE XXI: Kant and the Transition toward the Crisis of Modernity

As we have seen in earlier discussions, just as the ancient pagans and the doctors of the Church feared, Reason, once disentangled from belief in the divine and in a revealed morality, has run amuck. In a few generations (relative to the age of mankind) she leapt from expectations of absolute knowledge, after Newton and Descartes, to the absurdity of absolute skepticism, with Hume advising doubt not only of God and traditional rules of social wellbeing but even of objects seemingly revealed through our senses—doubt even of thought itself, thus exposing Reason's unexpected incompetence; heralding her possible retirement as our guide to truth. At first reason seemed aligned with nature, providing laws of physics (Galileo, Newton, Boyle's gas law, etc.), rules useful for technological improvement; then giving us natural rights as individuals (Hobbes and Locke, et al)—arguments, at least, against the state's unquenchable thirst for control over society. But Hume rather quickly dashed any such hopes by showing not only that natural law could not be demonstrated but that reason leads to such skepticism as to bring science itself into question and to deny any knowledge or proof of God.

The very notion of reason, Hume thought, was itself ill-defined, and so was used in different ways depending on the subject at hand. What could truly qualify as reason?

1. Mathematics (pure reason):

Only limited parts of mathematics could be held to such rigor. Those truths Hume labeled 'formal implications': meaning simply that 'a conclusion follows from a given premise', and therefore is 'true' only if the premise is certain. Since nothing in the empirical world is certain, actual knowledge is restricted to certain things of the mind: absolute (*à priori*) ideas such as could be known for sure only by what Kant would come to call 'pure reason'. So mathematics is *logic based*. Of course, a given premise might be false. Thus, though the method is always perfectly correct, the conclusion can be misleading. So pure logic does not necessarily lead to truth.

2. Physics (empirical reason):

This is different than pure reason. Science ('physics' was then a term associated only with medicine) is not as rigorous as mathematics. There are no 'formal implications' but only 'empirical correlations'. Physical 'facts' are uncertain. We can know appearances only, not reality—and even the idea of causation cannot be proven with reason alone. Cause-and-effect is only *assumed* due to repeated experience (habit), and then only by admitting intuition into the logic—intuition: something non-empirical, incorporeal, thus non-scientific and beyond physics. What this amounts to is reliance on probability. What are today referred to as the 'hard' sciences are *probability based*. Can probability really be a sufficient or practical substitute for truth? It is taken to be so in physics where the probabilities are usually very high; very promising—so much so as to be easily mistaken for truth, leading to what are improperly called 'laws' of nature. Thus certain long-tested theories are accepted as knowledge, when they are merely practical models of reality.

3. Social Science (intuitive reason)—ethics, morality, justice, human behavior, etc.: Humanistic studies are different from science. The term ‘social science’ had not yet been invented in the 18th century. That would have to wait for Auguste Comte, c.1830. But we are now looking at the rationality behind how humans act. This sort of reasoning is all about how to get pleasure and avoid pain, or more generally, how to achieve an end—thus it is utilitarian or *value based*. If science, the study of the behavior of matter is probability based, rationally weak but workable in practice, why not establish a science of human behavior? If we can get by with unverifiable ‘natural laws’ of physics, why not ‘natural laws’ of morality and society? But wait: the subject matter of social science extends into non-physics. Much of it is speculative, to say the least, and the probabilities are radically diminished in comparison to such as gas statistics, thermodynamics, radioactive decay rates, and the very ‘law’ of cause and effect. What then can we expect of ‘laws’ of human behavior, and can they really form the foundation of a science?

As **Edmund Burke** [1729-1797] pointed out, society rests on convention, not reason. Reasoning, sociologically, is limited to preserving or altering convention—and is not particularly dependable even in that function. Rights, justice, legitimacy, social morality—all convention: “If the premises of Hume’s argument be granted”, says Sabine,

...it can hardly be denied that he made a clean sweep of the whole rationalist philosophy of natural right, of self-evident truths, and of the laws of eternal and immutable morality which were supposed to guarantee the harmony of nature and the order of human society.

[George Sabine; A HISTORY OF POLITICAL THEORY; Holt, Rinehart & Winston, NY, 1961; p.604]

Burke was not in disagreement with that assessment, and was disturbed by it. But what reason seems to have rendered impossible was yet in existence. Laws, values, the intuition of conscience—a moral system was in place as part of our civil structure. Burke surmised a cosmic spirit speaks via history, not through reason. And *so what* if civil society is artificial? “Art, too, is man’s nature”. Society grows from instinct—over long periods. *There* is the connection to nature. And thus arise instinctual rules, instinctual institutions, instinctual histories of tribes or nations or races. This is what ought to be studied and respected and supported—and lived with, allowing for minor adjustments (as opposed to revolutions) to meld with present conditions. Irrational “sentiment, tradition, and idealized history filled in for reason and natural rights,” Burke held.

...[T]his change itself implied a new sense of the meaning of history. In the history of civilization it became the custom to see the gradual unfolding of the divine mind and the divine purpose. Hence the values of social life—its morals, its art and religion, and its cultural achievements—were at once absolute and relative, absolute in their ultimate significance though relative in any particular historical embodiment. Reason in man is a manifestation of an underlying cosmic spirit which realizes itself gradually in the history of the nations.

[Ibid.; p.606]

It may seem strange to hear Hume, having thrown aside natural rights, agree with Burke that there is “nothing of greater importance in every state than the preservation of the ancient government, especially if it be a free one” [Essays: *Of the Liberty of the Press*; par.6; as quoted by Robert S. Hill in *David Hume*; Strauss-Cropsey; HISTORY OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY; Univ. of Chicago, 1987; p.556]. Radicalism, it seems, need not be absolute.

On a Mission from God:

Immanuel Kant saw his mission as not only saving God from obscurity and science from rational extinction (unbeknownst to practical scientists, mostly unaware of such transcendental problems), but to remount the locomotive of Reason on the high rails; to get her moving once again, hopefully progressively. Kant refused to let civilization be permanently sidetracked and to fall into ruin due to a belief that truth and knowledge are unobtainable. Surely, he maintained, we can continue to learn more and more, without apparent end. But we may have to make some undemonstrable assumptions; accept some merely apparent or partial truths if we are to continue our progress. Reason, surely, was not as easily foiled as Hume and Berkeley had made it seem. Maybe she had simply been misunderstood. He would examine her more deeply.

His two great studies, *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Practical Reason* are not, as the novice might assume from the titles, a ‘criticism’ as in ‘debunking’ of the power of reason. Rather they are the publication of his investigation. It occurred to him—or he found himself in agreement with Hume—that even a pure concept like reason might be divided for study. There were distinct sorts of reasoning, he thought, conceiving of what he called ‘pure reason’ as that which looks beyond any association with the senses. Something it would seem Hume and Berkeley would have considered impossible even though they engaged in it themselves. The best example is the incorporeal logic of mathematics, which deals with eternal principles that can be known completely apart from the sensory world, i.e., without having been learned through experience (whereas the original materialists apparently assumed complex mathematics to have developed from finger and toe counting: empirically gained).

Pure reason, then, for Kant, concerns concepts or mental categories that are *à priori*, that is to say, above or beyond the physical world. Here is the home of universals. $2 + 3 = 5$ whether we count apples or oranges or both or neither. An alternate world where mathematical laws are different or irregular is not even imaginable. Is this not reminiscent of the Platonic world of ideas: ‘forms’ without substance? Kant thus *transcends* the materialist position that all knowledge passes through the senses (hence his use of the term ‘transcendental’ throughout his work). So he now will study the laws of mind. The knowledge gained, or the method of gaining it, he calls ‘transcendental philosophy’. Kant does not believe the human mind develops from a *tabula rasa* as Locke and others thought. It is not a passive receiver of sense data and is much more than a mere organizer of otherwise chaotic and meaningless impressions. From the purely sensory we could never generalize unless there were a principle of organization and a cataloging organ—and furthermore a *purpose* for such activity. The receiver: the collector of impressions (thus far in agreement with Hume) is certainly the brain. But the activity of conceiving, organizing, generalizing, and knowing is the *mind*. The ‘tools’, as it were, utilized in conducting this activity include the ideas of space and time. The very first questions the mind must answer is *where* and *when* the bits of information are encountered in relation to the where and when of past bits, such as to construct our pictures of reality—a pseudo-reality, of course, but one that is useful, predictable, and even malleable. Space and time, he points out, are not material things; not ‘out there’ in the real world at all. They are simply modes of perception, useful, even necessary concepts that must be *à priori* because all ordered experience depends on them and presupposes them. And just as our *perceptions arrange raw sensations* from the outer

world “around objects in space and time, so *conception arranges perceptions* about the ideas of cause, unity, reciprocal relation, necessity, contingency, etc. These and other ‘categories’ are the structure into which perceptions are received, and by which they are classified” as objects of thought. “And here again,” continues Will Durant:

Observe the activity of this mind that was, to Locke and Hume, mere “passive wax” under the blows of sense-experience. Consider a system of thought like Aristotle’s; is it conceivable that this almost cosmic ordering of data should have come by the automatic, anarchistic spontaneity of the data themselves? See this magnificent card-catalogue in the library, intelligently ordered into sequence by human purpose. Then picture all these card-cases thrown upon the floor, all these cards scattered pell-mell into riotous disorder. Can you now conceive these scattered cards pulling themselves up, Münchhausen-like, from their disarray, passing quietly into their alphabetical and topical places in their proper boxes, and each box into its fit place in the rack,—until all should be order and sense and purpose again? What a miracle-story these skeptics have given us after all!

[Durant, THE STORY OF PHILOSOPHY; p.295]

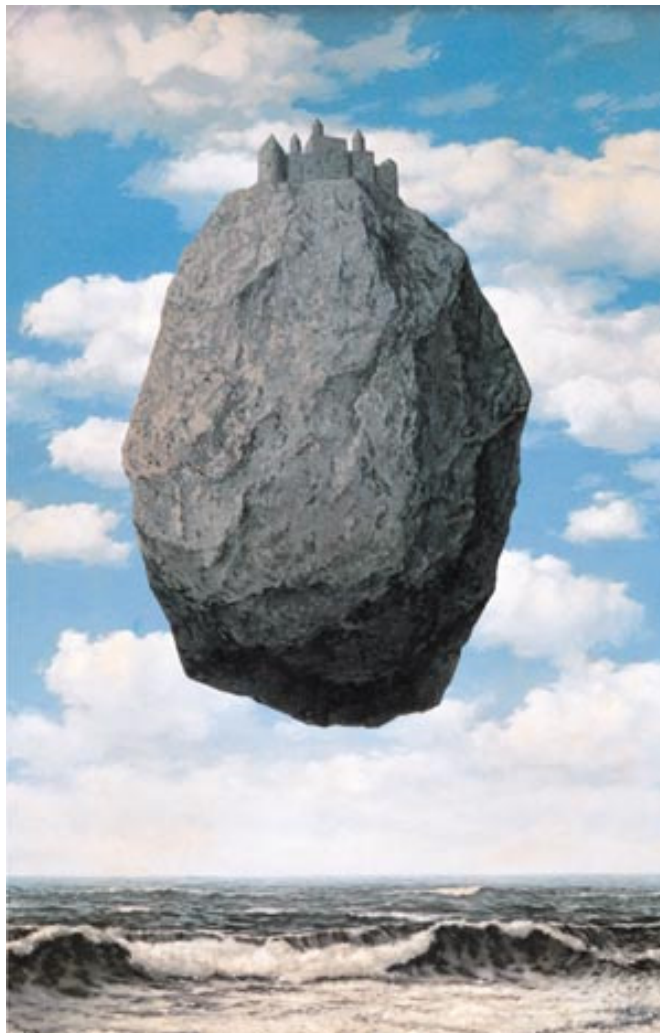
So, then, what is ‘out there,’ so to speak? If we can know only our impressions of reality, *what is reality itself*—its foundation, and how can we come to know it? Kant, agreeing thus far with Hume and Berkeley, denies we can have such knowledge.

What may be the nature of objects considered as things in themselves and without reference to the receptivity of our sensibility is quite unknown to us. We know nothing more than our own mode of perceiving them, which is peculiar to us, and which, though not of necessity pertaining to every animated being, is so to the whole human race. With this alone we have to do. Space and time are the pure forms thereof; sensation the matter. The former alone [space and time and our other categories of understanding] can we recognize *à priori*, that is, antecedent to all actual perception; and for this reason such cognition is called *pure* intuition. The latter [sensation] is that in our cognition which is called cognition *à posteriori*, that is, *empirical* intuition. . . . Supposing that we should carry our empirical intuition even to the very highest degree of clearness [to the ultimate level possible by science and technology], we should not thereby advance one step nearer to a knowledge of the constitution of such objects as things in themselves. . . . [T]he question: “What are objects considered as things in themselves?” remains unanswerable, even after the most thorough examination of the phenomenal world.

[*The Critique of Pure Reason*, § 9. ‘General Remarks on Transcendental Aesthetic’; J.M.D. Meiklejohn, Trans., in GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD, vol.42, KANT; University of Chicago; pp.29-30]

Nonetheless, science is absolute within those limitations [whatever that phrase might mean]. The world of mere appearance is still a practical world, even if incomplete and consisting only of our ideas. As far as the actual external world of ‘things-in-themselves’ is concerned, we know only that it must exist, though we can have no understanding or direct knowledge of it. So the idea that existence is a fake; that it is in some sense ‘created’ by each of us when we think we are merely observing it, is not at all what Kant is conveying. He merely expresses that science is naïve in thinking it is dealing with true things, dividing them ever more into tiny parts in the quest for ultimate,

uncorrupted reality. Thus science is ‘saved’ by understanding its limitations. It has a kind of truth within its own frame, and it is certainly practical, but for explaining fundamental nature, science is strictly limited to hypotheses. The same is true also and more obviously of religion, since (Kant supposes) “understanding can never go beyond the limits of sensibility” [*Critique*, p.215], meaning we can know only appearances. Beyond appearances, as Einstein would later say, ‘we see only through our theories.’ And what can we know about our theories? Only that they *seem* confirmed, temporarily that is, until ultimately falsified by experiment; whereas what we are really confirming is merely that the theory is practical: that it works—so that we can *pretend*, with an air of confidence in future engineering and technology, that it is true. Here we have the philosophy illustrated by Magritte’s surrealist painting ‘Castle in the Pyrenees’: a fortress atop a mountainous rock—‘hard’ and ‘massive’ phenomena—floating in air over the universal sea. What holds it up? That we can never know any more than we can explain why we should expect it to fall into the ocean of eternal possibility (for gravity is not an explanation but a concept encompassing a fact: a mere name for the description of a tendency, the mystery behind which we cannot directly experience or know, but which we nonetheless assume to be a force because we do experience falling and because we can calculate such ‘things’ as relative rate of descent and the earth-weight of objects of perception).



Problems arise when science tries to step beyond experience: leaping from empirical to transcendental knowledge. Kant calls such problems ‘antinomies’. When we attempt to know, e.g., if the world had a beginning in time, then scientific logic finds a dilemma. Whatever the evidence either way, eternity is not something our minds can contain, nor can we have any such experience. On the other hand, could the Universe have had a beginning? A cause without an antecedent is equally boggling. Is the cosmos infinite in space, or is it somehow contained? We cannot picture infinite space, though we know what the concept means; nor can we consider space as limited without wondering what might lie beyond the limits and/or how there could be a limitation of nothingness. Kant’s answer to such questions is not actually a resolution: time and space and causality, and even measureable things such as energy and force, are mental constructs; not part of the external world but modes of thought: tools of the mind useful for organizing a workable reality out of the otherwise baffling and unknowable ‘things-in-themselves’.

That doesn’t mean time and space and all these other ideas or categories are non-existent. They are very real elements of the mindscape of all humans, and humans are as real as any other natural things, so their mental aspects and attributes must also exist—in a way. Though incorporeal, they ‘exist’ in a different sense (or what we might refer to today as ‘in another dimension’) and are nonetheless real. Otherwise, how could we experience and utilize them, discuss them, examine them? Of course we perceive them in a different way that we perceive ‘things’ that have a material aspect. The *mental* things, in fact, are the means of interpreting the *extended* things. They are useful only for classifying and arranging sensations—measuring, weighing, counting, recording, evaluating, etc.—valid only in regard to the phenomena of sense-experience: thought-instruments conducive to doing physics. That is why these mental tools, the tools of reason, cannot be used to examine or clarify themselves, nor to resolve problems of metaphysics where there is nothing measureable or weighable or susceptible to experiment. Therefore, “religion cannot be proved by theoretical reason”, thus undermining the age-old attempts to prove that the soul is an incorruptible substance, or to verify free will, or to demonstrate that God is a ‘necessary being’ as the presupposition to all reality. [See Durant, *STORY OF PHILOSOPHY*, p.299].

So we can know nothing about what lies beyond appearances; nothing at all about how we seem to know about the mental things that present only inferences; nothing as to how we are able to exercise logic. Does that mean reason is incompetent? Kant, as a philosopher and a teacher of philosophy, having based his whole sustenance on reason, writes for his life against such a conclusion. In hundreds of pages heavily laden with ponderous terminology, much of it his own invention, he claims to be solving all the problems of metaphysics. In direct contradiction of his own description of the limitations of the tools of reason he is salvaging the absoluteness of science and even demonstrating the truth of religion.

But what has he really done? He has exposed the naïveté of science in its expectation of one day fully understanding reality and he has strictly limited its ‘knowledge’ to hypotheses. With convincing arguments that religion *cannot* be proved by reason, he has ‘saved’ religion by allowing room for priests to discover that, by the same token, religion cannot be *disproved*. But he hardly left a recognizable Christianity. It was more the sort of religion of Rousseau’s Savoyard Vicar. But Kant, rather than play to the hopes of the unenlightened, actually discouraged belief in an anthropomorphized god that

can be influenced by prayer or sacrifice or any sort of fancy ritual. No wonder German ecclesiastics took revenge, Will Durant suggests, by naming their dogs Immanuel Kant. Heinrich Heine [1797-1856], German romantic poet of the next generation, considered Kant's accomplishment beyond even the terror of Robespierre. After all, the latter had only killed a king and a few thousand Frenchmen, while Kant had killed God [Durant; *THE STORY OF PHILOSOPHY*, pp.299-300, and from W.Wallace; *KANT; Blackwood Classics*; p.82]. And now the quaint old philosophical terrorist would turn to the problem of 'saving' morality, first in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, then more thoroughly in *The Critique of Practical Reason*.

Practical reason, you might be thinking, must mean logic applied to manipulation of the physical world: reasoning about phenomena (appearances)—e.g., science. But no. For Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason* is a deep examination of morality: *reasoning about the practice of right living*, which actually becomes an attempt to demonstrate logically the absolute nature of what turns out to be something like the Christian tenet: 'love thy neighbor'.

The expectation is to discover and/or to prove an absolute moral principle *à priori* from which a moral code might be deduced without need of revelation—or, in a sense, this *is* a sort of revelation; a revealing by reason rather than by deity in the expectation of eliciting Christian-like behavior without positing Christ. That is not to imply Kant is an unbeliever, but that he cannot prove God's existence (or the miracles of the Bible) in any traditional way. There are three of these attempts at logical proof—all speculative:

First there is the ontological argument that we encountered with St. Anselm: that God cannot *not* exist, by our very definition of Him as the Perfect Being—assuming existence to be a perfection and thus part of His nature, etc.;

Second is the argument from causality, often called the 'cosmological proof': the world is an existing thing; all things are in a sense effects which have prior causes, therefore (to avoid the absurdity of infinite regression) there must have been a First Cause (to which we assign the name, God); and,

Third, the 'proof' we hear bandied about today by biblical fundamentalists as if it were newly discovered: the argument from intelligent design, also called the 'physicotheological proof', intending to establish merely an *architect* of the cosmos, unimaginably powerful from our perspective; an organizing principle unlimited, perhaps, by time-space but not an omnipotent/omniscient superbeing 'Creator'.

By the same token, it should be mentioned that none of the counter-arguments to these arguments manage to *disprove* God. They only find a kind of negative relief in the issue's unresolvability. Faith, after all, is based on doubt. If all doubt were eradicated (which is, incidentally, the true and impossible mission of philosophy) we would have no more need of faith, for we would have replaced it with absolute knowledge.

Though he understands that one cannot prove God logically, Kant still believes in (and convinces himself that he can reason his way to) an *absolute*: an 'imperative' moral principle, and he expects such a principle might act the part of lead protagonist; a kind of stand-in for God. Well, "absolute" is putting it a bit strongly. Kant admits, for instance, that a person who is unaware of moral obligations—i.e., without a conscience—would not understand or recognize such a principle. On the other hand, such an ignorant being might not deserve to be included in the category of humanity [the latter is my suggestion, not Kant's]. Anyway, this moral principle hardly fulfills our desire for objective

knowledge, yet it is to be understood not only as logical but as a *certainty*: a “moral imperative”—yet he grants that it is something each person can and must discover among his own mental tools. Kant intends to assist by inducing us to search.

This taxes the mind a bit since, if it is logical and certain, it would seem to be universal and objective. But if it is left to be discovered (or not) by each of us, and almost certainly modified as it filters through differing minds under varying circumstances, is it not *subjective*? Kant seems to support this conclusion when he explains “I must not even say ‘*it is*’ morally certain that there is a God...but ‘*I am*’ morally certain.” Kant perhaps escapes from subjectivity by considering the moral absolute *à priori*: eternal, that is, but imperceptible, thus not necessarily discoverable or properly understandable by most folks (or maybe by anyone) without help from a philosopher. “In other words,” says W.H. Walsh, “the belief or faith Kant proposes as a replacement for discredited metaphysical ‘knowledge’ can be neither strictly communicated nor learned from another. It is something that has to be achieved by every man for himself” [Immanuel Kant; *article in PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS*; Macmillan **COMPENDIUM**; NY, 1999; p.530]. One wonders, then, what might be the purpose of his teaching. He does call our attention to what might be considered traces of the moral principle in the realm of our feelings and in what we refer to as a conscience. We seem to know intuitively about right and wrong behavior. Otherwise, based only on experience, honesty would not have risen to the status of a virtue, for it would at least be arguable that the most successful thief deserves our greatest praise (Thrasymachus became famous for making such an argument against Socrates [Plato’s *REPUBLIC*] more than 2,000 years earlier), in which case whoever has the most stuff when he dies might be declared (postmortem) the winner. So:

Why be virtuous?

This question and “What is virtue?” have been primary topics of moral speculation since thinking was sufficiently refined to consider such things. Does Kant’s contribution to this question take us any closer at all to a resolution (for those, at least, who do not believe that it was already resolved by Socrates)? This may seem to have taken us off-topic, but it has to do with trying to establish rationally a part of the cosmos that science has ignored or even renounced: virtue, ethics, moral judgment, etc.—and rightly so, says Kant, because science is incompetent to handle such categories. As materialistic science, fed by capitalism, developed into a dominant intellectual force in the Western world of the 19th century, the old, accepted social expectations and political relations and religious beliefs came increasingly under attack as out-dated, oppressive, non-provable, even evil. Still they persevered, due in great part to sheer inertia inherited from longstanding tradition. But how long could that momentum continue? The dual foundation of ethics, *faith* and *philosophy*, was eroding. The moral elements of existence were to be left without support: not in religion, not even in reason.

Kant was deeply concerned about what would happen to human behavior if it were no longer guided and constrained by the revealed moral code. What would prevent the most oppressive possible tyranny? What would contain the down-trodden masses, sparked by the newly emerging concept of natural equality, from violently overwhelming their rulers—especially if civil law and justice are understood as artificial and arbitrary, as the social contract theorists seemed inclined to believe? Was there some as yet undiscovered means of neutralizing the tension between tyranny and anarchy? Might it be possible to re-establish or invent an equivalent of Christian virtue without Christ—

without God—through only the power of reason? And, if so, how would this ‘moral imperative’ bind individuals? After all, Kant also believed in freedom of the will, which is at odds with the scientific-materialist belief in causality. Besides, if we have no free will and are bound to behave as we do, morality is devoid of meaning. We can only be moral if we are free to act *immorally*; we can only exercise ‘good will’ if we have *free* will that is just as likely to result in *ill* will. Morality is about what we *ought* to do, not what we *must* do—or are programmed to do. So the questions for Kant: What ought we to do? Why? How do we come to know the principle leading to the answers?

To answer, he is forced to deal with the obvious clash between the materialistic determinism of the new science (that every event, from sub-micro to macrocosmic, is determined by natural necessity) and the claim of freedom of the will. Kant tends to weasel-out of this through the Cartesian duality of worlds: the *empirical world* of an unknown but sensed reality (governed by necessity and thus predetermined), as opposed to the *metaphysical world* or mindscape, where the laws and logic of physics do not apply. So it seems we can be constrained by deterministic natural law in the world of phenomena, yet free in our minds: in our imagination. But ask a convict in solitary confinement if he is satisfied with such dichotomy. We don’t want to be free only in the fantasy world of our dreams. We want to be free to act in the real world; to battle against and overcome the futile and meaningless determinism of the extreme materialists. Finally Kant falls back on the same negative sort of product he offered to the theologians about God: that free will cannot be *disproven*. We cannot explain freedom because we have no insight into the metaphysical world and no tools with which to analyze such concepts, though we intuitively use those concepts. All we can do is explain why they cannot be explained, and *believe* in freedom or constraint as we believe in God: as it suits us.

What? C’mon, man! We waded through 800 pages of abstruse lingo and obfuscation for that? As Max Müller, one of Kant’s better translators, remarked in the preface to his 2nd English edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason* [p.lxxi] “Kant, it must be admitted, is a bad writer”—but is that so unusual for the greatest philosophers?—“so was Aristotle, so was Descartes, so was Leibnitz, so was Hegel.” [And just wait till we get to Heidegger!] It is in taking such great care about his reasoning that Kant tends to accentuate the negative. As we have seen in his treatment of God and free will, he finds a great deal more certainty in the *limits* of reason than in its potency. He said himself,

The greatest and perhaps the only advantage of all philosophy of pure reason seems to be negative only, because it serves...as a discipline for the limitation of its domain, and instead of discovering truth, it only claims the modest merit of preventing error.

[from Kant: THE CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON (1st ed.. 1781);
F. Max Müller, translation, 2nd ed., revised; Macmillan, NY, 1925; p.638;
As found in ‘Kant’s Critical Philosophy’, VG-3; A VITAL GUIDE BOOK;
prepared by Ben Kimple; Student Outlines, Boston, 1964; pp.3-4]

Apparently that was enough for Kant. Anyway, despite more modern opinions on this, he claimed *not* to be presenting a system of philosophy or discovering the ‘good’; merely uncovering principles of pure reason that would make such system possible—a system devoid of the errors he calls “dialectical illusions: ... mistaking the subjective condition of thought for the knowledge of the object.” [Kant; Müller trans., p.320]

We must, however, at last, get back to the substance of the moral code that comes out of all this jockeying of concepts. What is this moral law of nature (or is it from beyond nature)? Can reason find its way to an equivalent of the Golden Rule? And will the folk who needed rescuing from the emptiness of atheism be filled with philosophy, or will they hardly be able to understand more than a sentence or two of Immanuel Kant?

Reason alone is befuddled in this task. The morality that we have considered for ages to be true was ‘given’ to us from Above; revealed through religion. Religion is faith, which is beyond reason—but perhaps not beyond *pure* reason. So we shall turn the old thinking around: base religion on morality instead of the reverse. For that to work, morality must be absolute: not a rule based on sensory input from a doubt-ridden outer world, but firmly established, like the intuitive or *à priori* principles of mathematics: a ‘categorical imperative’. Our feelings, Kant believes, tell us, by our conscience (implanted we know not how, but we cannot deny its presence in the realm of thought), that we are to “act as if the maxim of our action were to become by our will a universal law of nature.” This is a metaphysical basis for obligatory behavior: the duty (not merely the directive from a doubtable deity but an absolute ‘categorical imperative’) to ‘do unto others as we would have them do unto us.’ Here is the springboard for John Rawls’ 20th century “Theory of Justice,” in which, by placing over him/herself a “veil of ignorance” (ignorance of who he/she really is, or might become, in proposing a social system: wealthy or poor, healthy or ill, strong or weak, lucky or unlucky, female or male, etc.), each party to the social contract agrees to the rules they are about to establish as they would apply to every conceivable niche of the society they are designing.

Here is the ‘absolute’ basis of equality; perfect equality *à priori*, equality of the imagination, which, like any other imagined perfection, cannot hold in a material world ruled by imperfection. Kant goes to extraordinary lengths, however, to convince his readers that, because we derive ‘feelings’, i.e., sensations of conscience or guilt from our inability to live up to this absolute moral law, we have in the mental world what is essentially a parallel to sense-experience in the material world: an ‘experience’ of failure; the exception (imperfection?) that proves the rule. Here we have Kant reverting, albeit in a new way, to Greek political philosophy; opposing the germ of political modernism, Machiavelli, who recommended lowering the expectations of human behavior from the ideal of perfectibility to accepting the limitations of real or ‘natural’ possibilities. Kant sees our moral obligations as derived from the ideal. Our actions, naturally, even when we do try to live up to the rule, do not always result in universal benefit. We might even find ourselves when in violation of the civil law jailed or ostracized by our friends and our community as punishment for being righteous. We all know of cases where lying is not only beneficial to ourselves but to all involved to avoid some unnecessary pain; pain for which we would rightfully blame the truth-teller. Yet absolute morality requires absolute honesty. Negative results are merely a problem in the world of reality. In the world of our minds, it is the intention that counts—and the only intention that counts is obedience to the natural moral law.

This is why proof of intent is necessary in criminal cases. It is also why this whole idea is ridiculed by such conservative ‘talking heads’ as Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Glen Beck, and dozens of others (whatever might be thought of them otherwise) who have accurately noted this weakness in the liberal political stance: that the actual outcome of a given action is less important, from their Kantian perspective, than the intent that

motivated it. Governments, practically all of them, claim this even as they are manipulating others (often to their harm), even convincing the whole of society itself, as much as is possible, in order to effect a particular outcome of their choosing (so they apparently do believe in some absolute: an *à priori* doctrine, or pretend to) instead of restricting their actions to conform with lawfully pre-decided political principles; principles such as might be discovered in nation-founding documents like the U.S. Constitution and Declaration of Independence.

A political or social organization like the Weather Underground, for example, or the Black Panthers or ACORN or PETA—or radical Islam or the NAZIs or the KKK or even an otherwise legitimate government, or patriots like the Minute Men or those who carried out the Boston Tea Party—might chose to break civil laws; skew or disrupt elections; even use acts of terror to gain what the actors conceive (or just feel, or have been led to believe via personal experience or indoctrination) to be, ultimately, the best conditions for everyone. ‘Weather Undergrounder’ Bill Ayers, for instance, a convicted terrorist from the 1960s and ’70s and now teaching (God knows what) at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle, openly admits that his organization’s mistake was not its partaking in terrorism, but the failure to terrorize sufficiently to achieve its good intentions. “I regret”, he said publicly, “only that we didn’t bomb enough”. Is this any different than a thief justifying his immoral behavior as morally necessary to feed his family or get medical treatment for his sickly child and regretting only that he didn’t kill enough bank tellers to save his loved ones? While in the thief’s case we might convict and, due to mitigating circumstances, reduce the charges, and/or minimize the sentence, we do not acquit or absolve his guilt. But isn’t Ayers’ position more akin to Adolph Hitler decrying that, due to lack of sufficient extermination techniques, he was unable to save the world from the scourge of Judaism before he was defeated? Do not the devastating results of such well intended actions in the real world (e.g., nearly a hundred million dead by the scourge of communism) far outweigh the ‘goodness’ of the actor’s dream-world expectations? Isn’t it the road to Hell that is paved with good intentions? So, will it be absolute principles or pragmatic relativity, theory or practice, that rules in our decision making?

“In Kant’s works,” says Nietzsche’s critical friend, Paul Ree, “you feel as though you were at a country fair. You can buy from him anything you want—freedom of the will and captivity of the will, idealism and a refutation of idealism, atheism and the good Lord. Like a juggler out of an empty hat, Kant draws out of the concept of duty a God, immortality, and freedom—to the great surprise of his readers.”

[*Ree’s quotes from* Untermann: SCIENCE AND REVOLUTION; Chicago, 1905; p.81;
quoted in Durant: THE STORY OF PHILOSOPHY, Garden City, NY, 1927; pp.314-315]

So was Kant the greatest of modern philosophers? We cannot, of course, have done him justice in this brief account. I am not convinced justice could be done beyond simply publishing his confusing works. If measured by sheer impact on the future, however; on civilization as we know it in the West, he may be the most important pure thinker since antiquity—hugely influential. Or (as Ayn Rand makes him out in her book, FOR THE NEW INTELLECTUAL) was he one of the most amazing sophists of all time? It depends. It is all relative to one’s age, situation, and perception, including one’s position on the question ‘What is philosophy?’. We can take Kant at his word as a professor of

philosophy and accept that he was not actually philosophizing in his difficult works, but merely spending his whole life's energy preparing the way for a complete 'transcendental philosophy'. This position is, in fact, in keeping with the contention that philosophy, by its original definition (what we now call 'classical' or 'ancient' philosophy), was essentially terminated by, or at least was made impotent simultaneously with, the scientific revolution. We have left to us only rationality: a logic severely limited, especially by the causality factor inherent in materialism; a thought-residue, as it were, of the scientific method. We are aware, also, that modern philosophers have not seen it that way, rising ever higher in their hot-air balloons through the misty thought-sphere Kant had been exploring; expecting at any moment to break through the clouds into the clear light of truth. Well, perhaps that *is* philosophy, allowing for its weakened condition today. For, by definition, truth *is* what philosophy seeks. But by 'dissecting' (Kant's term) immaterial *à priori* concepts with a knife of logic so dull that it cannot cut to the core of solid reality, it seems unlikely we will uncover any certainty in the meandering vapors of the mind or anything of much value for mankind beyond brain stimulation.

That is not to say modern philosophy has not served us; that it has not had an effect on Western society—and in turn on the whole world—but that the effect has been somewhat delayed and mostly negative. It has stripped away God, the soul, the hope of redemption, the idea of progress (other than purely technological advancement), and the very expectation of knowledge itself (beyond abstract mathematical formulae and the recipes, both productive and destructive, of physics and chemistry). All principles of morality and virtue have been reasoned away, including the very distinction between good and evil, and we are deprived of meaningful existence.

This is not what Kant had in mind, of course. He was inspired in his enormous efforts by the expectation that he could prevent exactly what he inadvertently promoted. I suppose the best that can be said of Kant, then, is his intentions were good. Still, there may have been greater utility derived from the heat engendered by the burning of his every page. But as we have seen in previous discussions, though unbeknownst to most folks of Kant's era, the route of modernity had already been mapped. If a genius of Kant's order could not find another path, perhaps philosophy has no way out of this fix. On the other hand, despite the anguish of hopeful non-aristocrats over the distressing interruption of the French Revolution by the Reign of Terror; the ravaging of Europe by Napoleon (to make it better) and the seeming endlessness of war; the restoration of disgraced monarchy; the heart rending works of Romantic era literati like Byron & Shelley, Goethe & Schiller, Beethoven & Schubert, Wordsworth & Coleridge, the prophetic ethical dilemma of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* [highly recommended] and the unspeakable grotesqueries of the Marquis de Sade [don't soil your mind with this drivel]—even with all the academic hoopla over Kant's literary offspring: Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Feuerbach, and their creations, and the despised anti-academic intruder Schopenhauer—despite all of this—still the unsettled pessimism of this new philosophy did not seem to dampen the sheer vitality unleashed by political revolution, the rise of capitalism, and the burgeoning industrial revolution. The new philosophers may have feared that *mentally*—conceptually, that is—we were hopelessly lost in Kant's transcendental labyrinth, but average folks didn't know that. Science and industry, undaunted, were promising perpetual *physical* progress.

HANDOUT: Ayn Rand: FOR THE NEW INTELLECTUAL; Signet (Random House), NY, 1961; pp.21-57;
plus the *Introduction* in Strauss-Cropsey, pp.1-6